

# Chapter One

## The Religious Concepts Of Ancient China

漢字を生み出した古代中国の宗教観  
 Kanji wo Umidashita Kodai Chūgoku no Shūkyōkan

### 1. 犧

(犧)

GI

sacrifice

Pronounced "GI" in Japanese and meaning "sacrifice," this character has a very meaningful composition. While animal sacrifice was apparently not very common in ancient Japan, it played a very important role in ancient China, just as it did in the ancient Near East. This can clearly be seen in the makeup of the character for sacrifice, particularly in its older form.

牛	+	羊	+	秀	+	戈	=	犧 <sup>1*</sup>
ushi		hitsuji		sugu(reru)		hoko		gi
ox		sheep		excel		spear		sacrifice

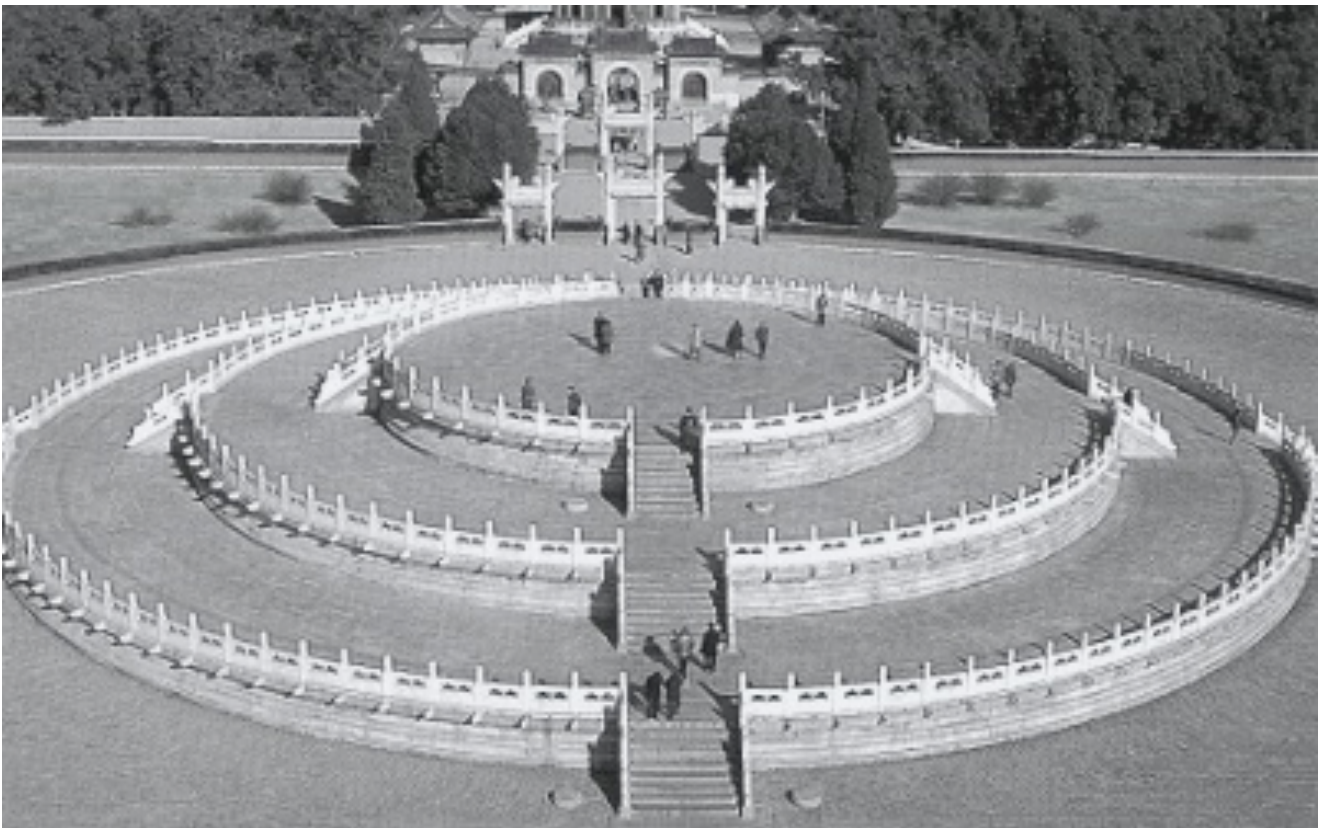
Many of the sacrifices described in the Old Testament required the worshipers to offer a male ox or sheep "without defect," that is, an animal that "excelled."

The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to Aaron and his sons and to all the Israelites and say to them: 'If any of you — either an Israelite or an alien living in Israel — presents a gift for a burnt offering to the Lord, either to fulfill a vow or as a freewill offering, you must present a male without defect from the cattle, sheep or goats in order that it may be accepted on your behalf. Do not bring anything with a defect, because it will not be accepted on your behalf.'" (Leviticus 22:17-20)

Such an animal was, of course, killed with a sharp instrument of some sort. Hoko 戈 is defined as a "halbert," which is a combination spear and battle-axe. At any rate, the combination of these four elements to make a character for an animal sacrifice is in perfect harmony with the biblical description for such a sacrifice.

With the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912, the Chinese emperor system, which had lasted some 4400 years, came to a close. On the morning of the winter solstice (December 22) of 1911, the emperor rode in a special carriage to the "Temple of Heaven" 天殿 (tenden) to offer a male ox as a burnt offering to "Shang Ti" 上帝 (jōtei in Japanese reading). (As this "last emperor" was still a child, he, of course, had help from his court retainers.)

A description of this "Temple of Heaven" from the early 19th Century described it as having no idols or any other representation of God. Likewise, the animal sacrifices were described as taking place not within



the temple itself but on a large stone altar outside the temple.<sup>2</sup>

This giant stone altar was 75 meters across and resembled a giant three-tiered wedding cake. The Temple of Heaven itself also was three-tiered, and as will become clear later, it would appear that this number three was of special significance in the Chinese understanding of Shang Ti. In between the Temple of Heaven and the "Altar of Heaven" 天壇 (tendan) was a smaller building referred to as the "Temple of Prayer" 祈年殿 (Kinenden) which contained a wooden plaque with the characters

皇天上帝 (nōtenjōtei) written on it. Literally, the four characters mean "emperor," "heaven," "above" and another character meaning "emperor." The first two characters are the same ones used to refer to the Japanese emperor 天皇 (tennō), though in reverse order, and literally mean "heavenly emperor." In the Chinese way of thinking, 天皇 (tennō) and 上帝 (jōtei) would basically have the same meaning, and thus the Chinese emperor was never referred to as 天皇 (tennō). Instead, he was called 天子 (tenshi, the "Child of Heaven"). Thus, it is only natural that both the Chinese and the Koreans never refer to the Japanese emperor 天皇陛下 (tennō heika) using the characters 天皇 (tennō). Instead, they merely refer to him as "King of Japan" 日王 (nichiō).

There are many parallels between the "Temple of Heaven" and the sacrifices that took place on the "Altar of Heaven" with the temple in Jerusalem and the sacrifices that took place there during Old Testament times. These parallels go beyond mere surface-level similarities, as the concepts the ancient Chinese had concerning "Shang Ti" 上帝 appear to have been quite close to the biblical understanding of God.

As evidence for this assertion, let us take a look at three examples from the recorded liturgy for the worship of "Shang Ti." (Note: In the Japanese original, I quoted the original Chinese and then a classical Japanese translation of that done by a Japanese scholar of ancient China, Professor Shunya Nakamura of Tsukuba University. That was then followed by my own translation into modern Japanese from a comparison with the English translation given by James Legge in his 1852 classic, "The Notions of the Chinese Concerning God and Spirits." Here, I give only the original Chinese and my translation, which reflects both Professor Nakamura's and Legge's translations.)

### 1. To greet the approach of the Spirit of Shang-Ti

於昔洪荒之初兮、混濛、五行未運兮、兩曜未明、其中挺立兮、  
有無容聲、神皇出御兮、始判濁清、立天立地人兮、羣物生生

Of old in the beginning, there was the great chaos, without form and

dark. The five elements (referring to "fire" 火, "water" 水, "wood" 木, "gold" 金, and "soil" 土, the same five characters used to designate the five planets observable with the naked eye) had not begun to revolve, nor the sun and the moon to shine. In the midst thereof there existed neither form nor sound. O Spirit Emperor, You brought them under your control, and for the first time divided the impure parts from the pure. After you made heaven and earth, you made human beings. In that, all living things came into being. <sup>3</sup>

## 2. Upon making an announcement to Shang Ti

帝闢陰陽兮、造化張、神生七政兮、精華光、圓覆方載兮、  
兆物康、臣敢祇報兮、拜薦帝曰皇

O Ti, when You separated the Yin and the Yang (i.e. the heavens and the earth), Your creating work proceeded. You produced, O Spirit, the seven heavenly bodies (i.e., the sun, the moon and the five planets that can be seen with the naked eye), and pure and beautiful was their light. The round heaven was like a covering over the square earth, and all things were at peace. I, Your servant, come before You in reverence to report. O Ti, I worship you, calling You "Emperor." <sup>4</sup>

## 3. Words said when making a wine offering to Shang Ti:

羣生總總兮、悉蒙始恩、人物盡囿兮、於帝仁、羣生荷德兮、  
誰識所從來、於惟皇兮、億兆物之祖真

All the herds of living things were created and exist according to your kindness. O Ti, all humans and all things are under your loving care. All living things bear the mark of your goodness, but who knows from whom their blessings come. You alone, O Emperor, are the true ancestor of all things. <sup>5</sup>

These three examples show that the concepts the ancient Chinese

had of Shang Ti were really very similar to what the Bible teaches about God. "Of old in the beginning, there was the great chaos, without form and dark" reminds one of the first words of Genesis: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters."

Likewise, the "dividing of the impure parts from the pure" and the "separating the Yin and the Yang" (陰 (in) = shadow, darkness, 陽 (yō) = sun, light) resembles the description of God "separating light from darkness" and separating the "waters above from the waters below." Also, the statement that Shang Ti is the "true ancestor" (or "parent") of all life and that all "living things were created and exist according to His kindness" certainly are consistent with biblical teaching.

Scholars generally agree that these ceremonies connected with the worship of Shang Ti (which continued right into the 20th century) have existed from the beginnings of Chinese culture and are far older than Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Thus, it is apparent that prior to the influences of polytheism, the original Chinese religion was monotheistic, focusing on the worship of Shang Ti. Likewise, the evidence points to many similarities between the religious concepts and rituals of ancient Israel recorded in the Old Testament and those of ancient China.

Even though polytheistic concepts influenced Chinese religiosity for a very long time, the original monotheistic forms inherent in the worship of Shang Ti were maintained until the end of the emperor system in 1911. Within the proscribed prayers of the ceremonies, there was a clear distinction made between Shang Ti as the unique God of Heaven and the spirits 神 (shin) that served him. (Note: In Japanese, the character 神 (kami) is used both for God and gods. As there are no "upper case" and "lower case" distinctions like in English, no articles such as "a" or "the," and no consistency in designating singular and plural, 神 (kami) is a very vague and undifferentiated concept.)

Among the prayers the Chinese emperor recited when he came with his own servants to bow down before Shang Ti are included the

following most interesting words:

萬神翌衛兮、而西以東、臣俯伏迎兮、敬瞻帝御、願垂歆鑒兮、拜德曷窮

Translating into English Professor Nakamura's Japanese translation, "Ten thousand spirits (神) accompany You as imperial guards and stretch from the east to the west. O Ti, as we await Your arrival, Your humble servants bow down before You. O Ti, as we worship You in Your infinite goodness, we beseech You to accept these our offerings." Concerning this concept, Legge said, "I wish to call attention to the distinction made between Shang Ti and all the shin, or as I translate the word, spirits. They are His guards or attendants. Just as Jehovah came from Paran with holy myriads (Deut. 33:2) — as He revealed Himself on Sinai among thousands of angels (Ps. 68:17) — so did the ancient Chinese believe that when Shang Ti descended to receive their worship offered by the emperor, He came attended by ten thousand spirits. He is not one of them, though He is 'a spirit.'"<sup>6</sup>

We can thus conclude that the 萬の神 (yoroazu no shin) of China were not considered as "gods" in the sense that the 萬の神 (yoroazu no kami) of Japan are (萬 (万)=10,000). On the contrary, they were thought of as spirits in the same sense that the Bible portrays angels. The verse Legge refers to in Deuteronomy 33:2 reads, "The Lord came from Sinai and dawned over them from Seir; he shone forth from Mount Paran. He came with myriads of holy ones from the south, from his mountain slopes."

It would appear that the ancient Chinese concept of "shin" as seen in the worship of Shang Ti was consistent with biblical thought. There is only one true God and all other spirits were created by God in the same sense that he created the physical universe. Thus, they are not to be the objects of worship. The essence of Shang Ti and "shin" were originally completely different, but as polytheistic tendencies began to creep in, that distinction became blurred and by the time the Japanese adopted Chinese characters, 神 was applied to the various gods of Shintoism.