Early China
THE GHOST HEAD MASK AND METAMORPHIC SHANG IMAGERY

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Introduction

The subject of imagery and its meaning in Shang ritual art has baffled scholars, perhaps as far back as the third century B.C. when the term taotie—demon devourer—was first coined to describe Shang imagery. It is my contention that the ubiquitous image portrayed on Shang ritual vessels was not a demon devourer, as earlier Eastern Zhou, Han and Song scholars would have us believe, but was rather an image of metamorphic power symbolizing access to influential, dead ancestors. Both art historical and epigraphic data support the interpretation that Shang ritual imagery was religiously meaningful. In order to amplify the visual and inscriptive evidence for a Shang religion based on metamorphic power, I intend here to analyze a series of key, complementary terms in oracle bone inscriptions. These key terms include the word gui 鬼, usually translated spirit-ghost, and others directly related to gui, including 祟 and zhu 祝, to invoke, and the cognate wei 異. Specifically, I would like to elucidate why spirit ghosts of ancestors, called gui 鬼 in bone inscriptions, were envisioned as anthropomorphized animal masks and how this conception is connected with the shamanic foundation of Shang religion. My analyses are designed as a prologomenon to the study of oracle bone evidence for spirit invocation and related “shamanic” practices.

Art historians have long wrestled with the meaning and style of

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Shang ritual bronze imagery. Although scholarly opinion is still divided as to the significance of ritual bronze imagery, due to the plethora of comparative epigraphical data, it is now possible to explore new avenues to explain Shang representation. I have recently demonstrated that certain modes used to represent the animal image in Shang art were designed to symbolize magical transformation from the human to the animal realm,¹ and that this transformation facilitated communication with the ancestor spirits (Fig. 1). Standardized modes of representation that document metamorphic properties include, for example, the interchangeable attributes of the human and the animal; the abbreviated body and devouring (transforming) dispositions; the displayed body; and the animal mask with body extended in the form of a cicada. The flat, abbreviated tiger mask (Fig. 2) and the representational, three-dimensional tiger with clinging human are two variations—simple and complex, abstract and literal—of the theme of human to animal metamorphosis. The animal mask image may also be specific in representing the semi-legendary, high Shang ancestor Kui 夔 as transformed shaman-priest.²


² For the identification of this image as Kui 夔, see Hayashi Minao 林巳奈夫, “In Shū jidai no ibutsumotsu ni arawasareta kishin” 殷周時代の遺物に表された鬼神, *Kōkogaku zasshi* 考古学雑誌 1960.2, 24–51, esp. 29 and fig. 10; Childs-Johnson, “The
Regarding metamorphosis, it is important to understand that Shang ritual bronze vessels were used by the king and his aristocratic retinue

to address primarily ancestor spirits. This type of spirit communication is represented by certain sacrifices using ritual vessels in ceremonies, the earliest of which is yu 祀-exorcism or the Da Yu 大 祀-Great Exorcism Rite. 3 One of these communicatory sacrifices constituting part of the exorcism rite of Period I and the later, ongoing Five Sacrifice Rites (Wuzhongjisì 五種祭祀) was the wine offering 薦 meaning “to pour out heated, sometimes chang 黒-black, millet wine from the jue 酒 bronze vessel.” 4 Meat sacrifices using the ritual ding 鼎 vessel were another, major type of offering made for spirit consumption. The flesh of animals, usually domesticated, but on more important occasions the wild trophy of the hunt, was prepared in different ways, the most popular of which is represented by the term shang 炊, meaning “to offer meat cooked in the ritual bronze ding.” 5 Such meat and wine sacrifices originated as a form of communication with powerful royal spirits whose ancestry is traced to legendary high ancestors from the beginning of the Shang dynasty, such as Kui, Wang Hai 王亥 and Xie 契.

The King as Shaman-Priest and Chief-in-Charge of the Invocation Rites — 周和 Zhu

Kwang-chih Chang has proposed that shamanism played a central role in ancient Chinese politics and art. 6 To Chang, the major focus of

3. Yu-exorcism and Da Yu-Great Exorcism rites were popular during the Wu Ding period, Periods I–IIA of bone inscriptions; see e.g., numerous examples cited in the concordance of Shima Kunio 島邦男, Inkyo bokuji sōri 職墟卜辭総類 (2nd rev. ed., Tokyo: Kūkosho, 1971), 52.4–56.3. These rites died out and appear to have been replaced by the Five Sacrifice Rites. Yu were purification rites held on spontaneous occasions to counteract local curses of ancestor spirits (see e.g., Hou bian, shang 23.7, 28.3), and Da Yu was a formal rite involving ritual vessel sacrifices offered to spirits of the royal lineage (see e.g., Hou bian, xia 6.12; Cui bian, 79; Zhi yi 64). For the identification of the graph, see Li Xiaoding 李孝定, jiaowenzi jishi 甲骨文字釋, Zhongyang yanjiu yuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo zhuanke zhi wushi, 8 vols. (Nangang, Taiwan, 1965), 91 and 583; Xu Jinxiong 許進雄, “Shi yu, 釋爍” Zhongguo wenzi 中國文字 12 (1963), 1–14.


5. For the identification of shang see, e.g., Chang Tsung-tung, Der Kult der Shang Dynastie im Spiegel der Orakelinschriften (Eine Pälaographische Studie zur Religion im archaischen China) (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1970), 134; Shima Kunio, Yinxiu buci yanjiu 職墟卜辭研究 (Taipei: Dingwen shuju, 1975), 271; Li, jiaowenzi jishi, 2337 and variations of the graph which are listed separately on pp. 853, 855, 2186, and 2341; and Zhou Fagao 周法高 et al., eds., Jinwen gulin 金文譯林, 16 vols. (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1974), 932.

Shang shamanism was the human facility "to cross" from earth to heaven in order to communicate with the spirit world. He quotes the Guoyu 国语 of the fourth century B.C. where the communicatory function of shamans (xi 玄) and shamanesses (wu 巫) is described. Chang propounds that this act of communication invested the king with a power that qualified him as shaman-in-chief. He also theorizes that Shang divinatory inscriptions, animal offerings, and ritual vessel imagery were "instruments of the all-important heaven-earth communication." However, rather than analyze Shang data for his identification of Shang shamanism, Chang relies mostly on late Eastern Zhou and Han texts, such as the Shanhaijing 山海經, Guoyu, and the study of wushu 巫術-shamanism by Chen Mengjia 陈梦家.7

By shamanism I refer to a religious practice that involves, to quote from Ake Hultkranz: "one who with the help of spirits attains a state that allows him to have a rapport with the supernatural world on behalf of his group members."8 As Hultkranz has also noted, "There is today . . . great confusion concerning the import of the term shamanism. This is most regretable since this is one of the most used terms in comparative religion, folklore and ethnology."9 Hultkranz acknowledges that different places at different times emphasize different properties belonging to the "shaman." He is insistent in maintaining, nonetheless, that one cannot depend on etymological explanations but rather one must depend upon phenomenological considerations in identifying universal properties of shamanism. Hultkranz also notes that practice includes "the frenzy or ecstasy connected with the shamanistic performance and other events associated with the shaman."10 But, unlike Mircea Eliade,11 Hultkranz points out that "the morphology of the ecstasy [trance?] can-

7. Chen Mengjia was probably the earliest to propose that Shang religion was founded on shamanism, and the only scholar to introduce how certain practices in Shang oracular inscriptions might be used to explain shamanic practice in Shang times; see "Shangdai de shenhua yu wushu," 466–576. For a similar but later view on Shang shamanism see Shirakawa Shizuka 白川静, Kōkotsubun no sekai—Kodai in Ochō no kōzō 甲骨文的世界—古代殷王朝的構造 (Tokyo, 1972), tr. as Jiaguwen de shijie-Gu Yinwanzhao de digou 甲骨文的世界--古殷王朝的締構 (Taipei: Juliul tushu gongsi, 1977), 1–26, esp. 21–26.


not, as such, constitute the mark of shamanism." The shaman in essence "is a mediator between man and the powers."\(^\text{12}\) This description fits the function of the Shang king, in particular, as one who was chief-in-charge of invocation.

Evidence indicates that the king's major religio-political role in Shang times was as supernatural interlocutor, an intermediary between the world of the living and that of ancestor spirits. He was the chief priest. The well-being of his descent group and federated others depended on his ability to deal with the power of the ancestor spirits permeating all aspects of Shang life. There was no separation between the sacred and the secular. All was sacred. Ancestor spirits and Shang Di, the God on High, had unlimited powers to curse, and, if appeased, to bless. Shang Di was a primordial god distinguished from his offspring, the godlike royal ancestor spirits.\(^\text{13}\) From above, Di alone had the ability to command (ling \(\伶\)) blessings or destruction. Shang Di, unlike royal spirits in the line of kingly succession, did not receive institutionalized sacrifices. Standardized rites of worship focused primarily on the Shang lineage stemming from Da Yi, founder of the dynasty or from Shang Jia, a distant Shang ancestor. Di, on the other hand, like high ancestor spirits, such as Kui and Wang Hai, could be addressed by liao \(\燎\), ritual burning and other agriculturally related rites. This difference in type of sacrifice received by ancestors appears to reflect a convergence of earlier shamanic practices with the newly established cult of worshipping royal ancestors.\(^\text{14}\)

\(^{12}\) Hultkrantz, "A Definition of Shamanism," 34, 29.

\(^{13}\) The relationship between kingly and supernatural power, or that between Shang Di and the royal ancestral spirits, has been the subject of unresolved debate. Shang Di, for example, has been treated from two different extremes: either as an abstraction without specific godly attributes or as an ultimate ancestor, the progenitor of the Shang ruling house. Both definitions have their difficulties but the second appears to be more accurate. The problem in identifying Shang Di's nature has to do with the difficulty of identifying the original meaning of Di. It is significant that Shang Di was worshipped with liao sacrifice like other distant kings. Shang Di was also received in the bin \(\宾\) rite by deceased royal kings; see David N. Keightley, "The Religious Commitment: Shang Theology and the Genesis of Chinese Political Structure," *History of Religions* 17 (1978), 215. Like them and kingly spirits, Di shares power over the natural world. Shang Di stands at the pinnacle of a spiritual hierarchy, beneath which are royal ancestors in order of their succession. Shang Di appears to have been primordial, in the sense of having comprehensive power over the kings beneath him.

\(^{14}\) Chang Tsung-tung recognizes the standardization of ancestor rites as signifying a change in religious outlook, from the cult of the ghost of Period I to the cult of the ancestor spirit of Period IIb–V *(Der Kult der Shang Dynastie*, 159, 161). I agree in part with this interpretation but would emphasize that the cult of the ghost con-
By Period II, the most important ceremonies undertaken to counteract the potential threat of royal ancestor spirits and, theoretically, of Shang Di, were scheduled sacrifices in ritual vessels offered by the king and his kin. Equally significant is one other rite that I interpret to be the standard for royal shamanic practice in Shang times and a major piece of evidence demonstrating that the Shang king acted as shaman. The name for this rite, 鬱, conceivably means “to carry out spirit invocation.” Although we cannot trace the origins of this word to a period before Late Shang writing, and it does not have a modern equivalent, the rite to which it referred must have originated in a pre-Shang setting. Like that of bin 賓 “to entertain the dead,” and zhan 占 “to prognosticate,” this rite was the prerogative of the king. The graph portrays a figure—

tinues to be all-important since, like Shang Di, the power of the ghost of royal ancestor spirits to curse and bless is consistent throughout inscriptions of Periods I–V. I see evidence for a change in religious orientation with a new emphasis on the institutionalization of ancestor worship rites; see David N. Keightley, “The Religious Commitment,” 216. There is a de-emphasis on shamanistic practices and outlook, as, for example, represented by the disappearance of liao cult burning and related agricultural rites addressed to Shang Di and high ancestors. On the latter point, Chang also wrestles with the idea that ritual bronze art may represent a survival of earlier concepts:


His point about “survival” is fundamental in understanding the limitations of our literary evidence. Shamanic tendencies, such as use of a mask symbol in art, are already present in Early Shang art and in pre-Shang Late Neolithic art of Liangzhu and Longshan eras; see e.g., Mou Yongkang 牟永抗, “Liangzhu yuqi shang shen chongbai de tansuo” 良渚玉器上的神崇拜的探索, Qingzhu Su Bingqi kaogu wushiwuniian lunwenji 慶祝蘇秉琦考古五十年論文集 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1989). By the time of Wu Ding in Late Shang times, there is already evidence that ancestors were not envisioned as individualized gods but as generic, generationally significant spirits with god-like power. Hu Houxuan 胡厚宣 identifies a similar change in emphasis from worship of gods to that of kings, with the result that kings in post-Wu Ding inscriptions were addressed with the title Di as in Shang Di; see Hu Houxuan, “Yindai zhi tianshen” 殷代之天神, Jiaguxue Shangshi luncong 甲骨學商史論叢, (Chengdu: Jilu daxue, 1945), 300–301. Chen Mengjia identifies this change as one from a fear of animals to a fear of gui-ancestral ghosts, and the consequent anthropomorphization of myth into history, or transformation from animal to human; see Chen, “Shangdai shenhua yu wushu,” 515, 568.
presumably the king as shaman-priest—donning a spirit mask and kneeling before an ancestral altar. To Guo Moruo, this graph is related to 祀 and is an early form of 各 祀, “to sacrifice.”15 Other scholars, such as Ye Yufen 葉玉慎 and Li Xiaoding 李孝定, argue that the graph is interchangeable with 祀 of bone and bronze inscriptions.16 I maintain that this term means “to invoke or to conjure the ancestor spirit by donning a ghost head (spirit mask).” I also maintain that because this verb of invocation is the Shang king’s prerogative, the Shang king acted as shaman-priest.

Variations of the graph 鬲 share the major components of a kneeling figure wearing a spirit mask in front of either an altar, wine container, wine droplets, or a bound bundle of fragrant grasses, signifying sacrificial offerings of the kneeling propitiant. The head part has been interpreted to refer to a spirit mask in the guise of an animal.17 The latter identification is supported by the fact that the Han term for spirit mask, 皁, can be traced to and identified as primarily a phonetic loan for the mask radical in this verb of invocation and in the graph for spirit ghost. The signific for altar is believed to represent a stand for ancestor spirit sacrifices.18 The other components, such as a bundle of fragrant grasses and wine, probably refer to specific offerings that were used in invoking spirits.

The verbal meaning “to carry out invocation” is based on the graphic and semantic similarity of 鬲 to 祀. The graphic evidence is the most significant. 祀 is also composed of a kneeling figure and altar, and may also be written without the altar component. In addition, if 祀 is not combined with the altar component, it may be combined with wine drops or a tied bundle of fragrant grasses and represent the same word.19 Only the head part of the kneeling figure is drawn differently. For 祀 the head is drawn upturned with mouth open. This disposition lends

16. Ye Yufen 葉玉慎, Yinxi shuqi qianbian jishi 殷墟書契前編集釋 (Beijing, 1932), kaoshi, no. 18, 25; see also Li Xiaoding, Jiagu wenzi jishi, 807, 2903; Chen Mengjia, “Shangdai shenhua yu wushu,” 567 n. 69.
18. Keightley, Sources of Shang History, 16–17 n. 71; Li Xiaoding, Jiagu wenzi jishi, 37.
19. For these variations, see Shima Kunio, Inkyo bokuji sōrui, 44.4–45.2.
itself to the interpretation of to invoke or to call forth a spirit by incanta-
tion and prayer, or to the exhalation of qi—the lifting wind that aids an
invoker’s (shaman’s) flight.\textsuperscript{20}

Representative examples of zhu used in bone inscriptions not only
underscore the role of the king as subject, but also point to the ana-
lagous semantic relation between _THAN_ and zhu. One senses that in reality
the Shang king while kneeling and donning the mask or raising his
head in trance-like prayer, with the accompaniment of fragrant wine
and grass offerings, could successfully communicate with the dead.

庚子卜喜貞嵗月王祝
At divination on the gengzi day Xi tested the proposition: As for
meat cut with the yue it should be the king who carries out invoca-
tion (zhu). _Fu yin_ 6

庚辰卜王祝父辛羊貞卣酒
At divination on the gengchen day: The king will carry out the rite
of invocation to Father Xin with sheep, pig [and] you-buckets of
millet wine. _Jinbun_ 3014.

辛丑卜殷貞祝於母庚
At divination on the xinchou day Que tested the proposition: Carry
out the rite of invocation to Mother Geng. _Tie yun_ 127.1

Apparently zhu was popular over a longer time period, since it can be
documented in use from Bone Periods I through V, while _THAN_ appears
only occasionally and entirely in Period I inscriptions. Zhu must have
been favored by scribes as the way to write the name for this royal rite
of invocation. The change in terminology from _THAN_ to zhu also appears to
parallel the chronological change from use of the Da Yu-Great Exorcism
rite during Period I to use of the Five Sacrifice Rites in scheduled ances-
tor worship during Period IIB and thereafter. This change suggests a de-
emphasis on “pure” shamanism to a form of shamanism integrated with
bureaucratic ancestor cult worship emphasizing the Shang royal lineage.

In later texts, zhu continued to mean to invoke or call down ancestral
spirits. The ritual practice of invocation continued to be prevalent, but
with the major change that the invoker was not necessarily a shaman
king, as in Shang times, but a religious professional. In the _Shuowen_, zhu
is defined:

祭主贊詞者，從示從人口。

\textsuperscript{20} Chen Mengjia identifies this invoker as the shaman-king; see “Shangdai shen-
hua yu wushu,” 533–535. In the much later Han _Shuowen_ definition for zhu, the one
who invokes is identified as a _wu_-shaman.
The one in charge of prayers offered at sacrifices; [it] derives from shi ‘altar,’ ren ‘human’ and kou ‘mouth.’

Duan Yucai 段玉裁 states that zhu is an etymonic compound of three words, including altar, kneeling human, and mouth referring to a person who communicates with shen 神 spirits. Xu Shen’s definition continues:

一曰從兌省, 易曰: 兌為口為巫.
One [tradition] says that [zhu] derives from an abbreviated form of dui. The Yijing says: “Dui is kou-mouth and is a wu-shamaness.”

From the equation of zhu and wu 巫, it is clear that in Han times one who invokes was a wu: one who has the power to communicate with the supernatural. Earlier Western Zhou inscriptions and references from the Shang shu and Shi jing also refer to zhu as “the chief invoker” or “presiding invoker,” although a professional is identified in this role rather than the king.

The Equivalence of Guitou (Ghost Head) and Qitou (Masked Invoker)

In the Shuowen jiezi of Eastern Han date the graph gui, spirit ghost, is defined:

鬼人所歸為鬼, 從几凶象鬼頭; 從鬼陰氣賊害故鬼
Gui is that part of a person that returns [after death] as gui. It is from a kneeling man and a head resembling a guitou (qitou) (gui head=spirit mask). It is from “selfish” because gui [consists of] yin breath which can cause harm.

As defined here by Xu Shen, gui-spirit ghost is composed of a kneeling human and guitou, ghost head. In the Li ji 礼記, the gui 鬼 belonged to that part of a dead person that returns to earth, gui tu 歸土. It is precisely this omnipresent influence of the deceased spirit, gui, that earlier Shang leaders sought to control through invocation and conjuration. In

bone inscriptions, gui is the generic name for the same royal ancestors referred to by sacrificial titles who constantly curse, and occasionally bless. Gui and guitou of Han times and the box-like head of the kneeling worshipper in the Shang invoking graph are epigraphically related to another term, qi 颌 or qitou 頂頭, meaning animal mask, as found elsewhere in the Shuowen and related ritual texts of Eastern Zhou and Han times.

Qi is written variably, sometimes with gui as the signific: 魅. One of the post-Shang variations appears in a reference to the well-known passage of the Zhou li 周禮 (Xia Guan section), where the chief invoker (zhuo 祝者) is the fangxiangshi 方相氏, or one who sees in all (four) directions. This invoker or fangxiangshi is described as wearing a covering of a bear skin with four golden bronze, inlaid eyes. He wears this mask in order to expel evil and exorcize gui-human ghost pestilences.

For our purposes the key phrase is in the Han commentary of Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 who states:

蒙冒也.冒能皮者以驚風疫瘙之鬼.如今魟頭也.

Meng is mao to cover or to raise over; the one who wears the bear skin does so in order to drive out evil pestilence of gui; (this meng) is just like today’s qitou 頂頭.

In definitions relating to gui, qitou and guitou are evidently interchangeable binomes. In the Shuowen, guitou means “ghost head.” According to other descriptive post-Shang accounts it means “spirit mask.” Thus, ghost head and spirit mask are one and the same. As chief invocator and exorcist, the Han period fangxiangshi at the Da Nuo (Great Exorcism) rite and funerals presided while wearing a qitou-head mask of a bear, evidently symbolically metamorphosing into the spirit of this wild beast in exorcizing gui-spirit ghosts. It is my contention that this impersonator is the ritual heir of the Shang king who as chief priest presided over organized rites of exorcism two thousand years earlier.

In the Fengsu tongyi 風俗通義, Ying Shao 應劭 also writes qitou with the gui radical and phonetic qi to refer to the spirit mask. He states:

26. Zhou li zhushu, 7.28.5a; Gao You refers to a similar passage in Huainanzi and with a similar interpretation that 顙 is 魅 and 魅 is 頤, or that the gui spirit mask is the same as the Han exorcist head mask worn to exorcize demons; see Wang Niansun 王念孫 ed., Huainanzi 淮南子 (rpt., Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1989), 7.57.20 許慎. In tracing the origin of puppets and history of the head mask, Sun Kaiti relies on the above references; see “Kueilei xi kaoyuan,” 84–89. Sun’s analyses identify the head masks as impersonator’s masks worn at traditional funeral rites since the Han dynasty and as the basis of puppet mask imagery.
Ying Shao believed that *qitou* was originally a mask to preserve the *hun*, to recall the dead person’s spirit while also exorcising the spirit’s potential to harm. In the section on ritual of the *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 it is stated that “Each of the one-hundred officials of the *guanfu* (official residence) used wooden masks in the image of hunted beasts (*mumianshou* 木面獸) to officiate at the Nuo (Exorcism) ceremony.” These literary references suggest that the signfic 亝 is 1: the equivalent of *qi* 類 of the *Shuowen*; 2: the original root of *gui* 鬼; and 3: the signifier of the invoking ceremony 皆 in Shang bone inscriptions.

**The Cognate Wei 畏 Meaning Supernatural Majesty**

It is now evident that the basic graphic component of 皆 and ancestor spirit is the mask of a wild beast worn by a human petitioner that is usually the king. Certain other terms, in particular, the cognate *wei*, are significant in showing just how prevalent royal shamanic practice must have been during the Shang and before when these rituals originated and thrived. Both words derive their meaning from and are composed of the mask signifier.

The bone graph 皆, transcribed *wei* 畏, is written like *gui*-spirit-ghost or one dressed up in a *gui* mask beside a stick like object. The stick-like part of *wei* probably refers to *bu*, “the crack that appears as a result of divination.” Possibly the communication of the king-priest dressed in a spirit mask resulted in the spiritual response of the cracked bone. If the term is transcribed 畏 and 戚, as is standard, the graph in origin appears to have had the connotation “the awe produced when the king in donning an animal mask conjured the ancestor spirit.”

In early Western Zhou contexts, *wei* means “majesty” or “to be awe-inspiring, fearsome.” These meanings continue to be based on the mask signific, and continue to denote awe that derives from the king’s metamorphic power when wearing the mask. Many examples may be cited to elucidate this evolution of meaning. In the inscription of the Mao Gong ding, for example, *wei* is used in the phrase “jing nian wang wei” 敬

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27. Ying Shao 應劭, *Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義, as quoted in *Taiying yulan* 太平御覽 (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1935), 552.
28. *Hou Hanshu jijie* 後漢書集解 (Sibu beiyao ed.), 15.8b.
念王威, “to reverently uphold the king’s majesty.” 29 In the inscription of the Da Yu ding, wei is used in the phrase, “Be in awe (wei) of the awesomeness (wei) of heaven” (wei tian wei 天畏). 30 In A Dictionary of Early Zhou Chinese, Axel Schuessler glosses wei as meaning terror or majesty and cites numerous examples from the Shi jing, Shu jing, and other bronze inscriptions. 31 Wei is almost always used to describe the power of a supreme being, mostly the king but also Shang Di or Heaven. This equation indicates that during the Western Zhou the source of the king’s power, as the son of Heaven, was described by the metamorphic power of mask-wearing.

Conclusions

It is clear that gui 鬼 and related words wei 畏 and 礼 are intertwined in meaning due to their graphic origin in the mask element. Given the abundant evidence for the animal mask in art and ritual practice and the evidence that this mask represents access to the spirit ghost of royal ancestors, religion and art can be said to coincide in a shamanic orientation. Should we call the ubiquitous animal mask in ritual art a gui spirit mask or a qitou, as it is known in Zhou and Han literature? The evidence for the king’s role as shaman priest in invocation rites, in particular, and his singular power of spirit communication with Shang Di and godlike royal ancestors strongly supports the interpretation that Shang art and religion were based on an earlier tradition of shamanism. The emphasis on masked invocation in religion, the ancestor ghost as a conjured animal spirit, and the animal vehicle in art further substantiate that Shang religion was founded on shamanic practices. Whether this shamanic power basis was established during pre-Shang or Xia times and merely continued as a formal ceremony in Shang times remains to be clarified. That ancestor cult worship became rigidly bureaucratized by Late Shang times while ritual bronze mask imagery concomitantly degenerated, particularly in a loss of focus on the animal mask of transformation, suggests the displacement of a magical shamanic power for a religious one that was no longer entirely dependent on deceased spirits and a shaman king for leadership. Rather, the orientation of royal and spirit power changed to a system closer to that of the Western Zhou, where power was not based directly on anthropomorphized ancestor spirits.

but on a royal lineage and an abstract, moral ethic. If, as evidence suggests, Shang art was founded on the religious principle of human to animal metamorphosis, the Shang must be recognized as pivotal in the foundation of ancient Chinese cosmology and the continuum of Nature called the Da Hua or Great Transformation.

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DISCLAIMER: Due to a singular editorial decision, all graphics and comparative inscriptive data, the majority of bone inscriptions and literary citations have been deleted from the above paper. As a consequence, the very important argument that seeks to explain finally the meaning of ritual bronze imagery through bone inscriptive evidence was seriously undermined. For a complete version of this manuscript, the author may be contacted by e-mail at echildsj@aol.com or by fax at (212) 996-9003 or the reader may consult the author’s forthcoming The Birth of the Ancestor Cult: The Shang and Their Ritual Bronzes.