MAGICIANS, MAGIC, AND SHAMANISM
IN ANCIENT CHINA

BY

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Abstract
This paper examines shamanism and related religious phenomena in ancient China by exploring myths, legends, and histories described in transmitted texts; relevant archaeological data; and modern ethnographic records. Definitions and terminological issues are addressed, and a three-stage evolutionary sequence is suggested for the development of religion in China (primitive religion, polytheistic religion, and monotheistic religion). The terminological distinctions for religious practitioners are also presented, including magicians, sorcerers, and priests. Archaeological evidence for religious activities before the emergence of complex societies helps to fill in some of the gaps found in the textual records that relate legends ascribed to these early periods. The varying roles of magicians/shamans in the formation of complex societies in North China are examined. Finally, the rich evidence for shamanism in South China is surveyed.

History of research, theoretical framework and terminology
The study of religion is perhaps the least developed among the many subfields of cultural anthropology. As Ralph W. Burhoe stated in 1974: “It could be said that the scientific study of religion is today in a more primitive state than was biology two centuries ago. We have not yet had our Darwin; we have hardly had our Linnaeus to sharpen our basic descriptive terms and their classifications” (Burhoe 1974: 15). This statement is particularly true with respect to China, even though one might assume that, with its numerous written records, the conditions China offers for the study of religion are superior to those in many other parts of the world. In this essay, therefore, I will use three different kinds of sources that, when used in conjunction, can shed light
on the religious and spiritual life of various peoples in ancient China: transmitted texts that relate some of their myths, legends and histories; archaeological materials recovered during the past half-century that document their material culture; and modern ethnographic records, which show the survival of ancient customs among China’s 57 or more minority nationalities, each of whom had its own different trajectory of social development. The study of all these important materials is still in its infancy. In an initial attempt to alleviate this situation, I shall here present some ideas on magicians, magic, and shamanism as reflected in Chinese sources. In paying particular attention to their geographic diversity, this paper complements a previous study (Tong 1994), in which I investigated differences in the development of civilization in northern and southern China, but gave only passing consideration to religious phenomena.

The earliest systematic study of ancient Chinese religion was undertaken at the turn of the twentieth century by J. J. M. De Groot, who devoted six chapters in the sixth volume of his authoritative Religious System of China to the discussion of shamans and shamanism (De Groot 1892–1910: vol. 6, pt. 5, pp. 1187–1341). De Groot refers to shamans by the Chinese terms 五 (wu) and coins the word “wuism” for what we now normally call shamanism. Beginning in the 1930s, Chinese academics also worked on this topic. Qu Duizhi (1930) focused on the literary sources; Li Anzhai (1931: 3–11) approached shamanism from a modern sociological perspective; and Chen Mengjia (1936) interpreted oracle bone inscriptions as records of shamanism. More recently, K. C. Chang (1981; 1983: 44–55 et passim; 1986: 1–24; 1990: 41–65; 1994) adduced archaeological finds to study the topic, while Song Zhaolin (1989a; 1990) compared excavated materials with ethnographic data.

The Chinese terminology on the subject of shamanism is very much in flux. The character 五 (wu) (“magician,” “shaman,” or “medicine man”) first appears in the Shang oracle bone inscriptions. Afterwards, from the Western Zhou Dynasty to the present day, this word has occurred continuously, albeit relatively rarely, in all sorts of historical records. In modern times, scholars have used the term 五 to refer indistinctly to both part-time religious practitioners in Primitive Society1 and professional priests in complex societies. For related terms such as 术 (magic) and De Groot’s “wuism” (or Shamanism), the meanings are also vague—they refer sometimes to concrete magical activities in Primitive Religion, sometimes to ceremonies of institutionalized religion.

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1 Editor’s note: In his use of the term “Primitive Society,” the author is referring to preindustrial society; in modern Chinese archaeology, this generally is used to refer to the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods.