The Ancient Sages (sheng): their Identity and their Place in Chinese Intellectual History

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I. Introduction

Who is a "sage" and what is "sagehood"? The English words themselves signify the wise and wisdom, but these apparently simple questions are not easy to answer when discussed in the context of four thousand or more years of the Chinese intellectual tradition. Yet, these remain important questions for the student of Chinese thought, since the word sheng (sage, sagehood) occurs frequently in the writings of Chinese classics, philosophy, religion and history. Indeed, the "sage" is such a pivotal concept in Chinese thought that without a proper comprehension of this term and the ideal behind it, one can hardly understand the main thrust of the Chinese intellectual tradition.

For the purposes of this study, it is my intention to examine the meaning of the word sheng[1] from several perspectives, taking into account its importance in the history of Chinese philosophy, while going back to ancient myths, legends and history, to its usage in classical texts and commentaries as well as to its etymology. This is not an easy task, straddling, as it does, a vast time span as well as a spectrum of academic disciplines. I do not propose to give any final answers. My purposes are to probe and to interpret. I wish to begin by probing into the results of recent studies of ancient history and mythology, which have been done with the support of archaeological and epigraphic research as well as with anthropology, history and textual philology. After reflecting upon the tentative conclusions which have been reached in these areas, I shall reflect upon the place of the sage in Chinese thought. I conclude with an interpretive evaluation of the evolution of the concept of the sage against a broader perspective of the history of religious beliefs and philosophical development, to better determine its usefulness as a category of thought and its relevance as an ideal of achievement.1

II. Who were the Sages?

1. The Answer from the History of Philosophy

Two related typologies are often used in the history of Chinese philosophy to describe the sages of antiquity. The earliest among them are called "culture heroes", especially by Confucians and Legalists, whereas the later sages are usually known as "wise rulers", especially by Confucians and Mohists. I refer here especially, but not exclusively, to the so-called "Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors" (San-huang wu-ti[2]).

Sages as Culture Heroes. Confucianism and Legalism

The names of the so-called Three Sovereigns reveal their legendary character as well as their contributions to culture. They have sometimes been called the Supreme Sovereign (T’ai-huang[3]), the Heavenly Sovereign (T’ien-huang[4]), and the Earthly Sovereign (Ti-huang[5]). They have also been identified with such figures as Fu-hsi[6] ("Animal Tamer"), Sui-jen[7] ("Fire Maker"), and Shen-nung[8] ("Divine Farmer") who bear names that bespeak their merits. Fu-hsi and his spouse or sister Nü-wa[9] have been portrayed in murals and stone engravings found in Han graves as humans with intertwined serpentine bodies, with him holding either a square ruler or the sun, and her holding either a compass or the moon. Together, the two represent an ancestral pair which has transmitted life as well as material culture to their many descendants.

As a group, these legendary figures might very well represent the personifications of certain stages in the development of early culture. They are hailed as "culture heroes" by both the Confucian and the Legalist schools. To begin with the Legalist work, Han Fei Tzu[10]:

In the age of remote antiquity human beings were few while birds and beasts were many, and men were unable to overcome birds, beasts, insects, and serpents. Thereupon a sage arose who fastened trees and branches together and made nests, and all harm was thereby avoided. At this the people were delighted and they made him ruler of the whole world, according to him the title "Nest Builder". Again, the people in those days lived on the fruits of trees and seeds of grass as well as mussels and clams ... and many ... were afflicted with diseases. Thereupon a sage arose who drilled a piece of wood and produced fire [for cooking] ... At this the people were delighted and they made him ruler of the whole world, according to him the title "Fire Maker".2

In the K’ao-kung chi[11], a work thought to be of the Warring States period, the wise men who invented tools and implements and transmitted the skills they acquired in using these were called kung (artisans), but the tools and techniques themselves were attributed to the invention of the original "sages" (sheng): "Making carts to travel on land and boats to travel on water, these were all the creations of the sages."3

The Great Appendix to the Book of Changes mentions Fu-hsi or Pao-hsi as the inventor of the eight trigrams, as well as of nets for hunting and fishing, and of Shen-nung as the maker of ploughs and shares for tilling the soil. They were followed by the Yellow Emperor, Yao[12] and Shun[13] who allegedly built canoes and oars, used oxen to draw carts and yoked horses to chariots, built double gates for defence and made bows and arrows.4 These three are the best known of the so-called Five Emperors, who also include Ti-ku[14] and Chuan-hsü[15]. Yü[16], the Flood-Controller, is not on this list, although he has always been much venerated for his own contributions for human kind.

Legalists are utilitarians. They honor certain "sages" for having contributed to material advancement in human culture, but without paying reverence to antiquity itself. If Han Fei Tzu gives due credit to the Fire Maker, the Nest Builder (Yu-ch’ao[17]) and to Yü the Flood Controller, he insists that the sage ruler is to take into consideration changing circumstances, following the custom appropriate to his own time. For "circumstances change according to

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3 See K’ao-kung-chi, in Chou-li cheng-yii[64] (Correct Meaning of the Institutes of Chou), SPPY ed., 74. 7b. Actually, the invention of "carts" (or chariots) has been attributed to the Yellow Emperor.
the age, and ways of dealing with them change with the circumstances."^5 On the other hand, living conditions in antiquity were far from satisfactory, and even the so-called sage kings had to toil hard like slaves. Their lot was inferior to that of lower officials of later times. Referring to the legend of sage kings surrendering the throne to one another, *Han Fei Tzu* says:

> when men lightly relinquish the position of Son of Heaven, it is not because they are high-minded, but because the advantages of the post are slight; when men strive for sinecures in the government, it is not because they are base, but because the power they will acquire is great.\(^6\)

Sages as Wise Rulers: Confucians and Mohists

Speaking generally, Legalists acknowledge the contributions made by ancient sages to the advancement of material culture, whereas Confucians insist also on their contributions to political society and spiritual culture. These include achievements in the order of rites and music, and in institutional administration. And here we touch upon a consensus between Confucians and Mohists, who both extol ancient sages as wise kings and ministers. If Yao, Shun, and Yü are regarded as ideal rulers of the past Golden Age, this is due to the judgements of such classics as the Book of History, the Book of Poetry, the Analects and the Book of Mencius.

But why did Confucius exalt certain figures as sage-models? In the Analects, Confucius seldom describes the attributes of sagehood, but refers from time to time to those ancients whom he admires - in particular, Yao and Shun, whom he apparently assumes to be sages, that is, persons of superior virtue. Both were regarded as model rulers, and their devotion to their people was especially held up.

> Tzu-kung said [to the Master], "What would you say of a man who benefits the people extensively, and gives assistance to all? Might he be considered as humane (jen)?" The Master said, "Why call him humane? Would he not also have the qualities of a sage? Even Yao and Shun did not achieve all that you described."\(^7\)

Political wisdom was not the only criterion for sagehood. Family loyalty was also important, and basically, it was venerated as a model ruler, it was especially on account of his discovery of Shun, the filial son and wise minister, to whom Yao eventually yielded the throne. Mencius gives us the story of Shun's heroic filial piety toward a blind father, a wicked step-mother, and a murderous half-brother, and defends Shun for marrying Yao's daughters without getting prior permission from his own father.\(^8\)

But if Shun is praised for his filial piety, a virtue that first attracted to him Yao's attention, Yü, the flood-controller, is praised for selfless devotion to his work - a work which allegedly took him away from his family for eight years, and during which he passed the door of his house three times, and resisted the urge to enter (Mencius 3A: 7). It appears therefore that while all three - Yao, Shun, and Yü - were admirable as rulers, each of them also served as a model of virtuous behaviour in different circumstances. What they all possessed in common

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^8 Mencius argues on the ground that such permission would not have been forthcoming, and he would have prevented himself from entering what is described as "the greatest of human relationship." See 5A: 1-5.
was the universal virtue of humanity (*jen*), that quality which unites wisdom and goodness in an ideal human being. Indeed, this quality is more important than whether the human being ever became ruler. "The actions of the sages are different. Some have remained away from court, and others have drawn near to it. Some have left their office, and other have not done so. What is important is each keeping himself pure" (Mencius 5A:7).

In this spirit, Mencius praises Po-yi ([19]) and Shu-ch'i ([20]), the legendary brother-princes who became hermits in the forest to allow their other brother, favourite of their parents, to assume the throne. And he also praises Liu-hsia Hui ([21]), who held a low office under an undeserving ruler.

Mencius sees qualities in sages which transcend time and place. Comparing Shun with King Wen ([22]), father of the dynastic founder of Chou, he says:

Shun was ... a man of the Eastern barbarians. King Wen was ... a man of the Western barbarians. They were separated by over a thousand li of distance and over a thousand years in time. But in carrying out their principles when they were able to rule the country, their actions complemented each other as the two halves of the seal. Early sages and later sages have the same principles.9

Mencius also recognizes Confucius as the sage *par excellence*, and his judgement would receive the overwhelming support of later generations. Drawing an analogy from music, and comparing earlier sages to the music of different instruments, Mencius describes Confucius as having "presented us with a complete concert":

Such a concert begins with the music of bronze bells, and concludes with the music of stone instruments ... The beginning of harmony is the work of wisdom, its conclusion is the work of sageliness.10

But if Confucius and Mencius prefer a more strictly moral interpretation of what constitutes sagehood, Mo-tzu ([23]) adds to this arguments of a religious and utilitarian order, illustrating his points with stories of ghosts and spirits. He explains why these men of old were sages:

Above they honored Heaven, in the middle realm they served the spirits, and below they loved men. Therefore the Will of Heaven announced: These men love all those I love and benefit all those I would benefit ... 11

Note that loving the people constitutes here only one-third of the ruler's duties, the other two being both of a religious character.

Elsewhere, Mo-tzu asserts that the ancient sage rulers "took great pains to honor the worthy and employ the capable, showing no special consideration for their own kin, no partiality for the eminent and rich, no favoritism for the good-looking and attractive." On their part, the worthy men of antiquity also "thought only of finding an enlightened lord and serving him ... and if they achieved anything that was beautiful or good, they gave credit for it to the ruler." 12

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9 4B: 1.
10 5B: 1.
Yao and Shun have been praised for surrendering the throne to worthy men, rather than to their own sons. It has been said that this story of model sagely behaviour comes from the Mohists who were eager to prove the importance in wise government of "honoring the worthy".13

Sages as Mystics? The Taoist Response

Moving to the Taoist, we find a much more complex, and sometimes contradictory picture. The text Lao-tzu24 has lent itself to multiple interpretations, be they metaphysical, mystical, religious or political. The passages dealing with the "sage" are no different. We can discern at least two possible impressions: of an attitude antagonistic to that of the Confucian sage, and of a Taoist alternative of sagehood, which itself is ambiguous, wavering between that of a mystical sage-hermit and of a political despot.

Lao-tzu's antagonistic attitude toward the Confucian sage is disclosed in a passage which says:

Exterminate the sage, discard the wise, and the people will benefit a hundred fold; Exterminate benevolence, discard rectitude, and the people will again be filial; Exterminate ingenuity, discard profit, and there will be no more thieves and bandits.14

The implication seems to be that the Confucian exaltation of sages as moral exemplars, and the concomitant philosophy of humanity or benevolence (jen) and righteousness or rectitude (yi), created artificial distinctions giving rise to hypocrisy rather than true virtue, which is to be found only in a natural state.

In this regard, Chuang-tzu26 echoes Lao-tzu in saying that

the sage brings little benefit to the world, but much harm ... And when the sage is born, the great thief appears. Cudgel and cane the sages and let the thieves and bandits go their way; then the world will at last be well ordered!15

And while Lao-tzu makes no mention of the names of Yao, Shun, and Yu, they come up frequently in Chuang-tzu, but are used ironically to illustrate a position which is definitely at variance with the Confucian one. For example, Yao emerges in a dialogue with the border guard of Hua as the partner with inferior wisdom, an excessive worrier who unnaturally prefers virtue over a long life, wealth and a large progeny. The same happens to Yu, in a conversation with the hermit Tzu-kao, who admonishes him for handing out rewards and punishments.16

From this has come the anti-Confucian and anti-intellectual attitude attributed to the Taoist tradition in general, which maintains the superiority of nature over culture, and of a natural state of affairs over political institutions, moral distinctions and intellectual pretensions.

What alternatives do the Taoist philosophers offer? Lao-tzu presents two contradictory ideals: of a mystic who "acts without taking action (wu-wei)17 and teaches without using words" (ch. 2) and of a political ruler who, "in governing the people, empties their minds but fills their bellies, weakens their wills but strengthens their bones, keeping them innocent of

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16 Ch. 12, Watson, ibid., pp. 130-31.
knowledge and free from desire" (ch. 3). But are these ideals really incompatible? They seem to meet in a passage where the sage says of himself:

I take no action and the people are transformed of themselves; I prefer stillness and the people are rectified of themselves; I am not meddlesome and the people prosper of themselves; I am free from desire and the people of themselves become simple like the uncarved block.  

On the other hand, Chuang-tzu does not idealize the position of the political ruler, and consistently prefers to exalt the ideal of a mystic sage, a hermit who treasures his personal freedom above all else. In many chapters of the nei-p’ien[29] constituting the heart of the text Chuang-tzu, Confucius becomes a mouthpiece for Taoist ideas and ideals, explaining, for example, such spiritual and mystical practices as the fast of the mind (hsin-chat)[30], and sitting and forgetting (tso-wang)[31]. Besides, Chuang-tzu gives free expression to his sentiments and imagination when he presents his own "ideal", whom he calls the Perfect Man, the Spirit Man, the Sage, or the True Man. "Therefore I say, the perfect Man has no self; the Spirit Man has no merit: the Sage has no fame."  

Ch. 7. And also: "The Perfect Man uses his mind like a mirror - going after nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing." (ch. 7).

A portrait is painted of a man who rises above all distinctions of convention, who refrains from all unnatural activity, who belongs to a higher order of freedom rather to the world of affairs, who is always serene, because his mind transcends life and death. "The True Man ... knew nothing of loving life, knew nothing of hating death ..." Elsewhere, certain superhuman qualities are attributed to this True or Perfect Man:

The perfect Man is godlike. Though the great swamps blaze, they cannot burn him: the great rivers freeze, they cannot chill him ... A man like this rides the clouds and mist, straddles the sun and moon, and wanders beyond the four seas. Even life and death have no effect on him ...  

Some of these passages were to have an influence on the shaping of the "Immortal" ideal in so-called religious Taoism, which allegedly turned the quest for an ideal life to that for prolonging life itself and securing physical immortality, through practices of alchemy and yoga. However, in itself, the quest for immortality actually preceded the emergence of religious Taoism, reflecting a very human desire to live forever, even if that means going beyond the limitations of the human condition.  

A Doctrine of Sagehood

In the evolution of Chinese thought, the ancient sages singled out for praise by the Confucians, as well as the Confucian norms for sagehood, became the predominant. Such figures as Yao, Shun, Yū, T’ang, Wen, and others, gained the reputation of being sage kings, even if the word "sage" came to represent, not merely a political ruler, but an idealized human being, a man of humanity and filial piety. Some texts use words like "heavenly", and

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17 This is from ch. 57. See D.C. Lau, op.cit., p. 118.
18 Ch. 1.
19 Ch. 6. See Watson, transl., op.cit., pp. 77-78.
20 Ch. 2; in Watson, ibid., p. 47.
"godly", to describe the sages. The Book of History ("Counsel of Great Yü"), associates the sage with the word shen[32] (godly) and defines him as "one whose virtue comes naturally" - as with Shun, or "one who possesses a penetrating (t'ung[33]) understanding of all things", a description of Yü, the flood controller.22 In the Elder Tai's version of the Book of Rites (ch. 40), the sage is said to be someone "whose wisdom penetrates the great Way, who can respond to change without loss, and who fathoms the nature and feelings of the myriad things."23 In the Book of Rites itself, the word is given the meaning of "producing" or "giving life to the myriad things". And the Doctrine of the Mean calls the sage a man "co-equal with Heaven" (ch. 31). A glowing description is given by the Han (206 B.C. - 220 A.D.) Confucian text, the Po-hu-t'ung[34]:

He penetrates all Ways; he reflects on all light; on hearing the sound, he understands the feeling. His virtue is one with heaven and earth; his brightness is one with the sun and the moon; his order is one with the four seasons; his fortune is one with the ghosts and spirits.24

The exaltation of sagehood raised the problem of its accessibility. Could one acquire sagehood by learning and striving, or must one be born a sage? This was discussed and argued especially during the Wei-Chin period (220-420 A.D.), when Taoist ideas became incorporated into the understanding of the sage. He is described as a person who embodies "nothingness" (wu), transcending all distinctions and contradictions, and responding to things and affairs with naturalness and spontaneity. By the same count, however, sagehood appeared to many to be a distant, if not impossible goal. Although Wang Pi[35] (226-49) both asserted that sagehood may be acquired, and supported Confucius' claim as the sage, metaphysical discussions did not always encourage the practical quest of sagehood.25

Such a practical emphasis was resumed much later, by the philosophers of the Sung (960-1279) and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties.

Among these later philosophers, Chou Tun-yi[36] (1017-73) contributed a quietistic and mystical interpretation, showing Taoist and also Buddhist influences. He asserts that sagehood can be achieved, explaining that the way of achieving it is to [concentrate on] one thing. By this is meant having no desire. Having no desire, one is vacuous while tranquil, and straightforward while in action. Being vacuous while tranquil, one becomes intelligent and hence penetrating. Being straightforward while active, one becomes impartial and hence all-embracing. Being intelligent, penetrating, impartial and all-embracing, one is almost a sage.26

22 See the Book of History, "the Great Norm".
26 Wing-tsit Chan, op. cit., p. 473.
2. The Answer from Ancient History

Who were the ancient sages? The names given them by tradition are mysterious, and can hardly refer to actual historical individuals. We have referred to the names of the Three Sovereigns: the Supreme (T'ai-huang), the Heavenly (T'ien-huang), and the Earthly Sovereigns (Ti-huang), sometimes identified with the Fire maker, the Animal Tamer and the Divine Farmer, or, instead of the Fire Maker, the goddess Nü-wa. It has been pointed out that the word huang, which might represent the rays of the sun, or a crown or a king wearing a crown, has signified more often the adjective "supreme" or "great" rather than the noun "king". 27

There are also the "Five Emperors" (Ti [37]), of whom the best known are the Yellow Emperor, Yao and Shun. Yü, the Flood-controller, traditionally regarded as the founder of Hsia [38], China's first dynasty (c. 2200-1750 B.C.) is not among them. 28 He is sometimes called Ti, and sometimes called wáng [39] (king), the title of an actual historical ruler. 29

The Sages as Gods

About fifty years ago, Ku Chieh-Kang [40], Yang Hsiang-k'uei [41] and other of the critical circle of Chinese historians, proposed the theory that the most ancient among the legendary sages were god-figures. Their hypothesis was founded upon their critical examination of the fragmented materials in the early texts, be these classics, history, or mythology. It associated the Three Sovereigns and the Five Emperors with the primeval Supreme One (T'ai-yi [42]), which, in turn, represents the metaphysical Tao, the root and origin of all things, as well as the supreme being called God. According to them, the Three Sovereigns and the T'ai-yi are two traditions both of which can be traced back to a primitive belief in a supreme deity, while the Five Emperors represent a later legend which issued out of the earlier tradition of the Three Sovereigns.

The [Legend of the] Three Sovereigns emerged from circumstances surrounding the later Warring States period. They found their way on to government notices during the Ch'in dynasty, and became [the core of] a state religion in the Han times. They represent semi-divine, semi-human figures ... 30

According to them, the Three Sovereigns and the Five Emperors belong to the realm of mythology, but became regarded as human beings after a process of euhemerization, which happened on account of rationalist influences prevalent during the Eastern Chou period. By the time of Confucius and Mencius, the euhemerization process was almost complete. Confucius' and Mencius' contribution appears to be that of confirming a moral reinterpretation, which places the sages on a pedestal for their exemplary characters. In this sense, the mythical god-figures/ancestors were given a new role to play: that of serving as

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27 Shuo-wen chieh-tzu Tuan-chü [80], (An Explanation of Words and Terms, with the commentary by Tuan Yu-ts'ai [81]), SPPY ed., vol. 1, pt. 1, 13a.
28 The Hsia dynasty is not yet fully recognized as historical by the modern scholarly communities within and without China, even if evidences point more and more to the probability of a civilized order which was pre-Shang.
29 Ibid., p. 12b. The Chinese word for king wáng, which has its roots in the oracle bones, always had the signification of rulership. See K.C. Chang, Shang Civilization, Yale University Press, 1980, pp. 158-60, for a discussion of kingship in the Shang times.
moral exemplars; they were venerated more for their own sake than for being "gods" or ancestors. This is the more significant in the light of the assertion that where the Ti of the Shang dynasty had been the supreme ancestor, the Ti of the Chou dynasty became the infinitely just God, who rewards virtue and punishes evil, and for that reason was ready to transfer Heaven's Mandate to a different ruling house.31 True, the designated ruling house enters into a special relationship with this God, and the ruler alone could offer sacrifices to God as His "Son", but this sonship was regarded less in biological terms, and more in "adoptive" terms.32

According to these scholars, the words Yellow Emperor (Huang-ti[43]) represents a homophone of the term "Supreme God", a term which later on represented the emperor. Yao and Shun were also deity figures, representing the highest god or the ancestral god of the two population groups within ancient China, the Western and the Eastern groups. Yao meant "high", and was probably the same figure as Chun-hsü, both representing the God of the North-western tribes. Shun was identical with Ti-Chün[44] of the Shan-hai-ching[45], as well as with Ti-ku, and represent the God of the Eastern Yin people.33 Thus, the application of a term originally designating the deity, Ti, to human rulers appears a later development, and was usually bestowed posthumously.34

Where Yü, the Flood Controller is concerned, many of the stories surrounding him and the founding of his dynasty appear also to belong more to the mythological than to the historical realm. Mencius describes him as a "Western barbarian" (Hsi-yü[46]), critical scholarship has tended to look upon him as the god of the Western people, and Ku’s circle thought that he might have been their Earth-god (she-shen[47]), in charge of mountains and rivers, basing this interpretation on stories of his birth from a rock, and of his assembling the gods in Mount K’uai-ch’i.35

The Sages as "Totemic Spirits"

It is interesting that the ancient sages have also certain associations with the animal world, or with nature at large. They are either described as somehow semi-human and semi-bestial, or possess names or other characteristics which reflect close bonds with the animal world. This may be said to have a triple signification: that they represent the rudimentary beginnings of a civilization when men and beasts were hardly distinct, that they were

31 The Book of History and the Book of Poetry both maintain that the victory of Chou over Shang was not that of one ancestor over another, but the result of an impartial judgement of the one God regarding moral fitness to rule.
34 For the etymology of the word Ti, see Lee Hsiao-ting[86], comp., Chia-ku wen-tzu chi-shih[87] (A Collected Explanation of the Oracle bone Script), Taiwan, Academia Sinica, Monograph for the Institute for the Study of History and Languages, 1965, vol. 1, pp. 25-30.
allegedly in possession of certain qualities attributed to the beasts, and also that their existence and achievements were somehow unusual and superhuman.  

We come here to the totemic interpretation of the ancient sages. The word "totem" comes from native North American tribes, for whom it originally signifies kinship. But anthropologists have been using this term to refer to what they assume as a primitive religious belief, according to which certain peoples represent themselves or their ancestral spirits with specific animal or plant symbols, or with natural forces. When applied to ancient China, the names and stories of various legendary sages do have certain associations which, in this sense, may be called totemic. For example, the three figures, the sage Shun, the legendary Ti-ku, and the mythical Ti-chün of the Shan-hai ching, are all associated with the phoenix, and have been regarded as the same and identical ancestor of the Bird Tribe, while Yü, allegedly identical with Kou-lung[48] ("Dragon") of the Annals of Tso, has been called the ancestor of the Reptile Tribe.  

The problem is, should the human-bestial relationship which is illustrated in legend and art, necessarily point to totemism? Could it not be explained in other ways? Those scholars who emphasize the totemic character of the ancient Chinese sages do not explain whether the totems they refer to, represent human, divine, or semi-divine beings. The totemic theory seems both similar to and different from the theory that the sages were gods or god symbols. Depending on the understanding of the individual scholars, the totems may represent either the group itself, or the ancestor of the group. For example, to call Shun the ancestor of the Bird Tribe is not necessarily to deny his "divine" character. Instead, it may be a way of suggesting that the tribe has divinized its own primitive community.  

Were the ancient sages human or divine? The answer to this question depends also on whether we refer by the term "divine", to a supreme being, or to an ancestral spirit or deity of a tribal group.  

In this regard, certain scholars prefer to believe that each ethnic or tribal group in ancient society had its own religious beliefs, including their ancestral cults, in which their earliest forebears were divinized. The belief in a supreme deity allegedly appeared with the differentiation between a God of nature and the tribe's ancestral spirit. Some think that the Shang people already had this belief. Other think that the Shang and the Chou represent two different worlds, the former did not clearly differentiate between ancestors and gods, and only the latter had a belief in the supreme deity, the Lord-on-high or Heaven. If the Chou people continued to honor the ruler as the Son of Heaven, they no longer revered the rulers' ancestor as the Lord-on-high.  

Scholars who consider the ancient sages as deity symbols do not always agree as to what it means to be a deity. Ku Chieh-kang and his circle tended to think that these sages

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represented a supreme being, a personal God. But others prefer to regard these same sages as ancestral spirits, occupying a position lower than that of the supreme being. This is closer to the totemic theory. Still others say that the individual sages represented different nature spirits, that the Yellow Emperor was the god of rain and thunder, or the dragon god, that Yao was a sun god, Shun a swallow god, or that Yu was a flood god, or also a sun god.

True, scholars who assert that the Yellow Emperor, Yao and Shun might have been deity symbols also acknowledge that they are only proposing a hypothesis. It is a hypothesis based on an effort to assemble fragmented evidence, which explains the lack of consensus both regarding the general hypothesis, and the specific character of these deity symbols. But the hypothesis remains rich in suggestiveness, and should not be simply dismissed. Frequently, positions are taken on this subject depending on whether a belief in deity or deities is regarded as positive or negative, rather than with an openness to learning more from philological, textual and archaeological evidence.

Whether the ancient sages were divine or human is a problem that one may associate with the philosophical problem of whether sagehood is a gift, or may be acquired. But it is a problem that has also its own importance. The Tokugawa Japanese scholar Ogyū Sorai asserted that the ancient sages were wise rulers, but insisted that their sagely way was one of "venerating Heaven and the spirits". Already, he was pointing out the close relationship between religious belief and sagehood. But it remains to us to examine their real identities. The question we must yet answer is: Why were they venerated by later ages?

The Sages as Shaman Kings

Who were the wu, or the wu-shu of ancient China, a term which has been translated as shamans? According to the Shuo-wen chieh-tzu, the wu is a person who serves the invisible spirits and can call these down by dances. Besides, the word itself can be explained both as a person who is skilled in dancing, or as someone holding in two hands the instruments of magic or divination. The word chu, on the other hand, signifies communication through the mouth with the divine. This too is part of the duty of the priest. Hence the special skills of the wu-chu include praying in rain dances, communicating with the spiritual world, predicting good and evil fortune, as well as the healing of sickness and the interpretation of dreams. The Japanese scholar Kaizuka Shigeru has said that the word wu refers to a

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41 This is Mitarai Masaru’s theory, see Wang Hsiao-lien, Chung-kuo te shen-wa yü ch’uan-shuo (Chinese Myths and Legends), Taipei, Lien-ching, 1977, p. 294.
42 Shirakawa Shizuka, Ōgoku kodai bunka, Tōkyō, Ködansha, 1979, ch. 2.
45 See SPPY ed., vol. 5, pt. 1, 18a-b.
mediator between the human world and the divine, while the word chu refers to the mouthpiece of God who transmits His messages to human beings. The wu-chu is a person who apparently reaches a state of trance through ritual dance, and is able afterwards to transmit the wishes of the spirits to human beings.47

The information about King T'ang[53] that is found in the classical text, including the Book of History, is much more rational than that about the sage Yü. T'ang was the recognized founder of the Shang dynasty, who conquered the last Hsia ruler, the alleged tyrant Chieh[54], and unified the country. According to some accounts, T'ang was told during the drought by the diviners that Heaven could be placated only by a human sacrifice. Thereupon he purified himself, placed himself on the firewood, and prepared to offer himself to the Lord-on-high. But no sooner was the fire lit, when rain came and quenched it.48

T'ang's prayer is cited in the terse language of the Analects:

I, the child Li,[55] presume ... to announce to thee, O most great and sovereign God ... If in my person, I commit offences, they are not to be attributed to ... the people of the myriad regions. If [the people] in the myriad regions commit offences, these offences must rest on me alone ... 49

This episode serves to show how King T'ang regarded himself as a religious leader of the people, with responsibility even for natural disasters. His reverence of the Lord-on-high and love of the people, as well as his readiness to sacrifice himself, contributed to his sagely reputation.50

While King Wen, father to the founder of the Chou dynasty (1100 B.C.-220 A.D.), was only posthumously honoured as kind (wong), he is described in the Book of History as well as in the Book of Poetry as having ascended to a place near Heaven or the Lord-on-high. Each of the earliest rulers of the Chou dynasty - King Ch'eng[56] and his uncle, the ducal regent of Chou - performed also the dual functions of religious and political leaders, the Duke of Chou allegedly having prayed at the ancestral temple for the health of his royal brother, and begging that his own life be shortened in favour of his brother's, at a time when he presumably was acting as regent.51 In contrast to King T'ang, it should be noted that the Duke did not pray directly to the Lord-on-high or Heaven, choosing rather to beg the intercession of the spirits of his deceased ancestors. This shows how the ancestral spirits were regarded as mediators between the heavenly and the human orders. Besides, as the Duke was not a King, he could not presume to pray directly to Heaven.52

Undoubtedly, the religious context in which King T'ang and the Duke of Chou offered their prayers did not preclude their having also political motivations. This cannot be pursued too far here. Suffice it to mention that the drought following T'ang's conquest of Hsia could have been interpreted by people then as a punishment from Heaven, while the Duke of Chou, later the instrument of the deaths of two of his younger, rebellious brothers, might also have had ulterior motives.53 But both men showed the religious character of the position of the King or the chief minister. In ancient China, ancestral worship was the privilege of the aristocracy and was extended to commoners only later. But the worship of the Lord-on-high or Heaven, always the excuse right of the ruler, came from the fact that the ancient kings were also religious leaders or shaman-kings. In the story of King T'ang's attempted self-sacrifice, we may also discern a strong resemblance to the story in the Hebrew Bible of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac, and the parallel between the patriarch-priest and the king-priest can be noted.

The following passage from the kuo-yü[57] is also helpful:

Anciently, men and spirits did not mix. But certain persons were so perspicacious, single-minded, reverential and correct that their intelligence could understand what lies above and below, their wisdom (sheng) could illumine what is distant and profound, their vision was bright and clear and their hearing was penetrating. Therefore the spirits would descend upon them. The possessor of such powers were, if men, called hsi[58], and if women, wu. They supervised the positions of the spirits at the ceremonies, took care of sacrificial victims and vessels as well as of seasonal robes.54

This shows that hsi and wu were both mediators between the divine and the human, that both possessed the qualities of wisdom, clarity, and intelligence. By Shang times, the female shamans had been reduced to being specialist in rain dances, while the male shamans were growing in importance. Though shamans were not necessarily rulers, the ruler was in charge of all shamans, in some sense, the head shaman.55 The evidence from ancient Korea also suggests strongly that the political ruler was the head shaman.56

The translation of the word wu by the word shaman, taken from the religions of the Ural-Altaic peoples, does not necessarily indicate that the two words are identical. A shaman is a person who has special access to the gods or spirits and performs above all, healing and divinatory services. But it would appear that the shaman's duties and those of the wu (in Korean, mudang[59]) overlap functionally in many areas.57 Besides, while the shaman was not technically a priest, priests and shamans were both mediators of two worlds, although the shaman had as well the ability to manipulate nature, while the priest's duties appeared limited to that of offering sacrifices on behalf of the people, either to God or to ancestral spirits.

53 Consult Sarah Allen, The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legend in Early China (San Francisco, Chinese materials Center, 1981). This book focuses upon the problem of royal succession, and the repeated pattern by which the successor became known as a sage.
The Japanese scholar Katô Jôken\[58] declared, after his study of the Book of Poetry, that the earliest rulers of the Chou dynasty (including Kings Wen, Wu, Ch'eng and the Duke of Chou) were all *wu-chu* or religious leaders of their people. They heard the voice of the divine, and ruled the country in their capacity as mediator between the human and the divine. Only later were they regarded by rationalistic scholars as wise rulers and sages.\[58]

Conclusion

A quest for the "sages of antiquity" would not have been necessary had it not been for the Confucian exaltation of the sages as moral exemplars and "philosopher-kings", and for the gradual evolution of a doctrine of sagehood. There is also, however, a different quest, or rather, a question: who is a sage?

What is the etymological meaning of the word sage (*sheng*)? The modern Chinese character has three components: an ear, a mouth, and a word resembling *jen*, a component in the character for "court". In its earliest graph form, the oracle bone script, but also, to an extent, in the bronze script, the word seems dominated by a large ear.\[59] A recent interpretation emphasizes this fact, and offers and explanation that the sage was one with acute hearing, a gift that was most useful in primitive society, in both secular or purportedly religious pursuits, such as in hearing the voices of the invisible spirits. The word appears on bronze vessels more as an adjective than a noun, usually signifying a high degree of intelligence, which can also be related to "acute hearing", as the modern Chinese word *ts'ing* (clever, especially clever of ear) continues to suggest.\[60] As the modern ideogram is made up of the ear, the *t'ing*, and a small mouth, it might be said that the sage was the person who heard the voice or the words of the spirit, or the deity, and then transmitted it to others with his own mouth.

In this light, the identity of the ancient sages becomes clearer. Whether the Yellow Emperor, Yao and Shun were gods of men, whether King T'ang was a shaman-king, they might all be regarded as mediators between the human and the divine world. The ancient sages usually represent ancestral deities - if only after their deaths. And, should they have been historical persons, they were most likely also religious leaders during their lives.

And what about Confucius, a historical person who has been regarded as the greatest sage East Asia has produced? He was surely no deity figure, but a humanist and a scholar. What kind of consciousness did he possess, regarding his own sagehood, and what was his understanding of the sage? Let us listen to the word with which he describes his own spiritual evolution:

At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning. At thirty, I stood firm. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven. At sixty, my ears were attuned. At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right.\[61]

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59 Li Hsiao-ting, op.cit., vol. 12, p. 3519.

60 On this point, see the recent book by C.H. Hsü et al., Ancient Chinese Society: An Epigraphic and Archaeological Interpretation, Taipei, Yi-wen, 1984, ch. 2. I had some discussions with Dr. Hsü on the subject of this paper and wish to thank him for his assistance. He has explained that the third component in the modern word *t'ing* refers to "standing upright".

To what were his ears attuned? Perhaps this had to be with the decrees of Heaven. And, in that regard, the passage suggests that Confucius knew that he had a special relationship with heaven. This does not mean that Confucius regarded himself as divine, but that he was conscious of his own wisdom or sageliness, as well as of its religious character. By the time of Confucius, a time of growing rationalism, the ancient sages had probably gone through a process of euhemerization. The word "sage" had assumed a technical connotation in philosophical discussions, representing an ideal personhood which was regarded by some philosophers as worthy of achievement. Yet the religious character was not forgotten. And while Confucius never openly called himself a sage, he was regarded as such by his immediate disciples as well as by later generations. Confucius, however, was never a ruler, and was a minister for only a short time. He distinguished himself especially as a teacher of disciples, although his contributions to culture made him a "teacher of a hundred generations". It is interesting that later generations nearly made him a god, but actually made him a king - an uncrowned king (Su-wang) - to highlight his wisdom, his moral claims to rulership, and his exercise of such through his alleged writings: the Classics.

But what can we say of these "teachings of Yao and Shun", this ancient wisdom? Do we not discern any change or transformation of the past in Confucius' own doctrines? The point can certainly be made, that Confucius was more than a transmitter, that he was indeed, a transforming genius, who shaped the legacy of the past according to his own wisdom, and passed it down in a different form. And the doctrine of sagehood was one of such legacies. Through the efforts of Confucius and his school, the legendary figures of the past, whether deity symbols or ancestral spirits, were changed into moral exemplars. And it was as such that they would live on. With him as well, Yao and Shun were humanized, made emulable. And yet, Confucius did not render sagehood easy, even if both he and Mencius insisted upon its accessibility. Perhaps, the deity symbols hiding behind the ancestral spirits remind us of the transcendence inherent in the sage-ideal.

From these attempts at definition, the word "sage" refers obviously to a great and superior being; not necessarily a god, but a human being whose understanding and virtue may be described as god-like. And if the usage is especially associated with political concerns, the criteria for sagehood are not necessarily bound up with the criteria of good government. What is more important is virtuous behaviour. In the cases of Yao and Shun, the first is venerated as a model ruler who had the wisdom to discern sagely qualities in the second who, in turn, was also a filial son. But where Yao and Shun, Po-yi and Shu-ch'i, were all legendary figures, Confucius was an actual historical being, a man who desired to serve in government but was largely frustrated in this desire, and who found his real vocation in the instruction of disciples and the transmission of ancient wisdom. With him, sagehood is shown to be transcendent of rulership or government; nor is it essentially involved in a work of teaching. Sagehood is being, and being is followed by action, but not limited by it. A sage may be a ruler, a hermit, or a teacher. But a sage must be a virtuous man, one, for whom, the practice of virtue has become indeed instinctive.

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62 I owe this insight to Professor D.C. Lau, and wish to acknowledge it here.
63 This meaning has persisted in its usage, and, more recently, the word has been employed to translate the English word "holy" and "sacred" as well as the adjective "wise".
Be that as it may, myths and mythology appear to have something to instruct the intellectual historian as well. Whether deity symbols or not, the sages of antiquity beckon us onward and upward, not only to search for their true identities, but also to find our own, in a continual effort of self transcendence. And this is an effort which is existential as well as scholarly, as we look beyond the narrow confines of each discipline, be that history or philosophy, or the history of philosophy, and seek to incorporate, for our reflections, the findings of others, including the study of the history of religion and mythology.
[35] 王弼
[36] 周敦颐
[37] 帝
[38] 夏
[39] 王
[40] 顧頡剛
[41] 楊向奎
[42] 太乙
[43] 黃帝
[44] 帝俊
[45] 山海經
[46] 西夷
[47] 社神
[48] 勾竜
[49] 蒟生祖銜
[50] 巫祝
[51] 說文解字
[52] 貝塚茂樹
[53] 湯
[54] 桂
[55] 履
[56] 成王
[57] 國語
[58] 親
[59] 巫堂
[60] 加藤常賢
[61] 素王
[62] 韋政通
[63] 儒家與現代中國
[64] 周禮正義
[65] 周易王羲
[66] 楊寬
[67] 中國上古史導論
[68] 古史辨
[69] 李豐琳
[70] 不死的探求：道教信仰的解說與分析
[71] 藍吉富
[72] 中國文化新論
[73] 白虎通義
[74] 班固
[75] 皇清經解續編
[76] 湯用
[77] 魏晉玄學論稿
[78] 牟宗三
[79] 才性與玄理
[80] 說文解字段注
[81] 段玉裁
[82] 三皇考
[83] 呂思勉
[84] 杜正勝
[85] 中國上古史論文選集
[86] 李孝定
[87] 甲骨文字集釋
[88] 淮南子
[89] 魯語
[90] 童書業
[91] 鰲魚的傳說
[92] 徐旭生
[93] 中國古史的傳說時代
[94] 孫作雲
[95] 中國古代鳥氏族酋長改
[96] 森安太
[97] 黃帝傳說
[98] 中國古代神語之研究
[99] 王孝廉
[100] 御手洗勝
[101] 中國的神語與傳說
[102] 白川靜
[103] 中國古代文化
[104] 陳柯良
[105] 中國古代神話新解兩則
[106] 清華學報
[107] 辨道
[108] 朱謙之
[109] 日本的古學與陽明學
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[111] 商代的神話與巫術
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[113] 中國之神話：神々の誕生
[114] 鄭振鐸
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[116] 曹松業
[117] 請湯裨篇
[118] 東方雜誌
[119] 李玄伯
[120] 家邦通論
[121] 徐復觀
[122] 周初人文精神的躍動
[123] 中國人性論史
[124] 楚語
[125] 井上季雄
[126] ＜古代朝鮮史序説：王者と教教＞
[127] 詩經に見える周初に於ける王の資格－民族宗教人として－
[128] ＜中國古代文化的研究＞