1. Abstract

Of the three major doctrines (San Jiao 三教) of China – Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism – the first is fundamentally a native product, the second is mainly a foreign importation, and the third is a fusion of indigenous and alien elements. As established doctrines or religions, the San Jiao evolved chiefly during the late classical period through the early medieval period, roughly the 2nd c. BC through the 6th c. AD. Thus it is evident that the study of the history of religion in late classical and early medieval China cannot ignore the interfusion of Sinitic and non-Sinitic elements and influences. The thesis of this paper is that the same is true for the early classical and prehistoric periods. Evidence of pre-imperial xeno-Sinitic religious exchange is presented here under four rubrics: lamb of goodness, goat of justice; magi from the west; heavenly horses; heavenly questions.

2. Introduction

Scholarly understanding of the history of religion in China, like that of so many other aspects of Chinese history, tends to be disturbingly schizophrenic: on one hand, the uniqueness and insularity of Chinese religion is stressed; on the other hand, the foreign origins of Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism are reluctantly admitted. All of the religions just mentioned came to China and took root there during the medieval period – basically from the Eastern Han (25–220 AD) through the Tang (618–907 AD).¹ In this chapter, I wish to develop a model of cultural interfusion for

¹ Foltz, Richard C., Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century, New York: St. Martin’s 1999.
the period of early China—before the Qin (221–206 BC) and the Western Han (206 BC–23 AD) dynasties and moving backward in time through the Iron Age to the Bronze Age and beyond. This is the time of “China before China,” to adopt the fine phrase turned by Fiskesjö and Chen.  

The picture that I would like to paint in this essay is more like a sketch of the main outlines of religious development than a detailed portrayal of all facets of the history of early Chinese religion, which would require book-length treatment. I shall focus on several essential aspects of religious belief and behavior during pre-Qin times that established the foundations for the evolution of organized religion in China. I would be the first to recognize that there were many other religious manifestations in pre-Qin times that are not covered in this treatment. For instance, the elaborate Neolithic goddess worship of the Hongshan Culture in the northeast and the Bronze Age sacrificial pits filled with ivory tusks and peculiar statues at Sanxingdui in the southwest are evidence of vital cults outside of the East Asian Heartland (EAH), and there were many other local and regional traditions. Yet it is difficult to determine the degree to which such traditions contributed to mainstream practice and ideology of later times.

Instead of a comprehensive survey of the evolution of religion within the present territory of China during pre-Qin (i.e., pre-imperial) times, I shall focus on a limited number of phenomena that have remained central to Chinese ideas about ethics, spirituality and sacredness right up to modern times.

3. Lamb of Goodness, Goat of Justice

Somewhat surprisingly, the foundations of Chinese ethical and moral precepts are intimately linked to ovicaprids (or caprovines, i.e., sheep and goats). This is surprising in the sense that China is viewed as a typical agricultural society, which means that the modus vivendi of its people was settled, not pastoral or nomadic, as one might expect in light of the high esteem in which ovicaprids were apparently held by the founders of the civilization.