Archaic Chinese Sacrificial Practices in the Light of Generative Anthropology

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René Girard and Eric Gans developed their so-called “originary” or “generative anthropology” by reinterpreting some of the major developments in Western civilization. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the applicability and relevance of this theory in the field of archaic Chinese culture. China has been essentially a sacrificial civilization and, therefore, may be an adequate testing ground for Girard’s and Gans’s “originary” thinking.

The epistemology Girard and Gans bring to the “Chinese” testing site suffers from their almost exclusive concentration on Western traditions, as well as from the absence of any discussion on the wide-spread divinatory/oracular activity and the “animistic” phenomenon one finds throughout ancient humanity. From the beginning of its documented history, until recently, the Chinese state and much of its intellectual life remained directly or closely sacrificial. One can go so far as to say that the Chinese premodern state was built upon sacrifice. Sacrifice remained central in the Chinese state and no theory of Chinese statehood could ever be proposed without reference to sacrifice and sacrificial ideology. Like Western culture, China follows the evolution from blood sacrifice to non-blood, re-presented, “morally correct” sacrifice, and to the esthetic and ethical systems, such as Taoism and Confucianism, that evolved from it. It would be a formidable undertaking, however, to study the evolution of Chinese sacrificial practices and the impact they had on statehood throughout their long history, especially if we study, as we should, the Chinese sacrificial system or systems within a cultural totality. I must content myself with summarizing the sacrificial history of China’s earliest states. I do so to point out how, always keeping Girardian and Gansian originary hypothesis in mind, sacrifice continued to play a central role in both “Realpolitik” and socio-political ideology in the subsequent periods. The reader should keep in mind that ancient Chinese archeological and written data lack academic consensus and may invite controversy. Yet an attempt to put Girard’s and Gans’s hypothesis to a Chinese test is essential to our understanding of the usefulness of these theories.

The earliest historical dynasties were: the Hsia culture (ca. 2205-ca.1766), the Shang (ca. 1766-ca.1122) dynasty, and the Chou dynasty (ca. 1122-256). Because of the wealth of archeological and paleoglyphic data, I shall concentrate on the Shang and, to a lesser extent, on the subsequent Chou, mainly, to support the interpretation of Shang material. The Shang dynasty occupied a large territory, encompassing the fertile alluvial plains of the Yellow river. It was an agricultural state with a degree of socio-political organization needed for the kind of water control required by rice agriculture. The Shang also engaged in cattle-raising and silk manufacturing. It was ruled by a dynasty of "kings" who appointed (or confirmed) a landed gentry of warriors in what has been understood by most as a feudal system, but which appeared to be a kind of clan or kinship administration. Below these, the "state" was made up of petty officials of all kinds, plus artisans, peddlers, peasants and slaves. Among the kings' most important functions were sacrificial ritual, and ritual-related war and hunting, understood, among others, as a state-unifying, ritual action in search of sacrificial supply.

Between 1928 and 1937, more than twenty thousand oracle bones dating back to the 273 last years of the Shang dynasty have been unearthed in the Anyang area, the political center of Shang (presently Honan province, about three hundred miles south of Beijing). More recent excavations yielded about forty-thousand more. Excavations from the subsequent Chou dynasty (ca. 1122-256) adds another fifteen thousand. There would be considerably more if it were not for the medicinal (divine) qualities the ancient and modern Chinese have believed them to contain. These oracle bones were shoulder bones of oxen (also of goat and sheep) and, later, turtle plastron onto which, either before or after divination, the diviners inscribed the divinatory questions addressed to mostly ancestral but also a number of nature deities. These bones were heated to obtain a pair of cracks consisting of a vertical line plus, at about mid-point, a perpendicular line, corresponding to the present Chinese character meaning 'divination' or 'question to a deity'. If the perpendicular crack was more or less at a right angle to the vertical one, that is, within twenty degrees up or down the 90 degree point, the oracular reply was deemed positive. If the angle of the crack did not fall within this 40-degree range (from 70 to 110), the reply was negative.[1]

These Shang oracle bones provide us with a rich source of knowledge on Shang political and social organization, as well as its religious (ritual) system. No less important is the light they throw on the origins and, to an extent, the development of the Chinese writing system. Particularly relevant in view of the Girardian and Gansian theories are the oracle-bone inscriptions, by far the most numerous, which deal with sacrifice. I have therefore selected some oracle-bone inscriptions which both, in the nature of the questions they asked whom and at what occasions, represent the kind of oracular activity typical of the Shang, and which provide suitable data to discuss questions of generative anthropology. Given the lack of differentiation between a noun, verb, adverb, adjective and preposition in both archaic and modern Chinese language, I have preferred to translate, as much as feasible, each symbol only with a noun and to add the "most likely meaning". I shall begin with examples

of animal, human and combined animal/human as well as other sacrifice which addresses itself to mostly ancestral and, to a lesser extent, to “nature” deities. It is important that we keep in mind from the very beginning that oracle-bone activity was a royal prerogative, hence its centralization and subjection to government control.

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1. Ping-tzu/question/K’o/question/no/purification/Princess Hsieh/front/Keng, promise/Keng/pair of sheep/promise/Keng/three/sheep pairs.
Most likely meaning: “On the day of Ping-tzu, K’o asks (asked?) the oracle: Should Princess Hsieh be purified in front of [the late] Keng? Should one or three pairs of sheep be promised?”

When the bones mention the word “promise” it probably was fulfilled after good results. A large number of oracle bones indicate that animals and humans were sacrificed to “purify” a royal ancestor. The control of natural forces seems to have been the main reason for this purification. The following example combines animal and human sacrifice with a petition for rain:

2. Should/petition/rain/to/Hsi/burning/nine/sheep pairs
Most likely meaning: “Should a petition for rain be addressed to Hsi? Should nine pairs of sheep be sacrificed?[2]

Some oracles asked how the sheep should be killed, e.g., by letting them bleed to death, or how the sacrifice should be offered, e.g., by boiling them in a cauldron, etc. In the following two examples, humans were sacrificed for rain:

3. Question/burning men/stakes/have/follow/rain
Most likely meaning: “Should a man be burnt at the stakes? Will rain follow?”

4. Question/burning men/stake/have/follow/rain
Most likely meaning: “Should a man be burnt at the stakes? Will rain follow?”[3]

The Shang offered blood sacrifice for a good harvest of millet:

5. Chi-mao/question/petition/millet/to/Shih-jen/three/oxen pairs
Most likely meaning: “On the day of Chi-mao the oracle was asked if, to get a good harvest of millet, three pairs of oxen should be sacrificed to Shih-jen?

Shih-jen, the preferred object of such petitions, was the grandfather of the dynasty’s founder, and Chi-mao was his name date in the ancient Chinese decimal cycle.

Many oracle-bone inscriptions fail to mention any other sacrificial purpose than the

purification of an ancestral deity:

6. Chia-hsu/question/Hsuan/question/purification/Princess Hau/front/father I/promise/slave.
Most likely meaning: “On the day of Chia-hsu Hsuan divines (divined?): “Should Princess Hau be purified in front of [her late] father? Should a slave be sacrificed?”

7. Purification/before/Tsu-hsin,use/Ch’iang
Most likely meaning: “Should the purification take place before Tsu-hsin? Should a man of Ch’iang be sacrificed?

Men from the sheep-raising Ch’iang tribe seemed to have been the preferred source of human sacrifice. Sometimes, diviners presented the deities with a choice of animal or human sacrifice:

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8. Question/question/purification/before/Ting/three/oxen pairs/Ch’iang/ten
Most likely meaning: “Should the purification before Tsu-ting be done with the sacrifice of three oxen pairs and ten men of Ch’iang?

The Shang also divined the outcome of war:

9. Question/perhaps/king/going/fight/Hu…
Most likely meaning: “Should the king personally lead the military expedition against the Land of Hu?”

The following oracular question about going to war against Hu, suggests a choice of ancestral deities who should be asked:

10. Question/not/recruiting/fight/Hu Land
Question/not/recruit/man/three thousand
Question/recruit/man/thousand
Question/to/T’ang/petition
Question/petition/Hu Land/to/Shang-chia
Most likely meaning: “Should the people be recruited to fight against the Land of Hu? Should three-thousand or one thousand men be recruited? Should the petition for victory in the campaign against the Land of Hu be addressed to T’ang or Shang-chia?

Thanksgiving sacrifice was also divined. E.g.:

HsinTzu/question/K’o/question/wine/libation/we/reciprocation/Ta-chia/Tsu-i/ten/decapitation/ten/sheep pairs.

> Most likely meaning: “On the day of Hsin-szu K’o divined: ‘Should we offer wine? Should we offer ancestor Ta-chia and Tsu-i ten beheaded men and ten pairs of sheep to thank them?”

This oracle presented a choice between wine and human sacrifice. The meaning of the decapitation of sacrificial men is yet unknown. The Shang also performed oracles to find out the outcome of illness and what sacrifice should be offered for recovery. The questions the Shang dynasty diviners most often asked was, however, what sacrifice the ancestral spirit or nature deity preferred in response to a situation which is, in most cases, left unexplained, but, most likely, responded to a real or putative sacrificial crisis.

Some well-defined “nature” deities, such as river and mountain deities, required their own sacrifice. Unlike other ancient agricultural states, no sacrifice was ever offered to the sun or the moon. Instead, the river god Ho played an important part in ancient Chinese ritual, requiring his own set of animal and human sacrifices which were sunk, or buried on the river banks. Perhaps, in their agricultural endeavor, the Shang feared the capricious nature of the river more than the sun. Probably in the Shang, but definitely in the Chou dynasty, Ho required a yearly sacrificial marriage with a select virgin who, in a place called Yeh in the area of the Shang capital, was ritually sacrificed/married to Ho. She was placed on a raft and drowned.[4] She differed from other human victims in that she was a surrogate member, probably a precious one, the community was willing to “sacrifice” only to ensure its well-being. This practice was discontinued under pressure of Confucian “humanism” in the year 400 BC.

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As we have learned above, Shang dynasty sacrifice consisted in humans and animals and, to a lesser extent, wine and food (millet), and sometimes, as practiced later in Japan, tools, weapons and clothing. Sacrificial animals included dogs (traditionally interpreted as guides for the spirits, to help them during their hunts), and also sheep, oxen and pigs. Over one hundred dogs were buried underneath the city walls of the Shang capital. According to the pictographs archeologists have been able to decipher, there were in Shang thirty-seven categories of blood and food sacrifices. Some of them were completely or partially burned or buried. The total burning of sacrifice has usually been interpreted as a way to feed the spirits in the form of smoke climbing up the heavens. Humans were completely burned either to satisfy the ancestral appetite and, or, as scapegoats, to exonerate the community from evil. Partial burning may have had, in addition, the purpose of communal feasting. Some sacrificial victims were buried especially when they were addressed to an earth deity or, they were sunk into the water of a river deity.

Shang China seems to support Gans’ understanding that human sacrifice was not practiced *in illo tempore*, only later in agricultural “high culture”.[5] Tsung-Tung Chan believes that

human sacrifice was a relatively late practice belonging to an agrarian high culture and its centralized court and, therefore, cannot be found in more primitive local agricultural settings. There is also ample evidence of human funeral sacrifices which, by the tenth century BC, were gradually replaced by clay and wooden substitutions. According to the *Shih-ching*, they buried in all 117 men including three high dignitaries during the funeral of duke Mu.[6] In this particular area of China, such human sacrifice was abolished only in the year 384 B.C.E. and replaced, like in China's heartland, by clay and wooden figures.

As we can observe in other (e.g. the Aztecs) cultures as well, the most common Shang source of human sacrifice was war prisoners and, or, slaves, many of whom were natives of the sheep-raising Ch'iang tribe, the preferred source of human sacrifice for the Shang. A community tends to choose its sacrificial victims outside itself, as René Girard pointed out; prisoners of war, slaves, beggars, cripples, and other people at the fringe of society, being the favorite supplies.[7] Sociologically, such selection not only reflected the social order, but created it. The *Tso-chuan* reports that in the years 663 BC, 532 and 488, in Lu, a backward state continuing the Shang sacrificial system, war prisoners from a recent campaign were sacrificed.[8] Sacrificed war prisoners were sometimes mutilated (beheaded), although the meaning of such mutilation is still being disputed.

The hunchback, another favorite sacrificial victim, was believed to be the drought spirit among humans. According to the *Tso-chuan*, in the year 639 BC, the duke of Lu wanted to expose a hunchback to the heat of the sun during a severe drought. When his minister discouraged him, for reasons of humanity, he selected a shamaness but finally decided to close the market as a sacrifice. (Confucian ideology). Slaves must be understood not only as war prisoners, but useful laborers until sacrificed, but included people accused of crime, desertion, murder, etc. Other than the surrogate bride of the river deity, the way war prisoners were sacrificed at the ancestral shrine, does not seem to reflect Girard's understanding that such victims must first be totally integrated into the community before sacrificing them.[9] Integrating a relatively large number of war prisoners into the community would surely have been dangerous and uneconomical. It is more likely they were killed without delay.

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It is sufficiently clear that the kinds of sacrifice enumerated above were addressed to royal ancestors, offering them animals, humans, a choice between them, or both. Often, as the oracle bone inscriptions clearly indicate, these sacrifices were offered at the ancestor's name day.[10] Royal ancestors were believed to control the weather and the welfare (peace, harmony, etc.) of the state. They had the power to influence the course of nature. To overcome a sacrificial crisis, animals and or humans were sacrificed at the royal ancestral altar to an ancestral deity. The blood of the sacrifice was supposed to end drought, flooding, and other natural calamities believed to originate from dissatisfied ancestors, or, to obtain

from them the climactic conditions necessary for agriculture and human survival. Sacrifice was also offered as a prayer for victory in war. According to one oracle-bone inscription, at one occasion, one hundred prisoners of war were sacrificed as a prayer for victory.

The blood of a sacrificial victim was considered the most potent apotropaic, and was spilled upon an altar or sprayed towards the four earthly points of the compass. Oracle-bone inscriptions refer to sacrificial blood-letting ritual in its positive rather than negative sense, that is, as a purifying, cathartic and sacralizing force rather than a polluted and dreaded symbol of human violence.

Whereas human sacrifice was offered to ancestral deities, such sacrifice (including that of children and women) was also believed to strengthen the foundation (and pillars) of buildings, building gates (entrances), dikes, embankments and other water works. After he was caught in a battle that brought ruin to his kingdom, the crown-prince of Ts'ai, for example, was sacrificed to strengthen a dam, suggesting a possible correlation between sacrifice to the founders of the human order and to important buildings and public projects that uphold that order. The more important the construction, the more humans were sacrificed. Hundreds of human skeletons, sometimes with chariots and horses, were found at the site of the royal palace.

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The Shang especially offered sacrifice to the royal ancestors and other deities who had a stake either in the continuous welfare of the state or, in case of "ritual neglect", in causing harm to the state. The royal family worshipped the founder of the dynasty as an ancestor who continued to have an interest in its maintenance and, therefore, continued to be the center of attention. Also, these ancestors were thanked for good weather and harvests and for victory in battle, all in "thanksgiving" sacrifice. Conversely, the humans therefore blamed them for droughts, bad harvests, enemy invasions, or, for the curses they inflict upon the members of the elite. The role the Chinese attributed to their ancestors follows universal patterns. When social ills began to proliferate and clan relationships to crumble, when ritual was neglected and taboo broken, the ancestors were allegedly displeased with the living and caused natural disasters, nightmares, social disharmony and other ills. The leaders' ancestors, who have a stake in the order they had established, were particularly identified with natural calamities and social upheavals. Thus the ancestors were feared to cause natural calamities and worshiped to control them; they allegedly provoked as well as contained violence. From the viewpoint of generative anthropology, one can interpret the royal ancestor as the "first" violent deity who created a new order on the basis of "sacrificing" the old. As every royal successor's authority depended on the dynasty's founder, the maintenance of the new order continued to depend on the violence of its foundation which, in peacetime, was continued under the control of the sacrificial violence offered by the royal descendants.

In the way sacrifice is linked to royal ancestors, we discover an intrinsic system of reciprocity . The king's worldly authority seemed not only to depend upon, but to correspond to the ancestors' spiritual power. Therefore, in order for the combined king/ancestor to have sufficient power to maintain the state order, they had to be fed properly with nutritional sacrifice, the most potent food being, of course, raw or cooked meat. According to the *Tso-chuan*, ancestors, especially royal ancestors, had to be fed to keep them strong, like their living descendants. By this acquired strength, they could respond effectively to the demands and needs of the state.[11] If underfed, writes Girard about other archaic cultures, the god would waste away, or else, he will descend among men and lay claim to his nourishment with unexampled cruelty and ferocity.[12] If we understand the deities, like Girard did, as initially a "sacrifice" then the offer of sacrificial flesh and blood would mean feeding the god with his own "originary" substance.[13] This view is relevant to the Chinese experience insofar as, later, under Taoism and Buddhism, the deities' diet was changed to the less violent one of words and incense. The living, too, had to feed themselves well; behind an underfed human was an equally underfed deity and meagerness was taken as a sign or presage of a drought. Sacrifice was therefore a sharing of divine powers, ensuring longevity. This was also why the spirits of those who died premature, violent deaths were feared because they were supposed to take their still vibrant living energies with them into the world of the dead where, as evil ancestors or kuei, they were feared to curse the living and inflict illness.

A reciprocal "logical" parallelism seems to have determined the sacrificial system; the greater the calamity, the greater the required sacrifice; the greater the sacrifice the more likely it was answered; and the greater the bestowed favor of the deity, the greater the thanksgiving sacrifice the living offered it. Supernatural power seems to have depended not only on sacrifice, but on its amount. The greater the amount, the greater its effect. The greater the sacrifice, the greater the corresponding "magical" power of the spirit, to whom it was addressed, was supposed to grow. This perhaps explains human sacrifice as the ultimate sacrifice in the hierarchy of sacrificial values, and, most likely, as a later "derived" development.

The ritual language, too, reflected this reciprocal state; the same word being used for 'revenge', 'atonement' and thanksgiving'. This reciprocity may have contributed considerably to the kind of "give-and-take" that, under Confucianism, dominated Chinese social ideals. Veritable "deals" or covenants, based on a strict give-and-take, bound the living to their ancestors. Whoever it addressed, sacrifice has to be understood as a ritual, carried out in a ritual context. Scholarly opinion is divided as to who officiated in ritual. Oracle-bone divinations and, most probably, oracle-bone inscriptions were the domain of "official" diviners. Yet, according to Chou dynasty data, there were also both male and female shamans, whose functions are subject to controversy. Some may have served

“private”, others “public” interests. Some oracle-bone inscriptions, such as the following, refer to the practice of sacrificing shamanesses during droughts:

> 11. Perhaps/woman/Tsai/man/burning at the pyre/bringing/rain
> Most likely meaning: “Should the woman Tsai be burned at the stakes? Will this bring rain?”

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Conceivably, Tsai may have been a popular (non-official) shamaness accused to have caused the drought by evil sorcery.[14]

Some oracle-bone inscriptions suggest the existence of official shamans who, called wu, sacrificed to the supreme royal deity Ti. For example:

> 12. Chia-tzu/question/Wu/Ti/sacrifice
> Most likely meaning: “On the day of Chia-tzu the oracle was asked: Should Wu sacrifice to Ti?”

Or:

> 13. Wu/Ti sacrifice/a/dog
> Most likely meaning: “Should Wu offer a dog to Ti?”

Other than sacrificing to the highest royal deity, the wu were also entrusted with the placation of natural gods, such as the wind and earth. These shamans were not directly involved in oracle-bone divination, but, given the fact they were placed under state control under the Chou, they must have fulfilled important ritual state functions.

K.C. Chang suggested that the king himself was a shaman who asks his ancestors about wind, rain, rituals, war, hunts, and who divines, foretells, and dances to pray for rain, and also interprets his dreams.[15] Oracle-bone inscription indeed suggest that Shang kings danced and foretold the future, two activities which, in many archaic cultures, were the domains of shamans. It is possible, however, that such report was based on the activities of “professional” shamans under the king’s control. If Shang kings were truly shamans we would still have to offer a plausible definition of Chinese shamanism versus, say, Siberian shamanism. Scholarly opinion as to whether the king in fact practiced shamanism or used shamanic clairvoyants for his own political ends is sharply divided. We know that shamans concentrated around the royal palace and that, especially in case of succession disputes or rivalries, the contenders used shamans to claim legitimacy and eliminate rivals. False accusations must have resulted, as in Japan, in witch hunts, undermining orderly leadership succession. Once firmly established, Chinese leaders tried to subject shamanistic predictions to political control. Uncontrolled shamanism would undoubtedly have been a

mixed blessing for the early leaders because maintaining the state without controlling spontaneous oracles would seriously jeopardize the orderly foundations of the state. If the kings would have let shamans freely predict the outcome of important political and social issues, the state could only survive if the king himself was the chief shaman, or if he effectively controlled the delivery of oracular foretelling. We know that the official diviners who were in charge of oracle-bone divination and not the shamans. Oracle-bone divination was the domain of royal officials under the political control of the kings and not of the shamans. This is what led David Keatley to claim that the oracle-bone inscriptions were inscribed not before, but after the oracle, providing a historical record of the communication with the divine.[16] Whether such a posteriori inscriptions were truthful history remains an open question.

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To define Shang kingship as shamanistic is misleading, especially in view of the strong possibility that the Shang kings supervised most if not all politically sensitive oracular activity and were, no doubt, assisted by subservient oracle interpreters and other "morally pure," "loyal" officials. Conceivably, not all kings possessed the necessary shamanistic skills, nor did all have shamanistic inclinations, the use of "professional" shamans thereby becoming a sine qua non. Perhaps we should judge Shang shamanism in light of the Chou kings who placed the shamans under their political control, presumably to discourage ordinary people from sacrificing to state deities. It is easy to understand that such private sacrifice increased as central control weakened. Sacrifice and politics went hand in hand. Also, the difficulty in maintaining political control over shamanistic practice may have prompted the later Taoists to oppose shamanism and sacrifice, accusing the shamans of causing cosmic disharmony and earthly violence (succession struggles) and warning against its harmful effects on the state. It wanted to replace shamanistic practice with a state-controlled "shamanistic" bureaucracy, and sacrifice with an emphasis on "healing" and longevity, which it considered more beneficial for the state.

To maintain his state, the king had to control access to his ancestors (heaven), which is likely to have been the reason behind the designation, no doubt by a Shang king, of a supreme deity (Shang Ti), found in oracle-bone inscriptions. This was most probably, an abstract (neutral) royal ancestor superior to the ancestors of subordinate clans and squarely under the king's ritual control. The religious system had to correspond to the socio-political one and the ruler had to monopolize the communication between him and heaven for him to be able to maintain the state.

The kind of archeological evidence as summarized above strongly suggests that the Shang state was held together by ritual. Ritual rules and obligations were in fact law, the legal system developing out of ritual as in other cultures. The ancestral temple was the center of ritual and therefore the center of state affairs. In tune with the importance or "centrality" of

ancestral worship, the ancestral shrine constituted a center of social and political activities, where divinatory questions were asked, the place where important decisions were made, where warriors received their portions of meat before going into battle, where, after the war, the prisoners of war were paraded, where those who were not enslaved for labor, were sacrificed, and where quarrels were mediated and judged. It was the sacred center of the state where most if not all "significant" activity took place. It was a place on which depended the community's very existence. This place corresponds well to Gans's "sacred center of signification".

We can further conjecture that the defense of an ancestral temple was paramount to the existence of the state; its destruction or defilement meant the end of it. Taking its symbol across a borderline meant a declaration of war. Ancestral worship determined all those elements that allow leaders to "legitimately" claim and control a state, to establish the necessary socio-political hierarchy. Myths were tightly attached to the temple; they explained the virtues of the dynasty's founder(s), providing the raison d'etre of the ancestral cult. The ritual also determined the calendar, that is, the measuring of time as an important device of socio-political control.

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An ethical system also emerged from early Chinese ancestral ritual. This was not the freedom and equality Gans discovered in the "originary" human, but one which determining the relationship between king and subject, typical of the socio-political hierarchy of the early, as well as of the later Chinese states. The kings' ancestors become the ethical models of political and religious virtue the ruling kings allegedly inherit. Therefore, at least in principle, the kings merit the loyalty of their subjects because of the virtues they were supposed to embody, having inherited them, in direct patrilineal descent, from their ancestors. The myths portray the dynasty's founder as a person of exceptional virtue, a tradition the ritual wants to preserve. The *Li Chi* states:

> According to the institutes of the sage kings about sacrifices; sacrifice should be offered to him who had given good laws to the people; to him who had labored to the death in the discharge of his duties; to him who had boldly and successfully met great calamities; and to him who had warded off great evils…Only men and things of this character were admitted into the sacrificial canon.[17]

Maybe we can discover here the seeds for the retrospective nature of most of Chinese political ideology, that is, rather than establishing their own moral order, present rulers had to abide by the ethical standards established by the mythical founders. In this way knowledge of the past, knowing the virtuous deeds of one's ancestors, became one of the requisites of political authority. Such emphasis on ritual virtue may have been a

reinterpretation of the founding myths imposed by later generations of Confucian scholars/officials. First Shang King T'ang's abortive self-sacrifice – he is reported to have cut his hair and nails and was about to offer himself to the pyre as a self-sacrifice to overcome a severe drought were it not for a sudden rain that saved his life – may have been such a myth assembled and aggrandized according to Confucian ideology in a later age. This myth may have some historical basis, at least the king's cutting his hair and fingernails, since we know the Shang kings to have conducted their own sacrifices.

Gans's theory on the origin of language encourages us to think seriously about the way or ways the Chinese written language developed. The earliest Shang symbols found on offertory vessels are generally understood as emblems or names, most likely those of the clans' ancestral deities, and, or, that of the clans themselves. Clan or lineage leaders may also have devised such emblems to enhance their identity vis-a-vis other clans or the royal clan, especially when ancestral worship was still, by and large, a private affair. These symbols were, no doubt, invested with divine power and used only vis-a-vis the divine. They are Gans's "uniquely significant" naming of the center or whatever the center renders meaningful.[18] They were devices to make the deities present, or, vice-versa, to represent the communities vis-a-vis their deities. Yet, like ritual or the king/priest, they tend to blur the separation of center and those who communicate with it. Language was believed to have had a divine origin and, therefore, was the only way to communicate with the deities. This symbolic communication, according to Gans, appealed to both deity and man, substituting, like ritual itself, the absent deity.[19] This name or emblem is a sign that not only signifies something, but is also meant to influence something that, by its own essence, can never be completely controlled. Beyond the fundamental question whether this sign was closer initially to the divine than it was to the human, the Chinese experience suggests an oscillation, however subtle, between the divine and the human, leaning toward one or the other depending on the occasion and needs. Since animism depends on an identity between sign and the object it signifies, the closeness of sign and deity, for example, may explain the identity that one discovers in China as well as in other cultures between the shaman/priest and his deity, and between the name and its "sacred" substance.

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If the birth of language is to be found in ritual, then the birth of music must have been coeval. Music gave rhythm to language and dance and must have been an important part of shamanistic practice. The *Li Chi* states something one discovers in many other, including Western cultures: "When one used words in song, one drags them out. One gives words to things which have impressed one, but, because words are not enough, one adds exclamations and sighs. When one still wants to express something more, then one moves spontaneously one's hands and feet in dance."[20] Such "performance" is to be understood as the origin of Chinese poetry, music, dance, and, later, of the theater, originally offered by shamans and, as we have seen, by the kings themselves, to their ancestors. This was done

not only to “entertain” the deities or an audience, but to attract a deity onto the dancer/musician, an aspect many other archaic cultures share.

The Chinese language may have started with the “ostensive” but we must keep in mind that we know nothing about the development of the Chinese spoken language, only about the written one, as it is inscribed on ritual bronze vessels and oracle-bones. Paleoglyphic investigation seems indeed to suggest that the written signs were, above all, names, that is, according to Gans’s theory, an “ostensive”, used in China exclusively to communicate with the “absolute center”. The control of writing was perhaps as important socially and politically as the control of technology (casting bronze ritual vessels and tools), all of which were strict royal prerogatives.

Oracle-bone inscriptions, however, mark a “later” development into “mature” language or narrative. This narrative continued to be based on the ostensive, especially, because of the Chinese notorious indistinction of a name/word/noun from a verb, adjective, preposition or adverb. The Chinese language continues to be one of the simplest systems among advanced languages, determining grammatical function simply by the position of a word within the narrative. The narrative is in this sense merely a juxtaposition of various “ostensive” words which, according to their positions, can be understood as nouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs. The same applies to those words which, depending on their positions, function as interrogative, negative, perfective, pronominal, prepositional, and conjunctive particles, or, as devices introducing a relative clause.

There is another important possibility we need to take into consideration. The oracle-bone “written” language may, in all likelihood, have been a highly coded and esoteric language under the exclusive control of royal officials. Conceivably, only they had access to this language, only they mastered the code and only they could manipulate it to benefit (and sometimes harm) the state. The people who possessed these writing skills were both mediums and ritual scribes. How and when such a “secret” code was established, or, how long it took for it to develop, we don’t know. Eighty-eight pre-oracle-bone symbols have been found in early Shang inscriptions, sixteen of which at an other archeological site, indicating that, in the early stages, only a portion of the “vocabulary” may have been a “universally” shared one. There was a great leap from there to the ca. 4500 uniform symbols Tsung-Tung Chang counted in oracle-bone inscriptions.[21] The gap between names inscribed on offertory vessels and oracle-bone inscriptions prevents us from being able to trace the writing system through each important developing stage. The post-oracle-bone development of the written language is equally untraceable. We only know that poetry, but perhaps also to a degree, the writing of myth and history, developed from oracle-bone inscription. It also influenced later poetry which was controlled, as the oracular bone inscriptions were, by the kings’ and emperors’ bureaucracy.

We are equally unable to ascertain, at present, in what way this written language had once been spoken language; perhaps it never was spoken and only later came to be spoken as the ritual court language. As such it would have been a response to the traditions of the written language, rather than the oral. There is no doubt, however, that many Chinese ideographs originated in ritual and represent ritual gestures, speech, and ritual implements.

That the post-Shang Chinese official/scholars substituted ritual with language is beyond doubt. Opposed to both blood sacrifice and spiritual mediumism, Taoism only offered words. The Taoist "written" petition rites addressed to the Celestial Bureau of the government, indicate the degree of Taoist reliance on the written word more than on the shamanistic spoken word, encouraging development toward religious textualization or codification.

It is evident that political authority emanated from ritual. Though referring mainly to the following Chou dynasty, the *Li Chi* (Li Ki) indicates that the Chinese were keenly aware of the political use of ritual:

> Of all the methods for the good ordering of men there is none more urgent than the use of *li*. *Li* are of five kinds, and there is none of them more important than… *chi* [rituals].[22]

In typical Confucian way, the text correlates ritual and virtue, so that, the people who conduct ritual, who are the ritualists and have ritual know-how, are also looked upon as people of virtue imbued with political authority:

> [Rituals]…are not a thing common to a man from without; it issues from within him, and has its birth in the heart. When the heart is deeply moved, expression is given to it by ceremonies; and hence, only men of ability and virtue can give complete exhibition to the idea of [rituals].[23]

This made it possible for the conquerors-to-be to blame a sacrificial crisis on the previous ruler for having lost virtue by neglecting the rites, and that his elimination was legitimate. The following Chou dynasty was established precisely when, during a drought and the resulting sacrificial crisis, Chou Wu Wang overthrew the last Shang king on whom he blamed the neglect of ancestral worship.

Let us throw additional light on Shang practice by directing our attention to the Chou dynasty and investigate Chou continuation of, and deviation from Shang practice. The early Chou kings followed by and large the culture of the Shang and therefore maintained the sacrificial system basically as it was. Yet changes are visible; we just don't know whether they came about by sheer evolution or revolution. It is to be expected that a "violent"

change in leadership would legitimize a break with tradition. On the other hand, there is also considerable continuation of traditions that depend on the virtuous founders of the previous dynasty or dynasties.

13

The Chou tried to establish their socio-political order by juxtaposing and, at the same time, ordering the divine hierarchy to match the human one. In order to do so, the Chou established the *t'ien*(heaven) of the ancestors, but, made it a political center to which only the kings had unhindered access, claiming legitimacy by blaming that the last Shang king (Ti Wu-i) had despised it.[24] The Chou differentiated more between heaven and earth perhaps as a result of socio-political hierarchy and tabooization of the political prerogatives of the kings. They delegated the gods to heaven or to the earth, that is, to spheres where only the kings and their (priestly) representatives had access. The *Kuo Yu*, a fourth-century BC. text speaks about a separation of heaven and earth:

> Anciently, men and spirits did not intermingle. At that time there were certain persons who were so perspicacious, single-minded, and reverential that their understanding enabled them to make meaningful collation of what lies above and below, and their insight to illumine what is distant and profound. Therefore the spirits would descend upon them. The possessors of such powers were, if men, called *hsi* (shamans), and, if women, *wu* (shamanesses). It is they who supervised the positions of the spirits at the ceremonies, sacrificed to them, and otherwise handled religious matters. As a consequence, the spheres of the divine and the profane were kept distinct. The spirits sent down blessings on the people, and accepted from them their offerings. There were no natural calamities.In the degenerate time of Shao-hao (traditionally put at the twenty-sixth century BC.), men and spirits became intermingled, with each household indiscriminately performing for itself the religious observances which had hitherto been conducted by the shamans. As a consequence, men lost their reverence for the spirits, the spirits violated the rules of men, and natural calamities arose. Hence the successor of Shao-hao, Chuan-hsu, charged Ch'ung, Governor of the South, to handle the affairs of heaven in order to determine the proper place of the spirits, and Li, Governor of Fire, to handle the affairs of Earth, in order to determine the proper place of men. And such is what is meant by cutting the communication between Heaven and Earth.[25]

Despite the idealization of the past, this text provides a plausible rational for the "political control of heaven", allowing only government officials to communicate with it.

Whereas the Shang used their "writing system" exclusively in ritual, that is in most cases,

divinatory rites, the Chou secularized the system to the degree that it satisfied both religious and secular (state) affairs. Also, this shift resulted in a more structured ritual banquet during which the sacrificial animal was eaten in a way to create and maintain social hierarchy and strengthen the social fabric. The correspondence between human and divine satiation was thus carried on by the Chou.

Through this process, the emphasis shifted, however slightly, from the deities to the human sphere and to the esthetic/ethical "performance" of ritual, and, in the case of sacrifice, to the human consumption of the sacrificial animal, or other representative foodstuff, in ritual banquets. The spirits are no longer the main guests but important human guests fed to create political consensus and hegemony. During unexplained phenomena, one no longer questioned the divine so much as to change the ritual, the divine thereby being given a more permanent and stable status. This emphasis on performance will, in its own turn and according to its own dynamics, change into the ethical institutions of Confucianism valuing virtue over ritual effect. The Confucian concept li (rite, ritual) assumed a socio-ethical value, that of virtue as the correct attitude toward the ancestral shrine. The Confucian concept of filial piety undoubtedly developed out of ancestral worship/sacrifice at the ancestral shrine.

14

According to the *Chou Li*, the founder of the Chou dynasty set up a Ministry of Ritual with a number of subdivisions indicating the ritual activities the court deemed necessary to control:

- Officials in charge of the maintenance and furnishings of temples
- Officials in charge of tombs
- Court musicians
- Diviners
- Invocators
- Ritual scribes
- Palace scribes
- Officials in charge of ritual carriages
- Temple officials outside the capital[26]

This ritual bureaucracy comprised at least 3,763 persons, plus several offices (e.g. spirit mediums) whose number is unknown.[27] Accordingly, the spirit mediums were either placed outside the Ministry or subordinated under its various officials. The organization of the Ministry does not suggest that the spirit mediums were an entirely independent group, outside of government control. Yet they seemed to have been of low status, priority being given to the diviners in charge of ancestor worship rather than on the spirit mediums in charge of nature worship. According to the*Chou Li*, the shamans were squarely under government control: "When the king offers condolence, they together with the Invocators

precede him." And in case of the wu (shamaness): "When the queen offers condolence, they together with the invocators precede her… In all great calamities of the state, they pray, singing and wailing."[28] The spirit mediums continued to fulfill important ritual functions for the state including rain-making dance and exorcisms. They bore the titles of deities and lent their bodies to them (spirit possession), which suggests their identity with the divine, and with the political world only if this possession was politically manipulated. This was different for the invocators who, in charge of proper ritual demeanor and sequence, represented the needs of the government.

The Chou began what the Han (206 BC – AD 8 and 25-220) completed, namely the subordination under the state of all religion with the emperor as the high-priest of the nation. The Chou appointment of a master of ritual became, under the Han, the minister of sacrifice. Each dynasty changed the ritual system. The Ch'in ordered a general survey of all ritual activity in the state, from which only those that confirmed the overlordship of the Ch'in were tolerated. *Ti* (highest imperial title probably deriving from the Shang "Shang Ti") came to signify "divine emperor" or "emperor by divine right". The religious system had to reflect the state order and vice-versa. Private sacrifice was prohibited. Ritual became professionalized under ritual experts serving the state.

In conclusion, one may say that the earliest Chinese statehood experiences were heavily based on ritual of a kind I discussed above. In order to maintain the state, the ritual had to demarcate between the divine and human realms, government officials occupying a mediating position, whereas the king himself came to be identified "animistically" with the center. What was important for the king was to separate the divine center from the outside; the king maintaining a monopoly over it. To establish and maintain their authority, the kings had to identify with the divine center, that is, with his patrilineal ancestors. By virtue of this identity, the king controlled the communication with his ancestors through an esoteric system of symbolic communication. By virtue of this identity, his laws were believed to have had a divine origin. As long as he maintained order, this order was seen as the blessing the king's divine ancestors bestowed upon the state. Identical with the center, the king becomes the source of signification, of peace and order. In case of ritual/cosmic crisis, the king substituted animals and humans for his own sacrifice.

15

In the early Chinese states, however, the emphasis is not on the originary control of human violence, but on the natural forces which, under the control of the king's ancestral deities, threaten the state. The control of human violence is only indirectly implied in this perhaps more positive system of deferring human violence onto natural violence. Yet, in all royal ritual, the maintenance of the human order was a central concern of the king/priest. Since sheer martial force could not guarantee continued order, political authority and charisma had to come out of the divine center with which the king identified himself. Even this

“scheme” did not ensure political eternity. During major sacrificial crisis, the king was vulnerable to rebellion, justified by the center and its clever sacrificial/ritual, oracular, and linguistic manipulation. Overthrowing the king, as can be observed when the Shang changed to the Chou and during subsequent dynastic changes, the “last kings” became the real sacrificial victims, who, by neglecting their proper rites, have lost legitimacy and, have, like some of their African counterparts, become the system’s outsiders eligible for sacrifice. This regicidal sacrifice would absorb all impurities and potential for violence and shift the control of the natural forces to a new, legitimate representative of the center.[29] The new king was not only appointed as the new representative of the center, but, on the basis of this newly acquired identity, was charged “by the center” of writing the history of the former dynasty. By so doing he legitimized his newly acquired authority by pointing out how the last kings of the preceding dynasty had lost their legitimacy (mandate) by breaking ritual taboo. Thus, it was not the break of taboo which engendered the new order, as we observe it in ancient Judaic myth, but a legitimate re-establishment of taboo.

The unmistakable trend we discover in the early Chinese experience, is the political control of the divine “center” upon which the welfare of the state seemed to hang. Most Chinese emperors continued to identify with *t’ien* (heaven) the symbols of which were embroidered on their garments and signified by the palaces they inhabited and rituals they performed. The natural successor of this system is the bureaucratization of the divine in the Han dynasty, which gave government ranks and titles to a corresponding hierarchy of deities. In this development, the emphasis shifts from a “center” as the divine source of the human order to one combining control of the natural forces with that of human order thus trying to sustain the agricultural productivity which supported the state. The deities of the “center” turn into the ancestral spirits of the kings and other prominent families. The new king replaced the older deities of the “center” with his own ancestors. He cannot tolerate the continuation of separate deities related to a different or previous power base. Yet, as all founding kings embody universal virtues, each new king had to base his order on a combination of preceding founders. His rebellion against their later descendants becomes legitimate only if he can prove a spiritual discontinuity between them and their own founding ancestors, regardless of the blood that linked them.

In order to assume control within a state, the king must appropriate control over the “center”. Without this, the Chinese state if not any early state, would have been impossible. This may be a “normal”, to-be-expected development of early state formation. His position within the system is therefore highly volatile. To avoid undermining his state, he appoints ritual officials who can cushion some of this volatility. Since natural calamities never last forever, the king was able to claim that his power and control over “heaven” enabled him to overcome the “ritual crisis”. The state functioned squarely within this juxtaposition of human and divine in the absolute center of signification. The state ideology emerged from this center; it gave the king or any other claimant the ideological justification for authority, rebellion and war, and, by the same token, for the establishment of a new and “corrected”

order.

16

In view of the Chinese experience, The Gansian theory based on René Girard's pioneering work, finds a fruitful new testing ground. Both Girard and Gans developed their theory on the basis of Western traditions. The non-Western, Chinese tradition has strengthened rather than weakened their theory of the centrality of ritual, especially sacrificial ritual. The Chinese experience confirms that sacrifice played an important role in state formation, in the ordering of human society and in the control of human violence. This suggests that a state, like Shang and Chou China, could not have been successful without the violence control mechanism a state could provide. We might discover differences between "East" and "West" in the ways this mechanism was put in place, but we also discover the paradox of a state as a violence-controlling and avoiding organism. Paradoxically, the state could only avoid violence by perpetuating it in ritual periodicity. The archaic Chinese experience seems to confirm the universality of sacrificial ritual as a civilizing force. Like other nations, however, modern China carries on the "historical" burden of its violent "ritual" past as we have learned from recent events, and this, despite the non-violent, non-metaphysical Confucian ideology that has dominated much of China's state ideology.

17

Notes

1. I owe this information to Hung-Hsiang Chou, "Chinese Oracle Bones," *Scientific American*, vol. 240, no. 4 (April, 1979) pp. 135-51.(back)

2. Hsi was a mythical ancestor of the Shang royal clan.(back)

3. These examples have been adopted from Tsung-Tsung Chang, *Der Kult der Shang-Dynastie im Spiegel der Orakelinschriften – Eine palaographische Studie zur Religion im archaischen China*(Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1970) p. 34ff.(back)

4. For further discussion, see *Der Kult der Shang-Dynastie*, p. 167ff.(back)

5. *The End of Culture – Toward a Generative Anthropology* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1985) p. 137ff. (back)

6. James Legge, transl., *The She King*, The Chinese Classics, vol. 4, Reprinted edition, Hongkong University Press, p. 199.(back)

7. *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977) p. 254.(back)

8. James Legge, transl., *The Ch'un Ts'ew with The Tso Chuen*, The Chinese Classics, vol. 5, part 1, p. 117 (as a result of a solar eclipse); p.167 and footnote, p. 177; p. 633 and footnote on p. 635.(back)

9. *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 272.(back)

10. See on this, K.C. Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1983) p. 97 and p. 110.(back)

11. James Legge, transl., *The Ch'un Ts'ew with the Tso Chuen*, p. 613. See also, Werner Eichhorn, *Die Religionen Chinas* (Stuttgart, Berlin, Koln, Mainz: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1973) p. 40 and Tsung-Tsung Chang, *Der Kult der Shang-Dynastie*, p. 130.(back)

12. *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 266.(back)

13. *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 266.(back)

14. This is the opinion of Tsung-Tung Chang, *Der Kult der Shang-Dynastie*, p. 250ff.(back)

15. *Art, Myth, and Ritual*, p. 45 and p.47.(back)

16. *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronze-Age China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1978).(back)

17. James Legge, transl., *Li Ki* in *The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 27 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885) pp. 26-28.(back)

18. *Originary Thinking*, p. 64ff.(back)

19. *Originary Thinking*, p. 94.(back)

18

20. Transl., Seraphin Couvreur, *Li chi: Mémoires sur les bienséances et les cérémonies…* Tome II (Paris: Cathasia, 1950) pp. 113-14.(back)

21. *Der Kult der Shang-Dynastie*, p. 4.(back)

22. Legge, *Li Ki*, p. 236.(back)

23. Legge, *Li Ki*, p. 236.(back)

24. Arthur Waley, transl., *The Book of Songs* (London: Allen & Unwin, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937) p. 262ff. See also W. Eichhorn, *Die alte Chinesische Religion und das*

Staatkultwesen, Handbuch der Orientalistik, Vierte Abteilung, Vierter Band, 1. Abschnitt (Leiden/Koln: E.J. Brill, 1976) p. 39ff.(back)

25. From Derk Bodde, "Myths of ancient China," *Mythologies of the Ancient World*, ed. Samuel N. Kramer (New York: Doubleday, 1961).(back)

26. See on this, Lothar von Falkenhausen, "Reflections on the political Role of Spirit Mediums in early China: Two *wu* Officials in the *Zhou li*," forthcoming in *Early China*, no. 20. Von Falkenhausen argues that this early Chou dynasty ritual bureaucracy may have been projected on the Chou by ideologues of the Warring States period.(back)

27. This figure may be exaggerated. See "Reflections on the Political Role of Spirit Mediums in early China," p. 5.(back)

28. Sun Yirang, *Zhou Li Zengyi*, Sibu Beiyao ed. (Shanhai: Zhonghua, 1927, revised Taibei) 50:20a-21b.(back)

29. Wang Mang (r. 9-23) was a notable exception. He conquered the former Han without bloodshed, empasizing therefore, his moral virtues and virtuous conduct. His reign was exceptionally short-lived. (back)