Conviction of Fortunes and Misfortunes in Ancient China

Abstract

Many scholars have a general concept that the Ancient people in China were ruled or controlled by spiritual beings or Guishen (鬼神). This honours thesis aims to show that the people in Ancient China believed that they could determine their own fortunes and misfortunes.

The scope for this thesis is limited to the periods of Shang (商) and Zhou (周) and the materials are based on both primary and secondary sources. It focuses on the different ways or methods the people in the two periods used to communicate with spiritual beings. They thought that these supernatural beings such as their ancestors (祖先), Di (帝) or High God, were responsible for their happiness and suffering.

However, they believed that they had the ability to influence these anthropomorphic gods who might be worshipped or coerced into the service of man. Thus, they always took the initiative to communicate or interact with the supernatural beings. They tried all kinds of methods such as divination, prayer, ritual and sorcery, hoping that favour could be earned in these ways. In these cases, sacrifice acted as magical instrument which can be used as a bribe or as a gift exchange.

In conclusion, this thesis shows that the people from Ancient China did not resign themselves to the spiritual beings like what many scholars believe in. This finding would be useful for further studies on the psychology of religion in Ancient China.