

A Study of the Early Chinese Belief in “Heaven”

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Abstract: The belief in “heaven” in early China is an important part of ancient Chinese philosophy and culture. There are hundreds of schools of ancient Chinese philosophy, and they have their own unique interpretation and understanding of the concept of “heaven”. This paper aims to explore the belief based on “heaven” in ancient Chinese philosophy and analyze its philosophical significance in depth, so as to understand the evolution, characteristics, and inheritance of ancient Chinese philosophy. Through the study of the belief in “heaven” and the concepts of “Destiny of Heaven” and “Way of Heaven”, it is found that these thoughts not only had a profound impact on the development of early Chinese philosophy but also played an important role in the formation and inheritance of Chinese culture. This kind of thought has significance beyond the times and national boundaries, giving enlightenment on the theoretical construction and practical exploration of human society.

Keywords: heaven, hundred schools of thought, Chinese original belief, Chinese culture

1. Introduction

Ancient Chinese philosophy is one of the oldest and most profound philosophical systems in the history of global civilisation, with a profound cultural heritage and historical accumulation. It inherits its own unique Chinese cultural characteristics, integrates the concepts of “Destiny of Heaven”, “benevolence”, and “middle moderation” into philosophical thinking, and creates a series of unique philosophical ideas, such as Confucianism, Taoism, Mohism, and Mingism. In ancient Chinese philosophy, the belief in “heaven” is an important theme. This belief has profound cultural connotations and philosophical significance, and it is an important part of ancient Chinese society. In early China, people regarded “heaven” as the origin, ruler, and arranger of the world and believed that with the absolute rule of “heaven”, they needed to fulfil their responsibilities under “heaven”. Such a belief has left a deep impression on ancient Chinese philosophy and influenced the development and evolution of Chinese philosophy.

The core content of this paper is divided into three parts, namely, the concept of “heaven”, “heaven” in philosophical thought, and the philosophical significance, inheritance, and development of faith in “heaven”. The first part explains and elaborates on the concept of “heaven” in detail and explores the meaning and status of “heaven” in ancient Chinese philosophy. At the same time, the paper systematically sorts out and analyses the belief in “heaven” on the basis of exploring ancient Chinese philosophy, contributing to an in-depth understanding of the origin, evolution, and specific performance of the belief of “heaven”.

The second part studies the specific performance of “heaven” in different philosophical ideas from the perspectives of Confucianism, Taoism, Mohism, Legalism, etc. Through an in-depth analysis of the beliefs of “heaven” in these philosophical ideas, the commonalities and differences of ancient Chinese philosophy in the beliefs of “heaven” can be better understood.

The third part systematically sorts out the philosophical meaning contained in the belief in “heaven” and deeply explores the inheritance and development of ancient Chinese philosophy’s belief in “heaven”. Through an in-depth analysis of the belief in “heaven”, the relationship between “man and heaven” in ancient Chinese philosophy can be learned, the connotation and philosophical significance of concepts such as “destiny of heaven” and “way of heaven” are explored, and their practical application in ancient Chinese philosophy is studied.

Through the analysis of the philosophical thoughts and cultural backgrounds of different historical periods, this paper can help readers better understand the changes and evolution of the belief in “heaven” in ancient Chinese philosophy, as well as its impact on the development and evolution of ancient Chinese society, which is conducive to better understanding and inheriting the essence and cultural heritage of ancient Chinese philosophy.

2. The Belief in “Heaven” in Early China

The belief in “heaven” in early China can be traced back to the primitive religious period. In the primitive tribal society, “heaven” is considered a sacred existence and the world where the ancestors were located. People believe that heaven can determine people’s fate and can give blessings or disasters to human beings. Therefore, people need to pray to heaven for blessings and relieve disasters through sacrificial acts. This belief has formed the main content and characteristics of primitive religion and become an important part of ancient Chinese culture.

There is no consensus in the academic community about the source of “heaven”. Some scholars believe that heaven is a combination of “one” and “big”. Some scholars believe that heaven is a change of the word emperor. Some scholars believe that heaven originates from the worship of nature. However, the academic community basically affirmed that the “emperor” and “heaven” were the supreme gods for the people of Shang and Zhou respectively. In the late Shang Dynasty, the concept of “heaven” appeared. At the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty, the Heavenly Emperor has the meaning of “enlightenment”. The most obvious difference between the “emperor” and “heaven” is the existence and the place of existence. In the thought of the Zhou people, the ancestors of their tribe were all in heaven after death. Zhang Rongming mentioned that in the *Bamboo Annals (Zhushu Jinian)*, the death of the ancient emperor is not called “collapse” but “Zhi (陟)”. The concepts of “Zhi” in ancient times and the “collapse” and “die” in later generations are not exactly the same. This reflects the characteristics of ancient religious beliefs [1].

After the establishment of the Zhou Dynasty, the ancestor of the Shang Dynasty was replaced by “heaven” because of “morality”, which is the core difference between “Emperor Faith” and “Heaven Faith” [2]. With the development of society, “heaven” has gradually become a magnificent and loving god. In the Zhou Dynasty, “heaven” was respected as the supreme god, described as the father of all things, the god of the gods, the master of the universe, etc. People believe that “heaven” gives human destiny, while royal power is given by heaven. Therefore, the emperor, the successor to the throne, has become the representative of destiny. At the same time, he is also restricted by the theocracy and must govern according to destiny. This thought of “God’s destiny” profoundly influenced the formation of the ancient Chinese political system.

During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, the concept of “heaven” was more used to think about human behaviour and social changes. In hundred schools of thought, different concepts of “heaven” were put forward. Confucius emphasised the idea of “the meaning of destiny” and advocated that people should follow the provisions of “the destiny” and maintain their

personal morality and behaviour, so as to achieve the realm of “the unity of heaven and man” [3]. Xunzi put forward the view that “the heaven is healthy, and the gentleman is self-improvement”, emphasising personal self-improvement and unremitting efforts. Mozi believes that “heaven” is a fair and objective existence and advocates that people should abide by moral norms and follow “heavenly principles” to deal with social problems.

Generally speaking, the belief in “heaven” played an important religious, political, and philosophical role in early China. It has profoundly influenced the course of ancient Chinese culture and has become an indispensable part of Chinese ideology and culture.

3. Hundreds of Philosophical Views on “Heaven”

The early Chinese belief in “heaven” occupies an important position in the philosophy of hundreds of schools of thought, representing the roots of ancient Chinese culture and philosophy. This chapter discusses the philosophical viewpoint of “heaven” from the perspective of Confucianism, Taoism, Mohism, and Legalism.

3.1. Confucianism’s Thoughts on “Heaven”

In Confucianism, “heaven” is regarded as the highest existence of the universe and is a moral norm and value benchmark. The “way of benevolence” emphasised by Confucianism is the embodiment of the way of heaven. Confucius believes that human nature is good, so the mission of humans is to pursue kindness and benevolence. The process of this pursuit is to achieve the goal of “the unity of heaven and man”. This kind of thought on “heaven” is reflected in *The Analects of Confucius*, an anthology of brief passages that present the words of Confucius and his disciples [4]. For instance, in the chapter of *Taibo*, “The Master said, ‘Great indeed was Yao as a sovereign! How majestic was he! It is only Heaven that is grand, and only Yao corresponded to it’ [5]”; in the chapter of *Shuer*, “The Master being very sick, Tsze-lu asked to leave to pray for him. He said, ‘May such a thing be done?’ Tsze-lu replied, ‘It may.’ In the Eulogies, it is said, ‘Prayer has been made for thee to the spirits of the upper and lower worlds.’ The Master said, ‘My praying has been for a long time.’ [5]”.

In Confucianism, “heaven” also symbolises justice and order, which is the standard of social morality. Confucianism attaches great importance to the moral obligations and responsibilities between people and believes that people should follow the “Way of Heaven” and make their behaviours conform to moral norms. At the same time, Confucianism also believes that a gentleman should obey destiny, do things according to the will of God, and devote himself to achieving the goal destined by destiny. For instance, in the chapter of *Zihan*, “The Master was put in fear in Kuang. He said, ‘The death of King Wen was not the cause of truth lodged here in me. If Heaven had wished to let this cause of truth perish, then I, a future mortal, should not have got such a relation to that cause. While Heaven does not let the cause of truth perish, what can the people of Kuang do to me?’ [5]”

3.2. Taoism’s Views on “Heaven”

In Taoist thought, “heaven” is not an abstract existence, but a natural force, an orderly and disorderly force. Taoists believe that “heaven” has the laws of nature, and these laws have the function of self-regulation. At the same time, “heaven” is also a collection of natural forces, including all things and life in nature, as well as politics and culture in human society.

Taoism believes that the understanding of “heaven” needs to transcend the boundaries of human language and thinking and needs to be obtained through observation and perception of natural phenomena and human life. “God” is also considered to be a mysterious force, which needs to realise its true meaning in the state of governance.

Taoist views on “heaven” is reflected in *Zhuangzi*, an ancient Chinese text that contains stories and anecdotes exemplifying the carefree nature of the ideal Taoist sage [6]. For example, in the chapter of *Zeyang*, “Da-gong Diao replied, ‘When I look for their origin, it goes back into infinity; when I look for their end, it proceeds without termination’ [5]”; in the chapter of *Zhibeiyou* (*Knowledge Rambling in the North*), “Zhongni said, ‘There is no old time and no present; no beginning and no ending’ [5]”. Judging from the book *Zhuangzi*, heaven has six uses and meanings: First, it refers to the sky; second, it refers to the other party in the conversation; third, it is the general term of nature; fourth, it is the nature that can be produced; fifth, it is the nature produced; sixth, it is the principle of nature [7].

3.3. Mohism’s Thoughts on “Fate”

Mohism emphasised “Fate” and believed that people should follow “Fate” to do things. Mohists believe that “Fate” refers to the laws of nature, which are objective and universal, and all behaviours in human society must follow the “Destiny of Heaven” in order to get the blessing of “Heaven”. Mohism advocates “love at the same time” and “non-attack”, believing that this is the moral code given by “Fate”. Mohists believe that all behaviours must comply with the provisions of “Fate” in order to avoid fighting and war and achieve social harmony.

3.4. Legalism’s Theory of “The Unity of Heaven and Man”

In the thought of Legalism, “the unity of heaven and man” is an ideal state and the basis of political and social order. Legalists believe that people should obey the laws of nature and the laws of human society in order to realise the “unity of heaven and man”. Legalists advocate the rule of law, believing that the law can regulate human society and follow the law of “the unity of heaven and man”. Legalists advocate “the law as the criterion and the law as the yardstick”, emphasising the universality and objectivity of the law. Legalists’ thought on the “rule of law” is based on “fate”. They believe that the law should be consistent with “fate” in order to promote social harmony and stability.

In early Chinese philosophy, “heaven” had an important position, and there were different views and explanations in different schools. Confucianists believe that “heaven” is a moral code and value benchmark, emphasising moral obligations and responsibilities between people. Taoists believe that “heaven” is a natural and mysterious power, and people need to understand its true meaning through perception. Mohists believe that “Fate” is an objective and universal law, and all behaviours in human society should follow “Fate”. Legalists, on the other hand, believe that “the unity of heaven and man” is an ideal state and needs to be realised by law. These views and explanations reflect various values and ideas of ancient Chinese culture and philosophy.

4. The Relationship Between the Belief and Philosophy of “Heaven” in Early China

The development of ancient Chinese philosophy is inseparable from the support of religious belief, and the belief in “heaven” in early China played an extremely important role in the early stage of philosophical development. This chapter focuses on the relationship between the belief and philosophy of the early Chinese “heaven”, including the blending of faith and philosophy, the impact of religious belief on philosophy, and the impact of philosophy on the development of religious belief.

4.1. The Blending of Faith and Philosophy

In early China, people’s belief in “heaven” was extremely deep. In the early days, China’s “heaven” was an existence with sacred attributes. It was the power that was in charge of the universe, and it was also irresistible for human beings. However, in the study of Chinese philosophy, “heaven” is not

only a religious belief but also an important concept in philosophical thought. For example, in Confucianism, “heaven” is regarded as a moral norm and a guide to human behaviour; in Taoism, “heaven” is regarded as the embodiment of the concept of doing nothing. It can be said that “heaven”, as a belief in early China, has achieved a deep integration with philosophical thought, and philosophy has had an important impact on the development of “heaven” belief in early China.

4.2. The Influence of Religious Beliefs on Philosophy

The depth of China’s “heaven” belief in the early days has had a great impact on philosophical research. First of all, in Confucianism, “heaven” is regarded as the highest existence of the universe, symbolising justice and order, which is the standard of social morality. Secondly, in Taoism, “heaven” is regarded as a sign of spiritual consciousness, so the belief in “heaven” is regarded as an important step to achieve the rule of nothing. In addition, Legalists regard “heaven” as the absolute ruler of the world and advocate that human society must emphasise the importance of power and law, as well as moral norms. It can be said that the belief in “heaven” has had a profound impact on the development of early Chinese philosophy.

4.3. The Influence of Philosophy on the Development of Religious Belief

The influence of early Chinese philosophy on the belief in “heaven” is not only reflected in the transformation of faith into philosophical thought but also has an important impact on the connotation of faith. Confucianism has put forward the concept of benevolence, transforming the idea of the unity of heaven and man into a moral code to maintain social stability. Taoism advocates the “rule of doing nothing” and realises deep spiritual consciousness through internal practice. Legalism advocates the coercive force of power and law, which has transformed the moral norms of society. These thoughts have had a great impact on the belief in “heaven” in early China, and the connotation of faith has also been further developed and understood.

In a word, the belief in “heaven” in early China is inseparable from philosophy. The blending of faith and philosophy, the influence of religious belief on philosophy, and the influence of philosophy on the development of religious belief are all indispensable parts of early Chinese philosophy and religious beliefs, making valuable contributions to the uniqueness and diversity of Chinese philosophy and culture.

5. Conclusion

This paper aims to explore the belief in “heaven” in early Chinese philosophy and analyse its impact on hundred schools of thoughts in ancient China. Through the study of ancient documents, it is found that “heaven” played an important role in early Chinese culture. It was considered to be the highest spiritual existence in the universe and dominated the operation of nature and human society. Although each school has different understandings and expressions of “heaven”, they all believe that “heaven” is the supreme existence and has the role of promoting historical and moral standards.

At the same time, this paper also interprets the concepts of “Fate”, “Way of Heaven”, “Destiny of Heaven”, etc., and finds that it is an important ideological category in early Chinese philosophy. These concepts not only explore the relationship between man and heaven, but also have an important impact on the maintenance of social order and political governance. Each school also expresses its political position and views on historical development through the understanding of concepts.

Although this paper discusses the belief in “heaven” in early Chinese philosophy, there are still details that have not been covered due to space and time constraints. Future research can be carried out in the following directions: First, researchers can further explore the understanding and expression of “heaven” of various schools and analyse its relationship with social background and historical

development. For example, whether there is an essential difference between Confucianism and Taoism and whether Mohists' understanding and expression of "heaven" have anything to do with its opposition to war and advocating love. Secondly, researchers can further explore the specific expression and role of concepts such as "Fate" and "Way of Heaven" in various schools. For example, how Confucianism explains the relationship between monarchs and ministers and social order through "fate" and how Taoists express the relationship between man and nature and their understanding of human nature through "Taoism". Finally, the belief of "heaven" in early Chinese philosophy can be compared with the beliefs of other cultures to explore their similarities and differences and mutual influences. For example, if there is a concept similar to "heaven" in Hinduism and Buddhism and if there are any ideas similar to "Fate" and "Way of Heaven" in Greek philosophy and Roman culture.

Lu Xun said that both Confucianism and Mohism were dissatisfied with the status quo and they wanted to reform it, but the first step was to move the master, and the guys used to subdue the master were all "heaven" [8]. In a word, the belief of "heaven" in early Chinese philosophy is a category of thought with profound connotations and extensive influence, which plays an important role in the formation and inheritance of Chinese culture. Future research can be expanded in the above directions to understand and master this important idea in a more in-depth and comprehensive way.

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