

Pre-Confucian Heaven

Chapter I

The central theory of this study holds that it is not possible to understand the functional meaning of the term “*t’ien*” in early Ruist texts without grasping the depth of the intellectual and practical commitments of Ruists to Chou Dynasty ritual: *li*. That primary commitment is itself a puzzle. How is it possible that the foremost philosophy of China should be grounded on the ascription of cardinal value to what were, in the final analysis, accidental patterns of behavior particular to a single historical era? If we are to argue the cogency of a ritual-centered portrait of early Ruism, it is necessary to demonstrate not merely the evidence for such a claim, but its basic plausibility. In this chapter, we will sketch an outline account of the historical background that made Confucius’ celebration of ritual a logical response to the intellectual demands of his time. Part of the analysis involves a discussion of the general pervasiveness of ritual behavior in pre-Confucian China and its social function. Concern with ritual was no Ruist innovation, although the notion of ritual as a focal category of value most likely was.

But the particular historical circumstances behind the emergence of ritual as a philosophical focus are also central to our inquiries concerning T’ien. Confucius’ turn to ritual *li* was directly related to the discrediting of a belief that had served as the basic anchor of value during the early Chou: the belief in an omnipotent and omnibenevolent power guaranteeing social order—T’ien. The rise of *li* as a cardinal value can be seen as a function of the fall of T’ien.

1. The Ritual Antecedents of Ruism

The central role that ritual plays in the early stages of social organization is well known. One anthropologist has speculated that its symbolic systems of activity provide for human beings the sorts of coded information that are transmitted genetically as instinct in other animal species (Geertz 1973:92-3). Another point of view holds that ritual codes are one medium through which a human community is able to sustain an efficient interaction with the stable ecosystem in which it lives (Rappaport 1971:71).¹

The nature of these theories alone suggests our growing awareness of the enormous importance that ritual can play in society. Paul Wheatley has discussed the role of ritual in the genesis of urban communities in these terms:

Whenever, in any of the seven regions of primary urban generation [including China] we trace back the characteristic urban form to its beginnings we arrive not at a settlement that is dominated by commercial relations, a primordial market, or at one that is focused on a citadel and archetypal fortress, but rather at a ceremonial complex (1971:225).

Evidence from the earliest period of Chinese civilization of which we have written record, the Shang Dynasty (c. 1766-1045 B.C.), suggests that Chinese culture was, from a very early time, highly ritualized. The Shang rulers, who presided for many centuries as hegemon over a confederacy of tribal units, left records in the form of divination inscriptions, known as oracle texts.² These inscriptions, unearthed by archeologists during this century, afford us a detailed view of certain aspects central to the concerns of the Shang ruling house, particularly matters of religious practice.³

The religious picture revealed through the oracle texts is extraordinarily complex, particularly in light of the fact that the baroque network of ritual we are shown pertains only to the royal house of the Shang: popular religion is not accessible to us. The Shang ruler was responsible for maintaining sacrifices to a bewildering number of nature deities, culture heroes, and royal ancestors, the last group ever growing.⁴ By the eleventh century B.C. the king was obliged, on every day of the year, to stage a major ceremony marking the annual sacrifice to a prominent royal deity.⁵

The religious obligations of the Shang royal house reflected the ritual-centered nature of Shang society. Communities of priests and diviners bustled about the capital, and as Wheatley has noted, the demand for ritual artifacts of jade and bronze—which dazzle our eyes in museums today—made the ritual industries the focus of technological innovation for late Shang society (Wheatley 1971:73).⁶

During the eleventh century B.C. a tribe on the Western periphery of the Shang confederacy, the Chou, grew dissatisfied with its subordinate role. Under a leader known to history as King Wen, Chou political power seems to have begun a period of rapid growth.⁷ Under King Wen's son, King Wu (The Martial King), the Chou revolted against their Shang overlords. In 1045 B.C., on the plain of Mu-yeh outside the walls of the Great City of Shang, King Wu, tradition tells us, led his troops in a great dance of war, and, on the following day, the Chou were the rulers of the Central Kingdom.⁸

With the coming of the Chou, Chinese civilization experienced fundamental changes in social and political structure. The early Chou rulers

were not content to maintain the loose tribal hegemony that seems to have characterized the Shang. Immediately after the conquest, King Wu and his successors began policies of mass resettlement and political enfeoffment that soon resulted in direct control by members of the royal house or their stalwarts over most of the territory of the Chinese cultural sphere.⁹

This redrawing of the political landscape opened a remarkable period of stability in China. From the middle of the reign of King Ch'eng in the eleventh century B.C. to the reign of King Yi in the early ninth century, the historical record is remarkably blank. Although occasional crises of royal succession and military setbacks do occur, these seem to have been well-spaced in the overall context of political calm, and in the retrospective eye of historical tradition, they served only to accent the dominant theme of tranquility.¹⁰ What stands out is the gradual consolidation and expansion of the Chou polity under a succession of comparatively capable kings and regents.¹¹ This century and a half, as featureless as utopia, is the true backdrop of the Ruist vision of the world.

1.1. The Three Pillars of the Western Chou

In the view of later Ruists, living amidst the decay of the Chou social order, the early centuries of the Chou Dynasty represented the acme of human potential.¹² This period of the Western Chou (1045-771 B.C.), as it is known, came to be regarded by later generations as a golden age of peace and virtue. This reverent view is not surprising. The Western Chou kings successfully administered a unified empire long before any entity of comparable size and duration had been created in the West. The early Chou Dynasty *was* remarkable.¹³

The architecture of the Chou polity was sustained by three pillars of social order: the institution of the kingship, the institution of hereditary succession to political office or social occupation, and the unifying force of a state religious system centered on the king and his god, T'ien. These constituted consensus foundations for value in Western Chou society.

The innovative political program of King Wu, along with salutary contributions of the Duke of Chou, who succeeded him as regent, served to strengthen the power and raise the prestige of the early kings far beyond their Shang predecessors.¹⁴ In terms of the mechanics of social stability, the pseudofeudal structure of Chou political administration combined with normal forces of social inertia to produce a society firmly committed to the notion of hereditary social roles, a pattern that must have made Western Chou life comfortably predictable.

The kingship and hereditary "feudal" structure were the practical bases of Chou social order. But their legitimacy and intellectual power rested upon the third pillar of the early Chou: the explicit claim that Chou rule was

no more than an agency for the benevolent will of T'ien, and that government was, in effect, an organ for the discharge of religious responsibility. During the early centuries of social tranquility, the benign image of T'ien seemed plainly visible in a succession of adequate rulers. When the quality of Chou rule declined in the ninth century B.C. the nagging riddle that began to undermine beliefs and values was not how the House of Chou could decay, but how a benevolent T'ien could allow a decadent house to retain the throne. The debasement of the ruling king entailed the debasement of the ruling god, and this is the impetus that set philosophical thought in motion.

However, even during the brightest days of T'ien and the Chou kings, the ritual patterns to which philosophy would first turn as a new ground for value were being woven.

1.2. The Patterning of Chou Society

The three pillars of the Western Chou anchored that society for two centuries. And during that period, encircling each of these pillars grew a network of highly stylized political, religious, and social etiquette, mirroring throughout the Chou polity the affinity for ritual behavior that seems to have typified the Shang.

The intricacy of the ritual system of the Western Chou is probably difficult to overstate. Throughout the period we see a growing profusion of the paraphernalia of ritual, particularly bronze ritual vessels. Nearly all contemporary inscriptions of any length describe religious or political ceremonies, often in great detail and invariably in language itself highly stylized.¹⁵ Even allowing for the exaggerated detail in later Ruist accounts of Chou ceremonies, the question can only be the degree to which ritual constituted the grammar of social intercourse among the elite, not the fact that it did.¹⁶

A single detail reveals much about this aspect of Chou culture. The ritual articulation of Chou society is reflected in a passage in the *Analects* in which Confucius comments: "The Chou was a mirror of the previous two eras; how rich were its patterns (*wen*)!" (A:3.14). The word "*wen*," which we will see later was a key term in Ruist ritual doctrines, was used in the Western Chou to denote a type of personal virtue.¹⁷ The original meaning of the term is revealing. The early graph pictured an outstretched human body with an outsized chest, upon which appeared a pattern whose particular form might vary.¹⁸ Inscriptional and later textual evidence indicates that the graph may have depicted a dancer costumed as a bird with a patterned feather breast.¹⁹ On sacrificial vessels of the Western Chou period, the word commonly is used to honor a deceased ancestor, sometimes in parallel with the word "*huang*," a term also drawn from dance.²⁰

“Pattern” denotes the original sense of the term “*wen*,” and its positive connotations are conveyed by the choice of a ritual symbol for the graph.²¹ The applications of the word in extended senses of “beautiful,” “cultured” and “honored” reflect broadening of the term from an aesthetic notion to an ethical one. Its centrality to Western Chou civilization is reflected in the fact that “*wen*” was the word selected as the posthumous name of King Wen, the founder of the dynasty, father to King Wu.²²

All this suggests the care with which the Chou ruling class relied upon aesthetic criteria of ritual conduct to shape social behavior. Yet the Western Chou people probably did not consciously view themselves as a “ritual society,” or conceive of ritual as a distinct category. Our evidence suggests that not until later did the term used to mean “ritual,” “*li*,” come to have a generic sense.²³ During the period of the Western Chou itself, ritual codes were not likely stressed as sources legitimizing action and status. Positive bases of value were provided by the pillars of kingship, hereditary roles, and, ultimately, the sanction of T’ien. Ritual was not perceived as the distinguishing characteristic of the Western Chou until the pillars of the era had largely decayed. But once they had, it was logical that Chou ritual codes should inherit their role as value standards.

2. T’ien as the King’s God

According to tradition, at the time of the Chou conquest, King Wu and his supporters legitimized their action in overthrowing the Shang by claiming that the Chou had simply acted as the agents of T’ien. This claim, known as the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven, asserted that T’ien was an omnipotent guarantor of tranquility and justice in the Central Kingdom. T’ien fulfilled its guarantee by intervening occasionally in human affairs whenever the virtue of the ruling house of China declined beyond a critical level. On such occasions, the Chou founders explained, T’ien would effectively order the most virtuous house in the land to displace the offending royal line and succeed to the throne. The claim was simply proved: had omnipotent T’ien not wished the Chou to occupy the throne, it would not have enabled the conquest to occur.²⁴

These arguments were effective in reconciling the peoples of the Shang polity to Chou rule. But they had yet another function. Whereas the Shang king had been merely chief priest to the high gods, the Mandate of Heaven theory made the Chou king T’ien’s executor on earth.²⁵ T’ien and the king were now nearly indistinguishable.²⁶ During the period of vigorous Chou rule, T’ien was virtually the personal deity of the king. Only the king was permitted to have intercourse with T’ien through sacrifice. When T’ien was spoken of by others, it was always with reference to the king, or to affairs of

state under the king's direction. People who were not members of the royal house neither sacrificed to nor prayed to T'ien. In terms of function, T'ien was practically reduced to the king.²⁷

The identification of T'ien and king is marked by their significant coincidence of powers and interests, as is revealed in contemporary inscriptional texts. One of the kings, probably King K'ang (r. 1005-977 B.C.), exhorts an appointee in these terms: "Steady and diligent, remonstrate from dawn to dusk; exhaust yourself in service, fearing the awesomeness of T'ien."²⁸ T'ien will punish those who do not serve the king well, and the executor of that punishment will surely be the king himself.

The point is made even more clearly by the *Pan kuei* inscription. There the king sends his generals off to war with the order: "Within three years settle the eastern lands so that none is not peaceful, assured of the awesomeness of T'ien."²⁹ Yet it will not be T'ien they hold in awe, but the king's army. A general responds, "These people have foolishly courted disaster; they are all deaf to T'ien's orders, and so will perish."³⁰ Yet the orders they ignore are not T'ien's but the king's.³¹

The identification of T'ien and king naturally helped legitimize the Chou claim to the throne. What is often overlooked is that the stable rule provided by the early Chou kings legitimized T'ien's choice. The king and T'ien were linked in the action of good government, and under these conditions, it was possible for a sense of T'ien as an ethically prescriptive force to grow.³² During the heyday of the Western Chou, political success gradually strengthened the dual belief in the legitimacy of the Chou order, and in the omnipotent goodness of the god who had mandated it.

2.1. T'ien as a Royal Adversary

The vigorous rule of the early Chou kings legitimized T'ien, the king's god. But from the mid-ninth century B.C. the fortunes of the royal house went into a steep decline. The border "barbarians" were no longer subjugated with ease, the Chou kings attracted increasing disrespect, one even being exiled, and internal dissension arose. In 771 B.C., the dynasty was forced to flee the capital and relocate in Lo-yang to the east. The Western Chou was at its end; it was followed by a prolonged period of war and suffering.

In some late Western Chou bronze inscriptions, the king continued to claim the protection of T'ien, as evidenced by a rather boastful inscription on a vessel apparently cast by King Li (r. 859-842) that refers both to T'ien and to "ti" the term used to denote a supreme deity in the Shang:

The king said: I am but a small child, yet unstintingly day and night, I act in harmony with the former kings to be worthy of august T'ien. . . . [I] make this sacrificial

food vessel, this precious *kuei*-vessel, to succor those august paradigms, my brilliant ancestors. May it draw down [the spirits of] those exemplary men of old, who now render service at the court of Ti and carry forth the magnificent mandate of august Ti³³

But other inscriptions tell a different story, a story of mounting military impotence and the abandonment of the king by T'ien. In the *Yü ting* inscription, the general Yü laments:

Alas! T'ien has sent great disasters down upon the lower countries. Yü-fang, Marquis of O, has led the southern tribes of the Huai and the Yi tribes of the east in a great attack on the southern and eastern lands, reaching to Li-han. Whereupon the king has ordered. . . . "Fiercely attack Yü-fang, Marquis of O, sparing neither young nor old."³⁴

The general has seen here what the king may not yet have seen, that T'ien and the king were now fighting on opposite sides of the battle.

The new distance between T'ien and king is portrayed in the text of the *Mao Kung ting*, a vessel which may be dated to the reign of King Hsuan (r. 827-782 B.C.).³⁵ The king first recites how T'ien bestowed the mandate to rule upon Kings Wen and Wu, then he continues:

And so august T'ien unstintingly stood by us, watching over and protecting the Chou. There was no danger that the former kings would prove unworthy of the mandate. [But now] pitiless T'ien rises awesome, and if I, a small child succeeding [to the throne] am inadequate, how shall the state be blessed? The four quarters are in chaos, all following in unrest.³⁶

Here again, the king stands in opposition to T'ien, and it is interesting to see that he faces an unjust fate. It is not because the king is weak that T'ien has wreaked havoc, but because T'ien is pitiless that the king fears his own inadequacy.³⁷ From the royal perspective, the issue is not kingly virtue, but the puzzling failure of T'ien's benevolence.

Another inscription of the same period tells the story even more plainly. The king speaks again of the past beneficence of T'ien, but then addresses his minister Shih P'ou with these words:

Alas, Shih P'ou! Now T'ien rises awesome and sends down disaster. Foremost virtue cannot overcome and control it, hence none can receive [the throne of absolute power] from the former kings.³⁸

Within a few decades, T'ien had completed its subversion of the royal house. The king had fled the capital, and he and his successors would be no more than figureheads thereafter. Soon after we find evidence that the king's

monopoly on T'ien has ended as well. Within a century of the Chou flight to the East, we find the Duke of Ch'in proclaiming:

Magnificent, my august ancestors received T'ien's mandate, receiving the reward of the Yü lands. The twelve [former] dukes now reside with Ti and look down; reverent in caring for T'ien's mandate, they protect their Ch'in and dispatch (?) the southern and central peoples.³⁹

In another inscription, the ruler of the small state of Hsu, styling himself "king," dedicates a vessel for sacrifices to "august T'ien and my exemplary father; long may they guard my person."⁴⁰

2.2. The Injustice of T'ien

When the Chou founders made their claim that the conquest of the Shang was by the grace of T'ien, the power of their assertion rested on the established authority of T'ien as a religious figure. We do not have clear evidence of the preconquest role of T'ien, or of the early meanings of the term "t'ien."⁴¹ There is evidence, however that during the Western Chou, the notion of T'ien as the benevolent god of state may have existed side by side with popular agricultural traditions, most likely very old, which cast T'ien as the unpredictable ruler of the sky, whose whims were as likely to be malevolent as otherwise (Eno 1984:91-94).

The firm rule of the Chou kings had demonstrated T'ien's political benevolence during the early years. Now that the kings had lost the power to restrain social chaos, T'ien's political behavior became as changeable as the weather. Instead of ruling with ethical perfection, T'ien now allowed injustice and suffering in human affairs, just as it had in natural affairs before. The king's god was coming more and more to resemble the popular sky god, blind to good and evil, a danger to man even as man depended upon it.

In the "Hsiao ya" section of the *Poetry*, there is a remarkable group of poems datable to soon after the fall of the western capital, which gives eloquent testimony to the change in T'ien:

Bright T'ien so vast prolongs not its grace,
Hurls misery and famine, beheading the states.
Bright T'ien rises awesome, unthinking, unplanning,
Lets the guilty go free; they have paid for their crimes—
And the guiltless must join them, all drowning as one (194/1).

The poem continues, lamenting the fall of the capital, and it is clear that the sky god, who is causing famine here, is the same god who abandoned the

king to his fate. The theme of these passages is the confusion of good and evil, and it is no accident that the poem's title is "Rain Without Justice."

Another poem with a similar theme begins by describing an ill-omened eclipse, a portent of the instability of nature. After describing the political situation, the poet says:

The four quarters are sated, I alone am in anguish;
 All loose themselves from care, I alone dare not rest;
 T'ien's commands are all awry, I dare not obey (193/8).⁴²

This poem is usually dated to the reign of King Yu, just prior to the fall of the capital (Wang 1968:407). Once again, the poet stands in opposition to T'ien, surrounded by evildoers whose conduct T'ien seems to condone, both by failing to punish them and by its own irregular course.

The fall of the Western Chou left T'ien morally bankrupt, and the language used to vilify the supreme deity is startling by Western standards:

Now the people are in peril, they look to T'ien all darkened;
 Were there one who could bring peace, [T'ien] would overcome him.
 August god above, who is it you hate? (192/4).

In these poems, a clear distinction is drawn between human evil, which is caused by man, and the chaos that engulfs the innocent, caused by T'ien.⁴³ Guilt is assigned to man in the former case, but to T'ien in the latter.

As long as T'ien remained linked to a strong human king, it was a just and discerning deity. Once the world of man degenerated into injustice and blind suffering, the king's god disappeared into the tradition of the sky god, terrific, unjust, and blind. As social values collapsed, so did the value of T'ien.

2.3. Creating a New T'ien

The fall of T'ien raised an issue capable of stimulating a transformation of religious thought to philosophy. Simply put, it was the problem of theodicy: how can a deity prescriptively good allow a world descriptively evil?

T'ien had served as a mooring for value. During the early Chou, service to the king, the king's law and customs, and the might of the king's armies had all been tied to T'ien. But it was the success of these institutions that had, in fact, anchored T'ien. Now the moorings were cut, and T'ien itself was adrift; only by discovering other values to fasten to it could T'ien again be anchored. The task was to find the "real" values, ones that restored to T'ien its prescriptive perfection. Finding a new point of view from which

even a chaotic world made moral sense was necessary. Whatever that *logos* was would become the new T'ien.

Nonphilosophical thought was not able to do this. It could, as the boastful Duke of Ch'in, simply claim that orderly rule, and T'ien, had been restored in the rule of a new leader, ignoring the contradictory facts of a chaotic world. Or, it could simply make do with T'ien as it appeared to be, descriptively amoral. Such a deity would be much like "fate": incomprehensible, commanding awe but not reverence. Nonphilosophical thought in the late Chou often chose such an option (Ikeda 1968:25-29).⁴⁴

But early philosophical thought was tied to the attempt to restore T'ien's credibility by redefining values that could in some real way be upheld in the face of social disorder. We will see that for Ruists, this world of value was defined as ritual and the transformation of man into a perfect ritual being. It will not surprise us, then, to find Confucius reassure his companions of his safety by declaring, "If T'ien had wanted this pattern (*wen*) to die, [I] would not have been able to participate in it; what can [my enemies] do to me?" (A:9.5), where the "pattern" referred to is the network of Chou ritual norms. In Ruism, the first response of philosophy to the mid-Chou crisis in values, ritual *li* succeeded to the place vacated by the practical pillars of Chou value: the kingship and hereditary roles. And, in turn, T'ien was restored to its place as the ultimate ground of value, recast as the mandator of ritual.

Summary

In this chapter, we have prepared some of the groundwork necessary to demonstrate the claim that early Ruism revolved around a ritual focus, and that the role of T'ien can only be understood as a function of that ritual orientation. Our argument to this point has addressed the basic implausibility, for the modern West, of conceiving a philosophy grounded on the ascription of cardinal value to a body of traditional ritual, by exploring the historical background that made the Ruist choice of philosophical focus logical. We have seen that, amidst the mid-Chou collapse of all stable value foundations, only the secondary elaboration of ritual codes survived as an existing basis on which to build philosophy. Moreover, having seen that the emergence of ritual as an intellectual category was tied to the decay of the existing notion of T'ien as a value standard, the reconstitution of T'ien as a legitimizing ground for ritual value seems more cogent.

But historical logic alone cannot rationalize a ritual basis for philosophy. We may still ask how a philosophy focused on ritual could be intellectually satisfying, and how a school built upon so problematical a base, could endure.

In the next chapter, our tasks will be to explore the intellectual dimensions of Ruist ritualism, and to describe the birth, structure, and social roles of the Ruist school.