THE NOTIONS OF GOD IN THE ANCIENT CHINESE RELIGION

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It is a well known fact that in imperial China, the emperor was hailed as Son of Heaven. 1) The explanation is less evident. According to the official version, this was because the emperor had received the Mandate of Heaven. This interpretation is based on a theory first expounded by the Duke of Chou, following the downfall of the Shang dynasty.

The Shang dynasty was the first dynasty in historical China. It is believed to have begun in 1766 B.C. In 1122 B.C., it was overthrown by King Wu who founded the succeeding Chou dynasty. The Duke of Chou was a brother of King Wu. After the latter's death, while his son, King Cheng, was still a minor, the Duke ruled the newly pacified country. It was during his regency that he stated this famous theory of the Mandate of Heaven. 2)

The notion of mandate was a familiar one. When a king appointed a subject to a certain office, he was said to give a mandate to that office. When he dismissed the official, it was said that he took away his mandate. The Duke applied this notion to the action of Heaven, who was believed to govern the whole world, and declared that, because the Shang kings had displeased Heaven with their wrong doing, Heaven had taken away His Mandate and had given it over to the Chou kings. 3) Obviously the Duke promulgated this doctrine for the sake of justifying the Chou's conquest of China. However, from the vantage point of the history of religion, the story is of unique importance.

1) Heaven or T'ien, as we shall see, is a name of the Supreme God in China.
3) Ibid. p. 231
It signalized indeed the beginning of the amalgamation of two concepts of a Supreme God that was to exercise a decisive influence on the further development of the religious thinking of the Chinese people. These two concepts were the Ti and T'ien.

The word Ti — which we shall translate as God-on-High — is found on the inscribed oracle bones rescued from the ruins of the Shang capital. 4) There, Ti is said to command the rain, the wind, the thunder, the drought, and the harvest. To Him are attributed victories, defeats, disasters, illnesses, and death. Indeed, His will was consulted by kings and was revered as Supreme Law. 5) Contrary to an opinion once prevalent, it is now established that the oracle bones do mention sacrifices to Ti. Of these the ting and ti are the most important ones. The former was held in the ancestral temple in honor of one's deceased father; the latter in the open country to ask for a good year. 6) It is therefore generally assumed that Ti, or God-on-High, was worshipped by the Shang people as their Supreme God. 7)

The word T'ien is also found in the oracle records, but it does not refer to the Supreme God. 8) The T'ien, as a name of a Supreme God, appeared first in the literature of the Chou period. There, T'ien is given anthropomorphic attributes. He is said to see, to hear, and to watch over all men. He is affected by men's doings. He is happy and angry with them. He blesses those who please Him and sends calamities upon those who offend Him. Though His ways are inscrutable, they are not arbitrary but always favorable to the virtuous, unfavorable to the wicked. T'ien is implored, is believed to be compassionate, ready to

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4) The Shang kings used to consult the will of the Supreme God or their ancestors by means of a particular method of divination called pu. The materials used in this divination were either the under-shells of tortoise or shoulder bones of cattle, on which the subjects of the consultation were often incised. Tens of thousands of shells and bones of this sort have been found in the recent excavation of the ruins of the Shang Capital in the modern Hunan province. These shells and bones are commonly called oracle bones.


