

# Introduction

## An Empire without a “Religion”

I heard a saying that “he who knows the “heaven” of Heaven may make himself a king, but he who does not have this knowledge may not. To the king the people are Heaven, whereas to the people food is Heaven.

—Li Yiji, “The Mad Scholar”<sup>1</sup>

### Monotheisms and Globalizations

In the past few decades, discussions on the role of religion in shaping the interconnections of politics, society, and culture have acquired a particular urgency. Since the end of the Cold War, after 9/11, and even more so with the surge of IS, religion has come to occupy a central position in discourses on the most sensitive aspects of globalization.<sup>2</sup> Popular media, public intellectuals, and academics regularly address religion either as the main cause of conflict or as the potential basis for a harmonious intercultural dialogue. In either case, most analyses tend to reify religion as if it were an independent historical subject endowed with agency, and—more or less explicitly—regard it as the foundation stone of collective cultural identities. In other words, once it is redefined more broadly as an essential component of “culture,” religion constitutes a pivotal factor in the study of group attitudes toward politics and institutions, social distinctions, economic behaviors, gender relations, and sexuality. These ideas are so ingrained in Mediterranean and Euro-American worldviews that even openly secular or atheist authors tend to articulate their arguments within ethical and epistemological parameters that reflect the unitary and totalizing bias of monotheism.<sup>3</sup>

Turning to the comparative study of ancient civilizations, the recent surge of China as a world power has prompted a new generation of scholars of antiquities to juxtapose Augustan Rome (27 BCE–14 CE) and Qin-Han China (221 BCE–220 CE) as two crucial phases in the trajectories of Western and Eastern civilizations.<sup>4</sup> Their projects have demonstrated that institutional and economic analyses based on quantitative data allow for a deeper understanding of political and economic centralization across the globe.<sup>5</sup> However, the empirical orientation that traditionally characterizes philological and historical scholarship has so far prevented these studies from engaging the postmodern and postcolonial critique of the validity of “religion” as a cross-cultural heuristic category.<sup>6</sup> Such an oversight, together with the adoption of Augustan Rome as a universal template for the examination of ancient empires, perpetuates the conceit that political unification must be based on a shared religion or unitary conception of the sacred. As a result, specialists and the general public alike still tend to assume the systemic, identitary, and moralistic interpretation of world religions that characterize modernity as timeless and intrinsic to the very notion of the divine.

*Heaven Is Empty* argues that unified rule is possible without cultural unification, and that cultural unification is possible without a shared religion. By offering a radical reinterpretation of the meaning of the “sacred” in Early China, I propose a novel approach to the study of the role of “religious” beliefs and practices in forging institutions and identities in the ancient and contemporary world. My research engages the fields of history of religion, world and intellectual history, sinology, and classics. In reconstructing the crucial political and cultural battles that shaped China in the period of unification under the Qin and Han empires (221 BCE–220 CE), it questions the teleological, unitary, and identitary preoccupations that have driven indigenous and foreign scholarly theorizations of religion in ancient China since the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> More specifically, this study challenges the indiscriminate application to the Qin and Han periods of conceptual categories developed in the study of Greco-Roman and organized religions and suggests that such applications often cloud our understanding of Qin-Han China and present a serious obstacle in comparative studies.

In the past few years, specialists of more recent periods of Chinese history have begun to deconstruct the introduction in Sinological scholarship of the very concept of a unitary religion, which occurred as a consequence of a partly voluntary adoption of foreign ideas following the dramatic clash with Western colonial interests at the end of the nineteenth century.

Early China scholars, on the other hand, because of a series of factors that we will explore in detail below, traditionally tend to operate within intellectual concerns and frameworks established by Euro-American academics. Especially in the case of the phenomena customarily studied under the category of religion, most Sinologists still seem informed by the teleological and systemic preoccupations typical of Christian historiography and that more or less openly reflect the cultural legacy of Hegelianism, both in the approaches indebted to German sociology and in Chinese state-sponsored Marxist readings.<sup>8</sup>

In the particular case of the study of empire formation, the application to the Han Dynasty of the Augustan model of a “state religion” based on “divine rulership” justifies inferences about the question of the sacred in early China that downplay the specificity and richness of indigenous worldviews.<sup>9</sup> Unless we assume the universality of a Western conception of “religion,” even in handling measurable data, we should consider that cross-cultural inquiries into the past are based on culture-specific categories and criteria of inclusion and exclusion that are hardly relevant for the subjects under study.<sup>10</sup> As Douglas Northrop remarks, “[S]cholars are of course situated culturally and historically, with predispositions and theoretical frameworks shaped by positions in a modern, especially Anglophone and capitalist West . . . [W]orld history studies a ‘globe’ that has been conceived through Euro-American historicist epistemologies . . . It is therefore neither objective nor value-neutral—and far from truly global.”<sup>11</sup> In support of Northrop’s observation, it should suffice to note that while no one would question the legitimacy of an academic pursuit of an “early Chinese religion,” studying Roman civilizations in terms of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽, *qi* 氣, or *dao* 道 would be deemed absurd both by Western and Chinese scholars. Clearly, the processes of intellectual borrowing seem to work only in one direction.

Reacting to these tendencies, I tackle the question of “religion” with a dialectic and reflexive methodology and a special attention to the intellectual attitude Reinhart Koselleck defines as “consciously admitted positionality.”<sup>12</sup> My work provides a study of early China that accounts for indigenous contexts and concerns while historicizing and problematizing the motivations and methods that inform our scholarly approaches and intellectual paradigms.<sup>13</sup> As quipped by the ancient Chinese thinker Zhuangzi (c. 369–286 BCE), the knowledge of the Other and of the Self proceeds through interdependent heuristic processes—“Without the Other there is no Self.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, *Heaven Is Empty* does not aim at countering or confirming the refutation of the knowability of the Other of some of postmodern scholars. It instead strives

to acknowledge the inevitable subjectivity of all intellectual approaches as an integral part of its empirical analysis.

### The Argument: Metaphysics in Historical Narratives

Among Sinologists, only Robert F. Campany has systematically questioned the applicability of Euro-American approaches to ancient Chinese religions.<sup>15</sup> He has convincingly challenged the tendency to conceive traditions such as “Buddhism” or “Daoism” in terms of theoretical coherence, collective agency, “faith,” or “belief.”<sup>16</sup> Taking my cue from his “fluid” approach to the performative aspects of ritual in the Chinese early middle period (c. 100–600 CE), I focus on the formative years of the empire, before the introduction of Buddhism set in motion a series of cultural transformations that I consider crucial in our understanding (and misunderstanding) of Chinese ancient religions.<sup>17</sup>

My approach hinges on the observation that the diffusion of new South-Asian beliefs and practices in the first century CE (at the earliest) coincided with the introduction of a universalistic notion of religion that caused notable changes in the way the Chinese envisioned their relationship with “the sacred.”<sup>18</sup> The moralizing potential of the “divine” as a vehicle for personal development provided new modalities for interactions within and among communities (real and imagined) and for the formalization of individual and group identities, which, as Erich Gruen points out in his study of Mediterranean civilizations, “in antiquity did not possess a pure and unadulterated character.”<sup>19</sup> The impact of Buddhism thus prompted the Chinese to formalize the theoretical foundations of indigenous traditions according to new paradigms. The social function of the sacred was profoundly transformed through the guidance of an organized clergy, the adoption of a scriptural corpus, and the new territorial dynamics produced by the construction of stupas and temples. From an epistemological point of view, these elements made Chinese, Greco-Roman, and Judeo-Christian experiences more easily comparable, while fueling the scholarly tendency to conceive ancient civilizations indiscriminately in unitary, systemic, and identity terms—after all, Buddhism arose in an Indo-European context.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most dangerous conceits regarding the interdependence of religion and collective identities revolves around the question of China’s inclusion among the “great world civilizations.” It has become customary to imply that the moral foundations of a complex society must derive from

an organic conception of the “sacred.” Debates on whether the origins of China were quintessentially “secular” or “religious” inevitably appropriate traditionally Euro-American philosophical preoccupations while implicitly subsuming the universality of Abrahamic models. For example, while some scholars extol the civilization of the Yellow River as one of the earliest instances of secular society, others, by referring to the supposed “spirituality” of Confucianism<sup>21</sup> or the monotheistic nature of the Chinese notion of Heaven, argue that ancient China was endowed with an indigenous ethical tradition comparable to Christianity.<sup>22</sup> On the other side of the spectrum, positivistic and Marxist analyses tend to treat popular religious traditions as evidence for the superstitious mentality of the earlier periods of Chinese civilization, one that must be overcome by a more “rational” and “modern” attitude.

*Heaven Is Empty* holds that these tendencies still underlie cultural complexes that can be traced back to the fateful clash with foreign powers, when late nineteenth-century Chinese elites felt compelled to rethink the early history of their country in non-native terms. Although these sentiments and ideas are culturally legitimate and represent an integral part of the current Chinese intellectual universe, once applied to the study of ancient societies, they can engender insidious anachronisms.

In order to formulate culture-specific notions, *Heaven Is Empty* looks at the scholarship on the sacred in the ancient Mediterranean world and tests the applicability of its heuristic tools to early Chinese contexts. It concentrates on historical, literary, and material sources dealing with the imperial propaganda produced to justify the dominion of Rome over the ancient Western world and of the Qin and Han dynasties over the Central States. The comparison of the Augustan age with the dynasty of the Western Han (206 BCE–9 CE) serves as the starting point for a broader critique of the ways the hegemony of Abrahamic models produces views of the past that are still instrumental in the persistence of Eurocentric approaches to current intercultural debates on political and cultural identities.

### Elusive Rulers, Lacunose Accounts, Inadequate Models

The main protagonists of this book are Emperor Wu 武 of the Han (r. 141–87 BCE), his court archivist Sima Qian 司馬遷 (c. 145 or 135–86 BCE) (who was in charge of recording both human and astronomical events), and the first history of China from its origins, the *Records of the*

*Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記, hereafter *Records*), which Sima Qian completed by integrating and finishing the work begun by his father Sima Tan 譚 (c. 165–110 BCE).<sup>23</sup> However, studying Emperor Wu’s period through the accounts of his official historians represents a much less straightforward endeavor than it may appear. The two chief problems in the study of the *Records* are the well-known falling out between Emperor Wu and Sima Qian (which led to the castration of the latter), and the complicated issue of the *Records*’ authorship and transmission.<sup>24</sup> *Heaven Is Empty* highlights the fact that, although recent scholarship has demonstrated that a syncretic form of “Confucianism” was established as a state doctrine only after the death of Emperor Wu, most readers of the *Records* anachronistically attribute to its authors a mature and self-conscious understanding of “Confucianism” as a coherent moral-philosophical doctrine, although it had not yet been formalized as such at the time. Furthermore, most scholars have routinely overlooked the fact that neither of the Simas was allowed to witness the most important phases of the historic ceremonies carried out by their sovereign. It is equally striking that despite the length of his reign (fifty-four years) and the sheer magnitude of his achievements, Emperor Wu always occupied a very ambiguous position in Chinese and Western historiography. The *Records* describes this sovereign as superstitious, inconsistent, and hopelessly under the sway of the untrustworthy *fangshi* 方士 (experts in esoteric practices and bodily practices, especially hailing from the coastal areas of the former states of Qi and Yan). The *History of the Former Han* (*Han Shu* 漢書), by Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE) praises him as the emperor who, after the bemoaned period of persecutions and ostracism against the Classicists (in Chinese *ru* 儒, traditionally translated as “Confucians”) began to appoint them to important positions at court. In contrast, the poetry and popular or “apocryphal” literature of the Tang period (618–907) expressed longing for the marvelous times of Wu’s reign, a lost golden age when the Son of Heaven leisurely consorted with female deities in his private rooms.

Tellingly, the prolific British sinologist Michael Loewe, widely recognized as the most authoritative and influential Han studies scholar, routinely attributes the most impactful military campaigns and policies carried out in this period to Wu’s generals, ministers, and advisors, thereby implicitly suggesting that the emperor himself lacked leadership skills, political savvy, and agency. Although he never explicitly makes the point, Loewe treats Wu as a puppet in the hands of court factions or charlatans—a viewpoint he happens to share with Sima Qian.<sup>25</sup>

There is no question that Emperor Wu had the opportunity of benefiting from the service of several exceptionally talented statesmen. However, it

cannot be ignored that almost all of his influential ministers and courtiers eventually fell out of grace or died after a very brief—albeit successful—period in office. There is, however, one interesting exception to this rule: the minister Sang Hongyang 桑弘羊 (152–80 BCE), who enjoyed Wu’s confidence until the end of his reign. Sang is remembered as the staunch promoter of radical economic centralization and state monopolies, which eventually turned several aristocratic and wealthy families against Emperor Wu. Richard von Glahn has aptly branded this political model as “*mercantilist* fiscal state,” which “aspired to supplanting private commerce with state-run institutions managed by enterprising merchants recruited to government service.”<sup>26</sup> Sang also features in the *Discourses on Salt and Iron* (*Yantielun* 鹽鐵論), the partially fictionalized account of a court debate on the pros and cons of economic centralization that took place after Wu’s death.<sup>27</sup> In the diatribe against the supporters of devolutionary measures and relative autonomy of regional elites, Sang is the champion of the court faction that envisioned a big government directly in charge of all the fundamental productive and administrative activities. The importance of Sang’s political longevity supports my thesis that despite the accusations of incoherence and superstition directed against Emperor Wu’s ritual reforms, they in fact constituted an integral part of the legitimization of radical economic centralization—the first priority of his government.

In the *Discourses*, in contrast with our current understanding of economics as an independent field, discussions on the viability of state monopolies also explore the themes of ritual and historical memory, while including elements that we would define philosophical or mythological.<sup>28</sup> In the *Records* and other Han Dynasty texts, whose declared focus is not the implementation of specific politics, narratives about myths, rituals, and the legitimization of hereditary monarchy intermingle with economic questions rather frequently. I argue that if we ignore the traditional boundaries between academic disciplines and textual traditions and look at these sources while framing specific “religious” debates in their historical contexts, mythological disquisitions about ancient cultural heroes and sages acquire a much more concrete background. In the case of the *Records*, if we complement its reading with contemporary documents such as the *Huainanzi* or excavated manuscripts from Mawangdui, it becomes clear that the rivalry between Classicists and *fangshi* also overshadows radically different positions about Emperor Wu’s centralizing reforms.<sup>29</sup>

Wu’s long reign, according to Michael Loewe, was characterized by a struggle between *Modernists*, those officials who envisioned a government based on radical and administrative centralization, and *Reformists*, those who

opposed it.<sup>30</sup> Marianne Bujard, by concentrating on the cultural aspects of these tensions, has highlighted the rivalry at court between the Classicists, who propounded a form imperial authority thoroughly informed by the “Confucian” textual tradition, and the *fangshi*, on whose expertise Wu would rely in his quest for physical immortality.<sup>31</sup> As mentioned above, Sima Qian’s attribution of his sovereign’s inconsistencies and flimsiness to the influence of these magicians is well known. Surprisingly enough, Han scholars seem to overlook that Sima Qian disapproved of the contemporary Classicists as well. My point is that since his attacks are seldom straightforward, Sima Qian’s overt admiration for Confucius and familiarity with the texts associated with his teachings can be easily mistaken for an endorsement of the various contemporaries that claimed the Master as their inspiration. In fact, I argue that Sima Qian’s own strong background in the *Classics* allowed him to weave an informed and subtle—albeit indirect—critique of the superficiality, hypocrisy, and opportunism of most of the Han Classicists. Conversely, since he could not be as well versed in the cultural traditions of the peripheral regions from which the *fangshi* hailed, he limits his sarcasm to their continuous references to spirits, ghosts, extraordinary phenomena, and immortality, without engaging the possible import of the ceremonies Emperor Wu inaugurated under their advice. I demonstrate that the *fangshi*’s contribution to Wu’s ritual activities, which the *Records* describes as an incoherent congeries of badly understood esoteric regional traditions, was often consistent with the political agenda of the Modernists, for it aimed at legitimizing a charismatic, all-powerful, and autocratic conception of rulership.

Recently, Tamara T. Chin has detailed how Han literary genres reflected the dramatic impact of Sang’s program on Han perceptions about the economic relations between China and foreigners, and between center and periphery.<sup>32</sup> For example, she analyzes the development of the rhapsody *fu* 賦 as the “primary scene of ideological contestation” against Wu’s aggressive economic politics and lavishness. Chin argues that the eventual reduction in the size and ornamentality of this poetic form echoed the increasing popularity of positions that advocated for a return to the frugal ways of the Western Zhou.<sup>33</sup> Paralleling Chin’s work, *Heaven Is Empty* focuses on Han discourses on economic models by concentrating on rituals and mythological narratives. It reconstructs substantial components of Wu’s ideological strategies by integrating the fragmentary accounts provided by the *Records* with contemporary material evidence, court poetry, and received and excavated documents conventionally associated with the Huang-Lao tradition.<sup>34</sup>

As eloquently summarized by Chin, Eastern Han historiography engaged in the erasure of the *Records*' "arresting, unsettling, reflexive and yet internally inconsistent treatment of the very terms and conditions of discourse on frontier and market."<sup>35</sup> As for the issue of state ceremonies and propaganda, I illustrate how the model of kingship pursued by Emperor Wu did not survive his death. Attuned to Confucius's "secular" dislike of direct involvement with spirits and ghosts, new generations of intellectuals would misunderstand or misrepresent the sovereign's ritual reforms. Disconnected from a specific strategy for the cultural legitimization of centralization, their memory would survive as testament of Wu's extravagance and superstition.

### Overlapping Historical and Cultural Contexts

Ideological interpretations of the Western Han, celebrated as the first "Confucian" dynasty, have inevitably produced several misunderstandings and interconnected anachronisms that are still influential in contemporary scholarship. For centuries Chinese and Western scholars alike, despite contrasting views on his political contribution, have praised Emperor Wu for allowing the Classicists to regain a central position in the political and cultural life of the realm. According to the narrative validated in Han historiography, the Qin (221–206 BCE), the first unifiers of China, had ruthlessly vanquished their rivals and imposed a regime of violence and intimidation. It was only with the adoption of so-called "Han Confucianism" as a state doctrine under Wu that, dynastic histories claim, the unified empire received full moral legitimation and won popular support. "Han Confucianism" was supposedly based on the holistic and metaphysical reading of Confucius's *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) exposed by the Classicist Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE) in the *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn* (*Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露).<sup>36</sup> His syncretic intellectual system complemented the theory of the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming* 天命) with "heterodox" cosmological speculations developed in the former state of Qi (Dong's birthplace) during the pre-imperial period, such as those revolving around yin and yang or the Five Phases/Elements. Dong's elaboration explained the violence that had led to the establishment and consolidation of political unity as an integral part of the moral principles underlying cosmic changes and cycles. In short, this doctrine allowed propagandistic historiography to credit the Han with the inauguration of a moral imperial line, which reframed preexisting theories about cosmic

rulership within the ethical standards of the legendary Sage Kings of yore celebrated by Confucius. According to the Master, the ancient sovereigns conformed their rule to Heaven without becoming directly involved with the spirits and ghosts worshipped in popular cults. Chinese officials and intellectuals cultivated Confucius's secular attitude for centuries, until the beginning of the Republican era in 1912.

Only recently have philological and historical inquiries demonstrated that the Classicists (or "Confucians") were still barely relevant at Wu's court, and that the text in which Dong Zhongshu elaborates his theories gained cultural preeminence, or was actually composed, in a later period.<sup>37</sup> It was *Han Shu*, completed at the beginning of the first century CE, which pushed back the "triumph of Confucianism" to the prosperous age of Emperor Wu, prompting generations of later historians to adopt Mediterranean models of "divine rulership" and overlook the uniqueness of his ritual vision.

Complicating matters further, in the crucial moment of the "opening" of China, late Qing 清 (1644–1911) intellectuals chose the conceit of a Wu-promoted "Han Confucianism" as the model for the creation of a modern Western-like state religion. Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer have meticulously traced the introduction of a Western notion of religion into China back to this dramatic period.<sup>38</sup> Before the unprecedented defeat suffered in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), China lacked both a single term that could translate the English "religion" and the very notion that this concept could become an instrument for the construction of a national identity. It was in the aftermath of this unprecedented and humiliating defeat that the Qing reformers decided to follow the example of the victor, Meiji Japan (1868–1912). It seemed to them that their neighbors had swiftly entered "the modern age" thanks to the ideological fervor spurred by the West-inspired cult of the emperor. His divinity and association with the origins of the country had inspired all Japanese, regardless of class and status, to sacrifice themselves for the common good, overcome the history of humiliations imposed on Japan by foreign countries, and become a feared power in their own right.

The hesitant and ineffective responses of the Qing Dynasty to the Opium Wars (1839–1860), the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), and other political and economic catastrophes of the nineteenth century had already deeply compromised the allegiance of the Chinese people to their government. After the unforgivable debacle of 1895, the Qing reformers believed that only a Meiji-like state religion could reestablish cohesion and trust between the rulers and the ruled in China. In looking at the past for legitimizing

precedents, these officials and intellectuals became particularly interested in the level of administrative efficiency and international reputation enjoyed by the Chinese empire under Emperor Wu. In this period, following almost a century of instability, the Han finally prevailed over internal and external enemies. Wu's officials established a firmer grip on the periphery and bolstered the treasury with the enforcement of state monopolies on salt, iron, and alcohol. These measures fostered an unprecedented period of prosperity and confidence, which Emperor Wu endeavored to celebrate with the performance of the solemn rituals for the legitimation of the dynasty, which his predecessors had preferred to postpone. Even if subsequent historians bemoaned Wu's aggressive and expensive policies as the principal cause of the economic crisis that would haunt his successors, his legacy was salvaged by his purported sponsorship of Confucian scholars. Starting with the Eastern Han, generation after generation of Classicists (or Confucians) would credit Emperor Wu with ending the ostracism they suffered under the Qin and reintegrating them at court.

Looking back to the tumultuous years following the defeat of the first Sino-Japanese war, in a political and cultural context heavily conditioned by the foreign menace, a group of Qing reformers resorted to interpreting "Han Confucianism" as an indigenous "state religion" to be revived for nation building purposes. In doing so, they engendered a long series of intertwined anachronisms and misunderstandings that have never been systematically deconstructed.

In addition to deconstructing these cultural processes, *Heaven Is Empty* reconstructs the political and cultural struggles that eventually led to the hegemony of a "Confucian" view of state and society a few decades after Emperor Wu's death. As importantly, it offers the first detailed interpretation of Emperor Wu's private and public rituals as integral to his imperial vision. If the Classicists opposed it, it is because it was incompatible with the hierarchical understanding of social and political relations that reflected the interests of the landed elites, a group to which they likely belonged. They embraced Confucius's condemnation of popular cults as a direct attack against Emperor Wu's attitude toward spirits and ghosts, and an implicit one against his "Modernist" agenda. In other words, I interpret early Han "Confucian" criticisms concerning popular religion as a reaction to the Emperor's attempt to impose a centralizing, autocratic, independent, active, and extremely mobile conception of monarchy. Wu's plan to strip local aristocracies of political and economic privileges was paralleled by his attempt to bypass their mediating function and opposition by reach-

ing out to his subjects directly, through appropriation of or participation in local ritual traditions. As we will see in more detail below, during this phase, the Classicists often contrasted these policies through literary references to alternative ritual and mythological models. In response to the *fangshi's* spreading of allegorical stories celebrating all-powerful legendary monarchs of the past who did not need ministers to communicate with the common people, the Classicists offered a contrasting narrative about founding fathers who succeeded only because of moderation, collegial rule, and decentralization.

It is important to remember that the Qin's administrative reorganization of China in commanderies and counties had greatly reduced the political and economic prerogatives of local aristocracies. It had been through the exploitation of the discontent—and military resources—of these elites that the founder of the Han, Liu Bang, was able to overthrow the unifiers of China. However, once in power, he had no choice but yield to their demands. While maintaining part of the Qin's bureaucratic structure, Liu Bang was compelled to bestow on his aristocratic allies extremely large estates that they could rule autonomously from the court. His successors, being still economically and militarily dependent on the periphery, continued to comply with this arrangement until Emperor Wu succeeded in bringing these territories back under the political and fiscal control of the central government. The opposition he faced was both political and cultural.

Finally, from a theoretical point of view, *Heaven Is Empty* relies on a comparative approach to test the applicability of the traditional notions of “religion,” “myth,” “ritual,” and “polytheism” to the Qin-Han contexts. In reconstructing the historiographical phases that led to the establishment of “Confucian” interpretations of this period, it proposes categories based on indigenous concerns. Emperor Wu's efforts toward capillary bureaucratic and economic centralization did not—and could not—imply the creation of an imperial religion because unitary, systemic, identitary, and moral interpretations of the divine were not hegemonic in early imperial China.

### Grappling with the Issue of “Religion” in Chinese History and Society

This book closely examines the development of the question of “an early Chinese “religion” in chapter 1. Here I want to provide a brief synthesis of what I consider to be the main features of notions of religion that are based

on the hegemonic role of monotheist models vis-à-vis conceptions of the divine throughout Chinese history. Of course, avoiding simplifications and generalizations is impossible in such an enterprise, and the outline I offer should be taken as a list of provisional comparative signposts that will help the reader establish some preliminary criteria for the study of “religion” in early imperial China. Throughout *Heaven Is Empty*, the concepts described in this section will progressively be replaced by notions gleaned from specific textual and cultural contexts.

First of all, monotheistic/Abrahamic notions of religion rely on ideas about the “sacred” and the “divine” that, despite evident etymological connections with the Latin terms *sacer* and *divinus*, have evolved differently over time in different parts of the world. By generalizing, we can say that these attributes now characterize the superhuman realm as ontologically separate from the human, as well as absolute, eternal, complete in itself, devoid of any negative connotation (i.e., perfect), and knowable through Revelation. Such features, once translated into social structures, inform a notion of religion that is supposed to define one’s ethical and intellectual attitude about all aspects of reality. This form of allegiance is expected to be exclusionary (professing allegiance to one creed excludes the possibility of acknowledging the truthfulness of any other) and characterized by the same degree of structural coherence that we value in philosophical and legal systems.

Even a cursory look at Chinese civilization shows that most of these criteria do not apply. The semantic range of the Chinese character *shen* 神, which usually translates the English “sacred” or “divine,” is far broader than that of its Western counterparts and varies depending on textual and cultural contexts. It is etymologically linked to *shen* 伸, to extend, and refers to everything that is more than human or extraordinary. Importantly, it does not necessarily imply the moral connotation of “holy.” Furthermore, if we are inclined to interpret *shen* in light of the classic Chinese notion that every element of the cosmos is made of different concentrations of *qi* 氣 (breath/energy/matter), it would be erroneous to define the Chinese “divine” in terms of ontological separation and absolutes. For these reasons, and in keeping with Poo Mouchou’s and Roger Ames’s work, I prefer to use “extra-human,” (meaning “more than human”) instead of “superhuman” or “supernatural,” which imply the existence of distinct realms.<sup>39</sup>

As for Chinese organized religions, as is well known, the Three Traditions (*sanjiao* 三教, i.e., Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism) do not require exclusive commitment. Their various practices and systems of beliefs, which at times overlap, can be followed universally regardless of one’s

allegiance to one or more of them. They can be instrumental in addressing specific critical phases of life such as birth, death, marriage, procreation, illness, success, loss, and so on, but do not necessarily subsume a holistic vision that can indiscriminately be applied to all human and extra-human phenomena. As for their social usage, references to transcendence—under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (1949– ) as well as during the imperial period (3rd century BCE–1911)—do not have a primary role in legitimizing political power, defining shared morals, or establishing specific public identities. Of course, Marxism’s proverbial rejection of religion as “the opiate of the people” relegates the sacred to the private sphere. Yet we should not underestimate the impact that Confucius’s (551–479 BCE) prejudice against direct interaction with non-human entities exerted on Chinese institutions and culture. Chinese intellectual and political elites, who were selected through a system of examinations based on the “Confucian” canon, maintained that rituals were less important for the connection they provided with ancestral spirits than for the sense of respect and harmony they fostered among the living. They believed that a revival of the ritual tradition associated with the exemplary Western Zhou 周 Dynasty (1046–771 BCE) which Confucius had promoted, was crucial to the stabilization and perpetuation of the hierarchical structure of society, as it required participants to follow ceremonial protocols determined by age and status. On the other hand, these elites considered the various forms of devotion to local deities useless at best, and at worst a threat to the moral fabric of society. It is important to emphasize that the prevalence of this “anti-religious” attitude did not automatically translate into the suppression of popular cults, nor did it prevent them from prospering. It simply relegated their treatment to popular, unofficial, or less respectable literature, some of which would be collected, starting with the 3rd century CE, under the genre aptly named “accounts of anomalies” (*zhiguai* 志怪).<sup>40</sup>

The apparent “vagueness” or “ambiguity” of Chinese attitudes toward the divine are more easily understandable if we consider that early China lacked an institution that held undisputed authority over questions regarding the relation between spirits and ghosts, the sociopolitical order, and the common people, as the Catholic Church did in Europe and elsewhere. In other words, Chinese elites did not conceive of ritual propriety in terms of dogma versus heresy, orthodoxy versus heterodoxy, or as a theological speculation on the true nature of the divine. The realm of the divine, including ancestral spirits and ghosts, did not constitute an indisputable source of moral authority. On the contrary, the elites tended to fear spirits and

ghosts as agents of chaos and uncertainty. People who were interested in regulating political and social institutions according to sound moral principle were supposed avoid invoking ghosts and spirits at all cost.

I argue that such an attitude became dominant only after Emperor Wu's death, when the "Confucian" Classics were definitively installed as the only legitimate source of ritual propriety, by which even the Son of Heaven had to abide. When in the second half of the first century BCE officials at court promoted the "revival" of the emperor's sacrifices to Heaven described in the literary canon, they were *de facto* tethering the ruler to their exclusive philological expertise and possibly political interests. Even though this move practically elevated the *Classics* to the status of scripture, the systems of values they illustrated, at least in theory, did not underlie revealed and absolute truths. The Classicists simply celebrated the wisdom and authority deriving from a superior literary education focused on the study of an exemplary past.

Another often overlooked factor concerning the study of religion and power during the Qin and Han is the novelty of the empire as a form of unified government. When the Central States were united in 221 BCE, the polities that we now call China had been divided for more than five centuries. The Qin and early Han rulers were pressed to contain the armies of local aristocratic lords who resented the loss of independence. In addition, their political priorities consisted of administrative, economic, and fiscal centralization; the establishment a common script; the standardization of legal codes, coinage, and systems of measurement; and the repair of roads and canals to facilitate the movement of people and goods. In these conditions, structuring the realm on a shared conception of the divine would have been unfeasible, if not altogether unthinkable.

Of course, prior to and in addition to the institution of the ceremonies mentioned above, the Qin and early Han rulers did conduct sacrifices, but these had nothing to do with the establishment of a state religion (i.e., for all the subjects of the empire) but rather with ensuring the military and economic success of the government. At the same time, as we will see, early emperors as individuals seemed interested in practices that focused on personal well-being, and these acts of worship took place in the presence of a few courtiers or in private. The fact that extant Qin and Han monumental architecture seems conceived more for the spirits of the dead than for a living public further supports the point that the Qin and the Han did not develop a religious cult of the emperor for propagandistic reasons comparable to that of the Romans. The available evidence can justify hypotheses about

the existence of a *religion for the emperor* but not of an *imperial religion* of the Western kind.

### Time and Space: The Structure of *Heaven Is Empty*

Following contemporary trends in religious and ritual studies, I organize my analysis of Emperor Wu's ceremonies around the "Kantian absolutes" of time and space.<sup>41</sup> However, mindful of the specific concerns expressed in the Chinese sources, I interpret *time* more narrowly as the intellectual justification of hereditary monarchy in terms of mythical or historical narratives, and of continuity and rupture with the past. By *space* I mean the conceptual and ritual reconfigurations of the extension of territorial control that took place under Emperor Wu's rule. In my examination of *religion*, I include dynamics, systems, and phenomena (human, natural, or cosmic) such as fate, fortune, and elaborate theories of historical causation, that the documents consider as having an impact on human lives regardless of contingency (i.e., metahistorical factors).

Since this book's reconstruction of Emperor Wu's ritual activities proceeds from a historicization and deconstruction of Western paradigms, its conceptual vocabulary undergoes the continuous scrutiny and readjustments implied in the work of cultural translation. At times in keeping, at times in contrast with the *Records'* vantage point, *Heaven Is Empty* interprets Emperor Wu's "religion" as discrete clusters of rituals that never consolidated into a unitary understanding of the cosmos. Some of these rituals represented a response to personal or familial crises and were aimed at seeking immediate relief in alchemic practices or the intervention of spirits and ghosts. Some satirized specific familial, aristocratic, and paternalistic conceptions of the state and family expressed in the *Classics*, while promoting an autocratic and non-collegial conception of power. Still others constituted an escamotage to elude the opposition of court factions and justify controversial decisions as divinely inspired. The most complex and dispendious ceremonies of Emperor Wu's reign were part of a far-reaching program of political propaganda aimed at the elites. To the paternalistic and collaborative rule embodied by the Western Zhou, which Li Feng has efficaciously labeled *delegatory kin-ordered settlement state*, they opposed a centralizing, autocratic, "Huang-Lao" or "Daoist" model of cosmic rulership that was still popular in the early decades following the unification.<sup>42</sup> The rituals inaugurated or recovered by Emperor Wu—in open contradiction to the exemplary, passive, moral,

father-like rulership of the Sage Kings of the Confucian tradition—portrayed the Son of Heaven as a formidable warrior capable of harnessing the forces of the cosmos, leading his armies against human and non-human enemies, pacifying the world, and ensuring the productivity of the land, while redistributing its fruits without relying on aristocratic intermediaries. After Emperor Wu's death, this paradigm, not uncommon in ancient African and Eurasian civilizations, succumbed to the “devolutionary” model propounded by the Classicists, whose “secularism” would prompt generations of intellectuals to dismiss the import of regional ritual traditions.

In terms of methodology, *Heaven Is Empty* draws research hypotheses from cross-cultural comparisons, verifies working categories against specific historical and cultural Han contexts, and engages in the recovery of native priorities and concepts. Chapter 1, “Readings of the ‘Sacred’: Chinese Religion, Chinese Religions, and Religions in China,” establishes the epistemological foundation of the book's arguments and provides a critical reassessment of the application of Western paradigms to the study of the divine in early China. The chapter engages in a critique of the implicit ethnocentrism of discourses on the inclusion of China into the pantheon of the “great world religions,” and on whether its most influential cultural traditions were “religious” or “philosophical.” The inevitable circularity of these abstract questions reveals more about the concerns of Western scholarship than about the actual preoccupations of ancient Chinese. This chapter offers a cultural history of the application of classic and Abrahamic ideas of tradition, knowledge, and morals to early Chinese realities. Finally, it proposes revised, expanded, or alternative interpretations of notions such as “religion,” “divine,” “myth,” and “ritual” that overcome traditional essentialist, phenomenological, or structuralist approaches and that better fit the study of the Han Dynasty.

Chapter 2, “Writing the Empire: *Ex Pluribus Plurima*” concentrates on the historiographical strategies of the *Records* and subsequent literature in addressing the question of the relationship between political power and “religion.” It reconstructs the epistemological criteria of the *Records* as well as its conceptions of the relationship between ritual, text, and historical memory, especially in terms of the text's conversation with the past and contemporary historiographical traditions. In looking at the section of the *Records* chronologically closer to Emperor Wu's period, this chapter explores the development of Sima Qian's interactions with his sovereign (who notoriously condemned the historian to castration) as well as the historian's complex attitude toward the legitimacy of the Han Dynasty. It analyzes Sima Qian's treatment of Confucius's cultural legacy, his portraits

of contemporary Classicists at court, and his ideas about the relationship between intellectuals and power.

Following on Michael Puett's reading of Sima Qian's historiographical approach, I further elaborate on the *Records'* pessimist outlook.<sup>43</sup> I argue that its acknowledgment of the disjunction between the cosmic, political, and moral realms was both the cause and the result of what may appear to a contemporary readership as a multi-vocal literary approach. In other words, I interpret Sima Qian's skeptical attitude towards the linearity of human and especially divine agency (or "secular" sensibility) once compared with that of his Greco-Roman counterparts, more as the result of his inductive empirical approach than a conscious rejection of religion akin to contemporary secularism or atheism.

In analyzing Sima Qian's heuristic criteria, this chapter documents the progressive formalization of the domains of *li* 禮 and *si* 祀, which scholarship in English customarily lumps together under the category of "ritual." According to my reconstruction, *li* and *si* respectively referred to rituals that did not involve direct contact with the divine and to cults that focused on deities connected to specific communities and areas. In other words, they epitomize the non-universalistic, hierarchical conception of the divine in early China, as individual ceremonial duties and objects of worship varied according to rank, status, and locality.

Chapter 3, "Narrating the Empire: Metaphysics without God, 'Religions' without Identity" expands the theme of the legitimization of unified rule by examining the purported teleological structure of the *Records* and its treatment of Heaven as a meta-historical factor in the formation of the Han empire. It takes into consideration the broader context of the close and seldom explored relationship between narratives about empire formation, universalism, and teleological trajectories. More specifically, this chapter historicizes what I call the "hegemony of monotheism" in Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic historiographical traditions. In tracing the development of the conceit about the superiority of unitary narratives in the ancient Mediterranean, I compare the role of Heaven in the *Records* and of Fortune in Polybius in the creation of the Han and Roman empires. Although Sima Qian's analytical approach can more easily be compared to that of Livy or Tacitus, I focus on Polybius because his attitude toward Rome's history would eventually serve to justify both secular and confessional unitary historiographical attitudes. In addition, Polybius was arguably the first historian who identified Roman cults as having a mere political end, while his search for a unitary imperial trajectory enabled confessional historians to recognize

an implicit sense of the divine even in “pagan” narratives, insofar as they acknowledged the ultimate unity of the world.

By considering the impact of Polybius’s and Sima Qian’s personal experiences and unique cultural contexts on their work, I show the extent to which the two authors associated unified rule with the triumph of universal values or the establishment of divine justice. At the same time, I investigate how (if at all) the two authors complemented their unitary narratives about empire formation by accounting for other factors, such as geography, political structures, individual agency, ethnicity, and gender. In the end, the Greek Polybius recognized the causes of Rome’s triumph in the superiority of its mixed constitution, which combined institutional models previously implemented in Greece. He invoked Fortune only when the unpredictable military successes of the less-civilized Romans would otherwise be inexplicable, to compensate for his less than impeccable sense of causality. As for Sima Qian, according to traditional readings, Heaven seemed to favor the re-unification of the Central States despite the immorality, lack of intellectual sophistication, and dearth of political experience of the founder of the Han Dynasty. According to my interpretation, the Chinese historian instead treated the theme of Heaven rather ironically, as the residue of a rhetorical tradition—the Classicist one—that wanted to believe in the intrinsic morality of the cosmos. In the end, even if both authors considered the possibility that a single factor or being could have a direct role in the success of a given leader or lineage, neither of them conceived of the divine in the systemic, identitary, and exclusionary terms typical of the Abrahamic religions.

Chapter 4, “Time, Myth, and Memory: Of Water, Metal, and Cinnabar” deals with Emperor Wu’s justification of empire in terms of past traditions by contrasting this rhetoric with the diversified forms of propaganda devised by Octavian in Rome. The chapter focuses on the debates concerning different ideals of rulership that took place under Emperor Wu in the form of philological or mythological disquisitions on the Yellow Emperor, Yu the Great, and the interactions of monarchs with spirits and ghosts. I pay particular attention to Wu’s involvement with alchemists and experts of esoteric practices (*fangshi* 方士) as recounted by Sima Qian. The historian openly denounced these magicians as charlatans who flocked to court from the Northeast, eager to exploit the emperor’s gullibility with stories about the Yellow Emperor’s quest for immortality. I contend that the historian was also trying to suggest that Emperor Wu would have chosen the “wrong” model of rulership even without the *fangshi*’s tricks. I show how, through a

complex system of geographical and biographical references, Sima Qian wove a subtext that indicted Emperor Wu for rejecting the moral paragons of the Sage Kings of the Zhou Dynasty. According to the historian, his sovereign was too focused on becoming a “Hegemon King” (*bawang* 霸王), a title once held by the rulers of the ancient state of Qi. These dynasts had briefly prevailed over the other warring states thanks to the shrewd management of economic resources and exploitation of popular superstitions, and Sima Qian saw Wu as making an effort to model himself after them.

In addition, by taking into account information derived from newly excavated manuscripts, this chapter recovers three different interpretations of the import of the Yellow Emperor as a model of rulership. I make the case that these mythological interpretations respectively supported three distinct conceptions of monarchy: individualistic, collegial/delegatory, and interventionist. Through a close study of the language used in Han economic texts, I show how philological diatribes on the myths surrounding the Yellow Emperor, Yu the Great, and the Nine Tripods documented in the *Records* and other contemporary texts functioned as a proxy for more practical debates on fiscal centralization and state monopolies on iron and minting. Finally, I demonstrate how, despite Sima Qian’s possible misgivings and oversights, some aspects of Emperor Wu’s quest for immortality were likely formulated as an indirect criticism of the “Confucian” aristocratic conception of the state conceived as a family, which in turn reflected and served the values and interests of local landed elites. Unlike Octavian in establishing the Principate, the Chinese ruler could not appeal (not even instrumentally) to the unchallenged authority of values such as those of the Roman Republic or *mos maiorum*. Wu’s approach to rituals and beliefs was a peculiar blend of the tendency to use religion as an *instrumentum regni* and as a privileged form of individual escapism. In ancient Rome, regardless of one’s personal beliefs, openly showing allegiance to the gods that protected the city amounted to an acknowledgment of civic values and a display of patriotism. Emperor Wu had instead to deal with the absence of cults whose worship surpassed local communities, while facing the growing opposition of a faction that condemned all involvement with extra-human forces as a source of political chaos and moral uncertainty.

Chapter 5, “Place and Ritual: From *Templum* to Text,” addresses the issue of the legitimization of the Han in terms of territorial rituals and metaphors. It redefines the notion of “sacred space” in Chinese contexts through comparisons with Greco-Roman notions of *templum*, Octavian’s “transformation” into Augustus, and debates on rituals of place in Han