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Pre-Confucian Chinese Beliefs as Reflected by the Religious Symbols in the *Book of Poetry*

HO SHUN-YEE

Abstract

Analysis of the major symbols in the religious poems of the *Book of Poetry* (c. 1100–600 BC) reveals a spiritual world which is at once holy and secular. The Zhou people believed that the supreme Heaven, gracious and authoritative, granted blessings upon man, and that the ancestral spirits in the numinous world continually protected their descendants. On the one hand, the worshippers responded to the spirits by establishing communication with them, by expressing their sincere gratitude, and, in a mystical sense, by seeking harmony with the divine. On the other hand, pious supplicants expected practical rewards, especially wealth, prosperity, and longevity in return. Such wishes were only realized when worshippers pleased the divinities by presenting rich offerings and by obeying Heaven's moral rules. These considerations suggest that the symbolic order depicted in the *Book of Poetry* was so simple, rational, and sacred that it was unable to expand by incorporating sophisticated ontological quests, frenzied ritualistic practices, and practical humanistic concerns—elements which might be found in the symbolic worlds of other cultures and in other belief systems in China.

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Among the various approaches to research on the Zhou culture, two are particularly prominent. One is the study of *li* 禮 (rites) in ancient China.[1] *Li*, no doubt, represents the Zhou culture, but many scholars seem to emphasize the secular aspect of the Zhou *li*—a system of familial, social, and political norms and structures—and somewhat neglect its religious aspect.[2] Even if they do mention the institutionalized sacrificial activities, they usually consider them part of the secular order. This dominant trend of study is understandable because it is an appropriate approach for tracing the development of *li* in ancient China and in later periods from the sense of order and continuity. The rational character of the Zhou *li* paved the way for the rise of humanism in China, represented by Confucius (551–479 BC). It is no wonder that the traditional interpretation of the *Shi jing* 詩經 [Book of Poetry] since Confucius has emphasized the moral aspect of the text; the Confucian tradition made this emphasis practically inevitable.[3] The second area that has concerned scholars is the relationship between the Shang and the Zhou religions, especially the extent to which shamanic practices and the objects of worship in the Shang period influenced the Zhou practices.[4] Both fields of interest have been valuable because

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[1] The period before the Qin 秦 dynasty (221–206 BC) is commonly classified as ancient China, and the period after 221 BC as imperial China.

[2] See, for example, Lu Zhenyu 呂振羽, *Yin Zhou shidai de Zhongguo shehui* 殷周時代的中國社會 [Chinese Society in the Yin and the Zhou Period] (Beijing: Sdxjoint Publishing, 1962) and Du Zhengsheng 杜正勝, *Gudai shehui yu guojia* 古代社會與國家 [Ancient Society and Nation] (Taibei: Yunchen, 1992). Also, even though Herbert Fingarette asserts that *li* in the *Lun yu* 論語 [The Analects] is a holy rite, it is sacred primarily in the sense that it reflects the holiness of human existence. Man has the magical quality to become good, to realize himself, and to respect other people by spontaneously practicing *li*. To conclude,

> instead of being diversion of attention from the human realm to another transcendent realm, the overtly holy ceremony is to be seen as the central symbol, both expressions of and participating in the holy as a dimension of all truly human existence.

Clearly, what Fingarette emphasizes about *li* is its humanity, not its divine attributes. See Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 17.

[3] See Qu Wanli 屈萬里, "Xian Qin shuo shi de fengshang he Hanru yi shi shuojiao zhi yuqu" 先秦說詩的風尙和漢儒以詩說教之迂曲 [The Fashion of Interpreting the *Shi jing* in the Pre-Qin Period and the Twisted Use of the Poems for Moral Teaching by the Confucians in the Han Period], in *Shi jing yanjiu lunji* 詩經研究論集, ed. Lin Qingzhang 林慶彰 (Taibei: Xuesheng, 1983), 383–407; and Pauline Yu, *The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 76.

[4] See Chang Kwang-chih (Zhang Guangzhi 張光直), *Zhongguo qingtong shidai* 中國青銅時代 [The Bronze Age of China] (Taibei: Lian jing, 1990); Chow Tse-tsung (Zhou

they emphasize the continuity of religion and intellectual history in ancient China. Each period, however, has its unique characteristics. The focus of this study is on the beliefs of the Zhou people as revealed by the salient symbols in the religious poems of the *Book of Poetry* (c. 1100–600 BC, that is, the pre-Confucian period). The five hundred years of the Zhou period (from the eleventh to the seventeenth century BC) recorded in the *Book of Poetry* represent a specific cultural experience that differs significantly from that of magical shamanism and rational humanism.

It is important to note that although this research recognizes the *Book of Poetry* as an important source for exploring the Zhou ethos, the classic is not the only source. Other ancient Chinese writings such as the *Shu jing* 書經 [Book of Documents] and the *Li ji* 禮記 [Book of Rites], and archaeological materials such as excavated bronzes and oracle bones can contribute to an understanding of ancient Chinese thought and society. In this sense, the *Book of Poetry* cannot represent all kinds of religious thought, including, for example, the cult of mountains and rivers, nor all social strata in all the vassal states in the Zhou dynasty.[5] However, this study is only concerned with providing a basis for tracing significant ideas of the Zhou people at the dawn of Chinese civilization as revealed in an anthology of early Chinese poems.

In order to delineate clearly the characteristics of the Zhou symbolic world as portrayed in the *Book of Poetry*, two approaches are used in this study. First, the major symbols employed in the religious poems, especially the "Song" 頌 [Eulogia] portion, are identified. A series of research projects was conducted under this framework to elucidate the

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Cezong 周策縱), *Gu wuyi yu liushi kao* 古巫醫與六詩考 [Ancient Chinese Shamanic Medicine and Poetry] (Taibei: Lian jing, 1986). Lothar von Falkenhausen agrees with Chang Kwang-chih (see further explanation in note 18) and points out that the animal motifs decorating the Shang and the Zhou bronzes must have been related to the sacrificial activities within which the vessels were used. See Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius, 1000–250 BC: The Archaeological Evidence* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2006), 47.

[5] The *Shi jing* people in general are composed of populations from the royal domain and from more than fifteen vassal states. However, culturally speaking, from the evidence of both their refined material culture as seen in the poems and their sophisticated literary skills, the poets and their circles can likely be seen to represent the upper and educated class of the Zhou. See Chen Pan 陳槃 "Lun Guo feng fei minjian geyao de benlai mianmu ba" 論國風非民間歌謠的本來面目跋 [Supplementary Notes to Qu Wanli's "An Identification of the 'Guo feng' as Ballads Revised by Literati"], *Bulletin of the Institute of History & Philology* (*BIHP*) 34 (1963): 493–97.

symbolism.[6] These symbols serve as elements of the conceptual framework of a culture. According to Clifford Geertz, sacred symbols—which deal with bafflement, pain, and moral paradox—"function to synthesize a people's ethos—the tone, character and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mode—and their world-view."[7] By experiencing the religious meaning of symbols, people can transcend their sufferings on earth and accept them against a wider reality. Dale Cannon echoes Geertz in asserting that religion is therefore defined as "a system of symbols that participants use to draw near to, and come into right or appropriate relationship with, what they deem to be ultimate reality."[8] Participants feel that they can find solutions to the mysteries of life when they have access to an ultimate reality. Likewise, when the Zhou people faced challenges such as wars and draughts and felt inadequacies in dealing with life and death, they looked above to their high god (called *di* 帝, *shangdi* 上帝, or *tian* 天 in the poems) for help and guidance. The rituals and the objects which were adopted in sacrifices thus represented the Zhou people's thoughts about both their own lives and their relationship with their high god. Second, a comparison is made between the meaning of religious symbols in other cultures and those in the Zhou culture so as to identify the distinctive nature of the latter. Several Western theories of symbolism are employed in this comparison. The goal of this paper is not to isolate a five-hundred-year religious phenomenon from previous and later periods or from other cultures, but to highlight the distinctive ideas concealed within the sacred symbols of a rich Zhou classic.

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[6] Ho Shun-yee, "Significance of Musical Instruments and Food Utensils in Sacrifices of Ancient China," *Monumenta Serica* 51 (2003): 1–18; Ho, "Bird Symbolism in the Religious Poems of the *Book of Poetry*," *International Review of Chinese Religion & Philosophy* 9 (2003): 1–24; and Ho, "Plant Symbolism in the Religious Poems of the *Book of Poetry*," *Journal of Oriental Studies* 37, no. 2 (1999): 163–74.

[7] Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Reader in Comparative Religions: An Anthropological Approach*, ed. William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt (1958; New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 205.

[8] Dale Cannon, *Six Ways of Being Religious: A Framework for Comparative Studies of Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1996), 43.

I. IDEAS REVEALED IN THE SIGNIFICANT SYMBOLS

1. Communication

The concept of establishing communication with the divine world seems widespread and commonplace, that is, it is not a unique characteristic among the world's religions. However, for the Confucian intellectuals who represented high culture in China, the concept of communicating with divinities was not easily accepted. For many of these intellectuals, Heaven, *dao* 道 (the way), or an impersonal order in the universe, was so abstract and far away that communication was impossible. The focus of life, therefore, should be on the practice of moral principles in the human world.[9] For the Zhou people, however, the divine world with the high god and their ancestral deities were accessible. This meant that neither distance nor death could prevent humans from contacting spirits. Further, if it was possible to communicate with spirits, then spirits were beings who could correspondingly react to the human world. It was this act of reciprocal communication that inspired hope among the Zhou people. In *Mao* 258 ("Yu han" 雲漢),[10] for example, when there was a drought, people cried out for help from Heaven by offering sacrifices. Whether the spirits accepted these offerings or granted blessings might not be known, but at least man could take the initial step by knocking on the door and entertaining the possibility of intervention.

Symbolic stimuli that appealed to the senses—smoke, aroma, wine, bells, and drums—provided the raw materials for a communication network for the Zhou people. The Zhou people adopted this sensory method because it was a common way of communication in the human world. First, they chose a specific location for communication—a temple—to show their seriousness. It was in this fixed place, and not at a random altar, that people congregated and prepared for interaction with

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[9] Creel stresses that for Confucius the *dao* was not something mystical. It was an ethical pursuit in this life, here and now, for all mankind. For a further discussion of its meaning, see Herrlee G. Creel, *Chinese Thought, from Confucius to Mao Tse-tung* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), 33.

[10] The *Shi jing* edition that I use is Mao Heng 毛亨 or Mao Chang 毛萇, comm. Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, *Mao shi Zheng jian* 毛詩鄭箋 [Mao Poems and Zheng Commentaries] (Taibei: Xinxing, 1981).

the spirits. Today, temples are so common in China that people take for granted their status as the representation of Chinese religion and culture. They forget that the temple is and was a major religious symbol of spiritual communication. Wolfram Eberhard, for example, does not include "temple" as an entry in his work *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols*.[11]

Fragrant incense, a common religious symbol, does earn a place in Eberhard's book. However, he just notes that it is made of sandalwood and is used in temples. He never suggests its religious significance. The *Book of Poetry* does not record the use of incense sticks, and yet we cannot help but associate this symbol of later periods with the symbols of smoke and aroma in the Zhou period. The smoke and aroma symbols always appeared together in sacrifice such as burning fragrant plants or offering roasted meat.

What he offers,	是烝是享
Is *aromatic* and *fragrant*.	苾苾芬芬
The sacrificial ritual is formal,	祀事孔明
The ancestors are august.[12]	先祖是皇

When the smoke ascended and the aroma spread, the Zhou worshippers believed that the messages they carried would bridge the void between the human and divine worlds.

Similarly, the ceremonial sound of bells and drums functioned to invoke spirits. The ancients were clever and imaginative; they knew that human voices were limited, whereas the tinkling of bells and the boom of drums could be heard far away.[13] Further, although shamanism had declined by this period, the Zhou people might still believe that the deep sound of drums and the rhythmic steps of dancing possessed a special, if not magical, power enabling interaction with the spirits. Music and dancing in fact were used as religious symbols in most ancient cultures, for both represented rhythm-related symbols that were regarded as parts of the ordered pattern of the cosmos.

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[11] Wolfram Eberhard, *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols: Hidden Symbols in Chinese Life and Thought*, trans. G. L. Campbell (1983; New York: Routledge, 1991).

[12] *Mao* 210/6 ("Xin Nan shan" 信南山). Bernhard Karlgren, "The Book of Odes," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 16 (1944–45): 247. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent translations of the poems will also be Karlgren's, although in most cases, I shall make slight revisions where necessary.

[13] See *Mao* 208 ("Gu Zhong" 鼓鐘) and 274 ("Zhi jing" 執競).

Another sensory symbol of communication is wine. In the Zhou period, wine was made of grain crops. *Mao* 279 (“Feng nian” 豐年) describes a ceremony which celebrated a bounteous harvest.

> In this rich year there is plentiful millet and rice. . . . 豐年多黍多稌
>
> We make wine and sweet wine, 爲酒爲醴
> And offer [them] to the ancestors and ancestresses. 烝畀祖妣

The offering was precious because the people used the black millet, a fine grain, with the fragrant turmeric plant to make wine.

> I bestow upon you a jade ladle, 釐爾圭瓚
> And a vessel of *aromatic* wine from black millet.[14] 秬鬯一卣

In this part of the ritual, the black millet, the scent, the wine, and the ladle wove an organic network of symbolism, which will be discussed further in the later sections of this paper. The fragrant smell of wine attracts and guides deities to the human world. The intoxicating effect of the beverage also provides a mysterious experience of interaction when the worshippers also drink the wine. In addition, the Zhou people made libations (*guan* 祼) by pouring wine onto the ground.[15] This ritual was also common in ancient Greece and Rome.[16]

I think, however, that the *shi* 尸 impersonator is the most striking expression of communication in this symbolic network. During a ceremony in *Mao* 248 (“Fu yi” 鳧鷖), the worshippers had direct contact with their ancestral spirit because he was personified by an impersonator. As Arthur Waley points out, the *shi* was not possessed in the frenzied manner that might have characterized the behavior of a shaman; on the contrary, the demeanor of the *shi* was extremely quiet and restrained.[17] He was like an ordinary man enjoying delicious food and getting drunk. During the encounter between man and the “spirit,” the worshippers felt satisfied because they were able to interact with the

[14] See *Mao* 262/5 (“Jiang Han” 江漢).

[15] See *Mao* 235/5 (“Wen wang” 文王) and 239/2 (“Han lu” 旱麓).

[16] Ad de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* (Amesterdam: North-Holland, 1976), 296.

[17] Arthur Waley, trans., *The Book of Songs* (1937; New York: Grove, 1960), 209.

spirit in tangible form face to face and they would expect that the spirit would more likely reward them.

The symbolic assessment of the poems reveals the eagerness of the Zhou people to bridge the gap between the human and divine worlds. They accomplished this by actively employing various means to reach the spirits. To a certain extent, this spiritual pursuit of the Zhou people continued that of the Shang people. K.C. Chang has considered the shamanic means of communication with spirits in the Shang period from an archaeological approach.[18] When comparing my research with that of Chang, I find that the vehicles of spiritual communication such as burning, dancing, and offering animals and wine were almost identical between the Zhou and the Shang. Accordingly, a symbolic reading of the *Shi jing* poems is obviously valid. There was, however, a significant difference in the manner of communication with the spirits between these two dynasties—the absence of magic in the Zhou religious world. The Zhou people, for example, held their ceremonies in a temple, not on a magical mountain, nor in an enchanted wilderness of mulberry trees; the offerings were roasted meat and tasty soup instead of bloody animals; the music and dance performances were highly stylized and elaborate, unlike the ecstatic shamanic dancing accompanied by wild drum music of the Shang people; the *shi* impersonator was calm and "human" and his behavior bore little resemblance to that of the frenzied shaman once wine was consumed; and finally, divination in the Zhou period was not as popular as it was in the Shang period.[19] In sum, although the wish of the Zhou people to communicate with spirits was as sincere and fervent as that of the Shang people, the manner in which the Zhou people pursued this goal was more rational and secular, especially as it was expressed in the *shi* symbol.

2. *Gratitude*

Having opened the door of communication, the use of symbols representing items of great value strongly suggests that gratitude was the

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[18] Chang, *Zhongguo qingtong shidai*, 52–64. According to Chang, the shamanic means of communication included mountains, mulberry trees, birds, animals, divination, sacrificial vessels, wine, drugs, feasting, and dancing.

[19] Concerning the bloody sacrifice, the divination practice, and the shamanic dance for evoking rain and for expelling demons in the Shang period, see Chen Mengjia 陳夢家, "Shangdai de shenhua yu wushu," 商代的神話與巫術 [Shang Mythology and Shamanism], *Yanjing xuebao* 燕京學報 20 (1936): 485–576.

first gift that the Zhou people offered to their spirits. Valuable objects offered to the spirits, of course, may have been designed to show appeasement and an expectation of rewards on the part of worshippers. But gratitude seems a more likely option because the symbolic network also contained an idea of purity. For example, the animal-offerings, and even the officiant, were cleansed before any action is performed.[20] The color white and the clean sacrificial food in ceremonies also conveyed the message of purity. This phenomenon suggests that the worshippers must have had great respect for their spirits, going beyond any expectation of an exchange of benefits. Moreover, the idea of gratitude was reinforced by the context in which agricultural produce, a factor accounting for the survival of the ancients, was paramount.

Generally speaking, gratitude is a universal element of world religions, especially where the act of sacrifice is concerned.[21] In order to be more specific about the role and meaning of gratitude, we have to ask two questions: First, how did worshippers express gratitude (what symbols did they use)? Second, how serious were they in expressing gratitude to the spirits?

In the religious poems of the *Book of Poetry*, two cohesive systems of symbolism shed light on the idea of expressing gratitude. These systems, which formed an ox-millet network of symbols, were broken down as follows:

Ox—meat—food vessels
Millet—wine—jade ladles

Each of these symbols, located in different poems, reflects and reinforces the significance of the other. When examining the first system, we are reminded how the ancients chose a large ox of a red solid color as the victim, a select and costly gift.

He sacrifices with clear wine, 祭以清酒

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[20] See *Mao* 15/3 ("Cai ping" 采蘋) and 209/2 ("Chu ci" 楚茨).

[21] According to Wilhelm Schmidt, the original meaning of sacrifice can be seen most clearly in the firstling-sacrifices of primitive hunters and food-gatherers. These are sacrifices of homage and thanksgiving to the supreme being, to whom everything belongs and who therefore cannot be enriched by gifts; in other words, the supreme power cannot be bribed. See Joseph Henninger, "Sacrifice," trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade et al., 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 12:550. Although we cannot find firstling-sacrifices in the *Book of Poetry*, the Zhou people nonetheless offered their best to the giver of food.

Then follows with a red ox. 從以騂牡
He offers them to the ancestors.[22] 享于祖考

We offer a large animal. 於薦廣牡
We assist in setting forth the sacrifice.[23] 相予肆祀

The animal was ritualistically killed in a prescribed way and roasted to a turn. It was served to the worshippers, who, in their turn, offered their food vessels for sacrifice in a prescribed manner. The people offered their best to their spirits—we find the same idea embodied in the second system. The plant offering was no ordinary grain, but the most precious kind of black millet, which also served as the basis for fragrant and clear wine. During a libation ritual in *Mao* 239/2 ("Han lu"), the worshippers filled the drinking vessels with ladles made of gold and jade. In addition, all sacrificial food was considered pure because the victim was cleansed and the wine clear.

The essential role played by this ox-millet network in sacrificial poems indicates that the concept of gratitude toward spirits was crucial in the Zhou religious world. Comparatively speaking, this element may not necessarily be prominent in religions which emphasize supplication and exchange. In the following lines, I will use two poems to illustrate the Zhou people's serious attitude toward thanksgiving.

In *Mao* 209/4 ("Chu ci"), a sacrificial poem, the ox-millet motif and its related activities such as cooking and feasting thread their way through the whole poem with remarkable consistency. This extended presentation shows that the ox-millet network embodies a message. In the fourth stanza, the poet notes that the worshippers were sincere and earnest in their performance of the ritual:

We are very reverent, 我孔熯矣
Our rites have no error. . . . 式禮莫愆

We are reverent and swift. 既齊既稷

Hence the symbolic world rested on the sincere attitude toward ritual as expressed in these lines.

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[22] *Mao* 210/5 ("Xin Nan shan").
[23] *Mao* 282 ("Yong" 雝).

The specific choice of the ox-millet system is, in fact, related to the reason behind the Zhou people's gratefulness. In *Mao* 210 ("Xin Nan shan"), another typical sacrificial poem, the poet narrates in the first half of the poem that there was fertile soil, timely rain, and a rich harvest; in the second half he describes how the Zhou people prepared for a sacrifice.[24] The cause and effect are obvious. Without heavenly nurturing, they could not develop agriculture and obtain food. Because they had survived and become prosperous, they offered the best of their harvest and livestock to Heaven and to the spirits. Other valuable objects were also used as gifts, but they were not as significant as the food symbolism represented by the ox-millet motif.

From the viewpoint of intellectual history, several scholars have argued that in ancient China, requital through sacrifice implied the rise of moral consciousness.[25] According to this view, the worshippers reciprocated Heaven's favors by trying their best to repay their "debt" so that the human-divine gap could be bridged. This argument applies well to the late Zhou period, when sacrificial rituals had become routine and humanistic ideas were widespread. I think, however, that one must not over-extend this view into the early Zhou period (the dominant period of our classic poems). Instead, the ancient Zhou worshippers apparently acted more in the spirit of grateful thanksgiving than in the spirit of obligatory repayment. The oblation of the ancients stemmed from profound religious gratitude because the message concealed in the symbols was a life-and-death matter—no heavenly grace, no survival. How could man, for example, pay back the sunshine and

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[24] This pattern of organization appears recurrently in such agricultural and sacrificial poems as *Mao* 211, 212, 279, 290, and 291.

[25] Wei Zhengtong 韋政通, *Zhongguo sixiang shi* 中國思想史 [The Chinese Intellectual History], 2 vols. (Taibei: Shuiniu, 1992), 37–38. Wei quotes Yang Lien-sheng's and Tang Junyi's articles which stress the moral concept of reciprocity. Yang believes that this characteristic of Chinese culture originates from Confucianism; see "The Concept of *bao* as a Basis for Social Relations in China," in *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 291–93. Tang, however, points out that gratitude to spirits in ancient religion leads to reciprocity. Although the divine grace abounds, the distance between the divine and human beings decreases if human beings maintain their self-dignity and try their best to reciprocate the divine grace; see Tang Junyi 唐君毅, "Lun Zhongguo yuanshi zongjiao xinyang yu Rujia tiandao guan zhi guanxi jian shi Zhongguo zhexue zhi qiyuan" 論中國原始宗教信仰與儒家天道觀之關係兼釋中國哲學之起源 [On the Relationship Between Chinese Primitive Religions and the Concept of Heaven in Confucianism, and an Interpretation of the Origin of Chinese Philosophy], in *Zhonghua renwen yu dangjin shijie bubian* 中華人文與當今世界補編 (1948; Taibei: Xuesheng, 1988), 161, 165.

rain? Accordingly, the ancients responded to the awesome, benevolent, and all powerful Heaven spontaneously in a grateful way, not morally in a reciprocal manner. Here, I reiterate that it is important to understand the true feeling of the *Shi jing* people and to explore their unique religious world rather than distorting their intent with subsequent cultural and academic preoccupations.

3. *Appeasement*

For the Zhou people, the high spirit and their dead ancestors were personal gods who possessed human feelings and desires. The network of symbols in the *Book of Poetry* implies that the worshippers tried to entertain the spirits and to satisfy their sensory needs. Such an attitude of appeasement, then, was quite subtle because it was at times motivated by deep gratitude, and at other times, by gratitude mixed with an expectation of continued rewards on the part of the worshippers. At any rate, the aim was to make the spirits happy by providing them with enjoyment in the form of hedonic sensual pleasures of taste, smell, hearing, and sight.

Roasted meat and clear wine were the most significant symbols in the taste and smell network. In the previous sections, I have noted that fragrant and delicious food served the dual functions of establishing communication and of expressing thanksgiving, but in this section I emphasize another function, that of providing pleasure and enjoyment. Below is a good example to show that a rich symbol conveys several meanings.

> Fragrant is the offering, 苾芬孝祀
> The spirit *likes* your drink and food. 神嗜飲食

These lines in *Mao* 209/4 ("Chu ci") are vivid proof that the Zhou people believed that their spirits enjoyed these sensual pleasures. Likewise, the *shi* impersonator, mentioned above, felt satisfied after drinking and eating from the richly prepared dishes until full. Jordan Paper described how

> the male members of the clan then ate the sacrificial food in an atmosphere of merriment. The clan members and, it is assumed, invited guests, ate until satiated and drank until inebriated as had the clan spirits reflected in the behavior of the *shi* impersonator. Inebriation

> demonstrated the bountiful gifts of the ancestors in recompense for the gifts of the living to them.[26]

Next day, the banquet continues. *Mao* 248 ("Fu Yi") repeats four times that the fare is fragrant and tasty, while the wine is clear and plentiful. As a result, the sacrifice is blessed.

The impersonator feasts and drinks,	公尸燕飲
Felicity and blessings come.	福祿來成

In other words, the spirit was happy with the lavish entertainment provided by the worshippers and thus gave rewards to them.

Playing music and dancing were the most significant symbols in the sight and sound network. Coordinated and graceful movements accompanied by melodious sound are delightful to human eyes and ears, but the Zhou people thought that unless the spirits were first happy, man could not receive genuine joy. Therefore the basic aim of playing music and dancing was to entertain spirits.

With flutes they dance to reed-organs and drums.	籥舞笙鼓
The musicians perform in unison.	樂既和奏
They *please* the illustrious ancestors.[27]	烝衎烈祖

The body language expressed in the graceful and coordinated dance movements and the coordinated performances of the musicians brought about unity between the dancers and the musicians as well as harmony between the worshippers and the spirits. The same verb, *kan* 衎 (to please), also appears in *Mao* 301 ("Na" 那), a poem which honors the heroic ancestors.

4. Expectation

An offering may simply be a form of thanksgiving, or it may also reflect an expectation that something will be given in return. The latter is common in religion; if you beg the spirits to grant your wishes, you

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[26] *Mao* 247; Jordan Paper, *The Spirits are Drunk: Comparative Approaches to Chinese Religion* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 32.

[27] *Mao* 220/2 ("Bin zhi chu yan" 賓之初筵).

must first give them benefits. As we have described in the above section, the *Shi jing* world is no exception. A high proportion of the significant symbols, especially those concerning the offering of gifts, implies an expectation of rewards on the part of the believers. Generally speaking, the Zhou people were eager for material and physical things as revealed by their symbolic objects. Although the symbols did evoke spiritual meaning, that is, blessings from Heaven, the expectation of abundance and continuity in material and physical things was earthly in nature. For some religions, the focus of their symbolic world may be expiation or sacralization.

The concept of abundance is dominant in the religious world of the *Shi jing*. The Zhou people, for example, offered large numbers of oxen, sheep, fish, and crops; they put the food in many food vessels; big crowds performed the rituals involving sacrifice, feasting, music, and dancing. Moreover, luxuriant plants appeared frequently in the poems; the musicians produced resonant sounds by using bells and drums; the poets glorified deep and wide waters; and, finally, the concept of the fertile southern land was paramount. All these symbols and images point to a world of prosperity and richness. Because the Zhou people wanted to extend their lives to embrace the material things in this world, they asked for longevity and prosperity of their families in the future. The poets, for example, liked to use images of creeping and durable plants; rivers running continuously and mountains with their tops lost to heavenly clouds standing constantly; words such as “myriad” and “thousand” were used hyperbolically to describe periods of time. For the Zhou people, the significance of time was neither eternity with God, as Christians believe, nor afterlife by transmigration as Buddhists hold; the Zhou people simply wished that their physical bodies could exist longer on earth and that their descendants could continue the lineage.

These earnest expectations embedded in the symbols can be summarized by the word *fu* 福 (blessings), which appears recurrently in the religious poems.[28] Take the example of *Mao* 302 (“Lie zu” 烈祖). Here the poet evokes his illustrious ancestors to grant him blessings at the beginning and at the end of the poem:

Oh, illustrious ancestors,	嗟嗟烈祖
Great are your blessings. . . .	有秩斯祜

[28] The synonyms of *fu* include *lu* 祿, *zuo* 祚, *zhi* 祉, *hu* 祜, and *gu* 嘏.

Come and accept our offerings,	來假來饗
Blessings will descend upon me without limit.	降福無疆

Different forms of the adjective "great" are adopted to describe blessings such as *jingfu* 景福, *xiafu* 遐福, *fanzhi* 繁祉, *bailu* 百祿, and *chungu* 純嘏. In the above poem, the poet asks concretely for the substances of *fu*:

You comfort me with a vigorous old age,	綏我眉壽
Longevity without end. . . .	黃耇無疆
Heaven sent down prosperity,	自天降康
Rich years that are abundant.[29]	豐年穰穰

Longevity and abundance were indeed two main components of *fu* and the prosperity of one's family belonged to either of these components. In *Mao* 282 ("Yong"), the poet says that King Wen 文王 received a specific blessing from Heaven:

He appeased even the great Heaven,	燕及皇天
Which can make prosperous his descendants.[30]	克昌厥後

This blessing means not only that King Wen would have impressive descendants, but also that the blood-tied descendants would extend his life although he had died physically. That explains why the images of the fertile and spreading gourds and creepers were so significant to the Zhou people. The greater the number of offspring, the longer their family and their dynasty could last.

While heavenly blessing might have included a small element of morality, such an element was not very distinct in the symbolic network. An example can be found in *Mao* 209/4 ("Chu ci"), a ritual poem, where the sacrificers ask for *fu* and further elaborate its meaning:

Forever the spirit will grant you good things,	永錫爾極
In myriads and in millions.	時萬時億

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[29] Bernhard Karlgren, "The Book of Odes," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 17 (1944–45): 97.

[30] Ibid., 91.

Here, the sacrificers expect abundant goodness, not material things. The word *ji* 極, according to Qu Wanli, means something good and right.[31] Turning to *Mao* 247/5 ("Ji zui" 既醉), we see that the *shi* impersonator grants the worshippers a list of blessings that included goodness:

The lord has pious sons,	君子有孝子
Their piety will never be lacking.	孝子不匱
Forever the spirit will grant you good things.[32]	永錫爾類

The good things here include filial piety, a kind of moral behaviour which the worshippers expected of their children, and, more importantly, other practical benefits. The following stanza of the poem immediately presents an elaborate picture of a blessed family:

What are those good things?	其類爲何
Your house will be in harmony,	室家之壼
The lord will have a long life,	君子萬年
Forever the spirit will grant you offspring.	永錫祚胤

Besides expressing the wish that the family members love one another, the poet stresses the main themes of *fu*—longevity and prosperity. And in the last stanza, it is hoped that Heaven would grant young ladies as wives to the worshippers.

Finally, in the religious poems relating to the history of a people and the fate of a country, we must note that *fu* takes on a political dimension. The religious symbols revealed that *fu* means Heaven's Mandate (*tianming* 天命), that is, the charge of Heaven to give birth to a popula-

[31] See Qu Wanli, *Shi jing quan shi* 詩經詮釋 [Explication of the *Shi jing*] (Taibei: Lian jing, 1983), 405. The word *ji* 極 in *Mao* 275 ("Si wen" 思文) refers to the meaning of a proper way. The Zhou people followed the right course of Hou Ji 后稷 because he set a good example for them.

Fine are you, Hou Ji,	思文后稷
You are able to be a counterpart of Heaven.	克配彼天
You have established our multitude,	立我烝民
We take you as our proper way.	莫匪爾極

Note that the Mao commentary glosses *ji* as "middle," which is similar to "the norm" or "the right way."

[32] Karlgren, "The Book of Odes," 73.

tion that would sustain a nation.[33] The notion was complex, but the message of the symbols was simple: Heaven appointed a capable and virtuous leader to build a nation. According to *Mao* 303 ("Xuan niao" 玄鳥), the Shang people, for example, spoke of this special favor from Heaven and wished that they could preserve it forever. From the beginning to the end of the poem, the word *ming* 命 (charge) shapes the framework.

Heaven *ordered* the black bird,	天命玄鳥
To descend and bear Shang. . . .	降而生商
That Yin received the *appointment* was entirely right,	殷受命咸宜
A hundred blessings they bore.	百祿是何

What then did heavenly blessings mean for the Shang (that is, the Yin) people? The content within the framework is filled with such images and ideas as the black bird associated with the divine birth of the Shang's earliest ancestor; the numbers and the waters referred to a multitude of people and to vast territory. The very success of this dynasty embodied abundant blessings from Heaven.

I agree with Poo Mu-chou that the ultimate goal of Chinese religion is the search for personal and familial welfare.[34] In the poems, the network composed of symbolic figures—including Lady Jiang 姜嫄, Lord Millet 后稷, and King Wen of the Zhou, and Xie 契 and Tang 湯 of the Shang—reinforced the political aspect of *fu*. These figures, especially King Wen and Tang, illustrated the concept of *fu* in the *Shi jing* period—they were moral and prosperous, having both offspring and property. More importantly, they played a crucial role in founding the dynasties. Accordingly, their descendants, who were the rulers and the styled Sons of Heaven, expected that these ancestral spirits would protect their family and nation. The ancestral spirits had such power because they symbolized Heaven's favors and they had special association with the high god in heaven. However, ordinary people were not concerned with the rise and fall of a dynasty; their earnest requests of *fu* were for fertility and longevity.

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[33] For a detailed analysis of this notion, consult Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 46–47.

[34] Poo Mu-chou (Pu Muzhou 蒲慕州), *Zhuixun yi ji zhi fu: Zhongguo gudai de xìnyang shijie* 追尋一己之福——中國古代的信仰世界 [In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion] (Taibei: Maitian, 2004), 21.

5. *Harmony*

The pursuit of spiritual harmony was, in fact, the worshipers' aim, though scholars seldom mention this. Instead, students of this subject tend to focus on the Zhou people's supplication for material benefits, taking for granted that happiness is the natural result of material rewards after offering sacrifice to the spirits. Though there is some truth in this viewpoint, it is not comprehensive. In view of this, I place the question of harmony in this separate section for a closer look. After all, in the symbolic world of the *Book of Poetry*, the Zhou people pursued communion with the divine, which was a specific and harmonious experience.[35]

We begin the discussion by examining the explicit level of joy resulting from heavenly blessings, *fu*, especially from the receipt of material and physical things. *Mao* 239 ("Han lu"), for example, repeats five times the verse, "Joyous and pleased is the lord" 豈弟君子. His happiness stemmed from performing the sacrifice by burning firewood and by offering clear wine and a red ox. Here the accumulation of considerable property and offspring is once again suggested by the symbols of dense trees and creepers. In other poems, the poets stated that the sacrificers felt tranquil, *sui* 綏, and peaceful, *ning* 寧, when Heaven bestowed blessings upon them.

To *comfort* us with many blessings,	綏以多福
To give us continuously great blessings.[36]	俾緝熙于純嘏

To have longevity and *peace*,	壽考且寧
To protect our descendants.[37]	以保我後生

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[35] It is worth noting that the focus of this research is on the symbolic world of the religious poems of the classic. In this symbolic world, Heaven, or *di,* was a powerful, awesome, benevolent, and universalistic god. However, the *di* presented in the poems, written in the late Western Zhou and early Eastern Zhou period (for example, *Mao* 192 and 258), appeared less personal and benevolent. Other poems (for example, *Mao* 191, 194, 197, 264, and 265) went further by accusing Heaven of being malignant. During the most distressful moments, people finally gave up any hope of help from a personal Heaven, and at times of intense suffering, people believed that they were doomed to a tragic destiny. Thus, since the eighth century BC, the image of Heaven had degenerated from an omnipotent and benevolent power into an impotent, merciless, and even impersonal force in the poems.

[36] *Mao* 283 ("Zai jian" 載見).

So it was true that practical rewards were connected with comfort and peace.

An implicit level of harmony, nevertheless, was also embedded in the symbolic network. In a sacrifice, although there was communication, goodwill, and transaction between man and spirits, the relationship was not complete unless those involved felt a deep sense of harmony. Unlike Christians, who believe that they are sinful and in need of the grace of God to bridge the gap between God and man, the Zhou people simply sought sincere communion in the universe that included both heaven and earth. Sacrificial symbols—such as red oxen, bells, jade, food, and wine—threw light upon this pursuit of spiritual peacefulness. The *xing* 騂 (red oxen) offered to the spirits might bear the meaning of harmony because *xingxing* 騂騂, the reduplicative word that appeared in *Mao* 223/1 ("Jiao gong" 角弓), means "well adjusted."[38] Moreover, another reduplicative *yongyong* 雝雝 describes both the harmonious sound of small bells in *Mao* 173/4 ("Liao xiao" 蓼蕭) and phoenixes in *Mao* 252/9 ("Juan a" 卷阿).[39] Hence when the worshippers used a knife that had either a phoenix pattern on the blade or a small hanging bell to kill an ox-victim (*Mao* 210/5), the symbolic meaning of seeking harmony was unmistakable.

In addition to animals, people offered jade and food. The jade images in *Mao* 254/6 ("Ban" 板) implied harmony and perfection because two *zhang* 璋 jades were integrated into one *gui* 圭 jade. Nevertheless, it is in the lines describing food and wine that the word *he* 和 (harmony) is clearly brought out.

The wine is *well-blended* and good,	酒既和旨
They drink the wine and become harmonious.[40]	飲酒孔偕

There is also *well-seasoned* soup,	亦有和羹
Carefully prepared and blended.[41]	既戒且平

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[37] *Mao* 305/5 ("Yin wu" 殷武).

[38] For an explication of the adjective *xingxing*, see Karlgren, "The Book of Odes," 253 and Qu, *Shi jing quan shi*, 432.

[39] Note that the same adjectives *yong* and *yongyong* were used to describe the calmness of the worshippers in *Mao* 266 ("Qing miao" 清廟) and 282 ("Yong").

[40] *Mao* 220/1 ("Bin zhi chu yan").

[41] *Mao* 302 ("Lie zu").

The neatly arranged food and drinking vessels, of course, reinforced the sense of order. Our previous analysis suggests that the good smell and taste of food and wine served the functions of communication, thanksgiving, appeasement, and transaction. However, here in this poem, *Mao* 302, which gives honor to Tang, the Shang hero, the worshippers ensured a serene setting first by offering well-blended food and wine and then by quietly praying for the arrival of the spirit in the temple.

> The spirit comes silently, 鬷假無言
> Now there is no contention. 時靡有爭

When the minds of the worshippers combined with the spirit, they were freed from distractions and became peaceful. The same mysterious communion was found in musical performances. Although these were large ceremonial occasions in which many people participated, the atmosphere was always calm.

> Solemn and *harmonious* the musicians blend their notes, 肅雝和鳴
> The ancestors listen to it.[42] 先祖是聽

The sound of bells and drums reverberated, but there was never a discord because the notes were in unison. The above symbolic network thus implied a harmonious unity between the sacred and the profane.

Because of this holy communion with spirits, man gained true joy in their world. There might have been conflicts in human relations, but if a man's spirit was in accord with the ultimate, he would find deep satisfaction, which in turn enabled him to deal calmly with human relations. Again, in archery ceremonies or at sacrificial banquets, the poets stressed accord among the guests and fellowship among brothers and friends. *Mao* 164/7 ("Chang di" 常棣), for instance, describes a harmonious family at a feast:

> When wife and children are loving and harmonious, 妻子好合
> It is like playing the cithers and zithers, 如鼓瑟琴
> When brothers are concordant, 兄弟既翕
> They are peacefully happy and steeped in joy.[43] 和樂且湛

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[42] *Mao* 280 ("You gu" 有瞽).

In *Mao* 165/1 (“Fa mu” 伐木), the poet invites friends to his banquet. When hearing the beautiful singing of birds on a tree, he feels the same as he does when calling his friends.

> Hearkening to their voices with attention, 神之聽之
> I feel harmonious and peaceful. 終和且平

This kind of joy is certainly not based on material things. Some may argue that the Zhou people’s pursuit of harmony is not unique because from the viewpoint of Chinese culture, harmony has been emphasized for 2,500 years, and from the standpoint of other religions in the world, communion or fellowship is not a rare experience. As for the first viewpoint, although the same word *he* (harmony) was adopted, the divine harmony in the early Zhou period was distinct from the humanistic harmony in the time of Confucius and after. The “Yue ji” 樂記 [Book of Music], for example, in the *Li ji*, written in the late Zhou and early Han period, emphasized less the appeasement of, or communion with, spirits in sacrifice, and more the cultivation of self-restraint and harmony so that people would behave morally. Rites and music were the means by which a ruler cultivated moral virtues in his people and thus maintained social order.

> Ceremonies afforded the defined expression for the affections of the people’s minds; music secured the *harmonious* utterance of their voices; the laws of government were designed to promote the performance of the ceremonies and music; and punishments, to guard against the violation of them. When ceremonies, music, laws, and punishments had everywhere full course, without irregularity or collision, the method of kingly rule was complete. . . . Through the perception of right produced by ceremony, came the degrees of the noble and the mean; through the union of culture arising from music, *harmony* between high and low.[44]

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[43] Karlgren, “The Book of Odes,” 222.

[44] James Legge, trans., *The Li Ki*, vol. 28, *The Sacred Books of the East*, ed. F. Max Muller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), 97–98.

> 禮節民心，樂和民聲，政以行之，刑以防之；禮樂刑政，四達而不悖，則王道備矣。……禮義立，則貴賤等矣；樂文同，則上下和矣 (*Li ji* 19.1).[45]

As far as the second point is concerned, there are indeed many theories underscoring communion in the world of religious symbols.[46] However, as I point out at the beginning of this section, the Zhou people's pursuit of harmony with the ultimate was only an implicit element in their ethos; abundant material reward was the goal they pursued most ardently. We will see more clearly a particular combination of these two elements, one of the reasons that made the Zhou world unique, when we compare it with the symbolic worlds of other cultures in the following section.

II. A COMPARISON WITH OTHER SYMBOLIC WORLDS

The sacred symbols in the *Book of Poetry* formed a unique, meaningful network, which revealed the ethos of the early Zhou people. This uniqueness does not mean that there were no similarities between the Zhou symbolic world and the symbolic world of other cultures; instead,

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[45] The quotation from the *Li ji* is taken from Lau Dim-cheuk and Chen Fong-ching, ed., *A Concordance to the Liji*, CUHK ICS the ICS Ancient Chinese Text Concordance Series (Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, 1992), 99.

[46] Here we can profitably refer to the theories of W. Robertson Smith and Dorothy Donnelly. Smith proposes that in a sacrificial rite, "recipient, offerer, and victim were all of the same nature; sacrifice was thus originally a meal in which the offerers entered into communion with the totem"; see Henninger, "Sacrifice," 551. From a different perspective, Donnelly bases her argument on Christianity and believes that symbols are means for man to know and to love.

> Men have sensed, and their symbols show it, that they know nothing directly in itself, but only by a kind of oblique and indirect knowledge, that nothing is ended, exhausted, or completed in itself, but is a participant, a sharer in being, and that hence each bears to the other a likeness, of dependence, or of substance, or of structure, or of beauty.

The search for truth and satisfaction inevitably leads to the ultimate source—the eternal and unchanging One. "No other relationship would be satisfying because no other would be abiding, and forever-ness is one of the conditions of joy." In other words, man can find perfect fulfillment of joy only in God; see Dorothy Donnelly, *The Golden Well: An Anatomy of Symbols* (New York: Sheed, 1950), 156, 158. Here, Donnelly elevates the significance of symbolism to an ontological and theological level.

the Zhou holistic symbolic world viewed *as a whole* exhibited particular features, which could be found only in that period. From the analysis of the Zhou symbolic world, we conclude that the people humbled themselves to look above because they felt that they could not survive and thrive without divine grace. They believed in the supreme power of the high god and in the protection of their dead ancestors. Nevertheless, the gap between numinous and human orders was so wide and the confirmation of successful communication so nebulous that people tried a number of methods to approach the spirits. Once the spiritual bridge was built, man could express their veneration and gratitude to the spirits by worshipping and appeasing them. At the same time, worship and appeasement implied a transaction in which the worshippers expected to get rewards. The relationship between man and spirits did not exist merely in the past, but continued from the present into the future. Man needed continuous blessings from Heaven, and the Zhou people specifically wished for a rich harvest, a prosperous family, a long life, and a powerful country, all of which were summarized by the ideas of *abundance* and *continuity*. They based their spiritual aspirations on their material needs. From the viewpoint of perennial human desires, this kind of thought is readily comprehensible. A more mysterious part of their expectation, however, was the quest for communion with the divine in order to achieve full joy and peace in both spiritual and secular worlds. This seemingly inexplicable dimension of seeking harmony in the cosmos was cryptically embedded in the Zhou symbolic world.

Thus during the span of five hundred years covered in the *Book of Poetry*, we can see that on the one hand the Zhou people expressed sincere devotion to a religion in which a supreme god was the centre. Their emotions, longing, and satisfaction were connected with the divine; these affiliations in turn influenced their lives in the human world. This influence was not an inner force from man, but a sacred one from heaven. On the other hand, although the Zhou people understood the central position of the divine in their lives, to a large extent their attitude was rational and their concerns were secular. They did not immerse themselves in an enchanted world of mysteries and miracles. Their communication with the spirits was calm and sensible.[47] The Zhou people were aware of the high god's supreme power and many unknowns in the universe, but they did not explore further in this direc-

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[47] The Zhou people did fear the high god (as found in *Mao* 272 and *Mao* 288), yet they knew that this god was benevolent. If they followed Heaven's way properly, their god would bless them.

tion; instead, they concentrated on earthly profits and losses. The encounter between man and spirits seldom went beyond the human arena. For instance, among the Zhou people, the blessing of continuity meant long life and numerous offspring; their paradise was a fertile southern land on earth.[48] In short, the *Shi jing* symbolic network as a whole was notably different from that of the Shang, the late Zhou, and other related cultures.

The difference in ethos, knowledge, and feeling is due to the variation of vision and intensity that existed when the ancients were gazing above. "For though every man partakes of the same human pattern, each man is unique by virtue of his gift of intensity."[49] Each man, each people, or even the same people in different ages grope toward an ultimate understanding of the universe by various means. Some minds may be fallible, arriving at the wrong interpretation, while others may catch a glimpse of truth, illuminating the proper path to pursue, but in any case, they create their own symbols and present a unique symbolic world.

Nonetheless, men living in all cultures and ages share similar traits in trying to find the meaning of life. At the beginning of this paper, we argued that when facing the chaotic forces of ignorance, pain, and injustice, our ancestors looked beyond the human realm. The urge to understand, to solve the riddle of existence and to comprehend the chaotic forces in the universe gave birth to religion. Instead of denying the absurdities of life, religion denies the ultimacy of such experiences. At the same time, men have in common the desire to pursue love, truth, beauty, and other good things. In all cultures men have shared certain fears and longings. More importantly, when trying to communicate with an ultimate reality, men express their complicated feelings through symbolism and these symbols—defining one thing in terms of another—manifest a common spiritual quest in men.

Bearing these differences and similarities in mind, we can compare the Zhou's symbolic world as revealed in the *Book of Poetry* with that of other worlds by taking Mircea Eliade's analysis as a point of depar-

[48] For the Zhou people, the south symbolized all that were good and joyous. The most evident expression of this is associated with the southern land, a paradise filled with blessings. See *Mao* 4 ("Jiu mu" 樛木), 171 ("Nan you jia yu" 南有嘉魚), and 172 ("Nan shan you tai" 南山有臺).

[49] Donnelly, *The Golden Well*, 183.

ture.[50] Eliade has explored many of the great symbolic expressions of the world's religions: the centre, eternity, knots, shells, and water in the *Images and Symbols*; and light, androgyne, and renewal in *The Two and the One*, just to name a few. Eliade also probed what the symbols reveal in general. I will examine the conclusion that this historian of religions reaches when reflecting on his documents. I will not, however, compare the use of individual symbols in different cultures because every one of them is dense enough to be the subject of a book by itself.

First of all, Eliade observes that

> religious symbols which touch on the patterns of life, reveal a deeper Life, more mysterious than that grasped by everyday experience. They reveal the miraculous, inexplicable side of Life, and at the same time the sacramental dimension of human existence.[51]

For instance, the symbolism of the Waters reveals the creation of the world and the chaotic nature of existence; the Tree (or the Cosmic Tree) reveals the regeneration of the World and its inexhaustible renewal. These conditions of the World are not evident on the plane of immediate experience. In the symbolic world of the *Book of Poetry*, the water and the tree symbols do not suggest exactly the same meanings as they do in other cultures. However, all major symbols in the religious poems of the *Book of Poetry* imply a divine dimension; for example, the burnt and savory offering signified communication with the spirits and gratitude to them. This divine world had the power to influence the fate of the human world. Heaven, or the high god, was benevolent because this god guided the worshippers' ancestors and continued to protect their posterity. We do not know, however, why the ultimate god favored certain individuals or whole races, why Heaven was willing to open the door of communication. Neither do we completely understand why worshippers sought harmony with the spirits, nor the relationship between social and spiritual happiness. Although the Zhou symbolic world did not provide explanations for these mys-

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[50] Eliade's observations on religious symbolism are summarized in Mircea Eliade, *The Two and the One,* trans. J. M. Cohen (New York: Harper, 1965), 201–208. It should be noted that Eliade has mentioned a few Chinese symbols, but they belong to Buddhism and Taoism, and to periods later than that of the Zhou. See also Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Harvill, 1961).

[51] Eliade, *The Two and the One*, 202.

teries, the Zhou people believed that they were the concern of higher beings. Man is trying to explore a deeper Life through specific vehicles. Will Deming has suggested that religious symbols are tools for orientation to ultimate reality. Each religious system has its inner logic for reflecting the symbolic meaning of the sacred.[52] An outsider cannot easily understand the meaning by common sense because he is not touched by that mysterious Life. In this view, celebrating a harvest, sounding bells, making crop-wine, and feasting in a temple were no ordinary activities to the Zhou community. Together they illustrated that the lives of the Zhou people were inseparable from the supervision of Heaven and the ancestors.

The second general observation that Eliade made is:

> for primitives, symbols are always religious, since they point either to something real or to a World-pattern. Now, at the archaic levels of culture, the real—that is to say the powerful, the significant, the living—is equivalent to the sacred. . . . archaic religious symbols imply an ontology.[53]

We remember that according to Geertz, religious symbolism is the key to the study of ancient cultures. Eliade's bold assertion, however, cannot be applied to the early Zhou's symbolic world. For example, symbols are not necessarily religious in non-religious poems. Their significance may lie in a literary or cultural sense without making reference to the divine. Interestingly, there are approximately twenty music and dancing poems in the *Book of Poetry*, only half of which are rooted in a religious context. The other half manifest different interests such as celebrating a wedding, beating drums in a battle, and expressing the philosophy of *carpe diem*. In other cases, even in religious poems, sacred symbols may not imply ontology, that is, they do not always point to the nature of being or of ultimate substance. Although the Zhou people were conscious of a divine world, they were not interested in asking questions such as what gives a thing (substance) its identity, what accounts for its being there (existence), and how the divine established a World-pattern.

Let us examine the example of food symbolism. During a sacrifice, the Zhou people offered roasted meat and clear wine to the spirits.

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[52] Will Deming, *Rethinking Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 18.

[53] Eliade, *The Two and the One*, 202. Note that Eliade has not defined the term "primitives" in this observation.

These two symbols, undoubtedly, incorporate a sacred component. Nevertheless, the sensory experience of smelling and tasting in the ritual and the main goal of anticipating material and physical blessings were secular. Sharing food and feasting in the Zhou symbolic world did have a transcendental aspect of seeking harmony, but their ontological depth cannot be compared with, for example, the bread and wine symbols of Christianity. For Christians, the latter recalls the crucifixion of Jesus the Savior. Another example is divination, an interpretation of messages from gods. Divination symbols in the *Book of Poetry*, such as the burning of tortoise shells and the use of yarrow stalks, were religious, but certainly not ontological.[54] Moreover, we have mentioned that in the *Book of Poetry* the southern land represented a blessed, earthly paradise rather than, for example, an eternal, heavenly kingdom, and that waters symbolized abundant blessings rather than, for example, the cleansing of sins. In short, for the early Zhou culture, the statement that "symbols are always religious" is true for the religious poems, but not for the peoples' lives in general. Further, the sacred symbolism in the religious poems may not be ontological.

The third characteristic of religious symbolism is its multi-valence, that is, "its capacity to express simultaneously several meanings, and the *unity* [emphasis mine] which is not evident on the plane of immediate experience."[55] The simultaneous existence of several meanings suggests that diverse realities can even be integrated into a "system." The moon symbolism, for example, reveals a mystical order among various meanings of the symbol: the lunar rhythms, temporal transformation, the Waters, the growth of plants, women, death, and resurrection.[56] These diverse meanings form an organic network which seems to express death and rebirth—a cyclic pattern of Life. In fact, before Eliade, Donnelly had pointed out a similar characteristic of symbolism, suggesting that the symbolic meaning of one element elucidates the symbolic meaning of another, only if there are commonness and similitude among them.[57] For her, there is a common humanity to know and to love, a common desire to express both, and a common evocation of an ultimate being. What, for example, is the multi-valence and wis-

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[54] Examples of divination can be found in *Mao* 58/2 ("Meng" 氓), 169/4 ("Di du" 杕杜), 196/5 ("Xiao wan" 小宛), and 237/3 ("Mian" 緜).

[55] Eliade, *The Two and the One*, 203.

[56] Ibid. I have merged two observations of Eliade on symbolism—multi-valence and system—into one point, because I think it is the unity which accounts for the system.

[57] Donnelly, *The Golden Well*, 22.

dom embedded in the smoke symbol? Smoke can evoke the peaceful, tranquil, industrious home, the end of wandering, the enjoyment of repose, and so on.[58] Smoke, of course, also suggests such things as fire, warmth, light, home, and peace, all of which Eliade and Geertz would argue in composing a symbolic system.[59] Donnelly, however, would rather emphasize the aspect of commonness. Although one object sheds light upon the meaning of another, none will completely satisfy us until we look beyond the material world into the spiritual realm. That is where we find Finality, which is what we—the restless—seek.[60] In short, the ultimate reality unifies the meanings of separate symbols into a system of symbols.

As in the case for Chinese people, major symbols of a religion may refer to several meanings simultaneously. Deming agrees that "the relation of a symbol to its larger religious system can be manifold and complex."[61] Likewise, a significant symbol in the Zhou world embodied several different meanings. A large, red ox, for example, can be analyzed on material or cosmological level. For the Zhou worshippers, this sacrificial victim meant richness, abundance, gratitude, appeasement, and even harmony. Whatever the level, these meanings reflected an idea among the Zhou people that these experiences could not be attained in the human world unless the Zhou people were connected with the divine world. As a result of this need for spiritual unity, these symbolic meanings were organically related to each other in the Zhou symbolic world. As I have pointed out earlier, the expressions of gratitude, appeasement, transaction, and communion with the spirits were not independent phenomena; instead, they overlapped and penetrated one another on various levels. Further, the ox symbol formed a bigger network with other significant symbols. For instance, an ox as an animal is irrelevant to millet as plant on the material plane. Symbolically, however, both were precious tokens of spiritual veneration. The system of ox, meat, and food vessel together with the system of millet, wine, and ladle were thus integral parts of a transcendent network.

To recapitulate, I have discussed three similarities between the religious symbolism of the Zhou people and that of other cultures: the expressions of qualities inaccessible to human experience; the unity shared among several meanings; and the formation of a system by the

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[58] Ibid., 26.
[59] Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 206.
[60] Donnelly, *The Golden Well*, 26.
[61] Deming, *Rethinking Religion*, 95.

diverse meanings of a symbol and by heterogeneous symbols. From the legendary stories of Hou Ji about the Zhou dynasty (*Mao* 245), the black bird myth about the Shang dynasty (*Mao* 303), and the specific rituals of ox-killing (*Mao* 209, *Mao* 210) and ancestor worship with music (*Mao* 274, *Mao* 280), we can see that these symbolic elements penetrated many aspects of the daily life of the Zhou people such as history, politics, farming, and social gatherings. The life of the Zhou people reflected a striving for better life under the protection of supreme beings.

There is, however, a major difference between the Zhou world and that of other cultures. For Eliade, symbols in archaic cultures are always religious. This statement is not true in the early Zhou culture, and the religious symbols of the Zhou people were not as ontological as those of other cultures. In this case, the last two observations of Eliade on religious symbolism cannot be reconciled with the Zhou symbolic world.

Eliade further notes that an important function of religious symbolism is "its capacity for expressing paradoxical situations or certain patterns of ultimate reality that can be expressed in no other way."[62] In myths and legends, as Eliade illustrated,

> the following are the most frequent images: to pass between two clashing rocks or icebergs, or between two mountains in perpetual movement, or between two jaws . . . and come out unharmed, or enter a mountain that reveals no opening.[63]

I also think of the cross symbol in Christianity, which represents "contradictory" concepts—love and death, sin and atonement, shame and glory. In the *Book of Poetry*, nevertheless, the cosmos is like the rational human world; we cannot find paradoxes, miracles, or oppositions, which are mentioned above. For the Zhou people, the road of communication was smooth, the goodwill of man was answered, and proper behavior was rewarded. Both Heaven's way and human pursuits were logical and coordinated; harmony prevailed between heaven and earth.

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[62] Eliade, *The Two and the One*, 205.
[63] Ibid.

In a relevant observation, Eliade stressed the existential value of religious symbolism, an aspect which is not obvious in the Zhou world. According to Eliade,

> A religious symbol translates a human situation into cosmological terms, and vice versa; to be more precise, it reveals the unity between human existence and the structure of the Cosmos.[64]

The religious novice isolated in an initiatory hut, for example, is not only in a physical situation which makes him unique, but is also engaging in a symbolic act in which he comprehends something such as the universal, the cosmic Night or the foetal state of the World. In the high religions of other cultures, adherents may ask how a particular belief illuminates the human condition, sheds light on unique, individual realities, or suggests the possibility of a new situation which is beyond man himself. As John Macquarrie has noted,

> In the case of Kierkegaard and other Christian existentialists, the experience of anxiety may predispose toward the life of faith by awakening the need for salvation.[65]

The sacred symbols of these religions always point to a larger reality or a transformational situation concerning human existence. Although the Zhou symbols went beyond immediate reality to a level on which spiritual harmony with the ultimate was sought, the symbolic world did not refer to in-depth comprehension of the universal and profound meaning of human existence. The early Zhou people concentrated more on physical needs in a positive, realistic, and sensible world than on the multidimensional intangibles of life and existence such as sin, suffering, freedom, transcendence, anxiety, and death, subjects which are typically primary concerns of other religions. In the analysis of the beliefs revealed in the significant symbols of the Zhou poems, we see a self-contained, homogeneous, and collective world, instead of one imbued with questions, struggles, contradiction, and tensions.

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[64] Ibid., 207.

[65] John Macquarrie, "Existentialism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade et al., 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 5:224.

III. CONCLUSION

Since religious symbols often reveal a deep reality, we can extract the ethos of the Zhou people from the symbols in the religious poems of the *Book of Poetry*. The ideas embedded in the symbols enable us to interpret the characteristics of the Zhou symbolic world. However, since this research is confined to the religious poems of the classic, it cannot cover all sorts of religions and the thoughts of all social strata in the Zhou dynasty.

Although the symbolic world of the *Book of Poetry* did share similar traits with the religious and cultural worlds before and after the early Zhou period, the *Shi jing* people's desire to attain ultimate bliss was a distinctive feature. An examination of the significant symbols in the *Book of Poetry* has revealed that the Zhou people were eager to bridge a perceived gap by communicating with Heaven (or with a high god) and their apotheosized ancestors. The sacrificers, full of gratitude because they thought that the numinous nourished and protected them, tried their best to please the supreme god and the deities. This appeasement was, of course, also motivated by an expectation of rewards. For the Zhou people, earnest wishes for abundant material things, long life, and numerous offspring were fulfilled by heavenly blessings, that is, they were aspirations which mere human capacity was incapable of realizing. Further, although tranquil communion with the divine was never expressed as intensely as the desire for material rewards, it was another serious pursuit of the worshippers, who believed that this, above all, was the source of harmony and happiness in the human world. The Zhou symbolic world—composed of such contradictory elements as the pious and the pragmatic, the mysterious and the rational—cannot be fully understood by generalizations derived by observing the Zhou together with the shamanic Shang world and the humanistic Confucian society.

In order to highlight the analyzed ideas in the *Shi jing*, it is necessary to compare and contrast them with those of other cultures. Thanks to Eliade's observations about the revelations of world symbolism, we can compare the Zhou's symbolic world with that of other cultures without having to describe the latter in a fashion that exceeds the scope of this paper. Like other symbolic worlds, that of the Zhou was constructed by plants, animals, natural objects, artifacts, buildings, and sacrificial rituals. These symbols expressed the sacramental dimension

of the Zhou people, who believed that their longing and quest, as revealed in the symbols, could be fulfilled only by virtue of divine intervention. Thus it seems clear that religious symbols reveal the modality of the ultimate that is inaccessible to human experience. Since the inner value of the symbols is not evident on the plane of immediate experience, two inexplicable phenomena become possible: First, there is *unity* among several meanings of a symbol; And second, diverse realities of a symbol and of various symbols can be integrated into a *system*. In the Zhou world, the worship of the supreme Heaven and the apotheosized ancestors provided a basis for the unity of the system. Nonetheless, in the same way that I pointed out the dominance of the secular and rational elements in the ethos of the Zhou people, I find that three aspects of Eliade's analysis of religious symbolism are not notable in the Zhou symbolic world. Although the Zhou ancestors pursued the ultimate, their attention was more material than spiritual. Hence, their symbolic network did not necessarily imply an ontology which expressed paradoxical situations of ultimate reality and endowed profound significance to human existence. The Zhou were a practical, pragmatic people, confident of their open communication with the spirits, the reciprocity of that relationship, and the realization of anticipated blessings without the necessity of further exploring the abstruseness of the meaning of life and the cosmos.