

Rituals in Chapter “Chengwu” of Tsinghua Bamboo Slips and King Wen’s Sacrifice to Heaven for Commitment to the Reign

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Keywords: Chapter Chengwu in Tsinghua Bamboo Slips; Tai Si’s Dream; King Wen’s Commitment to the Reign; Sacrifice to Heaven

Abstract: As stated in Chapter Chengwu of Tsinghua Bamboo Slips, King Wen of Zhou has held six ritual ceremonies after Tai Si’s Dream: removal of evil omens; offering to ancestors and the state deities; prayers to all deities; reproach to the gods of Shang Dynasty; observing and paying homage to various deities; and divination. However, the ritual of “sacrificing to Heaven” is not included in these six rituals. The reason behind this could be that Tai Si’s Dream took place between the release of King Wen from Youli and the territorial dispute between Yu and Rui, and the tale was spread for political purposes. It was not until a few days before the conquer of the Chong state that King Wen performed the sacrifice to Heaven for commitment to the reign, and this indicates the breakup between Zhou and Shang.

1. Introduction

King Wen’s commitment to the reign starts from Tai Si’s Dream, a broadly spread theory of political transformations in the late Shang Dynasty and early days of the Zhou Dynasty. Before the unearthing of Tsinghua Bamboo Slips, the Dream could be found in the remnants of Chapter Chengwu in the “Lost Book of Zhou”, where there are brief accounts of the contents of Tai Si’s Dream and how King Wen interpreted it through divination to reveal a good omen. After Chapter Chengwu of Tsinghua Bamboo Slips was unearthed, we managed to fully understand the content of Chapter Chengwu in the “Lost Book of Zhou”, in which a range of ritual regimes are presented. Here, the first three parts of the Chapter Chengwu are introduced and quoted [1]:

“In the waxing crescent of the first lunar month of the first year of King Wen’s reign, Tai Si (King Wen’s wife) dreamed that Shang’s imperial courtyard was strewn with thorny plants. In this dream, her son Ji Fa (later known as King Wu of Zhou) took a catalpa tree from the imperial palace of Zhou and planted it among the thorny plants, which then miraculously transformed into pine trees, cypress trees, yu trees, and oak trees. Tai Si woke up in shock and shared the dream with his husband King Wen. King Wen dared not interpret it himself and

instead asked Prince Ji Fa to perform a low-key ritual to ward off the evil and perform a purification ceremony. Subsequently, purification ceremonies were performed to King Wen by the ritual officer Xin, to Tai Si by the shaman Shuai, and to Prince Ji Fa by the sacrificial official Ding. Afterwards, they reported the matter to the ancestral temples, offered to ancestral shrines, made prayers to all gods, reproached the gods of Shang Dynasty, observed and paid homage to various deities, and conducted a divination in the Ming Hall. Ultimately, King Wen and Prince Ji Fa both bowed in reverence to the auspicious dream, believing that they had received the mandate from heaven to overthrow the Shang Dynasty.”

Tai Si’s Dream in Chapter Chengwu in Tsinghua Bamboo Slips reveals the essence of “King Wen’s reception of the mandate”: following Heaven’s order to overthrow and replace Shang. This accounts for the fundamental political theory for the Zhou people to replace Shang, and Tai Si’s Dream marked the beginning of this theory. It was natural that King Wen, after receiving such an important mandate from Heaven, later offered sacrifices to Heaven to declare to the world that he had possession of the Heaven’s mandate. In fact, there are historical documents that mention King Wen’s sacrifices to Heaven before he started to lay the foundation for the Zhou Dynasty. However, it is rather perplexing that no records of this ritual of sacrificing to Heaven could be found in the Chengwu Chapter in Tsinghua Bamboo Slips. In the following sections, the series of rituals that King Wen performed in response to Tai Si’s Dream recounted in the Chengwu chapter of Tsinghua Bamboo Slips are analyzed to solve the confusion mentioned above based on the historical context of King Wen’s reception of the Heaven’s mandate.

2. Ritual Ceremonies in Chapter Chengwu in Tsinghua Bamboo Slips

In the Chapter Chengwu in Tsinghua Bamboo Slips, King Wen’s response was “not dare to interpret (the dream)”. In response to Tai Si’s Dream, King Wen and the Crown Prince Ji Fa held a range of rituals to find that it was an “auspicious dream”, and they “received the Heavenly mandate”. The range of rituals described in Chapter Chengwu in Tsinghua Bamboo Slips will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

The first ritual ceremony is “fu chu bu xiang” (which means “to purify and remove evil omens”): in Chapter Chengwu in Tsinghua Bamboo Slips, King Wen first “issued an order to Crown Prince Ji Fa to ask the shaman to tell whether omen is auspicious or ominous, and then perform the ritual to remove the evil omens”. Later, the ritual officials performed rituals to purify King Wen, Tai Si, and Crown Prince Fa of evil omens: purification ceremonies were performed on King Wen by the ritual officer Xin, Tai Si by the shaman Shuai, and Prince Ji Fa by the sacrificial official Ding. The letters “Xin”, “Shuai” and “Ding” are considered the names of the officials; the shaman Shuai is a female official and the sacrificial official Ding refers to a priest, and such arrangements match their respective status.

“Fu” is a ritual to remove evil omens. As stated in “The Rites of Zhou—Spring Officials: Female Shamans”, “she is in charge of seasonal purification rituals, including blood-letting and bathing to remove evil influences” [2], which refers to eliminating disasters and evil spirits. In “Zuo Zhuan—The Sixth Year of Duke Xi’s Reign”, a commentary to the texts “accepting the jade disc and performing the purification ritual” indicated “purification” as “a ritual to eliminate ill omen” [3]. “Purification” can also directly refer to the purification sacrifice. In “Zuo Zhuan—The Twenty-ninth Year of Duke Xiang’s Reign,” it says “performing the purification ritual before the burial and presenting mourning gifts”, with a commentary explaining “purification as a sacrificial ceremony to remove inauspiciousness” [3]. As read in “Shuowen Jiezi—The Section of Indication”, “purification is a sacrifice to eliminate evil” [4]. King Wen first performed the purification ritual because he did not know whether Tai Si’s Dream was auspicious or inauspicious, and if it was

inauspicious, it would bring disasters.

The second ritual ceremony is offering to ancestors and the state deities. In Chinese, it is called “bi gao zong fang she ji”. It is considered that “zong fang” means the family temple, which is consistent with the interpretation in “Guoyu-Zhouyu” where it says “the gate of the temple is termed ‘fang’, and ‘zong fang’ thus means ‘the ancestral temple’”.

This ritual is to provide offerings to the ancestors in the ancestral temple and to other state deities such as the God of Earth, the God of Farming, etc. In “Shuowen Jiezi—The Section of Indication”, it is recorded that “peng, men nei ji xian zu suo yi pang huang. Fang, peng huo cong fang” (which literally means ‘peng’, which is a more ancient form of ‘fang’, is offer sacrifices to ancestors inside the ancestor temple) [4]. “Fang” refers to the family temple where sacrifices are provided to the ancestors. “zong fang” refers to the ancestral deities of the Zhou people. “She” is the God of Earth. As recorded in “Rites of Zhou—Spring Officials—Grand Minister of Religion”, “wang da feng, ze xian gao hou tu” (when the King conducts a grand feudal enfeoffment, he first makes an announcement to the God of Earth), for which Zheng Xuan’s provided a commentary explanation: “hou tu, tu shen ye” (“hou tu” means the God of Earth) [2]. “ji” refers to the God of Farming, who was an ancient figure that taught people how to farm. After his death, he was deified and is worshipped by later generations” [5]. Therefore, those who King Wen of Zhou offered sacrifices to are the ancestral deities, the God of Earth, and the God of Farming.

“Bi gao” means providing sacrifices to the ancestral deities and the God of Farming when no complete sacrificial animals or grain are prepared”. Statements in the book “Rituals of the Suburban Sacrifice” also acknowledge that “bi gao” is just the step of “killing the sacrificial animals” in the whole sacrificial ritual [5]. Before the divination, King Wen of Zhou did not know that Tai Si’s Dream was an auspicious dream, so he prayed to the deities.

The third ritual ceremony is “qi yu liu mo shan chuan”, which literally means “to perform prayers to the deities of the mountains and rivers in the four directions of heaven and earth”. The compiler of Chegnwu considered that “liu mo” means “all directions”, and we maintain that it means gods and deities of all directions. As recorded in “Rites of Zhou—Spring Official—Great Music Master”, “the Huangzhong tone was thus played, songs in the Dalv tone were sung, and the ‘Yunmen’ dance was performed to honor the celestial deities. Subsequently, the Dacu tone was played, songs in the Yingzhong tone were sung, and the ‘Xianchi’ dance was performed to honor the earth deities. Then, the Guxi tone was played, songs in the Nanlv tone were sung, and the ‘Dashao’ dance was performed to honor the deities of the four directions. Finally, the Ruibin tone was played, songs in the Hanzhong tone were sung, and the ‘Daxia’ dance was performed to honor the mountains and rivers”[2]. There are some other statements in “Rites of Zhou—Spring Official—Great Music Master”: “six ritual jade instruments were crafted to honor the deities of heaven, earth, and four directions” [2]. People in ancient times believed that mountains could reach Heaven; mountains and rivers had spirits and their respective deities, and thus they were also the deities to pray to.

However, it should be noted that there is a paragraph in the “Book of Documents—The Reign of Shun”: “He offered sacrifices to the Supreme God in a grand manner, performed the ‘yin’ sacrifice to the Six Great Deities, offered prayers to the mountains and rivers, and made offerings to all the deities” [6]. The “Six Great Deities” are matched with “mountains and rivers” which can refer to the deities of the sun, moon, stars, and planets, and of four directions, which are equal to the term “all deities” in “The Reign of Shun”. “qi yu liu mo shan chuan” means “to perform prayers, rather than sacrificial rituals, to the deities of the mountains and rivers in the four directions of heaven and earth”.

As stated in “Book of Rites—Ritual Implements”, a gentleman once said, “When one is performing sacrificial activities, he is not to pray to the gods for anything (i.e., it is not for personal

desires or utilitarian purposes”. In Zheng Xuan’s commentary, it is said that “praying means begging or asking for; performing sacrificial activities is not asking for blessings” [5]. It is also recorded in “Mr. Lv’s Spring and Autumn Annals—Sincerity and Integrity”: When Shen Nong (Chinese God of Farming) ruled the world, he conducted sacrificial rituals on time with utmost reverence, but not to pray to the gods for any blessings or benefits” [7], which provides a counterproof that King Wen of Zhou just performed prayers instead of sacrificial rituals, to the deities. Moreover, the “qi” corresponds to “bi gao”, which means the rituals performed by King Wen of Zhou were simple and no grand sacrificial events were conducted.

The fourth ritual ceremony is “gong yu shang shen” (reproaching the gods of Shang). The compiler referred to a statement in “Rites of Zhou—Spring Officials—Grand Minister of Sacrifice”: “(the Grand Minister of Sacrifice) is in charge of six types of prayers to communicate with ghosts and spirits, ... the fifth type is ‘gong’, which means ‘reproach or condemnation’”, and Zheng Xuan’s commentary in which he explained “gong” as “using words to reproach (the ghosts and spirits)”. Thus, the compiler used this to demonstrate the meaning of “gong” and suggested that it might be due to the fear of the spirits of Shang causing mischief, so words were used to reproach them. This explanation makes sense.

Tai Si dreamt that “the imperial courtyard of Shang is strewn with thorny shrubs; her younger son Ji Fa took a catalpa tree from the imperial palace of the Zhou and planted it between the palace gates. The catalpa tree then unexpectedly transformed into pine trees, cypress trees, yu trees, and oak trees”, which was considered no trivial matter. The thorny shrubs are a sign of decline, while the catalpa tree of Zhou later grew into pines, cypresses, yu trees, and oak trees in Shang, which suggests that Zhou would replace Shang. In the section of Chengwu, both the rise and decline occurred in the “courtyard of Shang”. From the metaphorical perspective of this dream, this “courtyard” is not an ordinary palace or hall, but the ancestral temple and hall of worship for the Shang people, which embodies the political power of Shang. “Thorny shrubs growing in the courtyard of Shang” indicates the decline of the Shang Dynasty. King Wen of Zhou’s “reproach of deities of Shang” stems from his fear that the ancestors of the Shang might undermine the fortune of the Zhou people, so he “uses words to admonish them”.

The fifth ritual ceremony includes “wang” and “zheng”. The compiler, referring to annotations in “Huainanzi—Human Affairs”, explained “wang” as “sacrificing the sun, moon, stars, mountains, and rivers”; “zheng”, according to the annotations in “The Book of Songs: Tianbao”, specifically refers to a type of sacrificial activity conducted in winter.

Before the rituals of “wang” and “zheng”, King Wen of Zhou have already performed the two rituals of “offering to ancestors and the state deities” and “performing prayers to the deities of the mountains and rivers in the four directions of heaven and earth”, so if we interpret “wang” and “zheng” as two special types of sacrifices, which conflicts with the ancient statement that “sacrifices are not made for prayer”. The ancient saying goes that “if there is no suburban sacrifice, there is no need for the ‘wang’ sacrificial ritual”. There was an excerpt from “Zuo Zhuan—Thirty-first Year The 31st Year of Duke Xi”: “The ‘wang’ sacrifice is a minor part of the suburban sacrifice. If there is no suburban sacrifice, there is no ‘wang’ sacrifice to be conducted” [3]. Another excerpt in “Zuo Zhuan—The Third Year of Duke Xuan” reads that “in the spring of the third year, there was no suburban sacrifice; however, there was a ‘wang’ sacrifice. Both were not aligned with the conventions of rites. As the ‘wang’ sacrifice is part of the suburban sacrifice, there should not be a ‘wang’ sacrifice if there is no suburban sacrifice” [4]. Here, “wang” is considered to be part of the suburban sacrifice, which mainly involves sacrificing to Heaven. However, in Chapter “Chengwu” in Tsinghua Bamboo Slips, there were only rituals for praying to deities and no suburban sacrifice rituals were mentioned. Therefore, it is not advisable to interpret “wang” as the “wang” sacrifice; instead, it will be more reasonable to extend to the meaning of “setting up an alter

for the ‘wang’ sacrificial ritual”.

“Zheng” means offering. In “The Book of Songs —Er Ya—Interpretation of Heaven’s States”, it was recorded that “the winter sacrifice is termed ‘zheng’”, and an annotation attached to it says “it is an act of presenting offerings and items” [8]. In “The Book of Rites—Monthly Orders”, it was mentioned that “a grand feast with ‘zheng’ offerings”, where the annotation said “‘zheng’ refers to the winter sacrifice held at the ancestral temple. It is called ‘grand’ because there are many offerings that can be presented ‘during the winters’” [5]. Another excerpt in “The Book of Rites—Regulations of the King” says that “the sacrifices at the ancestral temple of the emperor and the nobles ... are called ‘zheng’ in winters”. Sun Yan, a scholar in the Han Dynasty, explains that “‘zheng’ means to present, to offer items”[5]. Therefore, the word “zheng” in Chapter Chengwu in Tsinghua Bamboo Slips should also be interpreted as “to offer or present”.

The words “zheng” and “wang” in Chapter Chengwu in Tsinghua Bamboo Slips should be interpreted as “setting up altars for the Four Directions and present offerings so that the deities of the six ends of the earth, the mountains, rivers, and other gods may enjoy them”.

The sixth ritual ceremony is “zhan yu ming tang”, which means “divination at the Ming Hall”. This is the last ritual performed by King Wen of Zhou as recorded in Chapter Chengwu in Tsinghua Bamboo Slips, which means that King Wen performed divination to learn that Tai Si’s Dream was an auspicious dream for him to reign. There are similar records in documents about the history of the early Zhou Dynasty. An excerpt from “Book of Documents—The Great Announcement” reads: “King Ning (interpreted as King Wen) left me a great tortoiseshell for divination, through which I am instructed by the will of Heaven”; another excerpt in it says “Heaven blessed King Ning and led our small state of Zhou to prosperity. King Ning conducted divinations and was able to successfully receive this mandate from Heaven to overthrow Shang and reign the world”. These records all prove that King Wen learned through divination that Tai Si’s Dream is Heaven’s mandate for him to lead the Zhou people to overthrow and replace Shang. In other words, before King Wen performed the divination, he did not know that the dream was a divine dream that embodied Heaven’s mandate for Zhou to replace Shang.

Given the analyses above, Chapter Chengwu in Tsinghua Bamboo Slips has kept records of the range of rituals that King Wen performed after Tai Si’s Dream, including removing the evil omens, praying to ancestors and deities of rivers and mountains, reproaching the ancestral deities of Shang, and performing divinations to receive Heaven’s mandate. However, the crucial ritual of sacrifice to Heaven has not been performed before and after the divination. General wisdom holds that King Wen should hold the sacrificial ritual to Heaven after receiving Heaven’s mandate, but in Chapter Chengwu in Tsinghua Bamboo Slips, it only reads “King Wen and Prince Ji Fa both bowed in reverence to the auspicious dream, believing that they had received the mandate from heaven to overthrow the Shang Dynasty”.

3. King Wen’s Sacrifice to Heaven for Commitment to the Reign

Before King Wen publicly offered sacrifices to Heaven to accept the mandate from Heaven, there were already words among the masses that King Wen should receive the mandate from Heaven. As read in the verse “Mian” in the section “Da Ya” in the “Book of Songs”, “‘Yu’ and ‘Rui’ were mediated to settle their disputes, and King Wen emerged vigorously” [9]. The settlement of the dispute between Yu and Rui offered a perfect opportunity for the Zhou people to promote the theory of their reception of the mandate from Heaven. Perhaps it was at this time that Tai Si’s Dream was first publicized by the people of the Yu and Rui states, but the time was not ripe for a public sacrifice to Heaven. As recorded in Chapter Chengwu in Tsinghua Bamboo Slips, King Wen said: “Shang fears the rise of Zhou, and Zhou fears the power of Shang”, indicating that Shang and Zhou

were a thorn in each other's flesh. There are also records in the Chapter "Wenjing" in the "Lost Book of Zhou": "King Wen told his dream and feared that his descendants' sacrifices might not be protected." [10]. Another record in the Chapter "Wujing" in the "Lost Book of Zhou" reads: "the king issued an alert and summoned Zhou Gongdan (Duke Zhou), saying, 'Alas, the plot has been revealed! I have just awakened from a dream in which the Shang frightened me.'" [10]. These records all reflect the critical situation faced by the Zhou people. If they had immediately offered sacrifices to Heaven after Tai Si's Dream, it would undoubtedly have intensified tensions between Shang and Zhou.

The tension between Shang and Zhou has already mounted to hostility and enmity at the time of Tai Si's Dream. Before this, King Wen had just been released from imprisonment in Youli and returned to the West; both his eldest son, Bo Yikao, and his father, Ji Li, were killed by the Shang rulers in an attempt to deter the Zhou people. Aware of the dire situation, King Wen warned his crown prince Ji Fa: "Shang is in trouble with Zhou, and Zhou is in trouble with Shang". In Chapter Chengwu in Tsinghua Bamboo Slips, King Wen warned his son Ji Fa: "yu wei bo meng, tu shu yan fu, yin you wu wang qiu ming wu wei" (which means to desire a dream of the cypress, merely to speak empty words, and not to lose the autumn brightness and martial power). "To desire a dream of the cypress", King Wen means to promote Tai Si's dream. With high prestige from tribes and vassal states, King Wen was considered the destined recipient of the mandate from Heaven, and after that, King Wen promoted that Tai Si had dreamt of the Heavenly Emperor conferring the mandate upon him. Later, as the words spread and the masses began to acknowledge this tale, King Wen declared his reception of the mandate from Heaven through a formal sacrificial ritual to Heaven [11].

King Wen could only adopt a humiliation strategy and acted covertly with goodwill in the critical situation. He first promoted the tale of his reception of the mandate from Heaven, but refrained from performing the formal sacrifice to Heaven; otherwise, he would infuriate the Shang ruler and get killed as well. Later, a few days before the conquest of Chong, Zhou had already established itself as the lord of the western territories, and to advance eastward and northward against Shang, Zhou had to remove Chong, the largest obstacle standing between Zhou and Shang. The conquest of Chong marks a crucial step in Zhou's ambition to move out of the Hangu Pass and fulfill Heaven's mandate of overthrowing Shang; it is a military move politically aligned with the goal of sacrificing to Heaven for commitment to the reign, and both mark the complete breakup between Shang and Zhou. Moreover, performing sacrifices to Heaven for the reception of Heaven's mandate to reign allows Zhou to stand on higher moral ground and legitimate its rallies with vassals against Shang. Thus, the sacrifices to Heaven could be performed only when Zhou's power grew strong enough to move beyond Hangu Pass and conquer Chong.

As read in the verse Huang Yi in the Da Ya section of the Book of Songs, after King Wen's conquest of Chong, "no power in any direction could oppose Zhou". Vassals turned to follow Zhou and the situation between Shang and Zhou shifted in favor of Zhou. The identity of Viscount of the West (later known as King Wen) as the Heavenly mandated ruler was first spread and acknowledged by other vassals, and only later did he perform a formal sacrifice to Heaven a few days before the conquest of Chong to announce his reception of Heaven's mandate. It is also the reason why the public sacrifice to Heaven for the commitment to the reign was not recorded in Chapter Chengwu in Tsinghua Bamboo Slips. If King Wen performed the sacrifice to Heaven (the "yin" sacrifice) to announce his reception of Heaven's mandate upon Tai Si's dream, the people of Zhou were likely to suffer a fatal blow from the Shang ruler. Thus, King Zhou maintained a low-key attitude and performed the sacrifice to Heaven before embarking on the expedition to conquer Chong to announce his reception of Heaven's mandate.

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