

# Humanization of Chinese Religion: From Heaven (*tian* 天) to Ritual (*li* 礼) in Xu Fuguan and Li Zehou

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## Abstract

This article aims to compare two interpretations of the emergence of new religious and moral concepts and beliefs in the period between the Shang (1600–1046 BC) and the Western Zhou (1046–771 BC) dynasties. It critically compares the theories of Xu Fuguan (1903–1982) and Li Zehou (1930–2021) on the process of humanization of Chinese religion. By emphasizing religious concepts such as Heaven, the Mandate of Heaven, the Way of Heaven on the one hand, and moral concepts such as virtue, reverence, and rituality on the other, the author illuminates the differences in each author's interpretation of the era in which Chinese culture moved away from religion and into the realm of humanism and ethics. This article reveals the reasons for these differences, which stem from the profound divergences in the basic methods of Li and Xu. While Li's elaboration is based on philosophical approaches, Xu Fuguan's understanding is based on philological and cultural analyses of the Chinese history of ideas. The author argues that these mutual differences between their interpretations demonstrate the importance of understanding different methodological approaches, which in turn allows for a deeper multi-layered understanding of the process of humanization of Chinese religion.

**Keywords:** Xu Fuguan, Li Zehou, humanization of religion, Heaven, ritual

## Humanizacija kitajske religije: od neba (*tian* 天) do obrednosti (*li* 礼) v Xu Fuguanu in Li Zehouju

### Izvleček

Članek kritično primerja dve interpretaciji pojava novih verskih in moralnih konceptov ter prepričanj v obdobju med dinastijama Shang (1600–1046 pr. n. št.) in Zahodni Zhou (1046–771 pr. n. št.). Avtorica primerja Xu Fuguanovo (1903–1982) in Li Zehoujevo (1930–2021) teorijo o procesu humanizacije kitajske religije. S poudarkom na verskih konceptih, kot so nebo (*tian*), nebeški mandat (*tian ming*) in nebeški dao (*tiandao*), na eni strani ter moralnih pojmov, kot so vrlina (*de*), spoštovanje (*jing*) in obrednost (*li*), na drugi avtorica osvetli razlike v Xujevi in Lijeви interpretaciji obdobja, v katerem se je kitajska

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kultura oddaljila od religije ter prešla na področje humanizma in etike. Članek obravnava razloge za prikazane neenakosti, ki izvirajo iz globokih razlik v osnovnih metodah in pristopih, ki jih uporabljata Li in Xu. Medtem ko Lijeva teorija temelji na filozofskih pristopih, temelji Xu Fuguanovo razumevanje na filoloških in kulturnih analizah kitajske idejne zgodovine. Avtorica trdi, da te medsebojne razlike med njunima interpretacijama kažejo na pomen razumevanja različnih metodoloških pristopov, sej le-to posledično omogoča globlje in večplastno razumevanje procesa humanizacije kitajske religije.

**Ključne besede:** Xu Fuguan, Li Zehou, humanizacija religije, Nebo, obred

## Humanization of Chinese Religion through an Ideational-historical and a Philosophical Interpretation

This article aims to compare two interpretations of the emergence of new concepts and beliefs in the period between the Shang 商 (1600–1046 BC) and Western Zhou 西周 (1046–771 BC) dynasties. On the one hand, it will approach Xu Fuguan (徐復观 1903–1982), who is known as one of the representatives of the second generation of Modern New Confucians (*xin ruxue* 新儒学) (Sernelj 2013, 72), and on the other hand, Li Zehou 李泽厚 (1930–2021), who is considered one of the leading theorists of modern Confucian renewal, world theory of humanism, ethics, aesthetics, and philosophical anthropology (Rošker 2016, 229). Although Li Zehou was largely influenced by the Modern New Confucian stream of thought, and greatly appreciated Xu's work, he never wanted to be associated with this school.<sup>1</sup>

1 While Xu belonged to the school of Modern New Confucianism, Li formed his own version of "modern Confucian renewal". One of the differences between these two interpretations of Confucianism, for example, is already in the understanding of the division of the phases of Confucianism. While Modern New Confucians recognize only three phases (*Ruxue san qi* 儒学三期), counting Confucius and Mencius as the first, Song dynasty Neo-Confucians as the second, and Modern New Confucians, beginning with Xiong Shili, as the third, Li Zehou thinks that there were clearly four phases. In the first phase he places the period from the Warring States to the Qin dynasty, i.e. Confucius, Mencius and Xunzi; in the second phase the Han dynasty, where Confucianism partly merged with the teachings of Daoism, Legalism, Moism and the yin-yang school, where Dong Zhongshu and the "yin-yang and five phases" system (*yinyang wuxing* 阴阳五行) are key; the Song dynasty and the Neo-Confucians, among whom Zhu Xi stands out in particular, in the third phase; and the Modern Confucians in the fourth and final phase, which lasts to this day (Rošker 2019, 116–17). Li Zehou strongly criticizes the division of Confucianism into three phases, accusing the Modern New Confucians of several shortcomings. First, the singling out of heart-mind (*xin* 心) and humanness (*xing* 性) as central concepts of Confucianism, despite the fact that these two concepts appear only twice in the *Analects*, and not much more frequently in Mencius. Li therefore says that to label these concepts as fundamental is a clear deviation from the original Confucian doctrine. Secondly, the division into three phases, says Li, virtually wiped out Xunzi and the discourses of the Han dynasty. (Li, in Rošker 2019, 118) Although Xu Fuguan by no means excludes Xunzi from his treatment, as we shall see in the following chapters, this difference in the basic division of

In some areas, the work of Xu and Li addresses the same issue. One example is the analysis in which both deal with the process of change that the earliest religious concepts and ideas underwent before they transformed completely or became accepted as key concepts in Chinese Confucian ethics. Through the following pages I aim to critically analyse the way these concepts are approached in Xu's and Li's analysis and search for methodological clues for such interpretations. The differences between their theories that manifest themselves through the present contrastive analysis of the ideas of both authors and their ideational backgrounds will serve as an exposition of certain discursive or paradigmatic differences between the work of a philosopher and a historian of ideas. So what were the ideational backgrounds of both authors and what methods did they use?

Xu studied under Xiong Shili (熊十力 1885–1968) and later devoted himself to philosophy, the sociology of culture, literary and art criticism, becoming most famous as one of the first theorists of a specifically Chinese aesthetics in contemporary China (Sernelj 2013, 72). However he never formed his own philosophical system. In his work, he used a holistic approach, formed by dynamic holism and structural holism, based on the consistent consideration of the hermeneutic circle, which is very similar to Gadamer's hermeneutic method. The essence of Xu's structural holism refers to the understanding of the entity and its constituent parts, as well as thought and reality, within their concrete historical contexts. Precisely this interaction between the parts and the whole is, according to Xu, a key methodological principle that leads to the understanding of different currents of thought. Xu's structural holism is based on the assumption that a structural entity is a unit composed of reality, thought systems, and parts of classical texts. For the interpretation and criticism of these texts, it is necessary to use the method of structural unity, similar to the method of the hermeneutic circle. Xu understands human mentality and social reality as two dimensions of structural holism, which enables him to concretely deal with original ideas and different mental orientations. According to him, this is only possible through a comparative perspective. Xu thus studied Chinese thought through the socio-political and economic context, while he tackled the aspects of a certain era through literary and philosophical analysis. He understood this approach as a dynamic method and a comparative perspective, defined above all by constant change and development (Sernelj 2020, 104). Within his comparative perspective, Xu emphasized the importance of taking into account the specifics of Chinese ideological history and warned that the study of Chinese culture and mentality must necessarily begin

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the history of Confucian thought is one of the key differences and stumbling blocks between Li Zehou and the adherents of Modern New Confucianism, especially Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995) and Du Weiming 杜维明 (1940–present).

precisely with these. The key lies in the fusion of the objective and subjective and the individual and community, which in China has led to the fact that man's self-cultivation and the cultivation of the outside world represent one inseparable unit. Only by understanding such specifics placed in the socio-political context of an individual period can historians of ideas even begin to compare Chinese and foreign ideological traditions. Xu also points out that humans are historical beings, i.e. beings endowed with historicity. According to Xu, human beings live in concrete historical conditions and actively participate in the productive activities of reality, while constantly influenced by historical experiences and reality. People's mentality can thus only be interpreted within the discourses of their time. It is therefore absolutely necessary to consider each concept within its time-space context, i.e. through the interpretive method of contextualization (Huang 2019, 31; Sernelj 2020, 104–07). Huang (2019, 180) believes that Xu's interpretation of Confucianism is a typical example of the classical Chinese tradition of hermeneutics. However, we must understand this as a method of political science with political-economic and socio-political, but not ontological or epistemological, foundations. As a method, it does not deal with abstract concepts, but with the history of thought as a part of socio-political history.

On the other side of this article's comparison we have Li Zehou, one of the most recognized Chinese philosophers of our era. However, as Paul D'Ambrosio has noted, today's professors generally deviate little from normative academic standards. And while this is true in case of Xu Fuguan's approach, this is not the case with Li Zehou. At the very beginning of his book *The Origins of Chinese Thought: From Shamanism to Ritual Regulations and Humanness* Li clearly states that in his opinion one can write the history of thought in two ways, historically and philosophically, and that this choice consequently corresponds to the respective methods. He chooses the method of "the classics commenting on [his] thought", which gives him the space to open up new and often controversial interpretations, which have not yet been considered (Li 2018, 11). Aside from his contribution to other areas of contemporary Chinese thought, Li Zehou is also the author of one of the most influential and scholarly innovative theories on the origin of Chinese culture. He argues that Chinese culture and Confucianism evolved from shamanism, and connects this theory with the rest of his philosophical system. Li devoted much of his philosophy to interpreting Marx and Kant and he complemented their interpretations with his theory of sedimentation (*jidian* 积淀), which he describes as the process dynamic psychological formations of human subjectivity (*zhutixing* 主体性)<sup>2</sup> (Li 1999, 98). Li does not interpret human psychology (*renx-*

2 Subjectivity is a recently coined neologism, which Li formed as a translation of the Chinese term *zhutixing* 主体性. Li here refers to Kant, for whom the study of the categories of mind was still

ing 人性) as arising solely from reason (*li* 理), as is typical of Western philosophy. On the contrary, Li emphasizes the contact between the emotional and the rational, or emotionality and rationality (*qingli* 情理) (D'Ambrosio, Carleo III. and Lambert 2016, 1060). Reason, Li suggests, gradually evolved from emotionality through concrete historical human experiences, with rituals in particular playing a key role (*ibid.*, 1063). Closely related to ritual and emotion is Li's concept of the *culture of joy* (*legan wenhua* 乐感文化), which I will address with more detail later in this article. The feeling of joy (*legan* 乐感) here, however, refers to a range of emotions, emerging from shamanic dance and ritual ceremonies, which formed a necessary precondition for the formation of a sense of humaneness (*ren* 仁) (Rošker 2020a, 233). In reading Li's work we need to be aware of one thing: he writes in the style of the master and commentator tradition, which is rather different from Xu Fuguan's approach. If we are to truly appreciate his work, we must understand that he is "philosophizing with texts, rather than merely on them" (D'Ambrosio, forthcoming).

Thus, in order to confront Li's explanations based mostly within his own theoretical system with another based on more solid hermeneutical footing, this article aims to critically compare Li's ideas with those of Xu Fuguan. I aim to critically confront the theories presented by both authors, highlight the differences between them, and present the reasons for these differences, which arise from the just mentioned differences in both author's basic methods. I will argue that these differences between their ideas demonstrate the importance of understanding different methodological approaches, which in turn allows for a deeper and clearer understanding of the process of humanization and rationalization of Chinese religion.

In order to make the proposed analysis possible, it is now necessary to shed light on the social and historical context of the period under study. When the Zhou dynasty came to power, the original religion of the agrarian Shang dynasty, based on the worship of fertility, ancestors, and the supreme ruler Shang Di 上帝, had to subordinate itself to the Heaven-oriented religion of the nomadic Zhou. The beliefs of the Zhou people centred on the sun and star cults that were a typical feature of nomadic tribes and their predominantly shamanistic beliefs. Roughly speaking, the new Zhou dynasty was the successor of two different types of cultures: the agricultural system, which was the typical form of production of the

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a "philosophy of consciousness" related to subjectivity (*zbuguanxing* 主观性). For Li, however, all theories of consciousness are based on theories that explain the origin of humanity. And this forms the basis for his new conception of subjectality (Cauvel 1999, 155). Subjectality is that which defines the difference between humans and animals, often defines specific human values, and occurs primarily in the realm of specifically human social existence (Rošker 2020b, 37).

defeated Shang, and the hunting and gathering system of the predominantly nomadic Zhou people (Rošker 2021, 46). The newly formed Zhou dynasty adopted some concepts and beliefs from its predecessor, but also developed its own ideas that greatly shaped the further development of Chinese intellectual history. The interpretation of the second generation of Modern Confucians argues, that it was during this period that the “Moral Self” as an ideological core of perception and identification of the individual began. Its emergence was the consequence of the meeting of various local cultures, each carrying their own religious beliefs (Sernelj 2013, 80–81). The social changes and transformation of beliefs and religious concepts during this period, when China slowly moved away from religion and into the realm of humanism and ethics, offer an important insight into the development of Chinese culture.

Through the analysis of Xu’s and Li’s interpretation of the key religious and moral ideas and concepts of the just introduced historical period, this paper aims to introduce Xu’s theory of the process of humanization of Chinese religion and and Li’s theory of the process of rationalization of shamanism. I will compare both authors’ contextualizations of concepts of Heaven (*tian* 天), the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming* 天命) and the Heavenly Dao or the Way of Heaven (*tiandao* 天道), as they claim were understood in the period between the Shang and the early Zhou dynasties. I will finally outline the crucial moral concepts such as virtue (*de* 德), reverence (*jing* 敬), and rituality (*li* 礼) that ultimately played a crucial role in the formation of Confucian moral humanism. Based on this analysis, I will argue that Xu’s interpretation describes this period as the cradle of the first beginnings of the process of humanization of religion and the dawn of spirit of humanism in China, and links it to the concept of *concerned consciousness* (*youshuan yishi* 忧患意识), while Li Zehou’s interpretation introduces the theory of Chinese shamanistic-historical tradition and the rationalization of shamanism, and connects them with the idea of the *culture of joy*. I will finally consider the question as to whether or not Xu’s idea of connecting the birth of human self-awareness with the idea of *concerned consciousness* should be understood as the opposite to Li’s idea of the interconnection between human subjectality and the *culture of joy*.

## Views on Early Chinese Religion and the Dawn of Human Agency

Xu believes that all human cultures began with original religions, i.e. forms of belief in miraculous powers that arose from a sense of terror and deep fear of natural disasters. Each original religion also began with mythology and superstition. However, as knowledge advanced, people began to reject the element of



superstition, and as a result the original religions experienced a decline. “The decline or growth of a religion depends on its ability to break away from superstition in the face of the resistance of human knowledge and develop meaning beyond superstition”, says Xu. The meaning of overcoming superstition must lie in the affirmation of humanism in real life, especially in affirming, promoting and guaranteeing the value of human life. It is precisely the value of life that is in turn the ultimate foundation of religion, Xu concludes (Xu 2014, 32). In the original religions, we cannot yet speak of any kind of self-awareness or consciousness, and this was also the case in the Shang dynasty. Xu thus argues that humanism in China gradually developed from the spiritual liberation of the theocracy that occurred after the end of Shang rule. Religion in the Shang period “was still primordial. Their behaviour, according to the records of divination, was entirely determined by external deities—ancestral spirits, nature spirits and Shang Di.” The Shang’s belief in mysterious forces, which stemmed from their fear of natural disasters and other calamities, was not yet an expression of human self-awareness. It was not until the Zhou dynasty that a shift toward humanism took place (*ibid.*, 14–16).

The Yin dynasty followed the regulations of the Xia; wherein it took from or added to them may be known. The Zhou dynasty has followed the regulations of Yin; wherein it took from or added to them may be known.<sup>3</sup>

殷因于夏礼，所损益，可知也。周因于殷礼，所损益，可知也。(Lunyu, Weizheng 23)

Zhou had the advantage of viewing the two past dynasties. How complete and elegant are its regulations!

周监于二代，郁郁乎文哉。(Lunyu, Ba Yi 14)

Xu uses these quotations from the *Analects* to argue that the Zhou cultural system was based on the legacy of the Shang dynasty (Xu 2014, 16). Therefore, the Shang and Zhou dynasties should not be considered as two different cultural systems, but as a form of development of one into the other (*ibid.*, 19). “The victory of the Zhou over the Yin was the result of the victory of a spiritually conscious ruling group over a ruling group that felt inadequate due to the absence of spiritual consciousness”, Xu argues (*ibid.*). That the Zhou based their rule on their succession of the fallen Shang is also evident in many records from this period. Indeed, the Duke of Zhou (周公 reigned ca. 1042–1035 BC) also justified the legitimacy of

3 This and all the following translations of the classical sources are made by James Legge.

this transfer of power to the Zhou by emphasizing the transition between the Xia 夏 and Shang dynasties that occurred at the time of the transfer of the Mandate of Heaven from Xia to Shang. In doing so, Zhou emphatically acknowledged that the Shang dynasty held the Mandate of Heaven and served as the representative of Heaven until the Mandate passed to the Zhou (ibid., 16).

Zhou became the new victor after the fall of Yin, but in early documents from the Zhou period we do not see the usual haughtiness of a victorious people, but rather a sense of “concerned consciousness” as recorded in the *Book of Changes*.<sup>4</sup>

周人革掉了殷人的命（政权），成为新的胜利者；但通过周初文献所看书的，并不像一般民族战胜后的趾高气扬的气象，而是《易传》所说的‘忧患’意识。(ibid., 19)

The main difference between the *concerned consciousness* that became characteristic of the Zhou period and the terror and despair that prevailed before is that the anxiety arises from the subject's vision. It is based on a reflection on the situation in which the subject finds himself, and in which a close connection can be established between the subject's actions and his responsibility for the outcome of the matter. It is out of this sense of responsibility, when one wants to overcome difficulties by one's own efforts but has not yet managed to do so, that *concerned consciousness* arises. In the case of the early Zhou period, it was mainly the delicate situation between the last Shang King Zhou (纣王 ca. 1105–1046 BC) and the first Zhou King Wen (文王 ca. 1112–1056 BC). This sense of anxiety was then passed on to the Dukes of Zhou and Shao (召公 died ca. 1000 BC) and from them to the people in general (ibid., 20). The *concerned consciousness* of this period is also evidenced by a number of quotations:

But I [Duke of Zhou] am the servant of Heaven, which has assigned me this great task, and laid the hard duty on my person. /.../ Do not be distressed with sorrow. We shall surely complete the plans of your Tranquillizing father (King Wen).

予造天役，遗大投艰于朕身；越予冲人，不印自恤。/.../ 无咎于恤，不可不成乃宁考图功。(Shang Shu, Zhou Shu, Da Gao, 5)

With the transition from terror and helplessness under the Shang to a state of *concerned consciousness* under the Zhou, the basis of human belief gradually shifted from gods to humans, and this is what Xu calls the beginning of Chinese humanism.

4 Translated by the author.



Li Zehou, on the other hand, also addresses the issues of religious belief in the Shang and Zhou dynasties. He explains that Chinese culture developed from a shamanistic tradition, which he sees as a connection between people and Heaven, conceiving of Heaven, Earth, and people as equally great. It is a system in which humans holistically coexist with the eternal cosmos (Heaven) (Deng 2018, IX). However, at a certain point in history a crucial change occurred, according to Li: A “severance of communication between earth and heaven” (*jue ditian tong* 绝地天通)<sup>5</sup> ended the earlier practice of “everyone being shaman and historian” (*jia wei wu shi* 家为巫史)<sup>6</sup> and resulted in only shamans holding the privileged social role of mediator between Heaven and Earth. In the inscriptions of the Oracle bones, the terms shaman (*wu* 巫) and god (*di* 帝) are often used together, clearly showing that the shaman held the highest religious role and was responsible for communicating with Heaven (Li 2018, 15).

Since the survival of entire tribes depended on shamanistic rituals, spiritual sacrifices and worship, which at this time took place almost every three to five days, these had to be performed very precisely. This led these practices to evolve into very complex ceremonial forms and norms, which Li refers to as *shamanistic ritual ceremony* (*wushu liyi* 巫术礼仪). While their subjective purpose was to communicate with the spirits and ancestors and bring good fortune and prosperity to the clan, objectively they also consolidated the clan by maintaining its order (ibid., 20). From earliest times, shamanistic ritual ceremonies were closely associated with ancestor worship and the worship of Shang Di. In the post-Shang period, however, the former strongly prevailed over the latter. Although there are many different interpretations of the relationship between Shang Di and the dead ancestors, their close connection is undeniable. Li here leans on Chang Kwang-chih investigations, which showed that in the Shang dynasty the distinction between the world of divine spirits and the world of the clan ancestors was basically imperceptible. The dead ancestors were a direct link between humans and gods, between this world and the other. They were the protectors of the clan and the state, and connected human achievements with the world of spirits by uniting them in a single body (ibid., 13–4). Since the boundary between the dead and the living, between humans and their spirits, has always been blurred in Chinese tradition, the practice of serving the dead was synonymous with serving the living and continued for centuries. Through the relics passed down from shamanistic culture, which closely linked the spiritual and human worlds, the position of the latter was elevated to the point where people in general could no longer fully comprehend their human limitations and began to search for meaning themselves, without the

5 Translated by Robert A. Carleo III.

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help of external forces (Rošker 2020b, 45). Li believes that the Chinese tradition has never actually focused on the search for a higher transcendental world, but instead on the search for ethical and social rules (D'Ambrosio, Carleo III. and Lambert 2016, 1059). In Li's view, Deng explains, the human struggle of the Chinese was never sustained by the idea of an eternal power, but was always based on people's own efforts to achieve the unity of nature and man. In this struggle to prolong their existence in this world, the *culture of joy* emerged (Deng 2018, XI). The term *culture of joy* also translated as *culture of optimism*, has a threefold semantic connotation. It refers simultaneously to the "culture of worldly happiness", to an optimism about one's ability to improve one's living conditions, and to the "culture of music and aesthetics" (Wang 2018, 235). Li explains that the Chinese tradition was often criticized for lacking the depth of Western pessimism. However, this optimistic attitude was closely linked to the lack of belief in the support of an omnipotent God, as one simply had to fight for progress oneself (Deng 2018, XI).

Yet in reality lacking any such dependence their struggle and hardship are much greater than those of people who have such support. It is from this dimension that Chinese thought ought to be further developed, and in which we recognize the forced smile of its "culture of optimism" and profundity of its deep sorrow. (Li in Deng 2018, XI)

The reason for this difference between the Chinese and Western traditions is that the West developed on the basis of religion, while Chinese culture, on the other hand, emerged from shamanism, Li argues. And the crucial difference between shamanism and religion lies in the affirmation of human subjectality. In this view, the rationalization of the shamanistic-historical tradition and its notion that humans (and not the gods) are the most fundamental, was the one which finally led to birth of the *culture of optimism* (Li 2018, 94).

## **Interconnection between Politics and the Humanization of Religious Concepts**

In the Shang dynasty the concept of a supreme deity Shang Di was still very clear and present, as was the concept of divine command (*di ming* 帝命), which can be equated with a kind of Mandate of Heaven. Accordingly, Xu argues, people must also have been familiar with the concept of Heaven, although, interestingly, it does not yet appear in the records of the time. The character 天 (*tian* Heaven) appears as the character 大 (*da* great) in the oracles. However, we should not conclude from this that the concept of Heaven was not known to the Shang people,

only that the characters *tian* and *da* were interchangeable at that time. “It seems unreasonable that men who lived on the great plain by the Yellow River, with the sun, moon and stars in a large candle above them, until the Yin dynasty, when the technology represented by bronze vessels was already very advanced, would not have had a sense of the stars above” Xu writes (Xu 2014, 18). The terms Heaven and Mandate of Heaven are found several times in the *Book of History*, proving that these were concepts the Zhou had adopted from the Shang dynasty cultural system. The Zhou also adopted the concept of Shang Di, and although the concepts of the Supreme Ruler (*di* 帝) and Heaven were often used interchangeably in the writings of the period, the title *di* referred specifically to the personality of the supreme god, while Heaven mainly described the world in which the deities dwelt, Xu explains (ibid., 17–18). The new Zhou rulers combined the concept of Heaven, which they had inherited from the Shang with their own family system, making the Shang Di one with the Son of Heaven (*Tian zi* 天子). This approach justified the rulers’ quest for absolute power and at the same time followed the original nomadic tradition of the Zhou culture (Rošker 2021, 47).

However, the connection between the ruler and Heaven was not direct. As shown in a story in the *Book of History*, when his brother King Wu (周武王, reigned ca. 1046–1043 BC) died, Duke Zhou asked if he could replace the latter’s body with his own (Shang Shu, Zhou Shu, Jin Teng). However, the Duke of Zhou did not ask Heaven directly, but turned to the three ancestral spirits, King Tai, King Li and King Wen. They were the ones who could convey his request to Heaven and to Shang Di, who could decide on it. The tradition of using deceased ancestors as intermediaries in communicating with Shang Di and Heaven was also adopted by the Zhou from the Shang (Xu 2014, 17). However, according to Xu, since the ancestors of the lower classes had no position on Earth, they also had no power in Heaven and therefore could not mediate between Heaven and their descendants. In this way, the people of the lower classes belonged directly to Heaven, and their relationship with it was more direct than that of the ruling class (ibid., 28).

While in the Shang period popular belief in Shang Di or Heaven did not yet contain ethical elements, in the Zhou period it became associated with morality. In the early days of the Zhou dynasty, the *concerned consciousness* of the ruling class also made Heaven an almost anthropomorphic deity, constantly watching over the human world and reflecting on each of its events. In its role as supreme deity, Heaven was not only the creator of human beings, but also their supreme judge, distributing praise and punishment according to the morality or immorality of their actions (Rošker 2021, 47). While the lack of self-awareness of the humanistic spirit at the end of Shang rule did not seem to cause a fundamental rethinking of religion, the situation changed with the emergence of self-awareness in the

Zhou (Xu 2014, 37). During this period, the Mandate of Heaven increasingly began to take human behaviour as the standard for its decisions and no longer supported those in power unconditionally. As a result, it also gradually began to lose its mystery and become more and more tangible and connected to human behaviour (*ibid.*, 24). People began to put aside their sensual desires and focus on their own responsibility and rationality (*ibid.*, 22). Respect for the Mandate of Heaven and building one's own moral virtues became the key to attaining and maintaining the Mandate. In other words, the ruler's moral virtue became a condition for Heavenly support, as it was no longer unconditional and unchanging as in the past. The Mandate of Heaven turned elsewhere in the case of poor ruler-ship, leading to the belief that the mandate was unknowable and unreliable. As Xu described the situation at that time: "If we abandon our actions and rely only on the Mandate of Heaven, then we cannot easily understand Heaven and we cannot trust it either." Thus, since Heaven could no longer be relied upon, a turn to the human was necessary, and this is what led to the humanization of Chinese religion. However, in the early Zhou era, Xu says, it was still too early to completely break away from religion, so another transformation of religious thought had to take place first. People began to understand the Mandate of Heaven through their political leader, more specifically King Wen. The Zhou people no longer revered King Wen only as their ancestor or as a great political leader, but also associated him with the Mandate of Heaven for religious reasons (*ibid.*, 25–26).

Heaven is not to be trusted. Our course is only to seek the prolongation of the virtue of the Tranquillizing king [King Wen].

天不可信，我道惟宁王德延。(Shang Shi, Shang Shu, Jun Shi 1)

The doings of High Heaven, Have neither sound nor smell. Take your pattern from king Wen, And the myriad regions will repose confidence in you.

上天之载、无声无恶。仪刑文王、万邦作孟。(Shi jing, Da ya, Wen Wang zhi shi, Wen Wang 7)

This, Xu argues, represents a leap toward a rational spirit of humanism that respects the Mandate of Heaven, but also knows that it cannot understand it. In doing so, the rational spirit led people to understand that when dealing with the incomprehensible, one cannot rely on divination and shamanism, but must be inspired by the concrete virtues of the ruler. King Wen thus became the concrete manifestation of the Mandate of Heaven, and his virtues became the true content of the divine. As such, we see that the relationship between King Wen and Shang

Di is not only closer than that of the other ancestors, but that Wen actually transcends the role of intermediary and becomes a divine representative. This has led some authors to conclude that King Wen was a shaman, Xu says, going on to note that this was not the case. The central worshipper of the deities was the king, who was hierarchically above the shaman. The shaman's mind was focused on Heaven, while King Wen's mind was entirely devoted to the human world and solving domestic problems. Thus, the position of King Wen in the minds of the people of the Zhou dynasty was actually a symbol of the awakening of the humanistic spirit in religion (Xu 2014, 27–28).

In this process, another aspect of humanism was born. The intentions of the people became the voice of the Mandate of Heaven, and the ruler had to interpret its wishes through the lives of his people. From the beginning of the Zhou dynasty, it was believed that Shang Di chose political leaders not for their own sake, but for the sake of the people, to select the one who could act on behalf of the masses. The Mandate of Heaven was thus not to descend first upon the king, but upon the people. It was precisely because of this incomprehensibility of the Mandate of Heaven that the belief prevailed that the Mandate should be freed from the shackles of shamanism and divination and made to face the people, says Xu. Heaven, the Mandate of Heaven, and the people usually appear together in Zhou dynasty texts. Xu believes that this is the beginning of a moral humanist spirit that illuminated the value of human existence for the first time in Chinese history (ibid., 29–30). Xu Fuguan here connects his analysis to his political thought by arguing that, according to true Confucian thought, the people should be the subject of the political order. However, since in the actual course of history absolutist imperial power was never limited, these ideals were not realized. Xu calls this the double subjectivity (*shuang chong zhutixing* 双重主体性),<sup>7</sup> which forms one of the central concepts of his political thought (Chen 2011, 26–27).

This is connected with the fact that in the following decades the moral-religious consciousness of the early Zhou eroded faster and faster, and since there was no independent monastic class and political and religious activities were mostly inseparable, people began to see the will of the gods in the actions of political leaders. This meant that the immorality of political leaders simultaneously represented a failure of the gods' credibility. The inefficiency, corruption and nepotism of the ruling class gradually led to the decline of the idea of the Mandate of Heaven, which led to the further development of humanism in China. By the end of the

7 This concept means that in the Chinese philosophical tradition (with the exception of the Legalist school) the people were seen as the autonomous subjects, however in the social reality of the despotic system the ruler always appeared as the subject. In this way the unsolvable basic contradiction between the Confucian ideal and the despotic reality was reproduced throughout Chinese history.

Western Zhou period the traditional religious concepts that had their roots in the early Zhou dynasty had almost completely dissolved (ibid., 37). Heaven and the Mandate of Heaven had lost their authority, but people still held them in high esteem. We can see the decline of Heaven's authority in many poems from the time of King Li's reign (厉王 reigned 877–841 BC). Xu notes the following passages:

Heaven is now inflicting calamities, And is destroying the State. My illustrations are not taken from things remote; Great Heaven makes no mistakes.

天方艰难，日丧厥国，去譬不元，昊天不忒。(Shi jing, Da Ya, Dang zhi shi, Yi 12)

O thou bright and great Heaven, Shouldest thou not have compassion on us?

倬彼昊天，宁不我矜。(Shi jing, Da Ya, Dang zhi shi, Sang Rou 1)

There is nothing to arrest the doom of the kingdom; Heaven does not nourish us.

国步蔑资，天不我将。(Shi jing, Da Ya, Dang zhi shi, Sang Rou 1)

By the time of King You's reign (幽王 reigned 781–771 BC), religious concepts and belief in the morality of Heaven had almost completely collapsed (Xu 2014, 34).

Great and wide Heaven, How is it you have contracted your kindness, Sending down death and famine, Destroying all through the kingdom? Compassionate Heaven, arrayed in terrors, How is it you exercise no forethought, no care? Let alone the criminals: They have suffered for their offences; But those who have no crime, Are indiscriminately involved in ruin.

浩浩昊天，不骏其德。降丧饥馑，斩伐四国。旻天疾威，弗虑弗图。舍彼有罪，既伏其辜。若此无罪，沦胥以铺。(Shi jing, Xiao Ya, Qi Fu zhi shi, Yu Wu Zheng 1)

While in the case of the Mandate of Heaven we can speak of its will and purpose, and the notion of a personal god was still present to some degree, this connotation disappeared with the transformation from Heaven to Destiny (*ming yun* 命运) at the beginning of the Eastern Zhou era. Destiny encompassed all inexplicable and



unsolvable human issues, but it no longer possessed a will or purpose of its own (Xu 2014, 35).

While Xu Fuguan views these changes from the perspective of the birth of the humanistic spirit and liberation from theocracy, Li Zehou develops his theory based on the rationalization of shamanistic practices. Li argues that the worship of totems, shamanistic dances, and songs that were typical of the shamanistic tradition were gradually replaced by the humanized and rationalized worship of heroes and ancestors during the transition from the Shang to the Zhou dynasties (Sernelj 2018, 339). In his explanation, Li relies on a Chinese archeologist Chen Mengjia 陈梦家 (d. 1966), who tells us that ancestor worship and the worship of celestial gods gradually converged and intermingled, giving rise to the paradigm of post-Shang Chinese religion, namely the predominance of ancestor worship over the worship of celestial gods. With this gradual integration of god and ancestor worship, the integration of religious and political authority also took place (Li 2018, 12–14).

From the earliest shaman leaders to Yao 尧, Shun 舜, Yu 禹, Tang 汤, Wen 文, Wu 武, and the Duke of Zhou 周公, and even including Yi Yin 伊尹, Wu Xian 巫咸, and Bo Yi 伯益, all of these revered ancient legendary or historical political figure can be seen as great shamans who had consolidated both political power (kingly authority) and spiritual power (religious authority) into single person. (ibid., 16)

Here Li uses many examples to show how the ancient kings communicated with Heaven. One of the five legendary god-kings, Zhuan Xu 颛顼, advocated reliance on spirits to establish social obligations (*yi* 义) because only he was able to manage the affairs of Heaven. The Xia dynasty kings Yu 禹 and his son Qi 启 are also often associated with shamanistic ritual. The *Fayan* 法言 speaks of the “Walk of Yu” (*Yubu* 禹步), which was often used in shamanistic rituals as a technique to invoke the spirits. His son Qi also performed a dance called the “Nine Changes” (*Jiudai* 九代), in which he rode dragons and connected with spirits (ibid., 16–17).

What Li Zehou is trying to show is the difference between dynamic and human-centred shamanism, in which humans and the divine are intimately connected, and static and rational religion, in which humans are clearly separated from the superior and objectified deity (ibid., 22). Li emphasizes that in shamanistic rituals the interaction with the spirits was proactive, not passive as in many other religious traditions. “This direct engagement with the divine evinced human agency as well as continuity—rather than separation—between the human and the spiritual” (Carleo III 2018, 7). In these ceremonies the human agency was highly

pronounced, and the spirits here were not objective beings separate from the activities of humans. It was only the shamanistic activity that formed a precondition for this form of the divine to occur. In other words, the existence of the spirits is inseparable from human activity, as the spirits have no independent transcendent or transcendental existence (Li 2018, 21).

While not forgetting about the transcendent aspects of Heaven, Li explains that the first origin of this Chinese concept developed through the transformation of ancestral spirits. From the early Zhou dynasty, Heaven replaced the legendary emperors and assumed the position of supreme deity. However, it then took a different path and developed as naturalized rather than the image of a personal god (*ibid.*, 85). Knowing Heaven was the key to ruling over people, and the intertwining of Heavenly and human affairs remained one of the characteristics of shamanism. Shamanism then gradually evolved into symbolic activities, a path that was different from the emergence of a supreme personal god. In the context of the rationalization of shamanism, calendrical calculations and the observation of celestial phenomena became the central fields of research at this time. Over time, the model of Heavenly guidance became more and more rationalized, clearly reflecting the process of rationalization from shamanism to historicism (*ibid.*, 27–29). Through this process, and through the increasing predominance of political over spiritual authority during this period, the connection between Heaven and humans shifted entirely to the office of the king. As Li concludes: “The fundamental qualities of “shamanism” were directly rationalized from the path of the integration of shaman and king, or political governance and religion, to become the basic characteristics of the mainstream tradition of Chinese thought” (*ibid.*, 19).

In the Zhou period, Heaven was seen as something rewarding virtue and goodness and punishing excess, representing the “Heavenly Dao” or the “Way of Heaven”. The Way of Heaven became understood as a vague and ambiguous supreme ruler that possessed unpredictable functions and divine power. However, it never separated from the worldly human experience and thus began to form “a formal imperative or governor of objective principle that also includes human emotionality” (*ibid.*, 85). The Way of Heaven included regularities, imperatives, and developmental principles that Li regards as “the most fundamental psychological development of the history of Chinese culture and thought” (*ibid.*, 86). At this point, the Way of Heaven basically served as a substitute for god for the Chinese people, Li argues. However, due to the tripartite unity of religion, ethics, and politics in China, the concepts of Heaven, “Dao” (道), and the Way of Heaven continued to be directly linked to the political and ethical aspects of the “Way of Humans” (*rendao* 人道) (*ibid.*, 88).

“Way of Heaven” and the “Way of Humans” are one and the same “Way.” Heaven, the Mandate of Heaven, the Way of Heaven, and Heavenly will always exist and arise within the Way of Humans. (ibid., 37)

The close connection of the Way of Heaven with the Way of Humans formed a basis for the development of pragmatic reason (*shiyong lǐxing* 实用理性)<sup>8</sup> in China, which in turn led to the importance of ethics and morality (ibid., 90–91). The Way of Heaven, Dao or the Way of Humans were not understood as any supernatural ideas, but instead as a form of government implied by nature itself. None of these concepts possessed will or the ability to speak, which led them to be understood primarily as expressed through the natural environment, actual life, and the principles of political governance (ibid., 88), and this is a connection that appears in Xu Fuguan’s texts as well.

## Between Rituality, Ethics and Aesthetics

With the birth of *concerned consciousness* the basis of human belief shifted increasingly away from the divine and toward recognizing responsibility for one’s own actions, Xu argues. This brought along a sense of endeavour, which reflected also in the ideas of reverence (*jing* 敬), virtue (*de* 德), and reverence of the virtue (*jing de* 敬德). The concept of virtue initially had no qualitative moral meaning either, and it simply referred to a person’s behaviour. It was not until the Wenmo period of the Zhou dynasty that virtue began to appear as reverence of virtue (*jingde* 敬德) or luminous virtue (*mingde* 明德), thus acquiring a positive moral character. Xu holds that reverence of virtue means to act seriously, while the idea of luminous virtue means to behave wisely. Later, the meaning expanded to denote virtuous behaviour that springs from the human heart. However, each type of virtue was filled with reverence. Reverence here did not mean letting go of one’s responsibilities and surrendering to the divine, as religious reverence does. This newly emerged concept of reverence referred to a kind of human spirit that puts responsibility before desire. It refers to a psychological state of a subject that is active, rational, and reflexive (Xu 2014, 23). When Xu talks about the early kings, he quotes the *Book of History*:

The Duke of Zhou said, “Oh! those kings of Yin, Zhong Zong, Gao Zong, and Zu-jia, with king Wen of our Zhou, these four men carried

8 Pragmatic reason, another of Li’s concepts, is a unique form of non-transcendental moral reasoning that evolved from the shamanistic-historical tradition and is characteristic of traditional Confucian thought (D’Ambrosio, Carleo III and Lambert 2016, 1063).

their knowledge into practice. If it was told to them, 'The lower people murmur against you and revile you,' then they paid great and reverent attention to their conduct; and with reference to the faults imputed to them they said, 'Our faults are really so,' thus not simply shrinking from the cherishing of anger."

周公曰，呜呼，自殷王中宗及高宗及祖甲及我周文王，兹四人迪哲。厥或告之曰，小人怨汝詈汝，则皇自敬德，厥愆，曰朕之愆，允若时，不啻不敢含怒。(Shang Shu, Zhou Shu, Wu Yi 6)

This is a clear indication of reverence in the early Zhou, Xu thinks. It is precisely this concept of reverence and its meaning that distinguishes Chinese humanism and that allowed Chinese culture to progress even at the institutional level, transforming the cultural heritage of the Shang into a new, morally grounded tradition (Xu 2014, 23). However, when we mention the Shang cultural heritage, we should first address the issue of rituality.

The concept of ritual developed from the practice of sacrifice. In his etymological analysis, Xu suggests that the character *li* itself is composed of the radical *feng* 豐, which refers to ceremonial pottery in the Oracle bones, and the radical *shi* 示, which refers to the ritual of worship itself. We cannot say that the concept of ritual was already present in the Shang period, but we can confirm, according to Xu, that this concept developed from the practice of worship in the Shang dynasty. Xu believes that all the rituals of the Xia and Shang dynasties that we read about in later literature consist of a concept that emerged later in history. Since the Zhou had not yet introduced their own sacrificial rituals at the beginning of their dynasty, when they replaced the Shang, they continued to use the rituals of the Yin dynasty. Xu further analyses the early Zhou dynasty texts and concludes that "the spirits and gods are treated as one thing and 'rituals' as another" (ibid., 38–39). In early Zhou literature, the word ritual actually appears only once, in a line stating that ritual is "that which is required by the rules of propriety of our kingdom"<sup>9</sup> (Shang Shu, Zhou Shu, Jin Teng 2). Xu also notes a quotation from Jun Shi:

(These ministers) carried out (their principles), and displayed (their merit), preserving and regulating the dynasty of Yin, so that, while its ceremonies lasted, (those sovereigns), when deceased, were assessors to Heaven, and its duration extended over many years.<sup>10</sup> (Shang Shu, Zhou Shu, Jun Shi 2)

9 我国家礼亦宜之。

10 率惟兹有陈，保义有殷，故殷礼陟配天，多历年所。

All other terms for rituals from this period refer to sacrificial ceremonies. This means that it was not until later in the Zhou period that people began to pay special attention to the meaning of ritual itself, thus shaping the concept of ritual as such. The idea of ritual as we understand it in the later texts did not emerge until the late period of the Western Zhou dynasty, when religion had already lost much of its power. Only then was attention paid to the humanistic elements of ritual, but even then ritual could not be separated from sacrifice. Another related concept that was influential at that time is that of norms (*yi* 彝), which also initially referred to the vessels used for worship. Only in later works such as the *Book of History* did *yi* transform into a humanistic concept that implied moral norms. By the end of the Western Zhou, ritual had thus become a sum of the original sacrificial meaning of ritual and the more abstract idea of norms, which by this time already reflected the spirit of humanism, and together formed a new understanding of the concept of rituality (Xu 2014, 37–40).

Referring to the same realm of ideas, Li uses the concept of virtue (*de* 德) to make the connection between early ritual practices and later moral ethics. Li believes that virtue originated in sacrifice in the shamanistic rituals of ancestor worship and initially referred only to a “mysterious quality possessed by the shaman”. Only later did it evolve into “the conventional regulations of various clans”. Virtue thus slowly shifted from mysterious magical powers to behavioral characteristics of the king and eventually to morality in general. In the early Zhou, however, this shift reached only the second stage and related mainly to the king’s activities, such as worship and military actions.

Over time, this was integrated with the shamanistic ritual ceremonies of ancestor worship to gradually develop into a full set of social norms, order, requirements, and customs that maintained the survival and development of the clan or tribe. (Li 2018, 32)

In other words, behind the word virtue we can first find unwritten regulations, which by the time of Duke of Zhou became comprehensively established as institutionalized clan-tribe-state norms of ritual and music. The “virtuous governance” (*dezheng* 德政) of institutionalized ritual and music can be divided into the internal aspect, i.e. reverence, and the external aspect, i.e. ritual, according to Li. The concept of reverence originated in shamanistic ritual ceremony and, according to Li, was the very definition of the ecstatic psychological state of shamanistic activities (ibid., 32). Here Li actually quotes Xu Fuguan’s definition of respect:

The notion of reverence emphasized in the early Zhou period seems similar to but in fact differs in nature from religious piety. Religious piety involves people dispelling their own subjectivity, casting themselves before the divine and thoroughly submitting themselves psychologically to the divine. Reverence as stressed in the early Zhou period involved human spirit. It moved people from a state of dispersal to one of concentration, dispelling one's own sensory desires before the responsibilities one has undertaken, which accentuates the functions of one's subjective agency and rationality.<sup>11</sup> (Xu 2014, 22)

Li explains that reverence includes not only awe and respect, but also fear, adoration and worship. He agrees with Xu that reverence in classical Confucianism does not negate the self in order to subjugate the human to the divine. Li believes that this is due to the way reverence arose in shamanism. Not through a deification of objectified spirits, but rather through an emotional experience of the union of the human and divine. In this way, a concept of a transcendent god never emerged, while the psychological state of reverence was slowly transformed into behavioral norms (Li 2018, 32). Li explains that the evolution from shamanism to ritual regulations was an extremely long process in which dance, music, ceremony, and sacrificial worship gradually transformed into behavioral norms. This process extended from the time of the "three sovereigns and five emperors" (*san huang wu di* 三皇五帝) to the early Zhou period, when the Duke of Zhou finally institutionalized ritual regulations and music (*ibid.*, 54–55). Through rituals, Heaven was able to maintain the sacred, while at the same time connoting a sense of normativity (Deng 2018, VII–VIII). Li links the emergence of the concept of ritual to the concept of ceremony or etiquette (*yi* 仪). Originally, both "ceremony" and "ritual" were a part of shamanistic dance and music. Li argues that ceremony could also originally refer to a type of legal institution or obligation (*yi* 义) that related to rituals and manners that achieved their appropriateness.

Through shamanistic ritual ceremony, "obligation" became the unwritten laws, conceptions of justice, and especially obligations that primeval communities had to abide by and carry out. (Li 2018, 62)

We see this in sayings such as "Ritual follows appropriateness"<sup>12</sup> (Li ji, Qu Li Shang, 5). Through the systematization, completion, and formalization of ritual, shamanism gradually developed into institutions, reaching its final stage with the Duke of

11 Trans. Robert A. Carleo III in Li 2018, 33.

12 礼从宜。



Zhou, who institutionalized ritual regulations and music, and finally with Confucius, who rooted them in humaneness (ibid.). Finally, Li connects the idea of sacredness not only to religious faith, but also to aesthetic enjoyment, which I mentioned earlier when discussing the *culture of joy* or the culture of music and aesthetics. In Li's interpretation, people always strive for emotional grounding and liberation. In the case of the Chinese tradition, however, this liberation was sought not through religious faith but through aesthetic enjoyment (Deng 2018, X–XI). Li believes that aesthetics is both the beginning and end point of humans, and that aesthetics actually transcends ethics. He sees this confirmed in the Chinese tradition's ideas of “establishing oneself through ritual” (*li yu li* 立于礼), but then moving toward aesthetics and finding “completion through music” (*cheng yu yue* 成于乐) (ibid., XII).

## Conclusion

The contrastive analysis of Xu Fuguan's and Li Zehou's theories of the origin and transformation of the earliest Chinese religious and moral concepts in the period of the transition from Shang to the Western Zhou dynasties presented in this article shows many parallels between their interpretations. The differences among them, however, originate in their different understanding and contextualization of religious belief in the pre-Zhou period of Chinese history.

Xu holds that the Shang dynasty was dominated by the idea of Shang Di, which indicates the complete submission of people to the will of the gods. According to him, this period was characterized by fear and terror of natural disasters and calamities, but there was still no sense of a person's own responsibility or human agency, which remained unchanged until the Zhou dynasty. On the other hand, we can see that based on Li's analysis this process of acquiring self-awareness began much earlier. In his opinion, early the Xia and Shang dynasties' shamanistic ceremonies played an extremely important role in this process, because in them the interaction with the spirits was already proactive and not passive, as in many other religious traditions. Li argues that as part of the heritage of ancestor worship human beings could not fully comprehend the boundaries between the world of humans and that of spirits, which enabled them to search for meaning and a better future through their own efforts. In shamanism, human agency within the engagement with the divine was highly pronounced. The existence of the spirits was not separate from the activities of humans, for the spirits did not possess a self-sufficient transcendent or transcendental existence. The shamanistic ceremony, which originated in the earliest times, was thus not a passive supplication, but an active attempt to influence the spirits.

Xu's textual analysis shows a different interpretation of early religious concepts, mainly because Xu operates with them in the context of the dualism between religion and humanism. Xu highlights the connection between the Mandate of Heaven and the morality of rulers. It was the fusion of religion with humanistic moral values and human subjectivity that allowed for the development of a higher form of religion. However, with the decline of the government's morality during the Western Zhou, religion and humanism lost their balance and tilted in favour of the latter. Consequently, the religious concepts of the early Zhou lost all meaning, Xu believes, and the Chinese culture entered the realm of humanism and ethics. Concepts such as reverence and virtue, which spring from the human heart and imply moral standards, gradually became the complete reflection of the spirit of humanism, which for the first time illuminated the value of human existence and shaped the future development of Chinese culture and politics, concludes Xu. Li, on the other hand, believes that Chinese culture never even strived for psychological and spiritual freedom in religious faith, so in Zhou times they did not strive for a liberalization from it either. On the contrary, their search was directed towards ethics and aesthetic enjoyment. However, Li's interpretation here is based on Li's own elaboration of the idea that the cultivation of human emotion was equated with the understanding of music in ritual in ancient China. In his view, the institutionalization of music and ritual in the Zhou dynasty actually represented only a formalization and rationalization of a system of rules and ethics that maintained social order for centuries by guiding people with norms. Li believes that aesthetics eventually transcended ethics in Chinese culture, as evidenced by ideas such as "to establish [oneself] through ritual" but then finding "completion through music".

Xu's main claim is that it was only the Zhou people who brought the previous culture based on material achievements into the realm of ideas, and through awareness of their own subjectivity and responsibility they developed a sense of *concerned consciousness*. While Xu emphasizes that the Zhou dynasty did not emerge in isolation from the Shang, and sets out how the former adopted much of the latter's ideational tradition, his leap from the complete absence of self-consciousness to its emergence with the very first (posthumously crowned) King Wen of Zhou seems rather abrupt. On the other hand, Li's entire interpretation derives much less from a solid hermeneutical analysis of classical sources, and leans much more on his own theories and ideas developed based on later interpretations of Chinese history. Even though Li's analysis of the classical sources from which his theory of the shamanistic-historical tradition emerged is less solid, it seems that within his own theoretic system Li manages to develop his ideas in a more gradual way than Xu. Li's idea of the interconnection

between human subjectality and the *culture of joy* here seems at first quite the opposite to Xu's idea of connecting human self-awareness with the *concerned consciousness*. Li believes that Chinese culture has always been based on the belief in only one world, therefore it never developed a transcendental world, and consequently the Way of Heaven and the Way of Humans have always been inseparable. This, according to Li, filled people with optimism and joy in their search for ethical interpersonal relationships and aesthetic enjoyment. Human agency has thus also always been clearly pronounced in concepts such as Heaven, Mandate of Heaven, and so on, as they were never pushed into any higher transcendental realm. However, Li also argues that the fact that the Chinese people did not have faith in any higher realm actually made their struggle and hardship much greater than those of others. As we have seen Li describes this as "the forced smile of its "culture of optimism" and [the] profundity of its deep sorrow", which finally gives the impression that Li's and Xu's ideas here might not be as opposed as they seem at first sight.

Since both authors base their research on the interpretation of classical works, the concepts they put forward are similar. However, the difference lies in the different contextualization of the emergence of these concepts and the meaning they had for the people of the period under study, as well as within different theoretical and methodological approaches of the authors. By comparing Li Zehou and Xu Fuguan, this article has attempted to bring Li's philosophical interpretation of the origins of Chinese culture into dialogue with Xu's theory based on intellectual history and linguistic analysis. Within their own frameworks, both authors have explored the same concepts but have reached different conclusions. While Xu takes his analysis of the humanization of religion through the concept of *concerned consciousness* and ends in the realm of ethics and moral philosophy, also building a connection towards his political theory, Li uses a different approach which takes him from the process of rationalization of shamanistic practices, through the *culture of joy* and through ethics and into the realm of aesthetics. I argue that their analyses are very similar in content, and that the major difference between them lies in their argumentation and contextualization of the emergence of the self-awareness and human agency, and in the way they connect this to the emergence of the key concepts of Confucian ethics, Xu's political theory and Li's aesthetic theory. However, these mutual differences, which originate in their different methodological approaches, form an interesting mutual complementarity, which in turn opens up a deeper multilayered understanding of the process of the humanization of Chinese religion and its possible influences on the formation of a Chinese culture marked with both optimism and concern.

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