

Mysticism in Ancient Chinese Political Culture

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Abstract: Mysticism in ancient Chinese political culture is a complex and profound phenomenon that permeates various aspects of history, including the rise and fall of dynasties, the construction of political legitimacy, and the evolution of philosophical doctrines. Hence, studying mysticism within this context allows us to interpret "political culture" as a performance. Throughout this historical narrative, regardless of dynastic changes or the emergence of different ideologies, mysticism remains a constant thread, manifesting from auspicious omens and disasters to various religious expressions. This paper will attempt to analyze the role that mysticism plays within political culture and examine how it influences the positioning of rulers and the populace, striving to gain a deeper understanding of this intricate domain often perceived as "the science of muddling through".

Keyword: mysticism; ancient China; political culture

1. Positioning of Rulers and the People

The positioning of rulers and the populace within the political culture has continually evolved alongside the rationalization of Confucian thought.

In the early stages of political culture's systematic development, Dong Zhongshu posited that "the superior man perceives the intentions of things in order to seek the will of Heaven." Here, the "will of Heaven" functions as a representative of the hearts and opinions of the people, reflecting his aspiration to impose limitations on royal authority through the doctrine of the interaction between Heaven and humanity. [1] During this period, the monarch was ascribed both the roles of an actor and a spectator: as an actor, he coordinated all resources on the political stage; simultaneously, as a spectator, he was compelled to accept celestial "judgment" that lay beyond his control. The populace, in turn, was reduced to an absolute "audience," exerting no tangible influence over the performance since the evaluation of the ruler's governance was entirely contingent upon omens and disasters, such as "when wind and rain are timely, the auspicious harvest of millet occurs." In this sense, the "Heaven" characterizing the "will of Heaven" became an abstract reflection of "public sentiment."

The development of epigraphy during the Northern Song dynasty marked a rational break from mysticism, and even the increasingly rationalized Confucianism stemming from the revival movements failed to provide resource support for mysticism. After the mid-Tang dynasty, traditional political cultures and symbols, such as the theory of the Five Elements concluding and beginning anew, began to face decline. By this time, skepticism towards the personification of natural deities had emerged; society grew less reverent towards figures like the Wind and Rain Deities. Han Yu's poem "Ode to the Wind Deity" even positions it as a source of drought, potentially satirizing the power holdings of certain officials. [2]. Consequently, the monarch's role as a "passive spectator" was diminished, while the role of the principal actor was reinforced—no longer relying on the symbolism of the will of Heaven but rather governing through personal rationality and practical political means. Moreover, the role of the populace gradually transitioned from that of a mere spectator to an active participant. With the decline of mysticism and the rise of rational thought, the consciousness of the populace began to shift, leading them to adopt a skeptical attitude towards natural deities and traditional concepts of heavenly will.

2. The Displacement of Mysticism

Mysticism in history serves the dual functions of maintaining order and imposing moral constraints; however, it also has implications of rational suppression and political opportunism. The Zhou dynasty's ideology of "moral governance aligning with Heaven" utilized the theory of "Heaven's mandate" to stabilize political authority. During the Han dynasty, questions began to emerge regarding the nature of auspicious omens and disasters, as illustrated by the inquiry: "Did Yao suffer from floods, and Tang from severe drought? Was there a warning in these events? Yao faced flooding and Tang experienced drought; were these merely matters of fate?" [2]. Ban Gu, in his "History of the Han Dynasty: Treatise on the Five Elements," interpreted natural disasters (such as "thunder without clouds") as ominous signs of political crisis, serving the political objective of "punishing wickedness and encouraging virtue." Ancient Chinese political mysticism can thus

be understood as a synthesis of "sacredness" and "instrumentality," providing transcendent legitimacy to authority while distorting rational development due to excessive attachment to power. The legacy of this mysticism continues to be evident in the symbolic systems of traditional political culture today.

In the founding of the theory of correspondence between Heaven and humanity by Dong Zhongshu, the initial signs of the displacement of mysticism began to emerge. He merely explained the phenomenon of disasters with the statement "changes in the atmospheric conditions disturb the balance of yin and yang," suggesting that there is no inherent universal correspondence (Dong Zhongshu's starting point is, in fact, rational). However, due to his failure to elucidate why and when atmospheric changes occur, his arguments lack strong persuasiveness and may even diminish the credibility of the theory of correspondence itself. To sustain the political support of this theory, the proliferation of prophetic and apocryphal texts surged rapidly, with various new writings emerging, which elevated and disseminated mysticism on the political level. The participants in the political culture appeared to accept this system as effective, and no longer attempted to seek explanations for mysticism; they simply adhered to the rules of performance.

The next significant displacement of mysticism can be traced back to the rationalization of Confucianism. As mentioned earlier, following the revival of Confucianism, traditional political cultures such as the theory of the Five Elements began to decline. However, during this period, the operational frameworks employed by rulers to construct a prosperous dynasty could not keep pace with the development of rationalism. Consequently, they continued to rely on auspicious omens and disasters to project an image of prosperity and success. For instance, Emperor Zhenzong of the Song Dynasty's insistence on fabricating "heavenly scriptures" reflects an awkward obsession with auspicious signs, which seemed out of place in the political culture of the surrounding dynasties. The contradictions between these elements revealed the collapse of the edifice of mysticism, highlighting the urgent need for an alternative theory, akin to the theory of correspondence, to stabilize the functioning of the state apparatus. In this context, Daoism emerged on the political stage, successfully supplementing the resources of mysticism by emphasizing human agency and shifting the perspective from mere compliance with natural forces to their utilization. However, in reality, Daoism did not completely escape the influence of mysticism; it merely served as a compromise between the prophetic theology of correspondence and the rationalization within Confucianism, shifting the position of mysticism from above humanity to below.

This situation persisted until the Qing dynasty. Although mysticism itself no longer experienced significant displacement, the trend of the populace shifting from fear to utilization of mysticism is noteworthy. In Kong Feili's *The Call of the Soul*, it is mentioned that "In such a troubled society, people begin to doubt whether they can improve their circumstances through work or study... . Sorcery is not only an illusion of power but also a potential compensation for the powerlessness of individuals." [2] . Here, mysticism operates through the activity of "calling souls," demonstrating that its subordinate position remains unchanged; however, among the populace, there are numerous instances where individuals are labeled as soul-callers, exploiting mysticism to harm others.

This indicates that despite society becoming more rational, mysticism persists in another form, continuing to influence the psychology and behavior of both rulers and the masses.

So, why has mysticism persisted in ancient Chinese political culture, continuing to play an undeniable role even as it has been increasingly marginalized? Some scholars have suggested that the public's adherence to mysticism "has no necessary correlation with their level of knowledge; rather, it is rooted in the inherent belief systems of the Chinese people, who have entered the logical framework of mysticism within the realm of faith. Perhaps no amount of scientific dissemination or educational endeavor can effectively alter or rectify this." [3] However, from a more considerable standpoint, the public's "belief" is chosen based on their initial rational judgments, rather than being an innate predisposition. It reveals that mysticism within ancient Chinese political culture serves as a crucial foundational support for power, essentially aiming to obscure (or explain) the legitimacy of its most primitive element — the source of power's orthodox legitimacy. The feudal system is not as straightforward and transparent as the social contract theory: social contract theory is grounded in rationality, deriving a well-structured and robust theoretical chain from the very beginning of "the relinquishment of power" [4].

However, the feudal society could not provide a completely clear and rational justification for the legitimacy of hereditary rule. This led to the development of a political culture encapsulated in the notion that "destiny is the decree of heaven, endowed by the emperor," thereby continuously reinforcing and evolving mysticism to illustrate the orthodox legitimacy of the ruling power.

3. The Function of Mysticism in Power Governance

Mysticism serves a dual function as a tool of power; it is not only a means for rulers to consolidate their authority but also a mechanism for the governed to comprehend and respond to the political environment [5].

Rulers utilize mysticism to bestow legitimacy and orthodoxy upon their reigns. For instance, concepts such as the correspondence between heaven and humanity and the phenomena of auspicious signs and calamities are employed to justify the monarch's "mandate of heaven." Conversely, for the governed, mysticism provides a framework for interpreting and understanding social phenomena. In times of social turmoil or personal adversity, mysticism offers psychological comfort and an explanatory framework. Through mysticism, those under dominion can find meaning and a sense of control, even when they are powerless to alter their reality[6-7].

The relocation of mysticism essentially reflects the adaptation of roles between rulers and the ruled. As previously discussed, the rationalization processes during the Northern Song Dynasty diminished the influence of mysticism; however, mysticism did not vanish but instead underwent adjustments and adaptations through forms such as Daoism. A significant change during this period was the "decentralization" of mysticism, transitioning from the Han Dynasty's exclusive monopoly over prophetic and apocalyptic interpretations to an era where Daoist priests and monks could earn a livelihood by practicing mysticism. Beneath this dispersion and diversification of authority lies the development of rationalism and the intensification of the power struggle between the bureaucratic elite and the monarch[8-9].

Under the framework of mysticism, the relationship between rulers and the ruled is characterized by interaction and mutual influence. Rulers shape and manipulate the thoughts and behaviors of the governed through mysticism, ensuring the stability of their reign. For instance, by means of rituals and sacrifices, rulers not only proclaim their divine status but also shape the beliefs and behavioral norms of the governed. The ruled are not entirely passively influenced by mysticism; they also adjust and respond based on their own needs and contexts. For example, during the Qing Dynasty's "soul-calling" activities, the populace utilized mysticism to seek psychological comfort and social control, demonstrating their agency and adaptability[10-11].

4. Conclusion

In summary, starting with the "unexpected" metaphors of the Wind and Rain Gods as political cultural performances, the continuous patching of auspicious and disastrous signs before the mid-Tang Dynasty cannot conceal the deepening fissures of authenticity that gradually emerged. Although the political culture centered on auspicious signs and disasters faced challenges from the rationalization of Confucianism, the most essential mysticism, which coexists with feudal monarchy, has long endured within the political culture in a progressively marginal manner, exerting a profound influence on the stability of political culture.

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