Metamorphic Imagery in Early Chinese Art: 
Long-Dragons, Feng-Phoenixes, Gui-Spirit Masks and the Spirit Journey

Pre-Han (ca.3000-200BCE) Chinese nature and art are dominated by animal numina, by 
demons and dragons that as metaphors for early thinking originated in the shamanic-like practices 
of early China and evolved into the Daoism of Han and later dynasties. Works of art from the 
prehistoric Yangshao, Hongshan, and Liangzhu cultures, the protohistoric Longshan culture, and 
the bronze-age Xia and Shang dynasties are concerned with the spirit rather than mundane world. 
Everyday subjects that represent man’s immediate environment, divorced from religious interpret-
tations, do not begin to surface in Chinese art until the Warring States and Han periods. My focus 
here is on the pre-Han spirit world of demons and dragons—on those fantastic animals and 
semi-humans, sometimes awesome, sometimes benign, that make manifest the metamorphic 
world and all-embracing powers with which early Chinese man sought to align himself. The major 
change in artistic medium from prehistoric to historic times was from jade to bronze, a change 
that is paralleled in religious orientation from a cosmologically oriented religion focused on a 
Sky/Sun deity to a “civilized” phase that encompassed Di or “God,” the royal ancestor cult, and 
later the Heavenly Mandate.

I. The Late Neolithic Religious Revolution: Cosmology and a Sky/Sun Deity

Recent finds of Neolithic date, represented by ceramic works from north China (figs.1-4) and 
jades from south China, suggest through their imagery that the cultures in which they were made 
may not have been so different in spiritual interest. The Neolithic in China was first known in the West 
as the Painted Pottery or Yangshao Culture from its initial discovery at the northern site of Yangshao 
Village in 1920 by the Swedish mining consultant, J. Gunnar Andersson. The site of Banpo near Xi’an 
in Shaanxi province has since been celebrated not only as a major village site (now partially enclosed 
as a museum of in situ remains) but for its sophisticated ceramic bowls bearing images of both abstract 
and representational subjects. On the interior of one bowl from Banpo (fig.1), two abstract semi-human 
faces with flanking fish extensions alternate with two similar fish in profile. Four images alternate 
at equidistant axes while above, on the bowl’s rim, the eight symbols placed also with axial sym-
metry are probably numerical in meaning. The imagery of this bowl exists in several variations (fig.3). 
On another Yangshao period bowl (fig.2), the exterior rather than interior is decorated with abstract 
calligraphic shapes that refer to flying birds and clouds, a subject that reflects an early concern with 
sky oriented images. The latter type also has its variants (fig.4). Both abstract and representational 
images are heightened aesthetically by the desire for an elegant shape and a shape that is also prac-
tical, as suggested by the vessel’s roughened base to prevent slippage.

What is the significance of this imagery? Was
there any meaning in the masked semi-human and
the abstract bird and cloud motifs for this wide-
spread agricultural community based in north
China? The likelihood that these images figure as
early predecessors of China's religious tradition
where both masks and supernaturally empowered
birds are prominent is reinforced by recent discov-
eries indicating that the Yangshao Chinese were
sophisticated thinkers with well-developed cosmo-
logical and astronomical beliefs. Banpo village is
characterized by a well-organized design, craft spe-
cialization, and a lineage pattern of burial; astro-
nomical calculations were used to determine the
orientation of houses and the directional exposure
of their doors.¹

Even more surprising for documenting astro-
nomical interest is the burial at Xishuipo, Puyang,
Henan province.² A male corpse lying supine was
flanked on west and east by images, well-known in
later Han cosmology, of the tiger of the west and
dragon of the east, here modelled entirely out of
mollusk shells (fig.5). At the corpse's feet lay further
shell remains of what has been identified by the
excavators as a symbol of the Big Dipper (Beidou),
the guiding constellation that could be used to
determine the position of the celestial realm and
man's relationship to it. Is this prescient evidence
that the Big Dipper was an astronomical guide to
the celestial realm, to the deceased spirit in its
afterlife and thus an early symbol of the spirit jour-
ney? Does this burial serve as evidence that in the
third millennium BCE the Chinese were using astro-
nomical calculations to map the sky and that
this power was invested in the hands of a religious
leader?

This burial layout at the Yangshao Neolithic site
of Puyang suggests reference to the well-developed
cosmological scheme that was thought to originate
in the Western Han (ca. 100 BCE) as recorded in the Shi Ji by the historian-astrologer, Sima Qian. The Puyang tomb and nearby remains have been C-14 dated to ca. 2200 BCE, the end of the Yangshao Neolithic. The scholar Feng Shi has compared the Neolithic burial design to a similar but more detailed representation of more than a millennium later, a painting on a 5th century BCE Warring States lacquer chest from an aristocratic tomb in Hubei (fig. 6). In addition to the Big Dipper and two directional animals, possibly functioning as cardinal asterisms, the Warring States artist included the 28 lunar lodges (xu) associated with constellations near the ecliptic that are represented in written characters around the Beidou-Big Dipper, the central axis of the universe. By the Eastern Zhou and Han eras, Chinese astronomers understood the cosmos as a sphere or perhaps simply dome-shaped heaven cover (gaotian) that could be divided into 28 xiu-lunar lodges and correlated with a five-fold division of the earth, a cardinal point system of the terrestrial horizon (fig. 7). The question arises: is this Neolithic burial design a document of China's understanding of astronomy? Several authors have now documented that 2300 BCE is the date for the first use of cardinal asterisms. Yi Shi tong, furthermore, would read the Puyang burial in a religious, cosmological sense, where the Big Dipper in combination with the supine human corpse was a symbol of combined human and spirit power, a giant spirit (jieliing) who controlled both sky and earth, conceivably the prototype for the semi-mythical hero Kui of Xia and Shang date.

The discovery of another remarkable find, an engraved plaque dating from about 2500 BCE, from further south in Anhui province at Hanshan (fig. 8), is also rewarding in documenting Neolithic cosmological interests. The plaque's engraving of an eight-pointed star within a circular field (symbolizing the heavens) and
four prismatic corners (the earth) is identifiable as a cosmological diagram. The diagram was found placed between the upper and lower shells of a turtle, which would corroborate the turtle’s archaic role as a sacred simulacrum of the cosmos. Comparable variations of this cosmological diagram are popularly represented elsewhere during the Neolithic period, as, for example, on spindle whorls, the interiors of footed ceramic bowls or as emblems on other vessel types (fig. 8B). What is significant religiously about the identification of the universe as a dome and equatorial plate dominated in the center by a pillar is not only the evidence this identification bears on certain myths but on current views of Neolithic religion.

If the combined evidence is assessed, including the Yangshao bowls with axial imagery and the others with abstract birds and clouds, which we theorize may represent Heaven’s dome, the latter specialized ceramics were evidently a modest part of the paraphernalia exploited by tribal leaders in their quest for attunement with the forces of nature. Although there is other evidence for an advanced scheme that incorporated cardinal asterisms in a religious context during the late Neolithic, no approximation like that at Puyang has yet emerged elsewhere amidst Yangshao remains. If, as is suggested by the excavated and scientific evidence, there is a cosmological scheme of the universe, with the center represented by a Big Dipper on axis with man, the remaining world then is envisioned as radiating outwards in all directions, which theoretically could be defined by dragon and tiger symbols representing east and west respectively. The major objective of humankind, at a time when nature and man constituted the same experiential realm, was to align themselves with nature’s powerful forces through symbols of real animals and their spirit administrators.

The sophisticated world view in Neolithic times and the place of animals in this view is amply documented by other archaeological data, in particular by cong-prismatic tubes of Liangzhu cultural date and slightly earlier ‘pig-dragon’ and ‘bird-in-cloud’ pectorals of Hongshan cultural date. Major earthworks carefully faced with stone in the form of a large square raised over an underground burial (17.5m wide x 18.7m long), and a large circular altar stepped at three levels that diminish in size as they rise (measuring from 22m to 15m to 11m in diameter) at the Hongshan site of Niuhe liang (fig.9) are thought to represent outdoor altars used in worshipping earth and sky, and corresponding moon and sun powers. Given the abundant evidence from later ritual texts for such worship and the traditional Chinese concept that the earth was square and heaven circular in shape, in addition to the fact that the similarly shaped and tiered, circular outdoor Altar of Heaven, called Huan Qiu Tan (Round Mound Altar) in today’s southern Beijing (fig.10) was used until 1911 for royal ceremonies and sacrifices to Heaven, it is likely that these symbolic cosmological associations were intact already during the Hongshan Neolithic phase of about 3000BCE at Niuhe liang, Liaoning province in the far north of China. It is also likely that the stepped, circular altar originates earlier than the traditional account that seeks its origins in the literary model of the Han period Zhou Li (“Rites of Zhou”).

Representative jade works of art of the Hongshan culture known as ‘pig-dragons’ (fig.11) and ‘hooked clouds’ (fig.12) are also religiously significant. From an artistic point of

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Fig. 9 Ground plan of the ceremonial center at Niuhe liang including square outdoor altars over burials (Z1-Z2) and the three-tiered circular outdoor altar (Z3). After Wénmu, 1986.8, fig.9, p.8.

Fig. 10 The Altar of Heaven’s Round Mound (Huan qiu), Beijing, Ming Dynasty, 1420. After Liang Sicheng, Tu Shuo Zhonggao jianju shi, Beijing, 1991, pl.79.
view the working of these jades is a true feat of craftsmanship; jade is harder than most stones and all metals, and, therefore, to work it one must grind at its surface with something harder, like quartzite or diamond. From the religious point of view, it is evident that these jades were symbolic amulets used in fertility and related rites; they were found lying on top of the outdoor circular and also square burial altars, as at Niuheliang, and within elite burials where they decorated the chest of the corpse.

Fig. 12 Jade hooked cloud with central bird head, 11.3cm. long, Liaoning Provincial Museum, Hongshan culture, ca. 3000-2400 BCE. After Zhongguo yuqi quanjí vol. 1, pl. 11.

Fig. 11 Jade boar-faced dragon (pig-dragon), 15cm. tall, Jiangningxian, Liao-ning, Hongshan culture, ca. 3000-2400 BCE. After Zhongguo yuqi quanjí vol. 1, pl. 24.

The tightly curled 'pig-dragon' is evidently a prototype of the legendary royal power symbol, labelled dragon in English and known as qiu and later long in Shang bone inscriptions. As the standard dictionary source of later Han, the Shuowen, states, the "long-dragon is [the] senior member of [the] fish and insects families (linchong zhi chang), with the ability to be both dark and bright, narrow and wide, short and long; in spring it rises to heaven and in fall descends to the dark springs underground." As an imaginary creature, the dragon is traditionally envisioned as an earth and sky power, as a reptile-related creation that rises from the earth's springs and ascends skyward to bring rain. That the dragon had a cosmological, fertility role in Hongshan Neolithic times is evident from the religious focus on a fertility goddess with whom the dragon as sculpture was intimately associated. The boar-faced jade (fig.11) may be identified as a dragon on the basis of the early graph for qiu-dragon, the earliest written form for this mythical creature (fig.13). If we define the Hongshan jades of the "pig(boar)-dragon" and 'bird amidst clouds' (figs.11-12) as symbols of cosmological power, as both mythic and real animals, this interpretation is in keeping with the theory that posits a cosmological function for both square and outdoor stone-faced altars at Hongshan sites.

The art of the Liangzhu culture, represented here by excavated cong prismatic jade cylinders (figs.14-15), is exciting for what it communicates about the level of civilization during the late Neolithic period, when jade was exploited for purposes of symbolizing religious and political power. The jades that filled elite burials served three functions: as ritual implements, as ritually symbolic weapons, and as ritually significant ornament. Based on burial finds and related archaeological data, it is evident that Liangzhu rulers were religious leaders who presided over individual city-states and their ritual centers. Although never directly represented as icons of religious or political myth, as is the case with Sumerian and Olmec or later Mayan rulers in Western cultures of comparable periods, we may conjecture that these men of power were equipped with elaborate head and body ornament, mostly jade, as is told.

Fig. 13 Variations of the graph for qiu-dragon inscribed on Shang divinatory bones, Anyang, Henan. After E. Childs-Johnson, "Jades of the Hongshan culture: the dragon and fertility cult worship," Arts Asiatiques XLVI (1991), fig.25:1-4, p.93.
by the position of jades in their tombs. We may hypothesize, for example, on the basis of archaeological evidence that the elite male leaders wore a jade headdress composed of four half-moon shapes crowned by one three-pronged mask shape out of which extended feathers, possibly peacock, and that they wore jade earrings, an elaborate jade necklace that could hang in many chains, plus bracelets and armlets and additional jades that decorated the wearer's robe and possibly slippers (fig.16). These leaders were also buried with jade weapons, including at least one jade yue-broad axe with handle, a group of jade spearpoints, plus a jade talisman with a trapezoidally shaped crown and jade necklace of its own (represented to the left of the corpse in figure 16).

It is also probable that this religious leader or his heroic ancestor was symbolized in semi-human guise on cong-tubes and on the variety of other jades found in these elite Liangzhu period burials. The semi-human, when represented in complete rather than abbreviated form on the Fanshan cong (fig.17-2), is flat and frontally disposed, with arms that extend outward to embrace the animal steed he "rides." The head of the semi-human takes the shape of a trapezoidal mask with a fan-like display composed of minutely delineated bird feathers. This bird-feathered headdress is a symbolic reference to sun rays and thus may be interpreted as a symbol of a sun god or simply tian-sky power.18 Wu Ruzuo and Mou Yongkang make the point that this identification is supported by the fact that the word for tian-sky/heaven (fig.18A) amidst the Naxi tribe of the Eastern Ba from the southeastern part of China today is a graphic abstraction of this feathered headdress and may be compared with the early precedent of the Liangzhu culture at the site of Hemudu, in the imagery, for example, decorating a ceramic basin (fig.18B).19 This equation between the Naxi graph and Neolithic image is attractive for many reasons, in particular since the major deity in Neolithic China has attributes of a sky and sun power. The feathered headdress in bow-shape that crowns the deity on Liangzhu jades is repeated (fig.18C) and simplified on the
Fig. 17 Drawn variations of the image of the semi-human "riding" the animal spirit on different Liangzhu jades (reading from left column to right column): 1: Three-pronged headdress ornament M7:26 Yaoshan 2: From "royal cong" M12:98 Fanshan 3: Xie broad axe M12:100 Fanshan 4: D-shaped headdress ornament, Metropolitan Museum of Art 5: Huang-shaped ornament M22:20 Fanshan 6-8: Tian-shaped headdress ornaments M15:7 Fanshan; M16:4 Fanshan; M7:26 Yaoshan. After Shenou 1988:1, fig.20, p.12, fig.29, p.7, fig.33, p.46, fig.24, p.42.


Jade figure from the comparably dated Neolithic site of Hanshan in Anhui (fig.18) and the axehead from Xuejiagang (fig.18), and continues to appear crowning the semi-humans depicted on jades of the last Neolithic phase, the Longshan (fig.18E-G).

Concrete evidence for the identification of the semi-human as one empowered as a Sky/Sun Power comes not from the later sun myth of "Hou Yi, The Archer and Ten Suns," but from contextual artistic evidence. There are many pictographic representations that can be identified as the sun symbol in the art of Liangzhu and its predecessors, particularly Hemudu but also Songze and Dawenkou. As I theorized in 1988, the pictograph for sun and for brightness, known in bone inscriptions of Shang date (fig.19-I), can be traced to similar, earlier graphic emblems in Neolithic Hemudu and Liangzhu art (fig.19-II). The graph for brightness is composed of both sun and moon pictographs as represented on the interior of the burnished black pottery "dou" from Jinhang, Nanhu (fig.19-IIB) and by variations of the same emblem worked into the surfaces of jades, mostly bi-discs, and ceramics of Liangzhu and Dawenkou period date (fig.19-IIIF). The sun symbol, when represented within or above the shape of mountain, may appear in conjunction with the moon symbol signified by a crescent (fig.20). The fact that both sun and moon symbols appear together with the bird and mountain motifs suggests reference, on the other hand, to their role as stated in the later Zhou text, Huainanzi: "The sun and moon are the agents of Heaven (Tian)." Thus, when we speak of a sun symbol we should speak of a broader power called Tian, a Sky Power (Heaven) envisioned mostly through the symbols denoting the sun, sometimes moon, and mountain, the latter of which in this context signifies the axial conduit from earth to heaven.

The emblematic image of the Sky/Sun Power has multiple variations of representation in Neolithic art, and most are abstractions or representations of the bird, sun, moon, and mountain in combination or as independent motifs. As illustrated in figure 19-II, major variations of the three include the encircled sun form framed by birds on Hemudu ivories; dual sun and moon images signifying heaven's brightness on the same ivories; a geometric abstraction featuring a central circle framed by wing parts of birds, especially popular on Liangzhu ceramics but also represented in openwork jade from later Longshan sites; the emblems on Liangzhu ritual
Fig. 19 Variations of the graphs and emblems referring to the sun/sky symbol on Hemudu, Dawenkou and Liangzhu period works of art:
A: Graphic and emblematic variations of the sun. B: Graphic and emblematic variations of brightness (sun and moon graphs also refers to daybreak) C: Variations of the sun and moon emblems in combination with the mountain emblem D: Variations of abstract bird parts in combination with the sun and/or moon emblem E: Variations of the bird emblem F: Variations of the bird in combination with the sun and/or moon and mountain emblems

II. The emblems of the sun/sky symbol in artistic context: A: Ceramic sun wine container, Lingyanghe, Shandong B: Blackware dou, Jinhang, Nanhu, Liangzhu Culture C: Jade ring/bracelet, Freer Gallery of Art, Liangzhu/Dawenkou Culture D: Jade cong, Capitol Museum, Beijing E: Bone and ivory carvings, Hemudu, Yuyao, Zhejiang F: Bi, Anxi, Zhejiang Provincial Museum; next three from the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution; Capitol Museum, Beijing.

Fig. 20 Drawn variations of sun/sky symbol with encircling bird symbols on Hemudu and Liangzhu period artifacts: A: Interior of a ceramic blackware dou bowl on a stem, Hemudu culture B: Upper surface motif of a ceramic face cover, Zhalingshan, Liangzhu culture C: Interior motif of a ceramic blackware dou bowl on a stem, Liangzhu culture D: Upper surface of a clay spindle whorl, Liuhe, Nanjing, Jiangsu, Liangzhu culture E: Small jade disk, Shijiazhe, Hubei, Shijia/Longshan culture F: Small jade disk ornament for necklace, Huating, Jiangsu, Dawenkou/Liangzhu culture.
Fig. 21 Variations of the graph for feng-wind spirit in oracle bone divinatory inscriptions, Shang period, ca.1700-1100BC. After E. Childs-Johnson, "The Shang Bird: Intermediary to the Supernatural," Orientations November 1989, fig.11, p.58.

implements, jade bi and cong; and the same emblems on other ritual implements, including large ceramic wine storage gun from Dawenkou. These emblematic variations are interesting for their complexity: the sun symbol is always the circle or a circle with dense or simplified internal scrolls; with a dash; as a quadratic cross of cardinal directions; a repeated diminishing-in-size series of circles; or the circle broken by laterally emerging bird heads and bird wings (fig.35). As a metaphor of the sun, the bird is represented in profile atop the mountain shape, or abstractly as wing parts, as a profile head or as both head and body. The mountain symbol (also interpreted as an outdoor earthen altar as known through Liangzhu excavations) is typified by a stepped rectangular shape. The inventive variations of the sun symbol also include those with rays, in the form of the trapezoidally shaped feather headdress crowning the semi-human (fig.20), or as axially oriented spiraling wing and abstract bird parts (fig.35). Recently, two Japanese scholars independently suggested that the intentionally large circular hole of yue-battle axes from Liangzhu sites

Fig. 24 The graph for Shang in Shang oracle inscriptions. After Li Xiaodong, Jiagu wenzi jishu, #293 B. The two components of the Shang graph.

Fig. 22 Javanese male peacock with feathers unfurled. Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History.

Fig. 23 The ocellated peacock feather as a standard part of the headress of Longshan Shangdông period mask imagery on the following representative work of art: A: Jade gui blade, obverse side, National Palace Museum, Taipei, Longshan period. After Dohrenwend, "Demonic Images," Fig.35b B: Jade gui, Sackler Art Museum, Harvard University. After Du, "Lun Linggu, Chufeng," fig.4:5, p.56.

Fig. 25 Complex and simplified variations of the animal and semihuman in Liangzhu jade imagery. A: Four variations of the animal mask B: Variations of the simplified semihuman mask C: Variations of the combined semihuman and animal mask. After Wenshui 1981, fig.35, p.20 (M17 Fanshan); fig.46, p.24 (M14 Fanshan); "1989-nian Jiangsu Xianjin Huating," Dongfang wenming, fig.17-1, p.106 (M50:9); "Changhoushi bowuguan," Dongfang wenming, fig. 5, p.59; figs.10-11, p.62.
should also be identified as a symbol of the sun in Liangzhu culture.24

The sunbird, known under various names in later Chinese literature, at some point during the late Neolithic was identified with the peacock species, written feng (later fenghuang), well-known from its function as supernatural intermediary in Shang period bone inscriptions (fig. 21).25 That the peacock as feng-phoenix and wind spirit may be traced earlier to Hemudu and Liangzhu Neolithic cultures is suggested by the decor on a ceramic from Denghu, dating late in the Liangzhu period.26 Flanking the animal mask are bird forms whose feathers are drawn with ocellated eyes, indicative of the peafowl (peacock) species (fig. 22). If this is an accurate identification, the Neolithic programer appears to have consciously linked the ocellated eyed feather of the peacock with the symbol of the sun. The eyed end of the peafowl feather naturally forms a dotted (eyed) circle with rays. Clearly the motif of birds encircling a large circle (symbolizing the sky/heaven) in Liangzhu and Longshan art (fig. 20), as suggested above, is a similar reference to the sky/sun symbol. It is also clear that if the feng’s feathers make up the headdress of the semi-human figure identified as a Sky/Sun Power in Liangzhu art, this supernatural bird crest may also be the symbolic reference continued in Longshan and Shang period mask imagery (fig. 23), and therefore the major component in the graph for the Shang people and their dynasty (fig. 24), to which issue we will return below.

If the semi-human in Liangzhu art and the human corpse in elite Liangzhu burials represent the Sky/Sun Power incarnate or its administrator, then how is the popular animal icon in Liangzhu and later traditions of representation to be explained? On the celebrated "royal" cong from Fanshan, the largest discovered to date (figs. 14; 17-2), the animal mask with extended body is thought to refer to the tiger. The tiger is well-known in later Shang ritual bronze imagery and may originate here, as has already been suggested by several authors.27 The most convincing argument for this identification is that amidst the variations of this most common image in Liangzhu jade art are the animal attributes of a pair of fangs, beady eyes and long snout (fig. 25). Whether or not the wild boar is also a possible inspiration, this animal image is a reference to the wild animal over which man has triumphed, the subject of later bronze imagery and the objective of the Shang king as master of the hunt.28 This image of man as physically superceding the animal and thus overpowering and controlling the animal he "rides," is a masterful artistic device symbolizing the power of one magically endowed (fig. 17).

Whether or not this image symbolizes the power of a shaman leader, as is suggested in the symbolic role of king during Shang times, the close relationship that native Chinese belief and later philosophy have traditionally espoused between man and nature, between man and animal, and their interchange, is definitely maximized in this potent image of spirit power. Ake Hultkrantz defines a shaman as "a social functionary who, with the help of guardian spirits, attains ecstasy in order to create a rapport with the supernatural world on behalf of his group members."29 He is a Sky Power. He takes spirit journeys, and on behalf of his fellow men intercedes with the spirit world by means of an animal vehicle. Is this the subject of Liangzhu imagery? During the Shang era the king functioned as a supernatural intermediary between man and dead ancestor powers, and in symbol if not in practice was a supernatural intermediary and priest-in-chief;30 there is thus little doubt but that the Shang's tribal predecessors also specialized in a form of shamanic-like practice. The religious image that signifies man's power over the animal in Liangzhu imagery is varied through the addition of flanking sunbirds and small-scale cloud scrolls that fill all body parts of both animal and man, or is simplified in decorating the length of the cong from Sidun, the tallest found to date (fig. 15).

The seemingly abstract image of two eyes crowned by horizontal striated bands on both cong is a simplified reference to the semi-human mask that alternates with the animal mask or repeats itself up and down the four prismatic corners of the jade ritual implement (fig. 25). On the "royal" cong from Fanshan (fig. 14), a double tiered arrangement is repeated twice along the four corners: a package of simplified semi-human mask above the animal mask flanked by sunbirds is repeated two times, and between the two corners the semi-human mask and animal composition is repeated two times. On the Sidun cong (fig. 15), the simplified semi-human mask with striated crown is repeated thirteen times (see fig. 25).
Most scholars of early China now agree that the cong was a meaningful ritual implement in late Neolithic China and that the bi-flat circular disk (fig. 19 II), commonly found together with cong in burials, was also significant in ritual practice. The shape and context of both jade forms and their definition in the later Zhou Li "Rites of Zhou" as ritual implements used in worshipping heaven and earth, suggest that both originated as ritually significant forms. Since bi are flat disks punctuated by a central hole, and several bi are decorated with emblems such as the bird or its abstraction symbolizing the sun (fig. 22), it is evident that this implement was associated with the power of the sun and sky. That the cong is also meaningful in shape has been concluded by not just a few scholars. The consistent shape of cong as a one or multi-leveled prismatic cylinder that widens as the vessel rises, is likely related to the early belief that the earth was quadratic in shape and the heaven circular, and to "the conceptualization of the world as a center from which influence radiates outward toward the eight cardinal and intercardinal directions," as discussed above in commenting on Neolithic man's advanced views on cosmology (see figs. 7-9; 20). The Neolithic evidence emphasizing belief in a cardinally oriented earth and cosmos "overseen" by the human intermediary and animal power is significant.

How were these cong and bi actually used in rituals? Although we cannot answer this question in detail, it is clear that both were ritual implements used in addressing earth and sky powers, respectively. That these specialized jade forms were also signifiers of wealth is suggested by their appearance in large numbers in tombs. The largest number of bi per tomb is, so far, the thirty-eight (out of fifty-four jade) from M20 at Fanshan. Within M3 at Sidun, twenty-four bi were uncovered. Further support for the suggestion that these ritual implements signified wealth is provided by the fact that amidst ritual yue-axes in burials, only one per tomb was made out of jade. All other yue were stone versions without hafts, with red lines painted to signify the position of hafting cords. These stone versions of yue evidently functioned as mingji-spirit objects, less expensive symbols of status.

The last Neolithic phase, called Longshan, although not as well known archaeologically as the Liangzhu and Hongshan phases, is clearly part of what we may define as incipient civilization. Although writing is not yet clearly represented, heavily fortified sites both large and small in scale, weapons, elite arts, metal tools, pooled labor force, advanced agriculture, stratified society, and ritual implements and insignia are all strongly in evidence. Jade dao and zhang blades (figs. 26-29) are new jade types that function as insignia or status symbols; this change in function of jade utensils emerges during the Longshan and Xia eras of about 2700-1700 BCE. Archaeological data that can be used to corroborate this use appears in a regional context, in the art of distant Sichuan, at Sanxindui, where the zhang insignia blade is represented as held upward and forward in a reverential manner by a kneeling individual.

That these jade insignia of Longshan and Xia cultural date reflect a new order of religious power and myth is also told by the popular representation of complementary semi-human images, usually a pair on Longshan period gui insignia, another shape that appears in the repertoire of jade insignia during this protohistoric and historic period (fig. 30). Shandong Longshan imagery on insignia features two versions of the semi-human head that is based on the type already popularized on Liangzhu jades, two complementary images including the semi-human head and eagle-type bird with spread wings, or sometimes only the semi-human mask or semi-human mask with crowning bird. Although the species of this bird is
new, the role of the bird still appears to be that of a supernatural sky power tied to the heroic semi-human version of the Sky/Sun deity. On both excavated (figs.30A,C) and non-excavated works (fig.30B), the Longshan image appears as a masked, semi-human with headdress composed of feathers and other extensions, and for this reason probably signifies the initiated shaman or heroic ancestor whose precedent is Liangzhu Neolithic in date. Other pieces, such as those in the Royal Ontario Museum (fig.31) and the Musée Cernuschi in Paris (fig.32), are telling for their evidence of the specific changes that occurred in religious imagery between the Liangzhu and the historic Bronze Age of the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties. 41 Although the represented bird appears to be the eagle rather than the peacock, this bird is frequently represented above the semi-human godhead or independently circumscribing the cloud decorated disk symbolizing the sun, as the bird did in Liangzhu period art (fig.19). The conjunction of the semi-human and bird, although different in composition here, is also familiar from earlier Liangzhu art. Imagery is still frontal and iconic but is now stylized in a mode that represents a new, Longshan proto-historic aesthetic. The representation of the semi-human with feathered and probably antlered headdress, on the other hand, still most likely refers to a power symbol of a tribal chieftain, a power of shamanic flight and thus control, as symbolized in the eagle with wings unfurled that crowns and
empowers the humanized deity.

II. Yin-Shang Metamorphic Imagery & the Ancestor Cult

During the Bronze Age, artistic medium and technique radically change. Jade is demoted and bronze promoted as the new medium par excellence, the new power symbol of the ruling elite. There is still some uncertainty about how bronze came to be used and how dynastic Xia and Shang were formed. We think that ritual bronze vessels derived mostly from ceramic prototypes that were used in a variety of Neolithic contexts, ranging from Liangzhu in the southeast to Longshan in the northeast and central north China. Since certain of the more refined ceramic prototypes suggest that they were copies of hammered copper vessels, including simulation of rivets and other metallic features, debate has centered on identifying the copper stage that is believed by most Western scholars to have preceded casting in bronze. Recently Louisa Huber gathered evidence from China’s northwestern frontiers to suggest that China learned about bronze from various horse-riding pastoralists of Central Asia during the early 2nd millennium BCE. 42 It would be an historical anomaly if the early Chinese did not go through an initial stage of working soft metal before they began to cast in bronze, first weapons and tools in bi-valve molds and then simple bronze vessels using the more complex, piece-mold technique that came to typify all later casting in China. 43 This argument for a northwestern stimulus for the use of bronze is reinforced by the presence in the very far northeastern site of Dadianzi, near Chifeng in Inner Mongolia, of ceramics that simulate copper hammered vessels. 44 One finds there gui-pouring vessels with sharp edged handles, raised seams, and rivetted nail heads (fig.33) that could only be imitations in ceramic of those characteristic features of soft worked metal. 45

Whether or not the origin of Chinese bronze-casting is to be sought in the west, by the early historic Xia and Shang period bronze ritual vessels came into their own as utensils of a new cult honoring royal ancestors. The jue-spouted wine vessel from Erlitou in Henan province (fig.34) represents the earliest type of cast bronze vessel of Xia dynasty date and the large ding tetrapod from Duling at Zhengzhou in Henan province (fig.35) represents the earliest tetrapod ding type from a successive phase allied with the early Shang dynasty, called the Erligang Period. How do we know that these vessels were used in ancestor cult worship or have any significance at all? Bronze, first of all, was a newly developed, highly valuable alloy. By the Shang period, elite burials were filled with bronze sets of mostly wine but also meat and some grain offering vessels, as is illustrated by those found intact in the M5 royal burial at Anyang. 46 Our primary literary data for documenting their function are oracle-bone inscriptions that derive almost entirely from the late Shang capital at Anyang, as represented by the inscribed tortoise plastron in figure 36.

The most popular subject of Shang divination concerns sacrifices addressed to spirits of the royal dead in seeking their beneficent influence. During the Shang era, these spirits were all-powerful and affected all aspects of life; they included recently dead kings and queens and legendary high ancestors, such as Kui, Wang Hai and Xie, who may be traced back to the beginning of and before the Shang dynastic period. 47 Spirits of the royal dead were beholden to Di, literally "God," who had the
sole power to *ling*-command, whether it be rain, divine assistance, an evil omen, or the auspicious construction of a city. *Di*, occasionally called *Shang Di* ("God on High"), appears to have been both a primordial ancestor and an all-encompassing cosmological power. *Di* presided at the top of a spiritual hierarchy in which were aligned dead kings and queens; he was directionally all-powerful as a god in command of all within the four directions.48 The latter attribute is undoubtedly in part inherited from this deity's Neolithic predecessor, the Sky/Sun deity of the Liangzhu and Longshan cultures, and thus *Di* may be conceptually compared with what Wu and Mou identified in Liangzhu art as the *Tian*-Sky/Sun deity. *Di*'s role as a Sky/Sun power is confirmed by the fact that the Shang royal dead were addressed as sons of the ten-day week.49 *Di*’s name is related to the *liao*-fire rite that symbolizes the power of brightness and thus the cosmic power of the sun.50 In oracle-bone inscriptions, *Di* is a subject who acts but is almost never the object of direct petition. Sacrifices were addressed primarily to royal ancestral spirits who theoretically could intercede with *Di*.51

By late Shang times, offerings made in ritual bronze vessels were part of a fully mature, hierarchically organized ancestor cult with scheduled rites, a yearly cycle known as *Wischongtis*/*The Five Type Rites*.52 By analyzing pertinent sacrificial terms in these Five Type Rites and related inscriptions it becomes apparent that ritual bronzes were used not to address just any spirit but solely those of ancestors.53 One of these sacrifices in the ongoing propitiatory Five Type Rites is the wine offering, transliterated *guo* and written in imitation of the ritual bronze pouring vessel called *jue* (figs.37-38).54 This sacrificial verb means "to pour out heated, sometimes *chang*-fragrant dark millet wine from the *jue*-vessel to ancestor spirits." A typical inscription reads "Crack-making on day yizi Diviner Bin tests the proposition: The king (Wu Ding) will offer the (deceased king posthumously named) Fu Yi (20th king in the royal sequence of 35) *jue*-wine offering (with the prophylactic aim that the spirit of Fu Yi will be propitiated and not curse)." Another reads: "...[X] tests the proposition: The king will entertain in the ancestral temple [the spirit of] Qiang Jia (23rd Shang king) with *jue*-wine offering so there will be no harm."55 The bronze *jue* of Erlitou period date (fig.34) and others of Shang date (fig.38) were em-
ployed in such offerings.

The large-scale ding of early Shang date, unlike the jue, was not used for wine but rather for meat offerings, which when mentioned in bone inscriptions was written shang, "to offer meat cooked in the ritual bronze ding." One such inscription reads: "On the jiaqin day the proposition is tested: On the coming day dingsi [the king] will offer in the ding to Fu Ding (21st Shang king) thirty oxen prepared according to the yi-method." Whether or not and how the thirty oxen were offered remains unclear. In another inscription the prophylactic purpose of the shang sacrifice is specified: "Crack-making on the yichou-day Bin tests the proposition: [The king] will offer the ding in sacrifice to Tang (7th Shang king) with meat cut or not cut by the yue-halberd so that there will be no ensuing harm." The tetrapod ding is one of the largest ritual vessels known among bronzes from the Shang period. The example from Duling (fig.35) measures 81cm in height; one pair from Zhengzhou (fig.39B) measures 87cm. and 100cm in height. Other pairs of large tetrapod ding from early and late Shang are illustrated in figure 39.

The Shang king was a voracious hunter who stood as intermediary-in-chief between heavenly and earthly realms. These powers are demonstrated in Shang times in part by royal hunts, in both symbolic and practical forms. The royal hunting ritual, for example, has been identified as sheli in Shang bone inscriptions. Victory hunts conducted after military victories are also well-known through trophy skulls of killed animals. Trophy animals of the hunt, including the buffalo and stag but also the tiger and argali ram, were theoretically prepared for offering to the powerful spirit of a recently deceased king or queen in vessels like the heroically large ding from Duling (fig.35) and Zhengzhou (fig.39A-B). This type of royal sacrifice in which a hunted animal was offered to a royal ancestor is undoubtedly what transpired when the pair of large-scale tetrapod ding (fig.39F) were dedicated to the consort of King Wu Ding, Fu Zi (Fu Hao), by her son, Zu Ji, or when a different pair, the large-scale ding from Xibeigang Tomb No. 1004 (fig.39C) were dedicated in honor of King Wu Ding or his heir and eldest son, Zu Ji.

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Fig. 38 Early Shang bronze jue, Jiushan, Feixixian, Anhui. After ibid., pl.3.

Fig. 39 Pairs of large-scale tetrapod ding A: From Zhengzhou, Henan H1:2 81cm. tall and H1:8 81cm. tall. After Wenwu 1983.3., p.56 B: From Zhengzhou. 100cm. tall and 87cm. tall. After Wenwu 1975.6, pl.1; Henan Qingtongqi, figs.34-35 C: From M1004, Xibeigang, Anyang. 73.2cm. tall and 60.8cm. tall. After Xibeigang M1004 pl. 25,29, figs.39.40. Anyang square ding sets D: From M5, Fu Zi Burial, Xiaotun, Anyang, 80.1cm. tall and 80cm. tall. After Yinwu Fu Hao mu, pl.3, color plate 1.
Since the offerings were made to royal spirits, it is likely that the imagery on the ritual vessels was also related to the realm inhabited by the ancestral spirits. As recently proposed on the basis of archaeological, literary and art-historical data, the major Shang image on ritual bronzes and related paraphernalia was religiously metamorphic in content, with metamorphoses from human to animal symbolized in the image of the vehicular animal mask. This metamorphic subject is intimately allied with the preceding "Jade Age" art of Liangzhu and Longshan where a semi-human Sky/Sun deity was superimposed over a tiger or related wild animal image or the same semi-human deity was crowned by a bird's unfurled feathers.

In the repertoire of Shang imagery it is possible to identify four wild animal types that served as the basis of this vehicular spirit mask (fig.40). These animals were those hunted by the Shang king, as known through oracle bone inscriptions. They are the buffalo, tiger, stag, and wild sheep called argali. Since these animals were hunted primarily by the Shang king, they were also symbols of the king’s power as master over beasts. There are two primary ways in which these wild animals were represented on ritual art works: as simplified and abstract masks or as entire animals, usually with more "realistic" representational features. The tiger on the bronze guang from M5 (fig.41), for example, is easy to read as a tiger. The early version of a tiger mask represented by the raised line relief on the Duling ding is, on the other hand, abstract and simplified (fig.35). The abstract mask versions are distinguishable by ear or horn type; the C-shaped ear, for example, identifies a tiger represented eight times in the upper body band of the vessel from Duling or represented in relief on the tripod ding in the E.K. Burnett collection (fig.42). The same complementary interchange between simplified mask representation and whole animal is evident in the comparison between the forepart of the argali represented on the wine zun vessel from Hunan (fig.43) and the abstract argali mask on the zun of early Shang date (fig.44). The former vessel, a provincial casting, is striking in its literal representation of an argali’s forepart to form the vessel’s four corners. In contrast, the argali represented on the early Shang vessel is simplified and abstract, a more simplified mode of representing the hunted animal as a metamorphic emblem. The Shang artisan interpreted the buffalo (figs.45-46) and the stag using the same two alternate modes of representation.

It is important to stress that the simplified version of the hunted animal possesses the properties of a mask. One of the standard representational
Fig. 43 Representational version of the argali (wild ram) mask on the four corners of the bronze ding, Ningxiang, Hunan, Late Shang period. After Exhibition of Ancient Bronzes of the People's Republic of China, Tokyo, 1976, cover photo.

Signifiers of the mask is the abbreviated body part—the ubiquitous short limb ending in claws that emerges below the head at flanking sides of the mask. This abbreviated body symbol is comparable typologically to the abbreviated limb represented in Liangzhu animal mask imagery (fig. 17). The abbreviated body symbol is interchangeable with the complete body of the animal, just as the face mask signifies not partial but complete transformation of the human who dons the mask into the animal represented on the mask itself.66

Fig. 44 Abstract version of the argali (wild ram) mask on the bronze ding, formerly E.K. Burnett Esq. collection. London. After H. Watson, Ancient Chinese Bronzes, pl. 15a. B. Drawing of the tiger mask. After W. Willetts, Chinese Art.

Fig. 45 Abstract version of the buffalo mask on the bronze ding. After Y. Lebeuvre d'Argence, Ancient Chinese Bronzes, pl. X.

Fig. 46 Representational version of the buffalo mask on the bronze ding from M1004, Xibeigang, Anyang, Henan, Late Shang period. After Xibeigang M1004, pl. 25.
That the mask image in Shang art signified the power of magical metamorphosis can be substantiated by other data. Foremost is the literary evidence from oracle-bone inscriptions showing that the Shang king acted much like his late Neolithic predecessors not only as military but also religious head, with an authority tantamount to that of a priest-king in ancient Sumer or shaman-king in ancient Mesoamerica.67 Of course, the Shang king's power compared to that of a tribal chieftain was far greater and more sophisticated in extent and content. Religiously, the Shang king was the sole intermediary between this living world and that of the spirit powers, including the all-powerful deity Di (God) and the royal dead. His function as intermediary can in part be compared to that of a shaman,68 known in post-Shang times as a ư và and in Shang times as ẑhuêu-spiritual interlocutor and invocator.69

In administering the cult of the royal dead, the Shang king presided at what appears to have been a mask-wearing rite that is interchangeable with and the predecessor of the rite of invocation, ẑhu. This mask-wearing rite put the Shang king as spiritual interlocutor-in-chief in touch with the spirit world. The king also received the royal ancestors in the bin ceremony, again representative of the king's sole right to spiritually receive the spirits of royal dead.70 As proposed, the wild animal mask ubiquitous in Shang imagery is none other than the propitiary spirit mask donned in the mask-wearing rite of royal prerogative. Although this royal prerogative may simply be symbolic in Shang imagery, and not a literal reference to mask donning, the significance of the image is tied to the meaning of the mask. In practice and symbol, the mask allowed the initiate to spiritually transform and gain access to and control over the spirit world via the animal vehicle, the animal mask that transforms. It should be emphasized that the king alone had this power of using the animal or its symbol as a means of communicating with the spirits of his ancestors. He alone travelled the realm that connected the square earth and domed heaven above. He was the controlling axis par excellence as initially reflected in prehistoric religious belief and now in historical cosmological belief. His power as King on earth mimicked that of Di above in the Sky/Heaven; he was master over the four quarters of the cosmos.

Several Shang bronzes can be used to amplify the concept of metamorphosis as embodied in the dominant animal mask image. Visual data confirming that Shang bronze imagery originated as symbols of metamorphosis appear in standardized compositional and representational devices, such as the abbreviated body symbol signifying a mask and the fluid interchange between the simplified animal mask and full animal image. Other devices used to symbolize metamorphosis include the iconic, flat and frontal mode of representation, the interchangeability between human and animal attributes, the extension of the animal mask in the form of a cicada body (figs. 47-48), the displayed-body mode of representation, and the "devouring" mode of representation.71 One of these artistic devices signifying metamorphosis—the extension of the animal mask in the form of a cicada body—is easily read in the imagery of vessels and objects from the tomb of Fu Zi: on the bronze owl-shaped ẑun (fig. 47) and on a jade (fig. 48). The cicada is represented abstractly, as a triangular body sometimes flanked by wings or legs extending below the animal.

Fig. 47 Drawing of the representational cicada and abstract cicada body decorating the bronze owl ẑun, M5, Anyang, Henan, Late Shang period. Yinou Fu Hao mu, fig. 36, p. 55.

Fig. 48 The jade image of the buffalo mask with human-like arms and cicada body extension, M5, Anyang, Henan, Late Shang period. Yinou Fu Hao mu, pl. CXXV.3.
masks. The body of this insect, like most Shang images, has abstract and representational versions. On the upturned beak of the owl zun a complete version of the cicada with folded wings and head is rendered. Just below this beak is another, a mask with argali horns and semi-human ears plus abstract triangular cicada body with cicada legs. The jade takes the form of a buffalo mask with human ears and arms and a cicada body with wings. Why the cicada is used as a body extension is explained by the biological life of this insect. A cicada originates from an immature form called a nymph; after one or seventeen years, depending on the species, it molts into an adult that after burial underground within a larva emerges fully transformed into a mature insect with wings, legs and a lusty throat. The cicada is here used to symbolize transformation and rebirth, as is already signified in the concept of the animal mask.

The large-scale bronze masks of semi-humans discovered at Sanxingdui in Guanghan, Sichuan (figs.49-50) are gratifying corroboration of the practice of mask-donning by a shaman-king or his equivalent during the early Shang period. The mask from Sanxingdui in figure 50 is one of fifty-four that were excavated. It is over life-size, measuring 65cm tall x 138cm wide, and is backless. That it is a bronze version of a mask is demonstrated by two major pieces of evidence: firstly, the slightly over life-size image of a human—unique for the Bronze Age—probably a shaman-king (fig.49), dons a mask of the type surviving from two pit discoveries (fig.50B-D); secondly, other of the bronze heads wear gilt-bronze versions of this mask or versions that show that the mask is tied at the back of the human’s head (fig.50A,E). It is also significant that the argali mask, which appears on metropolitan Shang bronzes (figs.43-44), is also rendered in bronze at Sanxingdui (fig.50G). Could the masked, life-size image from Sanxingdui of Shang date represent what the Shang king looked like when donning a spirit mask? Clearly this is possible, since humans had been immortalized in ritual imagery ever since the Liangzhu and Longshan Neolithic eras as the anthropomorphized deity identified as the Sky/Sun God. The fact that Shang royal ancestor spirits were identified in bone inscriptions with the day of a sun reinforces the association of Di with the early Sky/Sun God. Shang kings were considered to be Di’s offspring, as is corroborated by the fact that Shang kings took on the Di epithet when they were addressed posthumously. Di—the cosmic and primordial Shang God—may then be represented anthropomorphically in Shang times as the semi-human with animal mask or simply by the animal mask itself. Although a regional school of bronze-casting, Sichuan had long been in touch with the metropolitan traditions of northern Shang and earlier Xia, as is amply demonstrated by the excavation there of jade zhang-blades and by the local casting of zun-wine vessels in metropolitan, early Shang style.

It is evident that the predominant subject of early Chinese art is religious metamorphosis based on a belief in the cosmological powers of a ruler/chieftain which put him or her in contact with the Sky/Sun God and later Di. The animal spirits portrayed as mask images symbolize their role as vehicles for supernatural communication and thus the cosmological connection that empowered the presiding chief or ruler during the late Neolithic and historic Xia and Shang periods. As will be discussed in the second
part of this essay, the concept of empowerment through magical metamorphosis continued to be the all-important religious focus of the ruling elite from the Western Zhou through the Warring States period.

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1. In a recent article, "The Cosmo-Political Background of Heaven's Mandate," Early China 20 (1995), pp.121-122, David Pankenier cited archaeological evidence that documents late Neolithic man's astronomical interests. He referred, for example, to the desires of Yangshao settlers at Banpo to intentionally orient their house doors "toward the location of the mid-afternoon winter sun when at its warmest a month or so after the solstice." He also noticed the custom amidst certain minorities in southwest China who still call this time the "house-building month (qi fang yue)." For the orientation of Banpo houses see Lu Yang and Shao Wangping, "Kang yi cun zhong zong su fanying de shijian tianwen zhibu," Zhongguo gudai tianwen wenwu luji, Beijing: Wenzhu chuabanshe, 1989, pp.1-16.

2. "Henan Puyang Xishuo yi chi fajue jianbao," Wenzhu 1988.3, pp.1-6. Although no dates are provided in this report, since tomb M45 was found in the 4th strata of Yangshao remains, it has been compared to ceramics found in the same level of strata, and thus to the Hougang cultural era (see p.6 of the site report).

3. For the C14 dates of 1850 and 2510BCE see Zhongguo kaoguense zhong tan shii niandai zuzhi ji (1965-1981), Beijing: Wenzhu Press, 1983; cited in Feng Shi, "Henan Puyang Xishuo 45shao mu de tianwen xue yanjiu," Wenzhu 1990.3, p.55 and fn.6, p.60. According to Yi Shitong, there are other C14 dates taken from the shells that date the remains 1000 to 1500 years earlier ("Beidou ji," Zhongguan wenwu 1996.2, p.31).


7. Yi further hypothesizes that the human thigh bones used to construct the image of the Big Dipper's handle in the burial are significant since thigh bone, bi, is related in origin to the graph for upright stelae, bi, and thus to the gnomon used to measure the sun's shadow (Yi, "Beidou ji," pp.24-25). If the Dipper's handle signifies a human body (symbolized by the thigh bone) and the stelae upright, Yi speculates that the Dipper's spoon or dou "head" is related to a human head, and by extension to kui, the graph composed of gui-spirit and dou-head, meaning huge or kuihou, a person who is head and shoulders above others, thus one with the power of spirit, ghost and human.


9. See Sarah Allan, The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art and Cosmos in Early China, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991; as noted by Pankenier, "The Cosmo-Political Background," p.138, fn.30. The recently reported discovery of ceramic images of one large and one small gui-turtle from No.27 burial at the Songze Neolithic site of Nanhebin, Jiaxing, Zhejiang, has suggested to the excavators that they are deities or spirit turtles associated with sacrifice and belief at the time (Zhongguo wenwu bao 1996.12.15,p.1).


12. Although the connection between the 15th century imperial structure in Beijing and the 3rd millennium BCE structure at Niuheilang seems remote, tradition is strong. The two structures share circular outdoor altars of three diminishing tiers, designed for ritual worship. The tiers of the Hongshan altar measure 22m, 15.6m, and 11m in diameter. As related in Nagel's Encyclopedia-Guide: China (English version by Anne Destenay, Paris, 1979, pp.540-546), the Round Mound was one of three structures in the Temple of Heaven complex: "It consists of three rows of white marble squares, each one is edged with a marble balustrade. The number nine, symbol of the sky and the Emperor, recurs several times in the arrangement of the blocks of stone and the flagstones (particularly on the upper terrace, where the flagstones are arranged in concentric circles round the central stone, itself round: nine in the first circle, eighteen in the second, twenty-seven in the third, and so on, up to eighty-one... The Emperor arrived from the south, halted in a tent put up outside the first enclosure and signed the declaration which was to be read to the heavens, then proceeded to the terrace. The victims were prepared in the sacred kitchens, east of the Mound (the buildings still exist)." (p.542). It is here where the emperor jiao tian—reported to heaven the important events of the last year.