

## **Cognitive Science of Religion and Ancient Chinese Conceptions of Divinity**

Principal Investigators: Kelly James Clark and Justin Winslett

Co-investigators: Edward Slingerland and Leonard Siddharta

### **Introduction**

China is often alleged to be the outlier in terms of various metaphysical beliefs. In particular, China is alleged to be both non-theistic and non-dualistic. If true, China would constitute empirical disproof of the naturalness and intuitive dualist theses, both of which have been “confirmed” only in the West. China would, therefore, call into question an entire host of results in the cognitive science of religion as mere cultural artifacts. Claims about the Chinese stem from a conception of the ancient Chinese as immanent, holistic, and pragmatic. We reject both “the ancient Chinese” and consequently “the Chinese mind” as social constructs with no grounding in reality. We propose a thorough textual study of the earliest available extant texts to dismiss once and for all the view that Chinese is some sort of remarkable exception to religious and dualistic beliefs. Our approach will be guided by claims in cognitive science concerning both religion and intuitive dualism.

### **China’s High God**

China is often alleged to be a clear outlier in terms of theistic and other religious beliefs. As professor Chun-Fang Yu writes of the Chinese religions, “there is no God transcendent and separate from the world and there is no heaven outside of the universe to which human beings would want to go for refuge.” While the pre-Qin Chinese have nothing like the Christian conception of heaven, they certainly do have notions of a transcendent God. Shangdi is the High God who has authority over all of the lesser spiritual beings and, at the bottom of this celestial hierarchy, are ancestor spirits. While Shangdi, underwent a name-change in the Zhou dynasty to Tian, Tian remains a transcendent, high God for at least some in this tradition. The case for this understanding of Shangdi and Tian can be and has been made by reference to historical documents reliably dated to the late-Shang, early Zhou dynasty.

What we find in ancient China is just what we might expect if the cognitive psychology of religion is true. The cognitive and evolutionary psychology of Chinese religion would predict that our natural human tendencies would, in relatively similar circumstances, produce belief in a moralizing, superintending deity. While the moral superintendence of the deity need not be dependent on a next life, it can exercise providence by firm belief in a superknower with access to strategic information who exercises this-worldly providence. We predict that we find this in Shangdi and Tian in the best available sources.

We will focus this study on the most recent archeological and documentary evidence. We will conduct a keyword-focused analysis of pre-Qin dynasty texts. The potential audience includes philosophers, religionists, historians and scholars in the cognitive science of religion. This research could begin a fundamental rethinking of contemporary conceptions of Chinese history and religion. This work is important for prefacing the Chinese CSR project because changing how the Chinese view their past will help change how important they think religious cognition and undergirding conceptual structures are in the present. In addition, becoming aware of the instinctual

roots of religious belief will help alert Chinese CSR researchers to the abundant but oft-neglected historical and contemporary aspects of religion in their culture.

Our book-length monograph would bring insights from CSR – especially the naturalness thesis and supernatural punishment theory to bear on understanding ancient Chinese culture. We will find textual confirmation of a high god, a host of lesser deities, and a high god with strategic information that rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. We propose the following chapters:

- *Introduction:* (Contributed by Kelly Clark and Justin Winslett) We will present the near-universally accepted claim (by philosophers and religionists both in China and in the West) that ancient China held no belief in God. We will summarize recent studies in CSR that would “predict” that China should be no outlier in this regard. And then we will outline the course of our study. We will argue that our study will vindicate, at least historically, claims of CSR.

- *The Evolutionary Psychology of Chinese Religion:* (Contributed by Kelly Clark and Justin Winslett) Our detailed database search of 30 pre-Qin texts, complete with textual analysis, will support various claims of supernatural punishment theory. In particular, it will show that there was widespread belief in ancient China in a superknower with strategic information that rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked.

- *The Character of God:* (Contributed by Justin Winslett) While many concede that there is something god-like in shangdi, di, and tian, they deny anthropomorphic representations of the deity. Again, if CSR is right, we should expect representations of the deity to be both personal (theory of mind) and anthropomorphic. This chapter will consider representations of the deity and vindicate these claims of CSR.

- *The Gods of Abraham, Isaiah and Confucius:* (Contributed by Kelly Clark) Again, the outlier thesis repeatedly urges that Chinese representations of the deity are nothing like Western, especially Judeo-Christian, representations of the deity. We will show some remarkable points of agreement between such representations in the pre-Qin and early Hebrew texts.

- *Was Confucius a Theist?:* (Contributed by Kelly Clark) China is widely portrayed as Confucian. While we will deconstruct this myth, it is certainly worth attending carefully to the *Lunyu (Analects)* to determine Confucius’s conception of divinity. We will argue, in spite of enthusiastic claims to the contrary, that Confucius affirmed an anthropomorphic deity who is the source of morality and supernatural punisher.

- *Mozi, Xunzi, and Zhuangzi:* (Contributed by Justin Winslett) This chapter would draw on and augment the work that Robert Eno has already done on the 'Confucian' texts. More importantly, it would show that that texts from three different 'traditions' do all still reference a High Deity Tian. This will be especially significant since the Taoist classic the *Zhuangzi* is widely interpreted as thoroughly naturalistic.

- *Lesser Gods of the Pre-Qin:* (Contributed by Justin Winslett) If CSR is correct, we should expect to find not only references to a High God but also to many lesser gods in Pre-Qin China. We offer an introduction to the

pantheon of deities and spirits, particularly the one most commonly represented in texts from this time- *shen*.

- *Gods in the Han:* (Contributed by Justin Winslett) Despite the massive social upheavals and different societies brought about by the creation of the Qin and Han empires, the paradigms and idioms of deities in texts from the Pre-Qin and the Han remains surprisingly similar. This chapter will look at these similarities and show how understandings of deities found in the Qin continue to be a prominent part of the populations of the Han and beyond.

- *Three Types of Confucian Scholarship:* (Contributed by Kelly Clark) Given the massive and systemic misreadings of texts that we will have uncovered, we suggest three models for interpreting ancient Chinese texts. We make a plea for methodological clarity that, if followed, would prevent systematic misrepresentations of China's past.

### **Qualifications**

*Kelly James Clark* is well published in both cognitive science of religion and early Chinese conceptions of divinity. His work has been widely cited and anthologized both in the US and in China. He has been actively working in China for over ten years, the past four of which have been supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation.

*Justin Winslett* is currently a lecturer in Classical Chinese at the University of Oxford, having recently completed his doctoral study there on the representations of deities in Chinese texts from before 220 CE. Amongst other projects on the extrahuman and supernatural in classical China, he is currently turning his thesis into a book.

*Edward Slingerland* is a prominent sinologist who is trained in the tools of cognitive science. He has done pioneering work in empirical textual studies in ancient Chinese texts. His translation work is also exemplary.

*Leonard Siddharta* is a PhD candidate in Philosophy at Purdue University. He is fluent in both Chinese and English and can translate pre-Qin texts (this is extremely tricky because the Chinese characters were not regularized until the Qin era).

Please find attached CVs of all participants.