

The Evolvment of “Emperor” and the Relationship Between Heaven and Man in Pre-Qin Dynasty

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Abstract: The characters of a nation are often the surface reflection of its culture. Through studying these characters, we can deeply understand the thinking mode, cultural emotion and deep aesthetic implication behind them. In Chinese culture, the concept of “heaven and man” has always been one of the main focuses in academic research and debate, which has a profound impact on the evolution of subsequent culture. Therefore, primarily based on the background of pre-Qin to the Shang dynasty, this paper discusses the relationship between “heaven” and man. Through analyzing the different forms of “di” (emperor) in oracle bone inscriptions, this paper reveals the change of the concept of heaven and man and its influence on the relationship between heaven and man in later generations. By doing so, the paper seeks to deepen the understanding of the evolution of the concept of Heaven and man in Chinese traditional concept more comprehensively.

Keywords: Shang dynasty, emperor, the relationship between heaven and man.

1. Introduction

The concept of heaven and man is the core concept of Chinese culture research. According to Xu Shen's *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, we can find that the meaning of “heaven” is “the highest, supreme, unrivaled” [1], which can be understood as the meaning of the human head and large. And the meaning of “man” is “the most noble in the heaven and the earth. This is in the form of Zhou script resembles the form of arms and shins. All things related to humans are derived from the character ‘ren’ (person)” [2]. In the evolution of heaven and man in the pre-Qin period, the connotation of man remained basically unchanged, while heaven changed. From ancient times to the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States period, the relationship between the two went through a long process from chaos and difficulty to clear boundaries to mutual integration. The Shang Dynasty, as the key turning point, played a role in connecting the past and the next. The study of the relationship between heaven and man at this time has an important role in understanding the later view of heaven and man.

In modern studies, scholars mainly focus on “research on the prototype and evolution of the Supreme God”, “research on ideas”, “document-centered investigation of the Supreme God”, “research from a cultural perspective” and “research from the perspective of Confucianism” [3]. This paper will evolve from the form and connotation of specific Chinese characters to the entrance, through the concept of heaven and man behind the understanding of Chinese characters, hoping to find out the uniqueness and inspiration of the concept of heaven and man in the Shang dynasty in the explanation of “emperor”.

2. The Relationship between Heaven and Man before the Shang Dynasty

In ancient times, the combination of heaven and man was chaotic and indistinguishable, with totem as the main form of expression. The ancestors and the surrounding environment interacted with each other, people knew the world through their own eyes, but also through the eyes of the world to reflect on themselves, all things interact, heaven and man are inseparable. At that time, Chinese characters had not yet emerged, and the ancestors' understanding of the world was embodied in the visual marks represented by the totem pictures. For example, according to Li Zehou's "The Path of Beauty", the ancient totems of the Chinese ancestors were mainly dragon snake and phoenix bird, and most of the "gods" embodied in the ancient totems were the images of "human face and snake body", such as Nuwa Fuxi. The phoenix, as another image that makes people worship, also presents the image of a "bird with a human face" [4]. At this time, the sky is not only the natural sky, but also has a symbolic meaning, with the concept of primary God, but the relationship between man and heaven is not completely tense and serious, but with primitive kindness and closeness.

By the Xia Dynasty, heaven and man had a primary distinction, and people's self-consciousness had initially formed. Through Da Yu, we could find that people had transformed the world on the basis of understanding the world. Just as some scholars pointed out, Xia people took all things in nature as objects to understand, utilize and even transform. The establishment of administrative institutions and the promulgation of government decrees reflect that Xia people have a deep understanding of the organizational structure and operation management of social groups, and their conscious practice of system construction and social governance consciousness have made some progress. Therefore, the Xia people built an unprecedented natural and social political order [5]. However, there are no specific written records and unearthed documents at this time, so there are no conditions for research. And this also put forward the necessary requirements for the study of the concept of heaven and man in the Shang Dynasty.

3. The Concept of Heaven and Man Reflected behind the Word "Di"

3.1. Historical Background

According to the background of heaven and man in primitive times and Xia Dynasty, it can be seen that the distinction between heaven and man has an early form, while in the Shang Dynasty, the distinction between the two is more significant, and people have obvious worship and belief in gods. During the Shang Dynasty, sacrificial culture was very popular. Different from witchcraft, sacrificial culture emphasized people's belief in the supreme God. As Chen Lai stressed in "Ancient Religion and Ethics: The Root of Confucianism", "Although there was a history of witchcraft and divination in the Shang Dynasty, the dominant religious belief and behavior pattern was exactly what Fraser said, 'trying to coax and appease the stubborn and unpredictable gods through gentle flattery such as prayer and sacrifice', which belonged to the sacrificial culture; Rather than the witchcraft culture of 'using the power of spells and magic to make nature conform to human wishes' [6]. With the gradual deepening of people's understanding of the world, people find that the world is more and more uncontrollable, disasters and diseases can affect people's lives arbitrarily, in such a cultural atmosphere, the supreme God represented by heaven has more mysterious color, and people are more weak and insignificant to heaven, so people gradually turn from unknown ignorance to fear and prayer for the heaven that dominates all these things.

In the concept of heaven and man in the Shang Dynasty, according to scholars' research, "Heaven" at this time did not have the meaning of Heaven and God, but only the meaning of head and large, and the corresponding bearing the meaning of God is mainly the word "di" [7]. The highest object of worship also became the emperor. As Chen Lai states, "di" is the highest god believed by the Shang

people, with the highest authority, governing nature and the lower kingdom. The most important power of God is to govern the heavens and influence the years” [6]. Therefore, “di” represents the supreme God, representing the highest heaven, through the change of the shape of “di”, people can find the relationship between it and people.

3.2. Different Shapes and Connotations of “Di”

In the oracle-bone inscriptions of the Shang dynasty, the character “di” was mainly in the following three forms (Figure 1):



Figure 1: Shang Dynasty three (1/2/3) inscriptions of “di”

The connotation of the configuration reflected by these three forms has been debated by scholars throughout the ages [8]. This paper will be organized and analyzed according to the core views.

First of all, according to Hu Houxuan’s research, “di in shangdi (God) refers to character 1, the character di in diji (sacrifice) refers to character 3” [9]. This reflects that the character “di” represented by 3 has the meaning of a verb, indicating the act of sacrifice. The character “di” in 1 has the meaning of a noun, representing the supreme God himself.

Secondly, the three characters all contain inverted triangle. In the view of Wu Dacheng, Wang Guowei, Guo Moruo and other scholars, its shape is similar to flower pedicels, but also resembles female genitalia. Therefore, they gradually evolved into reproductive worship, and “di” has the meaning of ancestral gods. In addition, it can be seen from the font that there is an arrow shape below the “di”. It can be seen that because of the worship of reproduction, the character di as an individual can not only extend his own offspring, but after its scope is expanded, she is the mother of all things and has the ability to control everything.

In addition, character 2 is different from character 1, and character 3 and 2 above the small, short horizontal indicator symbol. Through the character “di” in the late Western Zhou Dynasty and the Warring States period, it can be found that the later “di” character has followed this way, that is, character 1 and 3, then 2, then this short horizontal represents the symbol of the supreme God who is high above and rules all things.



Figure 2: Characters of di in inscriptions on bronze of Western Zhou Dynasty



Figure 3: Characters of di in inscriptions on bronze Spring and Autumn period

Finally, with the three forms of the character of di, there are corresponding inscriptions (figure 2 and 3) [10]. According to the inscriptions reflected in the oracle bones, it can be seen that the emperor was believed to have a “supernatural power” to control the natural time, and it also reflects the meaning of having the supreme God, such as: “The Emperor commanded abundant rain for a fruitful

year—The Emperor did not command abundant rain for a fruitful year” [11]. The character is also the symbol of the deities of the merchants, that is, the ancestor god, which is called in the oracle “received by the emperor or hosted in the presence of the emperor” [11].

Therefore, through the above analysis, it can be found that the “di” oracle inscriptions in the Shang Dynasty mainly include sacrifice, the meaning of the supreme God, and the three are also related to each other to form the specific meaning of heaven.

3.3. The Relationship between Men and Emperor

The concept of heaven and man in the Shang dynasty mainly reflects the relationship between men and an emperor. According to the research of scholars, “di” in the Shang dynasty formed a gradual process from “famous with real” to “famous without real” and then to “nameless without real”. People first conducted sacrifices to the supreme God, and then the sacrificial objects moved down to the specific gods managed by the Supreme God. Finally, people’s sacrifices to the ancestral gods were far higher than those to the supreme God with natural forces. This is also a step-by-step reflection of the enhancement of people’s self-awareness and control over the external world, with human power gradually higher than natural force and royal power higher than theocracy [12]. The relationship between man and emperor is still separate.

However, the connotation of the emperor, the object of sacrifice and worship, has changed from the supreme God who controls the human world with supernatural power to the ancestor God. “Shang people not only ask their ancestors about various matters through divination, but also often hold large-scale sacrificial activities to sacrifice animals and jade to their ancestors and pray for their blessings and victory in war” [5]. In this kind of sacrifice, the emperor stepped down from the indifferent supreme God to the earth, reflecting people’s expectation to consolidate their political rule in the worship of ancestral gods. This form has stronger political and social attributes and reflects the businessmen’s ideological tendency to attach more importance to utilitarian reality.

4. The Influence of Shang’s View of Heaven and Man in the Western Zhou Dynasty

With the evolution of The Times and civilization, the relationship between heaven and man was further deepened. The concept of heaven and man in the Western Zhou Dynasty was deeply influenced by the meaning of “di” in the late Shang dynasty, and “Heaven” had a deeper meaning and the relationship between the two became closer. The object of worship of Shang people is “the emperor”, and the “Heaven” has not yet played a role. But by the Zhou Dynasty, “Heaven” and its rich connotation entered people’s visual threshold. The related concepts of the Heaven and the emperor were integrated, and “Heaven” was often used to express the meaning of “di” in the literature of the Western Zhou Dynasty. According to the relevant research summary, the replacement of the emperor by the Heaven is mainly reflected in the change of power - the change in the concern about personnel and the change in the relationship with people - the man king claims to be the son of Heaven, and the change of will - the enhancement of moral will [5]. It can be found that the influence of the ancestral gods on the Western Zhou heaven in the late Shang dynasty was mainly in two aspects.

First, after the “emperor” changed from the natural god to the ancestral God in the late Shang Dynasty, the relationship between heaven and man was constantly strengthened, and the connotation of heaven was further moved down. Heaven can no longer be a God high above the world, but a visible and touched human king. The things under Heaven’s control are not only all things in nature, but political rights in the world. The norms exercised by heaven also have moral concepts created by man, and heaven has gradually become an object closely related to man.

Second, the Zhou people inherited the belief in the supreme God embodied in the Shang emperor, but under the influence of politics, the Zhou people needed to establish legitimacy for their own

regime. When the small state Zhou, a vassal, defeated the big city merchants, the people doubted their belief in the supreme God. Since the supreme God “Emperor” will bless the Shang dynasty, how can Zhou defeat the Shang Dynasty? Therefore, in the original understanding of “di”, Zhou people added a new concept - “matching virtue to heaven” to ensure the stability of their regime. As the scholar pointed out: “In order to explain the inevitability of the revolution of Zhou, Zhou people created the concept of heaven and man which was different from Shang people: on the one hand, they used the concept of heaven to construct political ethics and deify the legitimacy of their regime; On the other hand, virtue is integrated into the connotation of heaven, thus integrating the concept of god in the religious sense with the political and ethical concepts in the secular sense” [13].

Therefore, under the influence of Shang, the connotation of human king was enhanced, which made heaven closer to people’s social life, and the increase of moral virtues also made heaven more human emotions and value judgments.

5. Conclusion

Through studying the deformation and connotation of “di” in the Shang dynasty, it can be found that the meaning of “di” in this period, such as the supreme God, was inherited from ancient times and the Xia Dynasty, showing the characteristics of the gradually clear boundary between heaven and man, and reflecting the insignificance of man in the natural force. With the gradual prosperity of the Shang Dynasty, the meaning of “di” in the ancestral God was enhanced. Reflecting the clear boundary and enhanced correlation between heaven and man, it also had a profound impact on the inclusion of human king and virtue in the meaning of “Heaven” in the Western Zhou Dynasty.

The main contribution of this study is that by using specific Chinese characters as the entry point, it can help people better understand the meaning of “di” and the reflection of the concept of heaven and man behind “Emperor”. At the same time, it also connects various major periods of the pre-Qin Dynasty, and helps people better understand the historical positioning of the concept of heaven and man in the Shang dynasty and the theoretical origin of the concept of heaven and man in the future history.

In the future, further research should start from the original literature and combine the contents of the research to discover the deep relationship between heaven and man in a more detailed way.

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