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Discussion on Agricultural Religion in the Pre-Qin Period of China

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Abstract Since ancient times, agricultural religion has been infiltrated into all aspects of economic, political and social life in China. Using rich historical data such as archeology, anthropology and ethnology, this paper discussed the historical process of agricultural religion in the pre-Qin period from animal worship to agricultural worship. It also discussed the agricultural objects, land, celestial nature, and labor ghosts. Finally, it revealed the inevitable trend of combination of social sacrificing activities.

Key words The pre-Qin period, Agricultural religion, Worship

1 Introduction

China's traditional culture is a type of culture with the agricultural culture as the main part. In the agricultural culture, material culture can be described, but the spiritual culture such as agricultural sacrifice worship, taboo and religious rituals are connected with religious worship because they are direct and indirect or distorted reflection of agricultural activities, to uncover the mysterious coat of the religion. This can prove every aspect of human agricultural production and reveal the regular things that are often neglected.

2 Animal worship evolved to agricultural worship

In the early history of the development of human society, fishing and hunting were accompanied with collection. The results of contemporary anthropological studies show that hunting, fishing, and collection stages are not separate but rather survival methods complementary to each other in a given environment. The family breeding is not evolved before but after the farming. In the fishing and hunting (including collection) period, our ancestors worshipped animals.

In hunting activities, people were unable to fight against tigers and became scared when talking tigers, so they hoped to obtain their assistance or tolerance and stimulate their intelligence of protecting people through worshipping them. No nation in the world takes collection as main livelihood, and main labors made collection only when fishing and hunting failed to feed them. In such situation, it is difficult for people to worship collection objects.

The way of human beings seeking food has a direct impact on religious belief. In the primitive agricultural society, planting was more stable and reliable than fishing and hunting (and collection), and natural forces manipulated by witchcraft, the mainstream changed from the animals to the plants and finally to celestial phenomena. For our ancestors, every kind of animal and plant related to survival of human beings had magical force, so they paid homage to them.

3 Several types of agricultural religion

3.1 Worship of agricultural object In agricultural activities, people produced grain using tools, so the worship of production tools also became widely popular. At early stage of tool worship, people mainly worshipped material object. Stone spade of Dalongtan Culture was possibly the product of some agricultural sacrificing activity in the late primitive society.

Similar phenomenon was also common in southern Guilin region. Before the Spring Festival, the Lahu People in Yunnan Province put the Baba (rice dumpling) made of spring rice on plough, chopper and hoe, to make earnest pray. In comparison, tool symbols were simple and visual.

On Pottery Zun Pot of Dahankou Culture in Lingyang River of Tailing County, Shandong Province, there were symbols of stone axe and stone spade, both were common production tools, showing obvious worship awareness.

3.2 Worship of land The worship of the land was derived from the understanding of the earth, the war between the tribes in the primitive society to compete or defend the superior land for survival. In the long-term labor practice, it is found that as the mother breeds offspring, the land factor is of utmost importance to the growth of the crop, and the knowledge of the meaning of the land to grain generates the recognition of the per capita significance.

In the primitive period, earth burial prevailing after the formation of the settled agriculture reflects the significance of the maternity of the land from another aspect. In the ancient time, people died and were buried under the ground. In that time, the dead people were also called returned people, namely, returned to the earth. It is believed that this is another reflection of land being the mother. People get born from land and so finally return to land.

The return to innocence in Taoism is just such meaning. The word "return" seems cordial and natural. In the sense of burying "returned people", the land becomes the medium for delivering "returned people" to the land. Its magic lies in not blocking passage of the soul of returned people. When people worship ancestors, it is only necessary to offer dishes and drink in the front of tomb or grave and express some memorial words, just like talking

with the returned people. The meaning of land neglected for a long time can be excavated from this kind of sacrifice, and the ancient Chinese concept of "land being the mother" is based on the understanding of the significance of land to grain growing and the deepening of the earth burial. Taking the soil (land) as the mother contains unlimited admiration and worship of land.

3.3 Worship of celestial nature In the face of nature, ancient people could do nothing and were baffled at wind, rain, and thunder. These natural phenomena exerted direct influence on plants and crops, and brought extraordinary excitement to people. Under the dominance of awe and mystery sense, natural phenomenon was personalized.

People tried to please, persuade and influence such force through praying, ritual and taboo, to make them obey the will of man. In all kinds of natural phenomena, the wind, rain and drought are the most prominent. The sacrifice of the natural gods, praying rain after a long time of drought, or praying sunshine after a long time of rain became popular. In oracle scripts, praying rain was associated with the Celestial Ruler Supreme God. In ancient times, there was a ritual of witchcraft, and witch was usually undertaken by a woman, in the hope of getting rid of the drought or rain ghosts. In Zuo Zhuan (Commentary of Zuo Qiuming), sacrifice started from Jingzhe, and dragon appeared in the sky^[1].

Here, dragon may refer to floating cloud or star associated with rain, finally became animal god administering rainwater and worship by people. The ritual of worshipping the sun was an important part of the agricultural sacrifice, which was of a long duration. In Yaodian of Shangshu, there were also records of ritual activities connected with agricultural sacrifice^[2].

The ancient people observed celestial phenomena and took laws in the ground. The utility device often carried the primitive religious consciousness, plate like containers were generated from imitating the sun, containing the unlimited worship of the sun.

3.4 Worship of labor ghosts The labor ghosts or the hero worship came from the recall of the ancestors. Ancestral worship was based on ghost worship and was a religious phenomenon with later start. The ghosts of ancestors were controlled easily by descendants and the easiest to communicate and subject to the will-power of descendants, because they also had emotion of human beings and had instincts and obligations of protecting offspring, they were also labor ghosts that not separating from production practice and were assigned with magical power.

The story of King Yu combating the flood was well known. Shennong taught people to plant many kinds of crops and tasted many kinds of herbs. Obviously, Shennong was not a specific person, but a symbol of the times. The ancient people connected Shennong with Yan Emperor, and connected Yan Emperor with Lieshan Shi, and created an agricultural invention of god.

"People are the product of the social environment, while the gods are made according to appearance of men."^[3] Although the creation of history by heroes had some limitations, in ancient times, such worship was noble and innocent.

4 Development and significance of agricultural religion

Originally, the primitive religion was the animistic (or pangenetic) belief. In the era of fishing and hunting, every kind of animal associated with human survival was a kind of god; the ancient agricultural times, every kind of crop and crop growth-related factors had the soul of god. The Neolithic Age was marked by the emergence of farming.

In the long-term practice of collection, ancestors gradually grasped the growth rules of certain crops and began to plant crops. Primitive, sporadic hunting, and collecting groups could be carried out in a larger range, while the more intensive collection groups or agricultural tribes carried out activities in a smaller range, characterized by semi-sedentary style. It could be conceivable that the destruction of the natural ecology in a smaller world was much greater than that in the fishing and hunting times. At the early stage, worship of agricultural objects, ecological environment such as crop, land, mountain, and river greatly reduced or delayed such damage.

However, the religious status of animistic (or pangenetic) gods was different. With the social development, the sacrificial and worshipping objects were gradually changed to gods closely connected with dominant factors in human society. In the agricultural gods, it highlighted the status of land and grain. In the process of the development of primitive religion, the level of human understanding of nature and the ability to resist nature are important factors.

However, at the early stage, namely, at animistic (or pangenetic) belief stage, the restrictive force of primitive thinking level to the religion should not be neglected, the concept of the language expression was a tool of thinking, and we should look at from the perspective of sociolinguistics. The animistic (or pangenetic) belief inevitably took such underdevelopment thinking as the precondition.

From the concrete gods to the abstract gods, it was the result of human understanding of nature in the practice of production, and it was the development process from concrete to abstract. In the Neolithic Age, the description and worship of specific crop image were agricultural religion with the primitive thinking of the early human beings. The worship of grain, land and celestial gods was based on a certain understanding.

It was the product of practice and thinking development to a certain stage, while the worship of hero gods was a noble agricultural ritual activity. The image of the labor gods showed that people were no longer addicted to superb craftsmanship of nature, but started some attempts of transforming nature.

The pre-Qin period had a tradition of stressing the agriculture. The agriculture-oriented idea was formed in this period. Agricultural religion and this idea complemented each other and were highly respected.

However, in the agricultural gods, there was the situation of no distinguishing of sacrifice and worship. In ancient times, China took agriculture as the basis, and all dynasties once formulated

policies of stressing the agriculture. The agriculture-oriented idea, prevailing in the period of Spring and Autumn and Warring States, definitely promoted the integration of agricultural sacrifices.

After the period of Spring and Autumn and Warring States, the expansion of the functions of social sacrifices was an indispensable factor in the process of integration of agricultural sacrifices. Social grassroots organizations had social sacrifice activities. People prayed for rain, and hunting, starting battle, triumph, and vow needed ceremony. The five cereals (rice, two kinds of millet, wheat and beans, were lord of all things and dominated the life of people.

The idea of agriculture-oriented thought and five cereals, as well as the expansion of the functions of the social sacrifice, also raised the understanding of people about the society. Social sacrifice was improved and obtained the equally important status as state power, indicating that the development of agricultural sacri-

fice reached its highest level-the unity of politics and religion, the perfect combination of social sacrifice and administration.

It was the unique form in the ancient Chinese society. It was of special significance to the prosperity and stability of feudal countries. The ruling class consciously or unconsciously employed the social sacrifice to deceive the masses, so as to achieve the dual purposes of social prosperity and economic stability.

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