

# Observations on the Chinese Ideas of Fate

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The pottery unearthed by Chinese archaeology, from the 2nd millennium B.C., belongs to three civilizations of a neolithic type. The red, black and grey ware of these civilizations characterizes the industrious people of the stone age tribes. Their utility was also decorated. Thus these people had an idea not only of the necessary and useful but also of the necessary but useless. But their signs are still too general to allow of an interpretation.

A bronze age civilization followed. The earliest forms of Chinese writing occur on thousands of tortoise shells found 65 years ago in the province of Honan. At that time inscriptions on bronze vessels from the first millennium B.C. were already known. But the new material was more difficult to interpret. The amount of material has grown since then: there are now about 100 000 inscribed shells and bones, some hundreds of whole tortoise shields with inscriptions as well as other archaeological material. One third of the signs has been deciphered. The inscriptions are mostly quite brief and contain oracle formulas.

The people of the Shang-Yin dynasty (1500–1028 B.C.) knew the useful and the beautiful. What did the oracle stand for? Did it represent something necessary? An oracular technique had been developed, “which consisted in touching shells or bones on one side with a little red-hot rod and interpreting according to certain patterns the cracks that arose on the other side as the answers of the ancestral spirits to the questions of the kings. After the consultation of the oracle the questions and often the answers were inscribed beside the cracks. Often also pure memoranda concerning weather, war expeditions etc. were inscribed.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from B. Karlgren, *Religion i Kina, Antiken*, Stockholm 1964, p. 2; in this book there are also translations of selected oracles, pp. 19 ff.

The philologist has to resign himself to the laborious task of deciphering the signs and organizing a stock of oracular terms, from which he can derive a picture of the religion of ancient China. The systematic task is as difficult as the pictographic one. Probably the systematizer, like the diviner, has what is called in the description quoted "a certain pattern", a system of ideas according to which the difficult new terms, answers to questions asked under other similar but not identical circumstances, are interpreted. The cracks in the oracle shells are forced to fit into the "cracks" of the already extant pattern. Over the field of the terminological stock spread like iron filings on a paper are moved, for instance, the magnets of theism—fatalism, and certain patterns arise. Theism and fatalism are already defined in terms of a ruling power versus the course of the world, or of personal faith versus an impersonal attitude. The oracle texts provide answers in situations which are originally undecided. They express uncertainty, appeal, perplexity, risk. The very situation is capable of many interpretations. The one who asks is both active and passive in the situation. The brief answers contain the names of the Supreme Ruler (Shang Ti) or a collective designation of those who offer sacrifices to the ancestral spirits; in the latter case the oracles are not real answers but reports on ritual activity, and it may be asked whether there is really an oracular situation, unless the oracle implies the acceptance of the reported sacrifice. The ancestral sacrifices also seem to have some relation to Shang Ti, since the spirits are described as his "guests", i.e. dwelling near him. Natural spirits are also denoted as messengers of Shang Ti. In connection with the question of the relation between theism and fatalism it is interesting to note that in the oracle texts the principal verb used to designate divine action is 'to command', the terminus technicus par excellence of Chinese fatalism, *ming*. Other verbs are: send down, approve, give, make unhappy, etc. What is commanded, sent down, done? Favour, difficulties, approval, calamity, hindrance, rain, etc. As for sacrifices there is reference to suovetaurilia, game, liquor, human beings, etc.

From the next epoch of Chinese history, Chou (1027–256), besides the archaeological evidence and sacral inscriptions in bronze, there are texts of considerable length, the Documents, the Odes, the Stories of Tso, the Discourses of the States, of which the Odes are the most important as religious sources. In addition there are the Records of Rites and the philo-

sophical writings, the Analects of Confucius, Mencius, the taoists Chuang and Laotse, and Mo Ti. While religious reflection and fatalism in this epoch were modified by thinking about value concepts and explanation of nature, an innovation took place in oracular technique. In addition to divination through tortoise shells another method was introduced, namely oracles with the aid of stalks of the Achillea plant. As a means of reference an oracular book was used, the Book of Changes, based on series of oracular figures, each consisting of six lines, whole or broken. Through the variation of the number and the position of the broken lines 64 different figures emerged, each with its own symbolism. Now the divining priest, after having directed his question to the Spirits, took a bundle of Achillea stalks, cut them (as one would a pack of playing cards), and drew in different instalments whole and broken stalks until he got a pattern of six lines, and interpreted the answer with the aid of Yi King.”<sup>1</sup>

It is important to consider the fact that these oracular methods to gain knowledge of Fate (*ming*), conceived in a rather theistic way, belong to the kind of Chinese thinking represented by the leading teachers of the Chou period.

A few quotations illustrating the ideas of the great philosophers on *ming*, destiny, follow below:

### *Confucius*

The Master said, “At fifteen my mind was set on learning. At thirty my character had been formed. At forty I had no more perplexities. At fifty I knew the Mandate of Heaven (*T'ien-ming*). At sixty I was at ease with whatever I heard. At seventy I could follow my heart's desire without transgressing moral principles” (Analects 2:4).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Karlgren, *op. cit.* p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Wing-tsit Chan, *A source book in Chinese philosophy*, Princeton 1963, pp. 22 ff.: “What *T'ien-ming* is depends upon one's own philosophy. In general, Confucianists before the T'ang dynasty (618-907) understood it to mean either the decree of God, which determines the course of one's life, or the rise and fall of the moral order, whereas Sung scholars, especially Chu Hsi, took it to mean “the operation of Nature which is endowed in things and makes things be as they are”. This latter interpretation prevailed. The concept of *T'ien-ming* which can mean Mandate of Heaven, decree of God, personal destiny, and course of order, is extremely important

When Confucius was in personal danger in K'uang, he said, "... If it had been the will of Heaven to destroy this culture it would not have been given to a mortal (like me). But if it is the will of Heaven that this culture shall not perish, what can the people of K'uang do to me?" (Analects 9:5).

Tzu-hsia said, "I have heard this saying, 'Life and death are the decree of Heaven (*ming*), wealth and honour depend on Heaven'" (Analects 12:5).

"The superior man stands in awe of three things:" the Mandate of Heaven, great men, and the words of the sages. "The inferior man is ignorant of the Mandate of Heaven and does not stand in awe of it..." (Analects 16:8).

"If a man in the morning hears the Way (Norm), if he dies in the evening, so be it, then. (Analects 4:8.)

### *Mencius*

To contrive what man cannot contrive, that rests with Heaven. To bring to the throne he whom no man can bring, that rests with Heavens ordinances. (5A.6 = Dobson, *Mencius* 3.8, pp. 62 f.)

When Heaven is about to confer high office on a man, it first exercises his mind with suffering and flexes his muscles with toil. It inures his body to hunger and his person to poverty. It frustrates him in his undertakings so that his mind is stimulated, his nature toughened to endure, and he develops capacities he lacked. (From 6B.15 = Dobson 6.61, p. 160).

Ch'i went and attacked Yen. Had he asked me, "Who should attack Yen", I would have answered, "He who is appointed by Heaven to do so". (From 2B.8 = Dobson 1.18, p. 24).

A prince finds his inheritance and passes it on to his successor so that it may continue. His immediate success rests with Heaven. (From 1B. 14 = Dobson 1.31, p. 35).

Mencius said: Whether my way is to prosper or be impeded is not within the power of man to determine. It was decreed by Heaven that I should not

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in the history of Chinese thought. In religion it generally means fate or personal order of God, but in philosophy it is practically always understood as moral destiny, natural endowment, or moral order."—Cf. also the commentary on this passage in Fung Yu-Lan, *The spirit of Chinese philosophy*, London 1947 (2nd impr. 1962), pp. 19 ff. For Confucius' idea of fate, see also H. Creel, *Confucius, the man and the myth*, London 1951, pp. 130 ff.

see the Lord of Lu; it could not be that girl of the Tsang family who prevented me. (From 1B.16 = Dobson 1.35, p. 40).

Mencius said: It is the man who has stretched his mind to the full who fully understands man's true nature. And understanding his true nature, he understands Heaven. To guard one's mind and to nourish one's true nature is to serve Heaven. Do not be in two minds about premature death or a ripe old age. Cultivate your mind and await [destiny].<sup>1</sup> In this way you will attain to your allotted span. (7A.1 = Dobson 6.24, p. 143).<sup>2</sup>

Mencius said: Everything is destiny (*ming*). We should accept obediently our rightful lot. Therefore, he who understands Heaven's ordinances does not walk below high walls, but when he dies in the full discharge of his principles he has fulfilled the lot that Heaven has ordained for him. He who dies, however, in a felon's chains cannot be said to have fulfilled the lot that Heaven ordained for him. (7A.2 = Dobson 6.26, p. 144).

### *The Doctrine of the Mean*

What Heaven (*T'ien*) imparts to man is called human nature. To follow our nature is called the Way (*Tao*). Cultivating the Way is called education ... (§ 1, beginning).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wing-tsit Chan, *op. cit.* p. 78 supplies "wait for [destiny, *ming*, fate, Heaven's decree or mandate] to take its own course." For the idea of "waiting for destiny", see Fung Yu-Lan, *op. cit.* p. 35: "According to this doctrine man should exert his utmost in moral endeavor and leave whatever is beyond our control to fate."

<sup>2</sup> Wing-tsit Chan, *op. cit.* p. 78 f.: "In ancient China there were five theories about destiny or the Mandate of Heaven. The first was fatalism: the Mandate of Heaven is fixed and unchangeable. The second was moral determinism: Heaven always encourages virtue and punishes evil; therefore, man can determine his reward and punishment through moral deeds. The third was antifatalism, advocated by the Moist school. The fourth was naturalistic fatalism, which means that destiny is not controlled by Heaven in the sense of an anthropomorphic God but by Nature and works automatically. Lastly, there was the Confucian theory of 'waiting for destiny'" (see above n. 4). For Mencius, see also W. A. C. H. Dobson, *Mencius*, Toronto 1963, pp. 140 f.: "It is the *hsing* [nature] and *hsin* [guarding the mind] that determine what we are. It is our *ming*, 'fate', that governs our fortunes and determines our lease on life. *Ming* was originally a patent to a fief-holder, given by the Son of Heaven, as heaven's deputy, to a feudatory. In extended usage it is our 'lot in life'—the fate ordained by Heaven. While a man can 'guard his mind' and determined his conduct, he cannot determine his fate, which is in Heaven's hands."

<sup>3</sup> Wing-tsit Chan, *op. cit.* p. 98.

The superior man does what is proper to his position and does not want to go beyond this ... He does not complain against Heaven above or blame men below. Thus it is that the superior man lives peacefully and at ease and waits for his destiny (*ming*), while the inferior man takes to dangerous courses and hopes for good luck. (§ 14).<sup>1</sup>

### *Mo Ti*

Who should be taken as example? I say, Nothing is better than to take Heaven as example. The working of Heaven is allcomprising and impartial. Its gifts are plentiful and it does not ascribe any goodness to itself. Its light is eternal and does never decrease. Therefore the holy kings took Heaven as their example, and in so doing they followed Heaven in everything. (From Ch. 4).

I have never heard of Heaven seeking blessing and good fortune from the Son of Heaven. So I know that it is Heaven that decides what is right for the Son of Heaven. (Ch. 26; Watson, *Mo Tzu* p. 80).

Moreover I say that he who kills one innocent person will inevitably suffer one misfortune. Who is it that kills the innocent person? It is a man. And who is it that sends down the misfortune? It is Heaven. If Heaven did not love the people of the world, then why would it send down misfortune simply because one man kills another? Thus I know that Heaven loves the people of the world. (Ch. 26, Watson p. 82).<sup>2</sup>

The advocates of fatalism say, "If fate decrees that the state will be wealthy, it will be wealthy; if it decrees that it will be poor, it will be poor.... If it decrees that a man will have a long life, he will have a long life; if it decrees that he will die young, he will die young. Though a man tries to combat fate, what can he do?"

To accept the theories of the fatalists would be to overthrow the righteousness in the world ... (Ch. 35, Watson p. 117, 119).<sup>3</sup>

In Taoistic mysticism the consciousness of fate is made relative in self-

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> See also Fung Yu Lan, *A history of Chinese philosophy*, 2nd ed. Princeton 1952, I p. 97 and parallel tr. in Y. P. Mei, "The works of Motse", *Probsthain Oriental Series XIX*, 1929.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also H. H. Rowley, *The Chinese philosopher Mo Ti (BYRL 31, 1948-49)*, p. 35.

consciousness. The attitude is characterized by independence in the psychological sense. At the same time the concept of fate prevails in the thinking as never before in a strict and disciplined terminology. Thinking can be said to be reduced to one idea, *Tao-te. Ming*, fate, is qualified by the prevailing intellectual climate:

“All things, however they flourish, return to their root. This return to their root is called quiescence (*ching*), which is called submission to Fate (*ming*). Submission to Fate is called the Invariable. To know this Invariable is called enlightenment.” (*Tao-te-king*, ch. 16)<sup>1</sup>

Finally, attention should be drawn to the fact that Chinese proverbs often refer to Fate. Here are some examples from C. Plopper, *Chinese religion seen through the proverb*, Shanghai 1937, Ch. 11:

Nr. 1926. The abacus in the Ch'en Huang's temple is not within human calculation, i.e. Man's life is fated.

Nr. 1946. The swallow living in the hall does not know the great building is about to be burned.

Nr. 2006. Great wealth is from Heaven, little wealth is from diligence.

Nr. 2082. Heaven's fortunes move in a circle.

Nr. 2125. The man is good but his fate is not.

Nr. 2129. Chang killed pigs, yet he became an immortal; Li who studied the liturgy, was killed by a tiger.

Nr. 2139. Silently awaiting Heaven's decrees.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Fung Yu Lan, *op. cit.* I, p. 181.