

Beliefs in Ancient China and Egypt and the Justification for Ruling Classes

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Abstract: This thesis discusses the development of some of the earliest wide-scale belief systems in two of the oldest civilizations in the world. Ancient China and Egypt developed in very different natural environments, which helped shaped the ancient people's worldviews. As these civilizations grew in population and size, the elite and ruling classes needed to justify their positions of power over the commoners. This thesis analyzes and compares how the ruling classes of ancient China and Egypt used these belief systems to justify and maintain their positions differently or similarly.

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Chapter One: Introduction

One question many scholars have asked centers on where certain beliefs come from. While belief systems are constantly evolving as society changes, historians must go as far back as possible to discover where they originated from. The oldest civilizations are the ancient societies of Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and the Indus River Valley.¹ This thesis looks into two of these oldest civilizations, ancient China (about 2100 – 221 BCE) and ancient Egypt (about 3150 – 332 BCE). There are many questions to ask about how and why belief systems formed in these ancient societies. What factors are key to shaping the worldview of ancient China and ancient Egypt? How similar are the belief systems of ancient China and Egypt? Why are they similar or different? How were these belief systems practiced, enforced, and policed in the two ancient societies? And finally, how did the elite classes in charge use these belief systems to secure or justify their political power?

There is a rich historiography centering on one or more these questions, including *Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture* by Anthony J. Barbieri-Low. This book compares the ancient New Kingdom Egypt to the Chinese Han Dynasty. While this book does go into many different areas of comparison, a large portion is dedicated to universal justice, the bureaucracies which held high power and doled out judgement and punishments, as well as the concepts they held about the afterlife. Another example of this is the research published by Bruce G. Trigger in his book *Understanding Early*

¹ Bruce G. Trigger, *Understanding Early Civilizations: A Comparative Study*, 1st pbk. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Civilizations: a Comparative Study. His work compares many different early civilizations and how their sociopolitical development differed. He also compares the economic, religious, and cultural systems they developed. Trigger points out that no early societies existed in a bubble, and many interacted with surrounding smaller communities or even each other in later years. This seems to imply ancient Egypt and China may have influenced each other.

The study of belief systems and how they form is an interdisciplinary study, one of which has been analyzed through anthropological and psychological lenses. The study of anthropology is the study of human cultures and how they formed. In order for a group of people to grow from a tribe or small community to a full society, there must be a set of societal rules for the people to follow.² In a small-scale society, it is common to know every member of the community to some degree, and therefore hold them accountable for social behavior. This becomes impossible as societies grow to include hundreds or thousands of people. Societies therefore needed to evolve ways in which to control such large populations. One such way, evident in many cultures, is the concept of ancestor worship. Ancestor worship serves many social functions and provides a reason to behave in socially acceptable ways. In some societies, social cohesion is encouraged through the idea the ancestors are watching their living descendants expectantly.³ In many cases, such as ancient China, the ancestors served as an extension of the elders, and as someone

² R.I.M. Dunbar, "The Social Brain: Mind, Language, and Society in Evolutionary Perspective," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32, no. 1 (2003): 163–181, accessed November 14, 2022, <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/10.1146/annurev.anthro.32.061002.093158>, p. 163.

³ Matt J. Rossano, "Supernaturalizing Social Life: Religion and the Evolution of Human Cooperation," *Human Nature* 18, no. 3 (September 19, 2007): 272–294, accessed November 14, 2022, <http://link.springer.com/10.1007/s12110-007-9002-4>, p. 274.

to contact in order to ask advice or gain wisdom. In some cultures, such as ancient Egypt, ancestors may possess magical or supernatural powers and can grant wishes.⁴

There are many anthropological and psychological studies discussing why and how societies need and create morality and other belief systems. Both anthropologists and historians depend on archeological findings, especially when studying ancient peoples; however, historians rely heavily on written texts. These societies left behind records for historians to study, including documents about ancient beliefs. Considered one of the oldest written documents discovered, for example, Hammurabi's Code from ancient Mesopotamia was a collection of laws and codes of conduct for when the laws were broken. This is the first ancient example of morality being written down, and how it was policed.

In order to compare these ancient civilizations, it is essential to have context to understand how the ways of life and belief systems these ancient people evolved. One of the more important factors in shaping the worldview of the early civilizations is the landscape in which they emerged, particularly the nature of the rivers that were key to their development. Their different experiences are reflected in their belief systems, and what they consider to be the correct way to live. This also manifested in similar but different ways: the ancient Egyptians believed in gods and the ancient Chinese believed in *tian*, or a moral universe. Both of these societies practiced rituals and had some form of ancestor worship.

Many historians have covered similar or partial aspects this thesis delves into, including Barbieri-Low and Trigger. Other scholars have covered more specific questions

⁴ Rossano, "Supernaturalizing Social Life: Religion and the Evolution of Human Cooperation," p. 184.

in the same realm. For example, Robert L. Thorp and K. C. Chang are experts on Bronze Age China and Chinese archaeology. Their works give historians many insights into Shang China and the early years of Chinese culture. Another example would be Benjamin Schwartz, a scholar who studies ancient Chinese schools of thought and belief systems. The leading scholar in the realm of ancient Egypt is John Baines, a very prominent Egyptologist who has been writing for decades on various subjects.

Despite these many scholars working on similar topics, this thesis provides a new insight into the conversation in many ways. It argues that the elite ruling classes of ancient China and Egypt used the societal belief systems formed by their natural environments in order to justify and maintain their control over the civilization at large. This thesis provides a brief history of ancient China and Egypt, and the governmental systems in place. It also covers the ancient belief systems and why they formed the way they did. Furthermore, it compares the societies of ancient China and Egypt, which is a rare comparison in the field. This work is important because it analyzes where some of the very first large-scale belief systems came from, and why they are still important and relevant today.

Chapter Two starts by analyzing the history and belief systems of ancient China, beginning with the Bronze age and continuing through the Zhou Dynasty. Starting with the significance of the Yellow River, it explores how the natural environment shaped ancient Chinese world view. The river served as the source of many foundational beliefs, including a focus on more humanized legendary figures. Then the chapter moves onto explaining the ritualistic beliefs, explaining shamanism and ancestor worship. These foundational beliefs predate written history, although the ancient Chinese still practiced

them throughout the ancient period and early dynasties. These beliefs stem from the worldview formed due to the natural environment. The Yellow River was rough and dangerous, and required a significant amount of human intervention to control. No amount of praying would have changed this fact, leading to a focus on more personalized luck and fortune. Therefore, ancestor worship and rituals to bring oneself good fortune prevailed over the idea of a god or set of gods who controlled the river. In the earliest dynasties, the ruling and elite classes used these societal beliefs to justify their positions of wealth and power. At first, the kings claimed themselves as descendants of the high god Di, and later justified their legitimacy through the Mandate of Heaven.

Chapter Three delves into the world of ancient Egypt, beginning with the dominant river of the region, this time the Nile River. The natural environment in Egypt differed greatly from that of China, and the river was significantly more consistent and tamable. Egypt was not without any danger, of course, as it was still prehistoric times filled with wild animals and nomadic wandering groups. However, the area was relatively peaceful and this had an effect on the Egyptian world view. The ancient Egyptians believed in benevolent or ambivalent gods, and also practiced ancestor worship. They too practiced shamanism and believed in magic, and ancestors could grant wishes with the right rituals. The ancient Egyptians additionally had a concept of the afterlife, which required spells and offerings to safely travel through. The ruling and elite classes used these beliefs to justify and explain their positions. The kings of ancient Egypt possessed their ability to rule from the gods, and the ruling class was made up of priests and the extended members of the royal family. These beliefs changed slightly over the long period of ancient Egypt, but mostly used the same core justification.

Chapter Four, the last chapter, summarizes and reiterates some of the significant similarities and differences. It restates the importance of the natural environment and its role in influencing the different worldviews. It also compares the religious beliefs formed as a result, and finally how the elite classes used these belief systems to justify their positions of power in different yet similar ways.

The societies of ancient China and Egypt evolved belief systems reflecting their natural environment, in similar but different ways. While China's belief systems became more humanistic in nature and focused on morality, Egypt's belief systems centered around religion and focused on order persevering over disorder. The rulers of both of these societies used these belief systems to justify and keep their positions of power over the common people of their land.

Chapter Two: China

Introduction

Chapter Two explores how the elite classes in ancient China legitimized their positions, beginning with an analysis of the Yellow River and its impact on shaping a humanistic tradition. It then moves to ritualistic practices and foundational belief systems in the Shang dynasty, and then analyzes the development of the concept of *tian* and a moral basis for rulership in the Zhou dynasty. This is best showcased though the Confucianist school of philosophy, which articulated this moral concept in a more systematic manner.

The environment played a large role in the development of ancient Chinese world view, with its unruly river and arduous living conditions. This led to the focus on personalized experience within religion, especially in regards to ancestor worship and rituals. The significance of ancestor worship became a key aspect of the justification of Shang kings, and the rituals and cultural customs which persisted throughout the ancient world of China (about 2100 – 221 BCE). It evolved over the course of the different dynasties, most notably with the introduction of the Mandate of Heaven in the subsequent Zhou dynasty, but remained consistent at its core. The ruling and elite class continued to use these belief systems to justify their positions of power, and these were more systematically articulated in the philosophical schools of thought evolved. Many schools of thought emerged, but Confucianism eventually became the orthodoxy in the following Han dynasty, and shaped social and cultural concepts into early modern times.

China is one of the oldest civilizations in the world, with archeologists estimating large scale societies forming around six to seven thousand years ago.¹ Many of these societies formed around the same time in different areas of China, including major centers in the south and south west of China. One of these ancient Chinese societies formed in the North, in the Yellow River Valley, which was generally unpredictable and unforgiving. The climate in the north of China was colder and more arid, with its growing season being shorter compared to the south. The soil was more alkaline, making the area more hospitable to crops like wheat and millet. The river also flows through loess regions, which collects silt that falls to the river bed and often has the effect of changing the course of the river and making it prone to flooding.² Starting as early as 4,000 BCE, there would have been dozens of little kingdoms all over the area of modern day mainland China, all of which had similar but different cultures.³

The first potential dynasty to unite these kingdoms was the Xia dynasty (approximately 2050–1600 BCE), which, depending on the scholar, may have been mythical.⁴ There does exist, however, evidence the independent kingdoms were trading and coming together during this time.⁵ The Shang dynasty (1600-1045 BCE) is the first dynasty which verifiably existed, based on prevalence of written and archeological

¹ Brian M. Fagan and Nadia Durrani, *World Prehistory: A Brief Introduction*, Ninth edition. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), p. 324.

² Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 12-13.

³ Kwang-chih Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 17-18.

⁴ This is an ongoing debate among scholars. While there is no written or archeological evidence supporting the Xia dynasty existing as a true dynasty, archeological evidence suggests there was a collection of interconnected villages during the early bronze age predating the Shang dynasty. However, this does not necessarily mean there was an overseeing dynasty which ruled over the land.

⁵ Robert L. Thorp, *China in the Early Bronze Age Shang Civilization* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 62.

evidence. During this time, a significant amount of ancient Chinese beliefs were founded and practiced. The Zhou dynasty (1045-256 BCE) eventually overthrew the Shang dynasty, and the beliefs of the ancient Chinese evolved during this time. The Zhou dynasty, especially the Eastern Zhou (776-256 BCE), was a time of philosophical debate, centering around how to correctly rule the kingdom and how to be moral. It was also a time when many of the major Chinese institutions and traditions were established.

The Environment and The Yellow River: The Case of Yu the Great

A great number of factors went into the ancient Chinese forming the beliefs they held. The environment in which they lived in would have meaningfully impacted these beliefs. Many ancient Chinese settled in the Yellow River Valley.⁶ The Yellow River was unforgiving, as it flooded unpredictably and made it difficult to live near, and required a significant amount of irrigation to control. Many historians theorize that the amount of irrigation needed to make this area livable would have required a preexisting ruling class to organize such a large-scale working force to control the river.⁷ The river itself, as well as the necessary bureaucracy, laid the foundation for several central belief systems throughout Chinese history. This is fundamental background information for discussing how important the collective was to the ancient Chinese versus the individual.⁸

⁶ Multiple “Chinese” cultures existed in the area around the same times throughout ancient Chinese history, but many historians consider the civilization which settled in the Yellow River Valley to be the ancient Chinese due to their descendants controlling most of China afterwards.

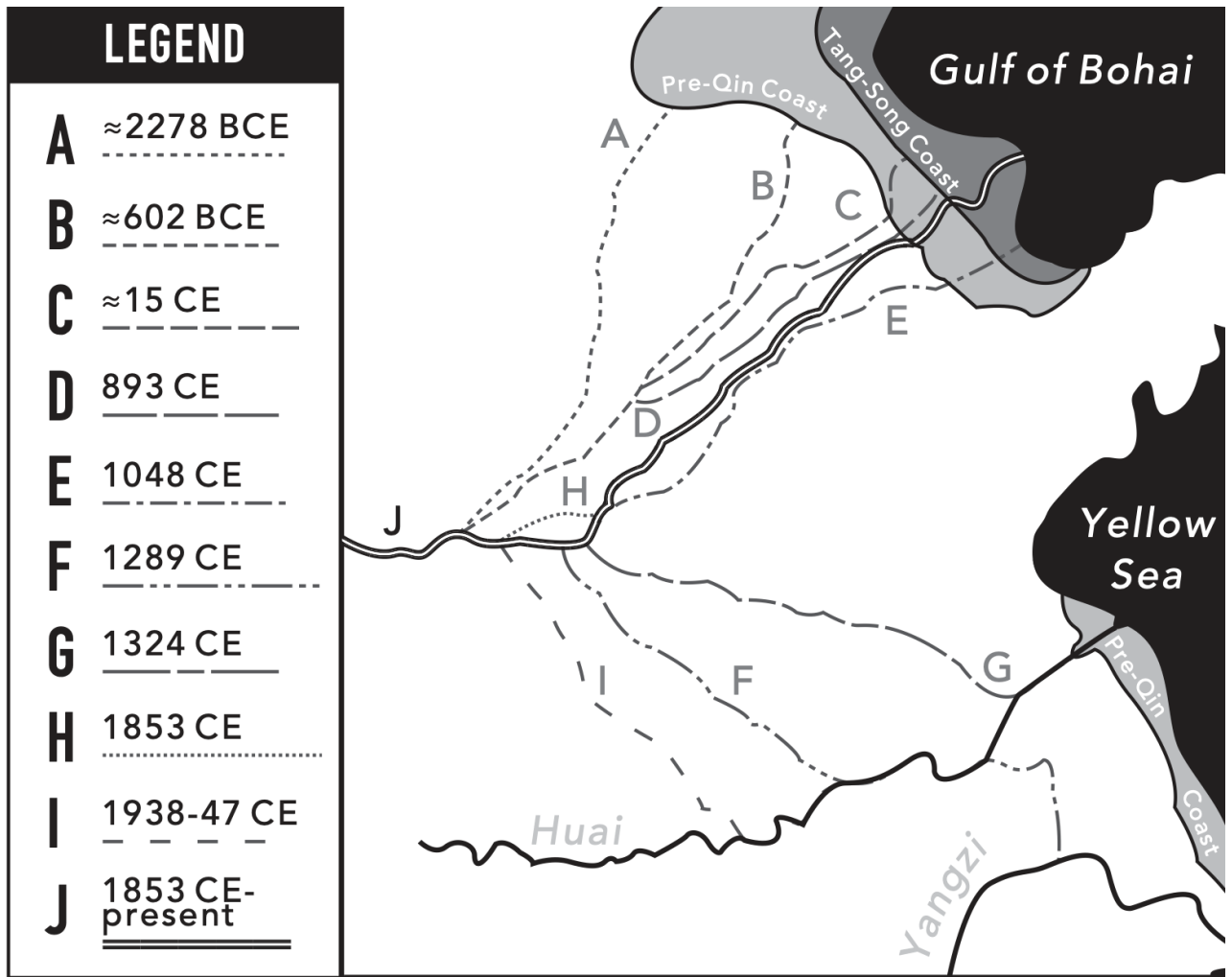
⁷ Anthony J. Barbieri-Low, *Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021), p. 20.

⁸ David N. Keightley, "Early Chinese Civilization in China," in *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization* ed. Paul S. Ropp, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990,) p. 19.

When it comes to ancient Chinese life, the Yellow River was a force with which to be reckoned. The river was unruly, intensely affected by Asian monsoons, flowing rapidly and eroding the surrounding landscape meant to keep it in place. The Yellow River shifted violently and to far distances, often killing many victims.⁹ Archeologists found significant amounts of artifacts left behind from people fleeing the river's violence, including muddy footprints fossilizing their retreat.¹⁰ The changes in the Yellow River would flood in an irregular manner, affecting many aspects of ancient Chinese life. Not only did this create many obstacles for agriculture, but it forced people away from their homes.

⁹ See Figure 1.

¹⁰ Thorp, *China in the Early Bronze Age Shang Civilization*, p. 31.



Map 1.3. Historical Courses of the Yellow River. Drawn by QZ Lau.

Figure 1: A map of the approximate changes of the Yellow River throughout time, as recorded by Chinese record keepers.

Source: Anthony J. Barbieri-Low, Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021), 27.

Unlike in Egypt, where the conditions on the Nile were ideal and close to paradise, the conditions in China were harsher. The mixture of a pleasant climate and a merciless river came together to create a worldview where life was difficult and unpredictable, but not miserable. Life was not tragic or unfair, but neither was it a

paradise or benevolent.¹¹ Instead, the worldview the ancient Chinese adopted was focused on personal welfare, and how to control their lives.¹² Historians then hypothesize that this worldview led to spiritual beliefs surrounding personal fortune and luck, as well as human effort, taking on a much more humanistic approach to philosophy than Egypt. Furthermore, the need for control over the river led to emphasis on human effort and expectations for kingly figures.¹³ They did have Di, the high god, but Di was neither vengeful nor benevolent. Furthermore, communication with and worship of Di was mostly practiced by the Shang kings, not the everyday people.¹⁴ The common people of ancient China would worship their own ancestors, performing rituals and sacrifices to them, not Di. This is related to Shang Kings calling themselves direct descendants of Di. The kings were not only communicating to and worshiping a god, but their ancestor. This showcases the importance of both ancestor worship and filial hierarchy.

In many cases throughout history, myths originated from real events or people and evolved into a story with the supernatural often being involved. In many Chinese legends and myths, however, the opposite process seems to have occurred. As discussed by Derk Bodde, Chinese legends tend to go through the process of euhemerization. Bodde defines this process as “the transformation of what were once myths and gods into seemingly authentic history and human beings.”¹⁵ Euhemerization occurred many times throughout ancient Chinese history, with many myths originating in the Xia or Shang dynasties and

¹¹ Keightly, "Early Chinese Civilization in China," p. 17.

¹² Barbieri-Low, *Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture*, p. 28.

¹³ Barbieri-Low, *Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture*, pp. 27-28.

¹⁴ Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 28.

¹⁵ Derk Bodde and Charles Leblanc, *Essays on Chinese Civilization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 48.

evolving via euhemerization in later years. Morphing the focus from supernatural and godly figures to historical and human legends showcases the ancient Chinese emphasis on human effort, and impacts many areas of ancient Chinese philosophy and morality.

The most prominent example of this humanistic euhemerization is the legend of Yu the Great. In this legend, Yu was able to control the Yellow River after many years of hard work, dedication, and selflessness. The people felt so grateful for his work that they made him the first emperor of the Xia dynasty, and his descendants ruled for many generations.¹⁶ The legend of Yu most likely started out as supernatural, with Yu and his father, Kun, being non-humans. Historians such as Bodde are able to come to this conclusion due to the origins of their names; the name Yu being derived from words similar to meaning reptiles and insects, and his father Kun's name containing elements meaning fish.¹⁷ In earlier versions of the myth, as Bodde discusses, the myth contained supernatural elements such as Yu coming down from the heavens on a winged dragon, or Kun being turned to stone. In later versions, the myths evolved to remove these mythical elements and instead focused on Yu's hard-working nature and dedication. This legend gives historians both the ideal for Chinese traits from Yu, but it also showcases the importance of having control over the Yellow River.

In the legend of Yu the Great, historians see the creation of an ideal ruler. A king was meant to be selfless and virtuous, dedicated to the people he ruled over, and a hard worker. Furthermore, the king needed to be able to control the violent and unreliable nature of the Yellow River. When the Yellow River was acting in an undesirable way,

¹⁶ Bodde and Leblanc, *Essays on Chinese Civilization*, p. 74.

¹⁷ Bodde and Leblanc, *Essays on Chinese Civilization*, p. 74.

political turmoil followed.¹⁸ This pattern continued through the Shang dynasty and into the next dynasties as well. These ideas were especially reflected in the morality and visions of kingship in the later Zhou dynasty (1045-256 BCE). This is significant in shaping aspects of ancient Chinese belief systems, as well as the formation of ideals of kingship.

Rituals, Ancestors, and Legitimation in the Shang Dynasty

Archeology in China has shown historians that ancient Chinese began with spiritual and supernatural beliefs. Starting in the Shang dynasty, evidence shows that ancient Chinese were practicing ritualistic forms of religion. One such ritual practiced during the Shang dynasty was human sacrifice. Archeologists found a site which serves as an example of a human sacrifice where the bodies are lined up in a row and are missing their heads.¹⁹ While it is impossible to know if these sacrifices were for the ancestors with certainty, like many of the rituals during this time period, this site definitely showcases an example of human sacrifice. The removal of the bodies' heads indicates that the people were killed, and for a specific reason. Due to further evidence of ancestor worship around the same time, these sacrifices were likely for the ancestors as well. As historians link these human sacrifices with ancestor worship, and the Shang kings ordered and organized them, these sacrifices were tied to legitimation as well.

Historians know the Shang dynasty worshipped their ancestors, along with many Chinese cultures before them. Evidence of ancestor worship can be found in many

¹⁸ Barbieri-Low, *Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture*, p. 36.

¹⁹ Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, p. 24.

instances, including burial practices, grave goods, and the use of oracle bones. Oracle bones were used in a ritualistic practice to see the future or ask certain questions. Diviners would carve questions into animal bones, often the shoulders of cattle, and heat the bones until they cracked and revealed the answers.²⁰ Oracle bones were used throughout ancient Chinese history to communicate with ancestors. While shamanism was a popular practice worldwide, as discussed earlier, ancient Chinese oracles would communicate with the ancestors using these oracle bones. Due to the kinship practices of Shang China, it is likely that people viewed the ancestors as not just supernatural beings, but as elders.²¹ Meaning, that ancestors served as both divine beings with supernatural knowledge as well as respected members of the family. This style of ritualistic religious beliefs of the ancient Shang would fall under the practice of Shamanism. While the practice of Shamanism varies throughout the world, a common connector between them is the belief in a supernatural plane beyond the Earthly world.²² Notably, this supernatural plane consists of spirits, who influence humans and the earthly world. A shaman can control and influence the spirits to help people through difficulties or sickness. A shaman can also do things such as see the future and communicate with the spirits of the supernatural world.²³ In ancient China, shamans used oracle bones to divine the future and communicate with the ancestors. As the ancient Chinese believed, this would allow the shamans to interpret the future or answer a question. Shamans would also

²⁰ Margaret Stutley, *Shamanism: An Introduction* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 11.

²¹ Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, p. 21.

²² Stutley, *Shamanism: An Introduction*, p. 2.

²³ Stutley, *Shamanism: An Introduction*, p. 6.

communicate with the ancestors, who were viewed as both spirits in the supernatural realm as well as elders of the family or clan.²⁴

Ancestor worship was important to the ancient Chinese for many reasons. Compared to ancient Egypt, where the gods controlled the world as a whole, the ancestors and the spirits focused more on individualistic luck and fortune.²⁵ As previously discussed, this phenomenon was in response to, in part, the effect of the environment and the Yellow River.²⁶ The Yellow River was vicious and unpredictable, needing large-scale irrigation in order to control. Therefore, the ancient Shang did not worship or communicate with gods who control the whole world but with ancestors who held individualized influence.²⁷ It was expected to discuss with the ancestors about important events or decisions because they were viewed as members of the family, as elders, and were to be respected and listened to just as living elders. This belief served to legitimize both Shang and Zhou rulers.

The Shang king was viewed as high priest, and an earthly counterpart to the high god of Di. The reason for this was because the King's ancestors were descendants of the high god.²⁸ As Schwartz put it, the kings' ultimate claim to power was their claim that they are direct descendants of Di.²⁹ Family and lineage served as very important cultural aspects of the Shang dynasty, and it was even more important for kings. The king's claim to the throne came directly from the high god Di, making it very important to worship

²⁴ Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 21.

²⁵ Ancient Egyptians also practiced ancestor worship, and they also asked for things from them. However, much like how the ancient Chinese believed in a god but it was not as prevalent as the worship of gods in Egypt, it was not as prevalent in Egypt as it was in China.

²⁶ Barbieri-Low, *Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture*, p.

²⁷ Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, p. 25.

²⁸ Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China*, pp. 9-10.

²⁹ Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, p. 29.

and acknowledge his ancestors. This era is when the belief practice of patrilineal based kin-systems became prominent.³⁰ Some of these practices included rituals surrounding the ancestors, something which remained important even during Confucius' time period (551-479 BCE) in the following Zhou dynasty.³¹ One of these rituals was consulting the ancestors with oracle bones, as discussed earlier.³² The focus on patrilineal familial kinship was important for many ancient Chinese at the time. It originated as a way for all people to access their ancestors, which many historians refer to as ancestral cults. It was very significant that the emperor was both the high priest and the father to the people.

The King's ties to the high god made them responsible for the people of China, as well as controlling the environment in the same way Di was expected to. This meant that supernatural forces typically reserved for gods, such as Di, were controllable by the Shang kings.³³ Controlling the Yellow River became the responsibility of the Shang king. The ruling class would have to organize a large-scale work force in order to achieve this through irrigation. The success of the Shang kings in this regard had the effect of the subjects believing in the kings' righteousness; therefore "people, both elites and the

³⁰ Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China*, pp. 25-37

³¹ Confucius spoke about rituals many times, as he was a strong believer in the rituals. He advocated for the practice of rituals, for everyone and certainly the ruling class. One such example would be when he spoke of the ritualistic practice of princes offering a sheep to the ancestors on the first of every month. During his time there, the dukes of Lu were neglecting this practice, but the sheep was still being sacrificed; which one of Confucius's students took issue with. In response, he said "Ts'ze, you love the sheep, I love the ceremony." This can be found in the Analects, Book III Chapter XVII.

Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (London: Clarendon Press, 1893), p. 161.

³² The king actually would have had professional diviners to prepare the oracle bones, but he himself would interpret the meanings. The predictions would have been about things out of human control, which is an aspect of why religion and supernatural beliefs formed in the first place, as discussed earlier in the paper. Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China* p. 25.

³³ Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, p. 37.

masses, had cheerfully flocked to serve virtuous rulers, often dynasty founders, who had won their allegiance not by coercion but by exemplary government.”³⁴

These early belief systems and events set the foundation for later Zhou beliefs. Zhou beliefs did evolve and change throughout the period, but they were still rooted in Shang beliefs and practices. Ancestral worship, rituals surrounding these beliefs, and the concept of a high god constituted these foundational beliefs. They later morphed and evolved to better suit the Zhou people, but did not fade out of existence completely.

Morality and Legitimation: *Tian* and Philosophy in the Zhou Dynasty

During the time of the Shang dynasty, the kings were viewed as the father of the ancient Chinese. Their right to power came from the claim they were the living descendants of the high god Di. This created a religio-familial-political institution which left very little room for dissent in any capacity against the kings.³⁵ Therefore, when the warriors of the later Zhou dynasty overthrew the last Shang king, they needed to fundamentally create a new justification for their right to rule. Instead of the kings being descendants of the gods, the king was given the right to rule through the Mandate of Heaven, or *tian*. Belief in the high god Di declined, and belief in the *Tian* grew. *Tian* is not a destination or after life, it is the moral universe itself.³⁶ This means that while the kings do have a mandate to rule, or a divine right to rule, their right is conditional. As

³⁴ Keightly, "Early Chinese Civilization in China," found in *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization* ed. Paul S. Ropp, p. 21.

³⁵ Keightly, "Early Chinese Civilization in China," p. 31.

³⁶ This can be found in *The Book of Chow*, Book XIV.

James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, 2nd ed., vol. 3 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), pp. 452-463.

long as the king is upholding the ways of the moral universe, he kept his right to rule.³⁷ A king who neglected his duties would bring down the wrath of *tian*, causing natural disasters and the mandate to be revoked and placed upon a new ruler.³⁸ This created a double edge sword.

The Zhou dynasty eventually overthrew the Shang dynasty around 1050 BCE. However, the Shang kings were thought to have divine right to rule, on top of being the Chinese subject's father. According to *The Analects*, a compilation of Confucius' teachings made by his students, the Zhou painted themselves as noble warriors overthrowing a corrupt and inept king.³⁹ Due to the highly religious claim to the throne Shang kings had, the Zhou dynasty is marked with several philosophical changes. Religious practices such as divining oracle bones and sacrifices declined, and the high god was replaced with the concept of *tian*. Specifically, kings were given power through the Mandate of Heaven. As previously stated, this heaven was a moral universe, not a destination, and it was called *Tian*. While Zhou kings were still linked to *tian*, their power was no longer divine or absolute. Instead, the king had his power only as long as he behaved morally and was approved upon by this moral universe. A king who neglected his duties would bring down the wrath of *tian*, causing natural disasters and the mandate to be revoked and placed upon a new ruler.⁴⁰

³⁷ This can be found in *The Book of Chow*, Book XIV. Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 3, p. 457.

³⁸ Schwartz, p. 40-55.

³⁹ Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (London: Clarendon Press, 1893).

⁴⁰ Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, p. 31. ; Schwartz *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, pp. 40-55.

After the Zhou dynasty first became established in the early Western Zhou period, there was relative peace in the regions with few if any wars or fights.⁴¹ However, there existed a flexibility which allowed new institutions to form.⁴² As a result of the Mandate of Heaven, the right to the throne was no longer necessarily guaranteed based on lineage. *Tian* served as a double edge sword, in which the ruling elite now had to prove their worthiness and morality while serving the Chinese people. Furthermore, the early Zhou dynasty had an elite ruling system where members of the royal family would rule key territories away from the king.⁴³ These lesser lords' power came from their claim to being a part of the royal family; however, China slowly became politically fragmented and divided due to nomadic invasions. In the early Zhou years, the royal families would seek alliances from the surrounding states in order to keep supreme power and avoid war. One of the ways in which they would achieve this would be marrying off the kings' children who were not heirs into surrounding states, giving them a stake in succession disputes.⁴⁴ During this time, the royal's heir would typically be chosen by the king, instead of defaulting to the king's oldest son by his wife. Royals, and especially kings, would often have many concubines, or women living in the royal palace to be with the king, often having his children.⁴⁵ The children not chosen to be the heir would go off to other regions to live as lesser lords.

During this time, "to expand their control over people and land, rulers also tried new techniques of governing. More and more they sent out their own officials rather than

⁴¹ Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, pp. 41-42.

⁴² Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, p. 42.

⁴³ Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, pp. 42-42.

⁴⁴ Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, p. 39.

⁴⁵ Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, p. 40.

delegate authority to hereditary lesser lords.”⁴⁶ This trend led to important consequences, including the elite ruling class system becoming more precarious to maintain.⁴⁷ It became a vicious circle of kings fearing their lesser lords and sending out their own officials, which in turn took away power from the lesser lords causing them to envy the central power of the kings. Paramount to this thesis, this also created a situation in which kings placed higher value on their personal advisors and officials, whom they chose and whose offices were not strictly hereditary. Not only did this create social mobility among the elite based on what they had to offer the kings, but it also made education and philosophy extremely valuable to the elite so they could compete to advise for the kings.

During the western Zhou period (1045-771 BCE), the country was fragmented into many culture centers and political organizations.⁴⁸ This time was when the three great legendary Zhou rulers supposedly existed: King Wen who formed alliances with neighboring states, King Wu who successfully defeated the Shang army, and the Duke of Zhou who acted as regent until King Wu’s son was old enough to rule. These leaders represent early and foundational traditions, in the form of military prowess and morality based upon filial piety and loyalty.⁴⁹

Yu the Great was used as a model for Zhou leaders. While it is likely Yu the Great was a legend passed down orally during the Shang dynasty, and perhaps earlier, the first written documents of this legend originated from the Zhou dynasty. He appears in many

⁴⁶ Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, p. 41.

⁴⁷ Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, p. 56.

⁴⁸ Feng Luo, “Political and Cultural Complexity in North-West China during the Western Zhou Period (1045–771 BC): New Evidence from Yaoheyuan,” *Antiquity* 97, no. 395 (2023): p. 1157, https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S0003598X23001047/type/journal_article.

⁴⁹ Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, p. 32.

historical documents throughout ancient Chinese History. One of the earliest depictions of the legend is in the *Book of Documents*, or *Shangshu*, which was likely written by a combination of many scholars of the time, and edited by Confucius.⁵⁰ Similarly, the legendary three first leaders of the Zhou dynasty also reflected ideal kingship behaviors, and Confucius articulated this in his writings as well. Confucius and his followers are responsible for many of the ancient Chinese classical writings which set the standard for Chinese morality for the next two thousand years.⁵¹ Confucianism ultimately became the orthodoxy in the following Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE) and in the process absorbed the ideas of other schools into its tradition.

One consequence of kingship being ruled by the Mandate of Heaven instead of a pure hereditary claim to the throne was the inherent ability to lose the right to rule. The king was meant to remain religious, ethical, and moral.⁵² However, concerned themselves more with their power and the control they had over their subjects. During this time, militarism and expansionism was on the rise. Not only were more people necessary to keep control of the land they were gaining, but political assassinations became more common and therefore a greater threat to higher ranking political figures such as royals.⁵³ The justification for why a certain person was in charge became paramount, and the shift to focus on advisors and philosophical morality slowly emerged.

However, due to the prevalence of so many noble regional lords as discussed earlier, the Western Zhou fragmented and the Eastern Zhou period began in 771 BCE.

⁵⁰ The classics were put together by many scholars, but Confucius is credited with editing and contributing to the works some.

⁵¹ Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, p. 56.

⁵² Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, p. 53.

⁵³ Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, p. 41.

During this Eastern Zhou dynasty (771-256 BCE), many schools of thought existed in regards to controlling the Yellow River. For the purpose of this thesis, Confucianism will be the main focus. The Confucian school of thought argued that it was the state's responsibility to control the river and protect the farmers from it. Contrarily, the Daoist school of thought advocated for letting the river be and letting it naturally flow. Both schools attempted to justify their position by linking their methods to Yu the Great.⁵⁴ Beyond philosophical thought, the Yellow River also served to legitimize the King's power. The ability to control the river was an important attribute for the Zhou King for many reasons, as it linked back to the legitimized earlier Shang kings. Due to the *tian* being tied to morality and not a deity, many scholars debated the correct moral way to live. Three distinct schools of thought emerged and dominated the discussion during the Zhou dynasty, although other schools did exist. These main schools were Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism. These three main philosophies were very different from each other, and had three distinct visions of how the government should properly govern, and what a good leader should do. This thesis will focus on Confucianism, and how it systemized the idea of a sage ruler.

The earliest of these philosophies was Confucianism, named after the philosopher Confucius (551-479 BCE). Confucius was concerned with morality and tradition, and strived to be not only a teacher, but a political advisor.⁵⁵ To Confucius, *ren* was the highest and most important virtue for leaders and commoners to have. *Ren* can be considered to be perfect goodness, benevolence, humanity, co-humanity, human-

⁵⁴ Barbieri-Low, *Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture*, p. 32.

⁵⁵ Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, p. 60.

heartedness, and nobility.⁵⁶ He was especially concerned with rituals, filial piety, hierarchy and living your assigned role, and reading the ancient texts. The *Book of Songs*, the *Book of Documents*, and the ritual texts were the most important texts to study in Confucianism.⁵⁷ His own teachings were written down by his students and compiled into a work called *The Analects*. This primary document is where historians gain the most knowledge about early Confucianism and the beliefs they held at the time.

In Confucius' teachings, a good leader would follow the royal rituals and rites.⁵⁸ In his teachings, a good leader would be the father of the people, and would treat his subjects as he would treat his children. The king should be the epitome of moral and ethical goodness, and lead by example.⁵⁹ Furthermore, he believed over policing the people and over punishing them would not teach the people to be moral, but only serve to teach them how to evade the law.⁶⁰ He also believed that greed and pride made a king unwise and unfit to rule. For Confucius and his followers, a good leader would be polite and virtuous, and lead by example. He also taught that leaders should listen to their ministers, and behave in ways which they deem to be virtuous and correct.⁶¹ During the Zhou dynasty, the leaders of the kingdom were expected to be wise and educated. They often had ministers, as Confucius points out, whose job it was to advise the ruling class on how to behave and what to do. These positions were limited to the elite and educated

⁵⁶ Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, p. 43.

⁵⁷ These can be found in the Legge translations of the Chinese classics; please see James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, 2nd ed., complete collection, (London: Clarendon Press, 1893).

⁵⁸ Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, p. 103.

⁵⁹ *The Analects*, Book II Chapter XX.

Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, p. 152.

⁶⁰ *The Analects*, Book II Chapter III.

Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, p. 139.

⁶¹ *The Analects*, Book III Chapter XIX

Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, p. 161

class, of which Confucius and his followers belonged to. Therefore, by declaring wise rulers should listen to their ministers, Confucius and his followers solidify their power and legitimacy in ruling China.

Confucianism continued on after his time, and his students and later scholars took his teachings in different directions. For example, Mencius was his most notable student, and took a positive view of life and humanity. He believed humans were naturally good, and a leader should be good and lead by example in order to keep the commoners good. He also asserted that the Mandate of Heaven was extremely important and sacred, and that any king not failing their subjects and living unethical lives would lose the mandate.⁶² He also believed in reducing taxes and lightening punishments, so the commoners would naturally want to be loyal to the king, as a son is naturally loyal to a father. Another prominent Confucianist was Xunzi, who had slightly different views on the world and humanity's natural state. His point of view focused more on humanistic beliefs than spiritual or religious. He did believe in practicing traditional rituals, however, due to the value they held as ways to satisfy desires. He also believed in traditional ranks and hierarchies. He believed, however, that humans were naturally selfish and needed a good and strong leader to show the commoners how to be virtuous.⁶³ In all three perspectives, the role of the government was to provide for and take care of the people.

⁶² Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, p. 44.

⁶³ Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, p. 45.

Conclusion

The beliefs and religious practices of ancient China originally formed and very much shaped by the Yellow River and other environmental factors which centered on personal fortune and ancestor worship. The combination of ancestor and humanistic legendary figures, and the need to justify overthrowing a father figure to the entire people such as the Shang king, led to a focus on moral leaders who take good care of their subjects. The double-edged sword of *Tian* created a situation where the leaders had to justify their position of power, and necessitated the need for political advisors who were highly educated and well read. Among all the philosophers, Confucianist ideas imported the most significant influence on shaping elite morality and political power.

Chapter Three: Egypt

Introduction

Chapter three examines the belief systems of ancient Egyptians up into the New Kingdom and the ways in which the ruling and elite classes justified their positions with these beliefs. It starts by describing the natural environment and what effects it had on the shaping of ancient Egyptian belief systems. It then discusses the rituals and belief systems which evolved in this culture, before finally moving onto the elite classes. These elite classes used the religious beliefs and rituals to justify their position in ancient Egyptian society. This is especially relevant to this thesis in how “the doctrine of divine kingship was the central, dynamic principle underlying Egypt’s social, political, and economic structures.”¹

The greatest difference between studying the history of ancient China and Egypt is the prevalence of written documentation. Most of what Egyptologists know about life in ancient Egypt (3100-30 BCE) is based on fragmented sources, and therefore a significant amount of inferences are needed. However, these lines of evidence have the potential to be more accurate to the average life of people as opposed to texts which are often written by the elite classes. As Dr. Lynn Meskell pointed out, the sources available to study ancient Egyptian life are documentary, iconographic, archeological, and anthropological.² Most of the written documentation comes from New Kingdom Egypt

¹ Lanny Bell, “The New Kingdom ‘Divine’ Temple: The Example of Luxor,” in *Temples of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Byron E. Shafer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p.137

² Lynn Meskell, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), p. 7.

(1550-1352 BCE), with earlier documentation being exclusive and limited. Most of the historical evidence of Old (2686-2160 BCE) and Middle Kingdom (2055-1650 BCE) Egypt comes from archeological artifacts, such as art. This is not to say written documentation of history did not exist at all, only that they are rare to find. While archeological artifacts are no more or less accurate than texts or written documents, it should be kept in mind when studying the history of ancient Egypt and China, due to the difference in inferencing and interpretation.

Another limitation of studying ancient Egyptian history in texts, similarly to Chinese history, is that it was written from an exclusively elite perspective, with primary sources coming from kings themselves or their officials.³ As Meskell and others accurately conclude, the lives this elite class lived were incredibly different from most of the Egyptian populace. Dr. John Baines summarized it best when he wrote that the elite running affairs had been a close-knit group, with “the total ruling and administrative class to fewer than 50,000, of whom perhaps one in eight were literate officeholders. They might have formed 3 to 5 percent of the population, which, in the Old Kingdom was perhaps one to one and a half million.”⁴

³ Meskell, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt*, p. 12.

⁴ John Baines, “Society, Morality, and Religious Practice.,” in *Religion in Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myths, and Personal Practice*, ed. John Baines et al. (Ithaca NY; London: Cornell University Press; Routledge, 1991), p. 132.

The Environment and the Nile River: Ancient Egyptian Cosmology

Egypt is one of the world's oldest civilizations, with the earliest neolithic settlements dating back to approximately seven thousand years ago.⁵ These first settlements existed largely as a collection of autonomous villages along the Nile River valley, existing in the mostly calm and consistent nature provided by the river.⁶ The Nile River valley had a mostly seasonally consistent climate, with temperatures most likely reaching below freezing in the winters and over 110 degrees in the summers.⁷

The theory that rivers had at least some level of influence on the political, social, religious, and philosophical thinking of the people living near them is potentially best evidenced by the Nile River and the Egyptians living there. The Nile is the second longest river in the world, being over 4,000 miles long, and covering over 2,900,000 square kilometers.⁸ The Nile provides a fairly steady year-long flow, with a regular and predictable flooding pattern.⁹ When it flooded, it brought down large quantities of silt from the Ethiopian highlands to the floodplains. The flooding led to the water staying in the land for six to eight weeks, after which time the water receded back to the river. This left the soil ready to be sown and planted for the season.¹⁰ Unlike the Yellow River in China, as discussed in chapter two, the Nile did not have much room to physically shift its overall course. This was due to the upper and middle floodplains being framed by

⁵ Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, New ed. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 33.

⁶ Robert L. Tignor, *Egypt: A Short History* (Princeton ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 17.

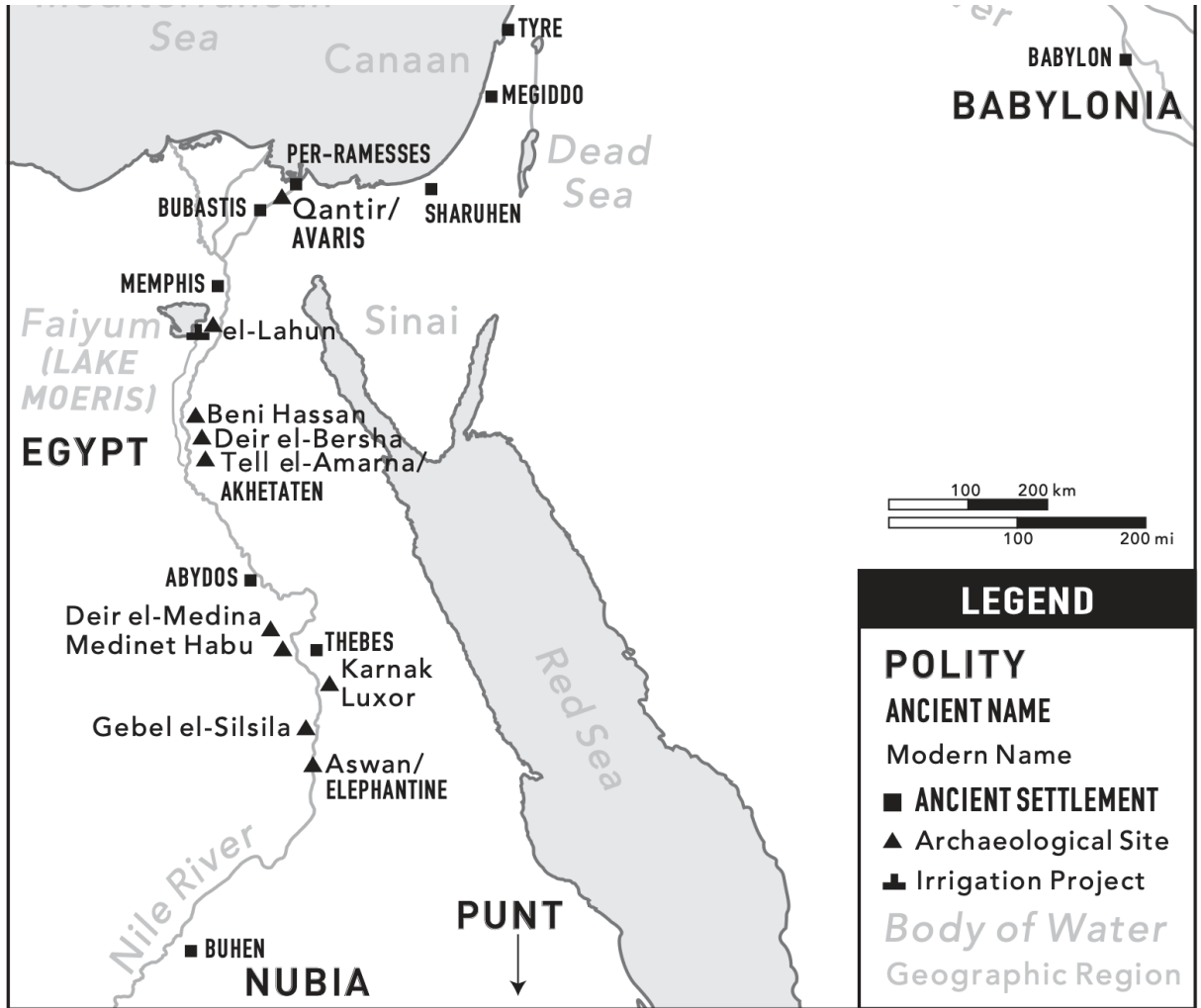
⁷ Talaat T. El-Gamal, *Nile Basin Encyclopedia (Vol 1-Part 1) By Hurst et al*, n.d., accessed May 12, 2023, https://www.academia.edu/32164090/Nile_Basin_Encyclopedia_Vol_1_Part_1_By_Hurst_et_al, p. 40.

⁸ Hurst et al, *Nile Basin Encyclopedia*, p. 10.

⁹ Anthony J. Barbieri-Low, *Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021), p. 23.

¹⁰ Hurst et al, *Nile Basin Encyclopedia*, pp. 20-21.

cliffs ranging from four to twelve kilometers apart.¹¹ The combination of the desirable climate, predictable flooding, and readily available arable land made the Nile River Valley a mostly ideal place to live.



Map 1.1. The Near East during the Late Bronze Age. Drawn by QZ Lau.

Figure 2: A map of the Nile River in the Near East during the Late Bronze Age (around 1500-1100 BCE).

Source: Anthony J. Barbieri-Low, Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021), 22.

¹¹ Barbieri-Low, *Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture*, p. 24.

There still existed the concept of danger, of course, as can be seen in Coffin Texts and the Book of the Dead.¹² Problems such as flood and drought were not uncommon, as well as other perils such as dangerous animals like snakes, alligators, and hippopotamuses. Even though the Nile River was mostly a reliable river, it did behave in unpredictable ways occasionally; and “the very waters that granted life could also deal death; for when the Nile was too high it brought destructive flood, and when it was too low it resulted in devastating famine.”¹³

As previously discussed, historians have speculated for a long time about the effect the environment and rivers have on the worldview of the people living there. This is especially true for ancient Egypt, where many aspects of the Nile’s landscape seem to have shaped the Egyptian worldview. One example of this influence is the way time was measured in ancient Egypt. The ancient Egyptians used both cyclical and linear concepts of time, simplified to as *nḥḥ* and *dt*. As Meskell phrased it, “*Nḥḥ* is often characterized as dynamic and *dt* as static.”¹⁴ Linear time was reserved for things like eternity in the afterworld, and keeping track of what has already happened.¹⁵ Cyclical time was associated with the cycle pattern of the annual flooding of the Nile, the birth and death of the sun every day, the recurrence of repetitive seasons, and the beliefs about death and rebirth.¹⁶ These beliefs also led to the dualistic worldview predynastic Egyptians held, where concepts such as day and night or life and death went together.

¹² These texts will be discussed more in depth in later sections of this chapter.

¹³ Bell, “The New Kingdom ‘Divine’ Temple: The Example of Luxor,” 129.

¹⁴ Meskell, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt*, p. 14-15.

¹⁵ Meskell, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt*, p. 15.

¹⁶ Barbieri-Low, *Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture*, p. 24.

Another aspect of ancient Egyptian thought influenced by the ways of the Nile was religion. The benevolent river and pleasant living conditions led to a more positive worldview and, potentially, even the earliest depiction of a paradise as an afterlife,¹⁷ although there were still dangerous obstacles. This worldview was also reflected in the ancient Egyptian's gods, both in what gods they believed in and how they believed the gods ruled over the world.¹⁸ For these ancient Egyptians, the gods would have been as benevolent as the Nile River. Furthermore, the success or failure of the king was often tied to the Nile, and political instability and turmoil followed whenever flooding was too high or too low.

Cosmogony, Magic, and Rituals: Ancient Egyptian Supernatural Beliefs

The ancient Egyptians believed in many different forms of cosmogony, or beliefs about the origin of the universe, with several overlapping or borrowing from each other. They did not necessarily view these beliefs as true or false, as they believed in aspects from many different belief systems. In the ancient Egyptian worldview, many different gods and cosmogonies could coexist, and they did not view the world as black and white. Despite the occasional contradictory belief systems which formed in ancient Egypt, "the ancient Egyptians generally would have been aware of these concepts and may well have had personal preferences among them, but no particular speculations appear to have been required dogmatically, since many conflicting descriptions often occur together."¹⁹

¹⁷ Barbieri-Low, *Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture*, p. 25.

More on moral and religious beliefs to come later in this chapter.

¹⁸ Ancient Egyptians believed in many varying forms of cosmogony, as discussed later in this chapter. Cosmogony is the belief in where the universe came from.

¹⁹ Leonard H. Lesko, "Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology," in *Religion in Ancient Egypt*, ed. Byron E. Shafer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 90.

Perhaps the most well-known cosmogony is the Heliopolitan cosmogony, consisting of the Ennead or group of nine gods. In this mythology, Atum was considered to be the creation god, of whom all other gods came from. He created Shu, the male god associated with air, and Tefnut, a female goddess associated with moisture. These gods then gave birth to Geb, a male god associated with earth, and Nut, a female goddess associated with the sky. Geb and Nut then come together to give birth to two sets of children, Osiris and Isis, and Seth and Nephthys.²⁰ According to Heliopolitan cosmogony, Osiris was the first king of Egypt, and his brother Seth killed him and dismembered his body, scattering the parts all over Egypt, in order to reign over Egypt. Osiris's sister and wife, Isis, found all of his body parts and revived him long enough to create an heir, Horus. Horus eventually defeated Seth and became the representation of the living, reigning king of Egypt.²¹ (This will be further discussed later on in the chapter). These narratives serve as both a creation myth with the ennead and an etiological myth, or a myth which explains why something is the way it is, explaining kingship with Osiris, Seth, and Horus.²²

Other cosmogonies also existed in ancient Egypt, including the Memphite cosmogony and Hermopolitan cosmogony. While these versions have different gods, "Egyptian gods overlapped, and groups of them could have complementary roles."²³ This concept is especially prevalent when comparing the Heliopolitan and Hermopolitan

²⁰ Lesko, "Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology," p. 92.

²¹ Lesko, "Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology," pp. 92-93.

²² John Baines, "Egyptian Myth and Discourse: Myth, Gods, and the Early Written and Iconographic Record," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 50, no. 2 (1991): 81-105, p. 95.

²³ Baines, "Egyptian Myth and Discourse: Myth, Gods, and the Early Written and Iconographic Record," p. 96.

cosmogonies. In the Hermopolitan version of creation, the Ogdoad replaces the Ennead. The Ogdoad is a group of eight gods and goddesses, with Amun and Amanuet who are associated with hiddenness, Huh and Hahuet who are associated with formlessness, Kuk and Kuaket who are associated with darkness, and Nun and Naunet who are associated with the watery abyss.²⁴ These forces came together to create Thoth, or Atum, who was the creator god. In the Memphite cosmogony, the creator god Ptah creates by using Sia, imagining in his heart, and Hu, saying it out loud or speaking it into being.²⁵ In this version, Ptah is equated with Nun and Nuanet from the Ogdoad, and creates the Ennead and Atun, therefore linking both Heliopolitan and Hermopolitan cosmogonies. This is an example of how “from time to time many of the cosmological and cosmogonical materials in the possession of the various Egyptian cults or religions were assimilated, integrated, and interwoven by skilled persons who knew what they were doing.”²⁶

Another important concept in ancient Egyptian religion is the cosmological forces believed in during the time. As discussed earlier, the ancient Egyptians used both cyclical and linear concepts of time, simplified to as *n \overline{h} \overline{h}* and *dt*. The linear concept of time was secular and associated with the mundane and ordinary human world, while cyclical time was sacred and associated with concepts which reoccurred regularly and repeated.²⁷ Some examples of these sacred, cyclical experiences of time include the day and night cycle, the rotation of seasons, the annual flooding of the Nile; and these reoccurrences were marked as weekly, monthly, and yearly holy days.²⁸ Moreover, the ancient

²⁴ Lesko, “Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology,” p. 95.

²⁵ Lesko, “Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology,” p. 96.

²⁶ Lesko, “Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology,” p. 90.

²⁷ Bell, “The New Kingdom ‘Divine’ Temple: The Example of Luxor,” p. 129.

²⁸ Bell, “The New Kingdom ‘Divine’ Temple: The Example of Luxor,” pp. 129-130.

Egyptians considered the lives of gods and kings to be cyclical and sacred, as “kings as *individuals* came and went, but kingship as an *office* never died.”²⁹ (This will be discussed further later in the chapter.) This created a complex notion where “in the Egyptian worldview, death did not disprove divinity. Gods died *and* they were immortal for the experience they practically infinite series of rebirths—as did the divine kings.”³⁰ Meaning, the ancient Egyptians held beliefs centered in the dual cosmological beliefs of both cyclical and linear time.

During the time in history known as Old Kingdom Egypt (2686-2160 BCE), the state was mostly geographically isolated from the rest of the world. The valley is protected in the south by the cataract at Aswan, in the west and east by the deserts, and in the north by the Mediterranean Sea.³¹ This relative isolation contributed to the continuity of culture and beliefs within the nation state. The ancient Egyptians of this time, much like in predynastic times, believed in a dualistic worldview. The Egyptians who lived during the Old Kingdom viewed the world as fluctuating between order and disorder, and it was the king’s task to rule in a wise and just manner to ensure *ma’at* and *Isft*.³² This duality was also prevalent in the belief that there was a worldly life as well as an afterlife. The evidence Egyptologists have regarding what these ancient people believed about the ancient life is fragmented, like much of Egypt’s historical records. Perhaps the most important example would be the early wisdom texts, which stressed the importance of living a life full of moral worth, pleasure, and material success.³³ These beliefs continued

²⁹ Bell, “The New Kingdom ‘Divine’ Temple: The Example of Luxor,” p. 138.

³⁰ Bell, “The New Kingdom ‘Divine’ Temple: The Example of Luxor,” p. 138.

³¹ Bell, “The New Kingdom ‘Divine’ Temple: The Example of Luxor,” p. 32.

³² Bell, “The New Kingdom ‘Divine’ Temple: The Example of Luxor,” pp. 128-129.

³³ Meskell, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt*, p. 15.

through the Middle Kingdom (2055-1650 BCE) and into parts of the New Kingdom (1550-1352 BCE).

Ma'at in ancient Egypt was the concept of cosmic order, truth, and justice; this concept did not necessarily mean good. It represented the way the universe, and Egypt as the center of the universe, should be. It was simply the way things were, and deviance from this was against *ma'at*. Anything else was criminal and savage.³⁴ The opposite of *ma'at* was *Isft*, or chaos. One example of *Isft* coming into Egypt would be the Nile River behaving in any undesirable fashion. The ancient Egyptians believed, according to many cosmogonies but especially in the Ogdoad cosmogony, that chaos reigned in the beginning, represented by the eight gods and goddesses. Then the earth and Egypt were created, along with all living things. Later on, in Coffin Texts, there was a focus on Nun, or the watery abyss, at the start of creation.³⁵ In this way, the Nile River “could symbolize the water abyss at the beginning of time when chaos prevailed,”³⁶ whenever it flooded with too much or too little water in any given year. This will be discussed in further detail later on, but it was the king’s job to ensure *ma'at* prevailed over *Isft*.

The ancient Egyptian religion also consisted of many rituals, both for the elite and the peasant class. Getting to the afterlife was a difficult process, and one which required many rituals to achieve successfully. People buried in private tombs would be born again into the next life, and it was required to have offerings. Their descendants would normally take care of these offerings, similar to ancient China. In order to get to the afterlife, a person needed all aspects of the personality in order to survive the ordeal into

³⁴ Bell, “The New Kingdom ‘Divine’ Temple: The Example of Luxor,” p. 128.

³⁵ Lesko, “Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology,” p. 95.

³⁶ Bell, “The New Kingdom ‘Divine’ Temple: The Example of Luxor,” p. 129.

the *Amduat*, or afterlife. The first part was the actual corpse or body, which would need to be mummified. There was the heart, which was where the Egyptians believed the person was kept, the name, and the shadow as well. Then there were three abstract aspects of the person which were needed in order to reach the afterlife: the *Ka*, which was considered to be your double and the part of you that needed offerings or nourishment, the *Ba*, which was the spiritual body and associated with movement, and the *Akh*, which were worshiped in ancestor shrines and continued to be felt by the living.³⁷ These concepts were complicated, but an important part of Egyptian culture and religion.

The burial tombs and mummification practices of ancient Egypt were very important to the kings, although they evolved over time. The biggest evidence of the pharaoh's esteem and power in the Old Kingdom was the royal funerary pyramids of Dynasty 4. By the Old Kingdom times, pharaohs were not only expected to ascend to the afterlife and join the gods, but their grave sites were also supposed to serve as places of worship of gods and kings.³⁸ In the Old and Middle Kingdoms, Egyptians buried the kings inside pyramids, which is where the pyramid texts can be found. As time went on, starting in the Middle Kingdom, kings were buried inside of royal tombs instead of the larger pyramids. Inside many of these royal tombs were coffin texts, which ranged from religious texts and spells to instructions on how to be a successful official.³⁹ One major literary work of the Old Kingdom was an example of the latter, titled *The Maxims of*

³⁷ Bell, "The New Kingdom 'Divine' Temple: The Example of Luxor," pp. 130-131.

³⁸ Robert L. Tignor, *Egypt: A Short History*, p. 35.

³⁹ Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 102.

Ptahhotep.⁴⁰ In this work, an aging elite nobleman is giving advice to his son on how to be a good person and how to behave properly.

The Middle Kingdom was a period of significant changes to culture, politics, and religion. This period is referred to by some as the classical period of ancient Egypt, due to it being “a time when literature, the monumental style of architecture, polytheistic religion, and the governmental institutions that were introduced in the Old Kingdom were brought to a high state of perfection...”⁴¹ While much of the evidence of this period did not survive, Egyptologists do have some excellent artifacts. During this period, Egyptologists start to see the emergence of Coffin Texts in both royal and elite tombs, and they were a series of spells designed to help the person through the arduous journey of the afterlife.⁴²

While the New Kingdom is associated with powerful pharaohs and military expansionism, it is also associated with monumental constructions, more involvement in the government from women, and religious worship.⁴³ Archeological evidence suggests many workers’ towns popped up to construct governmental buildings in the Valley of the Kings. In the specialized example of Deir el-Medina, it was essentially a worker’s town. The people who lived there worked on construction, typically construction of temples, and lived off of state support. All of their basic needs were supplied by the government as payment for their work.⁴⁴ Ancient Egyptian middle class typically lived like this, as

⁴⁰ William Kelly Simpson and Robert Kriech Ritner, eds., “The Maxims of Ptahhotep,” in *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, 3. ed. (New Haven, Conn. London: Yale Univ. Pr, 2003), pp. 129-148.

⁴¹ Robert L. Tignor, *Egypt: A Short History*, p. 54.

⁴² Lesko, “Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology,” p. 113.

⁴³ Robert L. Tignor, *Egypt: A Short History*, p. 60.

⁴⁴ Kathryn A. Bard, *An Introduction to the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt*, Second edition. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), p. 280.

laborers, or as farmers. Most people were illiterate, but some evidence suggests the middle classes could occasionally read and write. For example, there are artifacts of love poems found in the town of Deir el-Medina.⁴⁵ This was when the Valley of the Kings and Queens were constructed, and when the Book of the Dead first appears. The Book of the Dead was a series of spells designed to help people through the journey of the afterlife, usually reserved for royalty and the elite classes. It became so popular in the New Kingdom that “the papyrus copies of the book of the dead...provided spells for overcoming obstacles in the afterlife, and the book permitted anyone who could afford to have a personalized copy to be found innocent in a judgment by Osiris and to join Ra in the sky.”⁴⁶

It is within this religious context that historians can understand how the elite classes legitimized their positions of power.

Legitimation of Ruling Class: Cult of the Royal Ka, and the Exceptions.

Religion and government went hand and hand in ancient Egypt, as they both “had been divinely prescribed, and the sovereign wielded both temporal and spiritual power.”⁴⁷ The kings of ancient Egypt were both the head of state and the head of religion. Much like in Shang China, the Egyptian kings served as the High Priest, and “stood at the apex of the juridical and sacerdotal systems.”⁴⁸ A king’s legitimacy came from the ancient Egyptian religion, and the religion validated his position as king; “in some cases the King may have imposed himself upon a particular religious system and its mythology, but in

⁴⁵ Bard, *An Introduction to the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt*, p. 280.

⁴⁶ Lesko, “Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology,” p. 113.

⁴⁷ Bell, “The New Kingdom ‘Divine’ Temple: The Example of Luxor,” pg. 138.

⁴⁸ Byron E. Shafer *Temples of Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 9.

other cases the priest-scribes who authored the religious texts voluntarily affirmed the kings divinity for one reason or another and incorporated him into their religions by formulating and propagating the myths as they did.”⁴⁹

A very important concept of kingship was the royal cult of *Ka*. The *Ka* in this context is the divine aspect of the office of kingship. The king was supposedly born with the royal *Ka*, but he only achieves divinity when he becomes one with the royal *Ka*, which happens during the coronation ceremony. If the successor was not meant to be king, the *Ka* would reject him. This process was celebrated annually through festivals, propagating this belief system. One such festival, the *Opet*-festival, “serve as a starting point for exploring how temple rituals promoted social cohesion by validating the king’s preeminent role in society.”⁵⁰ This festival, as evidenced inside the Luxor temple, would have focused on five main aspects: the conception of the divine king, his acknowledgement by Amun, his coronation, his public recognition by the Ennead, and the renewal of the king’s powers by the celebration. While the king himself was not usually viewed as a god, his office was viewed as divine, and the legitimacy of his rule through association with the god Horus, Osiris’s son.⁵¹ The Egyptian king “possessed a dual nature. He was simultaneously mortal and divine, human and superhuman. He was the living incarnation of deity, the divinely chosen intermediary...”⁵² This concept is

⁴⁹ Lesko, “Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology,” p. 91.

⁵⁰ Bell, “The New Kingdom ‘Divine’ Temple: The Example of Luxor,” pg. 127.

⁵¹ Apart from certain quotes, which I separated into other footnotes, the information in this paragraph comes from Lanny Bell, “Luxor Temple and the Cult of the Royal Ka,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44, no. 4 (1985): 251–294, pages 251-258.

⁵² Lanny Bell, “The New Kingdom ‘Divine’ Temple: The Example of Luxor,” in *Temples of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Byron E. Shafer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 128

essential when considering particular kings throughout ancient Egyptian history, because it justifies their position.

In predynastic Egypt, most people lived in autonomous villages and worshiped local gods. The southern villages of Upper Egypt were larger and developed different cultures than settlements in the north. During this first distinct era known as the Badrian period (approximately 5500 to 4000 BCE) people were mostly farmers in these independent villages.⁵³ The next era was known as the Naqada period (4000-3100 BCE). This period is broken into three phases, and as early as the second phase social and occupational hierarchies existed, evidenced by more elaborate tombs with expensive grave goods belonging to the wealthier and more powerful people.⁵⁴ Upper and Lower Egypt were united during the third phase, and resulted in an elaborated state administration and early writing.⁵⁵ Thanks to archeological work in the Abydos royal cemetery led by David O'Connor and Gunther Deyer in the 1980s and 1990s, Egyptologists are able to conclude that the “development of monumental architecture symbolized a political order of a new scale, with a state religion headed by a god-king to legitimize the new political order.”⁵⁶ This belief in divine office of kings and practice of centralized government would continue into the next era of ancient Egyptian history.

As discussed earlier, during the Old Kingdom the pharaoh's position was seen as divine, and was seen as the mediator between the gods and the world. The pharaoh would

⁵³ Robert L. Tignor, *Egypt: A Short History*, p. 17-18.

⁵⁴ Robert L. Tignor, *Egypt: A Short History*, p. 18.

⁵⁵ Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 64.

⁵⁶ Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 66-67.

As previously discussed, the kings themselves were not seen as gods, but their office was divine and a part of them was the royal *Ka*.

have many responsibilities to keep Egypt in a state of order, including rituals to speak to the gods.⁵⁷ These kings would typically have absolute control over the state government made up of family members, while allowing local communities to police themselves.⁵⁸ The end of the Old Kingdom is associated with the First Intermediate period. The most likely reason for this was the catastrophic failures of the Nile River between 2180 and 2150 BCE, which led to famines and the suffering of the people.⁵⁹ This disorder was associated with the failings of the pharaoh, who was responsible for ensuring order. This, combined with unclear succession after the long reign of Pepy II, led to the collapse of the centralized government, and the country was fragmented into local monarchs.⁶⁰ The ways of Old Kingdom Egypt had come to an end, leading into the intermediate period and Middle Kingdom Egypt.

The First Intermediate period was not very long, but it was a time of chaos. This period is characterized by Egyptologists as a time of great change in intellectual thought and culture. The Old Kingdom ended with the collapse of the centralized government, leading to local governments taking charge of their areas. On top of this, the local monarchs competed with each other for land and power. Not only was Egypt fragmented politically, it was socially fragmented as well.⁶¹ Unlike during the Old Kingdom, the First Intermediate period saw an increased degree of religious and intellectual freedom, without the pharaoh and religious bureaucracy carefully controlling the localized elite

⁵⁷ Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 92.

⁵⁸ Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 92.

⁵⁹ Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 49.

⁶⁰ Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 107.

⁶¹ Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 110.

ruling classes.⁶² Archeologists have been able to deduce this from the lack of significant large-scale buildings, which were only possible under a centralized government. Further evidence comes from differing art styles, more prevalent coffin texts, grammatical changes, and localized styles in art and architecture. Furthermore, there is “evidence of a thriving culture among the poorer levels of society, as well as vigorous social development in the provincial towns of Upper Egypt,”⁶³ although the lower levels discussed were more likely localized elite than common people. The First Intermediate period only lasted one century, but it was a time of significant cultural change.

One local monarch, Mentuhotep II succeeded in unifying Upper and Lower Egypt, and similarly to humanized Chinese legendary figures, was later deified for his achievements.⁶⁴ Founder of the 12th Dynasty, the king, Amenemhat I, moved the capital to Thebes.⁶⁵ This is known as the start of Middle Kingdom Egypt (2055-1650 BCE).⁶⁶ One major change was the elevation of a local god, Amun, into a national deity. Amun was later merged with the Old Kingdom god Ra to become Amun-Ra, the god of all divine power (This concept will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter).⁶⁷ This is important because the First Intermediate period is associated with localized worship and beliefs. Kings during Middle Kingdom Egypt were viewed as divine, similar to how kings from Old Kingdom Egypt were potentially viewed as deities on Earth.⁶⁸ The role of

⁶² Robert L. Tignor, *Egypt: A Short History*, p. 54.

⁶³ Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 110.

⁶⁴ Lesko, “Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology,” p. 104.

⁶⁵ Dorothea Arnold, “Amenemhat I and the Early Twelfth Dynasty at Thebes,” *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 26 (1991): 5–48, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1512902>, p. 14.

⁶⁶ However, there is debate on if the 11th Dynasty counted as the First Intermediary period or the Middle Kingdom.

⁶⁷ Robert L. Tignor, *Egypt: A Short History*, p. 55.

⁶⁸ Lanny Bell, “Luxor Temple and the Cult of the Royal Ka,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44, no. 4 (1985): 251–294, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/544764>.

the king also changed during this time. Middle Kingdom kings were portrayed as good shepherds whose duty was to secure the well-being of the Egyptian people, as seen through art where the kings are depicted with larger ears, and holding canes and flails.⁶⁹

While little is known about the Middle Kingdom due to much of the evidence being destroyed, Egyptologists do know that the politics changed drastically between Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt. Some surviving documentation includes evidence that the ruling elite of crown bureaucracy were supported by taxation of the local people, and a system of intermediate and forced labor, or Corvée labor, which existed from the beginning of the state.⁷⁰ However, there were also local governors known as nomarchs, who ruled more closely over the people in their area for the royal court. These nomarchs were later replaced by mayors, who answered to the state government.

The Middle Kingdom ended with the Second Intermediate period (1650-1550 BCE), characterized by the emigration and rule of the Hyksos, a people from southwest Asia.⁷¹ Not much is known about the Hyksos rule from their perspective, as they did not leave behind any written documentation of their rule.⁷² However, there is a significant amount of archeological evidence relating to the Hyksos and their influence on the Egyptian people. The Hyksos rulers, who were likely descendants of Syrians, had been trading with the Egyptians for centuries before the Second Intermediate Period, with many artifacts showing Egyptian influence.⁷³ These people took Egyptian office during

⁶⁹ Emily Teeter, "Egyptian Art," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 20, no. 1 (1994): 15–31, p. 20

⁷⁰ Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 161.

Corvée labor is defined as labor exacted instead of taxes enacted by public authorities, typically for public works.

⁷¹ Robert L. Tignor, *Egypt: A Short History*, p. 57.

⁷² Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 173.

⁷³ Anna-Latifa Mourad, *Rise of the Hyksos: Egypt and the Levant from the Middle Kingdom to the Early Second Intermediate Period* (Archaeopress Publishing Ltd, 2015), p. 216.

the Middle Kingdom, and their numbers grew until eventually they outnumbered Egyptian officials.⁷⁴ They only ruled in Northern Egypt, and they never fully assimilated to the ways of the Egyptians, and were viewed as outsiders and oppressors.⁷⁵ In the South, there was a Dynasty of Upper Egypt made up of elite individuals who themselves were not descendants of the previous ruling class.⁷⁶ However, the kings in Upper Egypt used the preexisting belief systems of ancient Egypt to justify their rule, while the Hyksos did not. This tension, as well as the evidence that the Hyksos were gradually pulling away from Egypt already, led to the overthrow and expulsion of the Hyksos, leading into the New Kingdom era of ancient Egyptian history.

The New Kingdom (1550-1352 BCE) starts with the end of the Hyksos rule, accomplished by Ahmose I. Not only did he reestablish Egyptian rule and drive out the foreigners, he reunified Egypt and solidified Egyptian culture and religious beliefs.⁷⁷ The New Kingdom is associated with powerful pharaohs, exhibiting military prowess and expansionist ideologies to prevent any foreign rulers in Egypt. Perhaps the biggest example of expansionist ideology would come from Thutmose I who ruled in the 18th dynasty. His mother helped him rule for a significant portion of her life, as he was too young to rule by himself when he first came to power. After her death he ruled alone, and was constantly expanding into Asia.⁷⁸ He led an extended campaign in Syria and the Palestine area.⁷⁹ His son Thutmose II only ruled for about three years. He married

⁷⁴ Mourad, *Rise of the Hyksos*, p. 185.

⁷⁵ Robert L. Tignor, *Egypt: A Short History*, p. 59.

⁷⁶ Josef Wegner, "A ROYAL NECROPOLIS AT SOUTH ABYDOS: New Light on Egypt's Second Intermediate Period," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 78, no. 2 (2015): 68–78, p. 77.

⁷⁷ Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 209.

⁷⁸ Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 62.

⁷⁹ Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 225.

Hatshepsut, who was also the daughter of Thutmose I and held the title God's Wife of Amun. Although Thutmose II's son, Thutmose III, was supposed to rule after his death, he was too young to rule by himself. Therefore, Hatshepsut became the queen regent and ruled for him.⁸⁰ She made herself ruler of Egypt, and considered herself the result of a divine creation, with her mother being queen and her father being Amun.⁸¹ In this claim, she used the religion of ancient Egypt to justify her power. She focused more on trade and the economy than expansionism, which Thutmose III focused on, and oversaw many construction projects.⁸² She was buried in the Valley of the Kings, and many documentations about her from her time shows her with more masculine features and described with male pronouns most of the time.⁸³ Her name was completely feminine, however, making her title complicated.

Apart from Hatshepsut, most of the New Kingdom pharaohs were expansionists and focused on waging war and overseeing the construction of monuments, including Thutmose III who campaigned during her reign. One major exception to this was the reign of Akhenaten, who ruled from 1352-1336 BCE. This radical pharaoh attempted to completely change Egyptian culture and religion, and is considered by many to be the first creator of a monotheistic religion. He moved the capital city from Thebes to the middle of Egypt when he created Akhetaten. He attempted to erase the previous gods worshiped in Egypt, and declared that the one and only true god was the Aten.⁸⁴ However, because of his radicalism, it is likely he was unpopular among the elite priestly

⁸⁰ Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 228.

⁸¹ This is most likely where the concept of Pharaohs being god-kings may have come from.

⁸² Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 234.

⁸³ Robert L. Tignor, *Egypt: A Short History*, p. 63.

⁸⁴ Robert L. Tignor, *Egypt: A Short History*, pp. 64-65.

class. He had defunded the temples, removing their power over religion.⁸⁵ Because of his actions, later pharaohs attempted to destroy all evidence of his rule, and his successors reinstated the priestly class and moved the capital back to Thebes.

Despite later rulers' attempts to completely erase Akhenaten's rule, a lot is preserved. Akhenaten was a very unique ruler, as he attempted to erase the already established gods and create a new god, The Aten.⁸⁶ What separates The Aten from the rest of the Egyptian gods is that Akhenaten believed, and preached, that he was the one and only god. Not only was he the only god, but he was also the god of all of humanity, not just Egypt; something which separated him from the other Egyptian gods.⁸⁷ The Aten was a sun god, and he ruled over all benevolently.⁸⁸ Akhenaten not only "elevat[ed] The Aten to the position of chief deity, but he actively suppressed the worship of all other gods (except Re and Atum, whom he saw as manifestations of the Aten)."⁸⁹ He also changed the role of the king so that he was the only one able to act as an intermediary with the Aten, "thus Akhenaten's real intention may simply have been to deny any separation between the royal *ka* and the *person* of the king."⁹⁰

The New Kingdom was when a significant amount of empirical expansionism and trade happened, connecting them to the outside world in a way which didn't happen as much in earlier kingdoms. Like most societies, the ancient Egyptians saw themselves as

⁸⁵ Robert L. Tignor, *Egypt: A Short History*, 68.

⁸⁶ Barry Kemp and Albert Zink, "Life in Ancient Egypt Akhentanen, the Amarna Period, and Tutankhamun," *RCC Perspectives*, no. 3 (2012), p. 11.

⁸⁷ Terence Ward, "Akhenaten." In *Faith in Writing: Forty Years of Essays*, edited by Jennifer Lindsay, (NUS Press, 2015), p. 126.

⁸⁸ Donald B. Redford, "The Sun-Disc in Akhenaten's Program: Its Worship and Antecedents, I," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 13 (1976): p. 56.

⁸⁹ Lanny Bell, "Luxor Temple and the Cult of the Royal Ka," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44, no. 4 (1985): 251–294, p. 291.

⁹⁰ Bell, "Luxor Temple and the Cult of the Royal Ka," p. 292.

culturally superior to those around them.⁹¹ They conquered and colonized the areas around them, setting up trade routes and implementing offices.⁹² The Egyptians required tributes from the people they conquered, and this was especially prominent in Nubia, known for its vast amounts of gold.⁹³ There are not a lot of documents concerning the lower classes of ancient Egypt, but there is some archeological evidence from which to infer. For example, the size of houses in certain regions indicates that the majority of ancient Egyptians were lower class and lived on the outskirts of rich urban areas or in rural areas.⁹⁴ Evidence suggests that people lived together in large family units. Elite women would often have the same rights as men in New Kingdom Egypt, such as the right to divorce and hold property, but the society was very patriarchal.⁹⁵

Conclusion

The Nile River valley's direct impact on life and death in ancient Egypt contributed heavily to the belief systems they developed. These beliefs centered around gods who were mostly benevolent or ambivalent, as well as a construction of the afterlife which required spells to get through safely. They also believed in the concepts of *ma'at* and *Isft*, or order and disorder. It was the king's divine responsibility to maintain *ma'at* inside of Egypt, and keep *Isft* out. The elite classes were made up of the royal family and priests, who also acted as governmental forces, as the two offices were deeply intertwined. The kings received their legitimization through the cult of the royal *Ka*, in

⁹¹ Meskell, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt*, p. 20.

⁹² Meskell, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt*, p. 19.

⁹³ Meskell, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt*, p. 19.

⁹⁴ Meskell, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt*, 31.

⁹⁵ Robert L. Tignor, *Egypt: A Short History*, p. 77.

which the Egyptians believed a part of the person was reincarnated into each king. Rulers who did not abide by the pattern were unpopular and often lost support in their dynasties. The ancient Egyptian belief system was central to the legitimation of the elite to justify their political power and economic wealth.

Chapter Four: Comparison and Conclusion

Ancient Egypt and ancient China both have rich histories and belief systems. These belief systems formed in large part due to the natural environment, including the river valleys from which the first civilizations emerged. These world views and belief systems promoted social cohesion, such as through ancestor worship and an emphasis on morality. Once these societies became large enough, the rulers used these belief systems to justify and maintain their power. While these early nations formed different beliefs and governments, there are certain similarities which are still relevant today.

Comparison: Rivers, Religion, and Rulers

The natural environments of ancient China and Egypt differed greatly, and this effected the formation of their worldviews. The Yellow River was ferocious, requiring significant and widescale human intervention in order to utilize. It naturally flooded without pattern, and agriculture was only possible through intense irrigation. This reality helped shape numerous important aspects of the ancient Chinese belief system, including ones regarding rituals, ancestors, and the ruling classes. In comparison, the Nile River was benevolent and calm, flooding surely and requiring little human intervention. The natural environment of ancient Egypt influenced their worldview to be more positive, as they believed in ambivalent or benevolent gods. They also believed in *ma'at*, which meant order, and they believed it was the natural state of Egypt and the universe.

Beliefs of the ancient Shang people and earlier focused on some supernatural aspects, including the high god Di and shamanistic beliefs. These were grounded in

Chinese worship of their ancestors. They sacrificed to them or communicated with them through the shamanistic practice of using oracle bones. While the ancient Egyptians also worshiped ancestors and had rituals surrounding this concept, it was not as culturally important as in ancient China. In ancient Egypt, it was more important to ensure the correct performance of spells and rituals to help a deceased person onto the afterlife. The evidence of these practices can be found in pyramid and coffin texts.

The religious beliefs differed in other ways as well. Many historians believe the ancient Chinese had cosmogenous myths, along with other types of myths. However, these myths held less significance than in Egypt. By the time written history started with the Zhou dynasty, many of these myths had already become or were in the process of becoming completely humanized. Ancient Chinese myths morphed into legends, featuring extraordinary humans who possessed ideal moral and virtuous traits. For example, the myth of Yu the Great started out with supernatural elements, and evolved over time alongside the belief systems of the ancient Chinese people to become more humanistic in nature. Additionally, ideal kings needed to control the river and protect his subjects. Egyptians held various cosmogonies, all of which featured gods and goddesses. The most prominent cosmogony of the Ennead featured nine gods who created the universe, including the concepts of *ma'at* and *Isft*. Furthermore, the first king and the office of kingship was a god, Horus. Ancient China also had a god, Di, but he was ambivalent to humanity. The Shang kings could and did communicate with Di, as he was considered the ancestor of the Shang kings and ancestor worship was very important.

This was how the Shang kings claimed their right to rule. As dependents of Di, the Shang kings held the divine right to rule. On top of this, the Shang Chinese viewed

the king as the father of the people, a very important role in a patriarchal society. During the Zhou dynasty, the new ruling class therefore needed justification as to why they removed the Shang king and replaced him with a ruler they viewed as more moral. This is when the Mandate of Heaven came in, and the condition of being a moral and good ruler became tied to the right to rule. A king who neglected his duties would bring down the wrath of *tian*, causing natural disasters and the mandate to be revoked and placed upon a new ruler. While this did give the founders of the Zhou dynasty the justification and right to overthrow the king, it simultaneously created a double-edged sword. The Zhou kings needed to be moral and just, ruling over the Chinese people in a way approved by *Tian*. This in turn created a need for good and knowledgeable advisors, who would advise the king on how to behave and how to best rule the people. Therefore, the new elite and ruling class truly belonged to these advisors, even though the king was still the king.

After the Old Kingdom collapsed, a time of great political turmoil and fragmentation occurred. Local governments took over for a while, but a new unified government was formed in the Middle Kingdom. The kings' roles changed from simply ruling as they pleased to being viewed as good shepherds of the people, whose duty it was to secure the well-being of the Egyptian people. The Second Intermediate Period showed Egypt ruled by outsiders, the Hyksos people, who never really assimilated and were run out just a century later. The New Kingdom is associated with powerful pharaohs, exhibiting military prowess and expansionist ideologies to prevent any foreign rulers in Egypt. They were still god kings at this time, but they had new responsibilities in the Middle and New Kingdoms. This is very similar to China, where the rulers still had a right the rule granted by *tian*, but it was conditional on how good of a ruler they were.

Similar to the expansion of Chinese elite growing to include a new class of advisors, the New Kingdom of Egypt expanded the achievability of the afterlife to the extended royal family and elite classes.

The elite class in the Zhou dynasty solidified the need for their position for ongoing generations, as they dictated what a moral and just ruler did. Many philosophies questioning morality and how to rule emerged during the Zhou dynasty. While dozens of these philosophies emerged and spread around during the early Zhou dynasty, three main ones dominated the conversation, with Confucianism being established as the orthodoxy in the subsequent Han dynasty. Confucianism was a complex and ongoing debate at the time; however, it can be best summarized by a focus on rituals, filial piety, education, and leading by example. It was the king's job to rule justly and live as he commands. The elite and ruling class had power in the forms of dictating and enforcing the laws of China and collecting taxes. They lived above the standard of life of the peasants, especially the farmers of the time. They advocated for education and extensive study of the literature for the elite class, and while these positions were not exclusive to certain families, it was impossible for people not already from elite families to get the education required for these positions. This guaranteed their own power, and ensured future generations would also exclusively have access to their standard of living and education.

In Egypt, the elite class had the power to rule over local populations via controlling labor and taxation. The Pharaohs of Old Kingdom paid little attention to the outlying areas, allowing local communities to police themselves. During the Middle Kingdom, their responsibilities grew to include watching over the well-being of their subjects, a parallel of Zhou kings' responsibilities. In the Old Kingdom, the Pharaohs

were meant to continue taking care of the citizens and also expand Egypt and grow the wealth and prosperity of the early nation. They colonized and conquered the land around them, and the local enforcers took tributes and taxes in the name of the Pharaohs.

Conclusion

The people of ancient China and Egypt formed their societies in both similar and vastly different ways. They were both shaped by the natural environment and what they were exposed to, but their environments were vastly different. The belief systems they formed because of their environments started off as a way to explain why life was the way they experienced it; to explain how humans came to being, to explain why certain weather events happen, and so on. These belief systems were then used by the ruling class to justify their positions, first in the form of divine right to rule. These beliefs evolved over time, over hundreds or thousands of years. While the beliefs and practices of the ancient societies may have been different, the process was similar.

Furthermore, historians can see this process unfolding throughout history and into today. In America, for example, many politicians use religion and other social belief systems to campaign for their spot in government. In America, religion is no longer used as a right to rule, but it is still used as a political tool to advance certain agendas. While this process has evolved and changed over times and throughout different societies, the process is still prevalent.

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