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شانغدي

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Shangdi

This article is about the ancient Chinese deity 上帝. For the related later deities, see [Tian](#) and the [Jade Emperor](#). For the unrelated Beijing subway station, see [Shangdi Station](#).

Shangdi or **Shang-ti** (Chinese: 上帝; pinyin: *Shàngdì*),



Temple of Heaven.

also written simply as **Di** or **Ti** (Chinese: 帝; pinyin: *Dì*; “Emperor”), is a supreme god and sky deity in China's traditional religions. At a point he was identified as *Tian*, “Heaven” , the “Universe” , the “Great All” .

1 Etymology

The name is the pinyin romanization of two Chinese characters. The first – 上, *Shàng* – means “high” , “highest” , “first” , “primordial”; the second – 帝, *Dì* – is the same character used in the name of [Huangdi](#)—the Yellow Emperor, originator of the Chinese civilisation—and the title *huangdi*, emperor of China, and is usually translated as “emperor” .

The name *Shangdi* is thus generally translated as “Highest Emperor” , but also “Primordial Emperor” , “Ancestral God” , “First God” . The deity preceded the title and the emperors of China were named after him in their role as *Tianzi*, the sons of Heaven.

2 History



Oracle bone script, the earliest known form of Chinese.

2.1 Shang Dynasty

The earliest references to [Shangdi](#) are found in oracle bone inscriptions of the [Shang Dynasty](#) in the 2nd millennium BC, although the later work *Classic of History* claims yearly sacrifices were made to him by Emperor [Shun](#), even before the [Xia Dynasty](#).

[Shangdi](#) was regarded as the ultimate spiritual power by the ruling elite of the [Huaxia](#) during the [Shang dynasty](#): he was believed to control victory in battle, success or failure of harvests, weather conditions such as the floods of the [Yellow River](#), and the fate of the kingdom. [Shangdi](#) seems to have ruled a hierarchy of other gods controlling nature, as well as the spirits of the deceased.*[1] These ideas were later mirrored or carried on by the [Taoist Jade](#)

Emperor and his celestial bureaucracy.

Shangdi was probably more transcendental than immanent, only working through lesser gods.*[1] Shangdi was considered too distant to be worshiped directly by ordinary mortals. Instead, the Shang kings proclaimed that Shangdi had made himself accessible through the souls of their royal ancestors,*[2] both in the legendary past and in recent generations as the departed Shang kings joined him in the afterlife. The emperors could thus successfully entreat Shangdi directly.*[3] Many of the oracle bone inscriptions record these petitions, usually praying for rain*[4] but also seeking approval from Shangdi for state action.

2.2 Zhou dynasty

In the later Shang and Zhou dynasties, Shangdi was gradually replaced by or conflated with **Heaven** (天, *Tiān*).*[5] The Duke of Zhou justified his clan's usurpation through the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, which proposed that the protection of Shangdi was not connected to their clan membership but by their just governance. Shangdi was no longer tribal but instead an unambiguously good moral force, exercising its power according to exacting standards.*[6] It could thus be lost and even “inherited” by a new dynasty, provided they upheld the proper rituals.

Nonetheless, the connection of many rituals with the Shang clan meant that Shang nobles continued to rule several locations (despite their rebellions) and to serve as court advisors and priests. The Duke of Zhou even created an entire ceremonial city along strict cosmological principals to house the Shang aristocracy and the nine tripods representing Huaxia sovereignty; the Shang were then charged with maintaining the *Rites of Zhou*. Likewise, the Shang's lesser houses, the *shi* knightly class, developed directly into the learned Confucian gentry and scholars who advised the Zhou rulers on courtly etiquette and ceremony.*[7] The Confucian classics carried on and ordered the earlier traditions, including the worship of Shangdi. All of them include references:

The Four Books mention Shangdi as well but, as it is a later compilation, the references are much more sparse and abstract. Shangdi appears most commonly in earlier works: this pattern may reflect increasing rationalization of Shangdi over time, the shift from a known and arbitrary tribal god to a more abstract and philosophical concept,*[8]*[9] or his conflation and absorption by other deities.

2.3 Later dynasties

By the time of the Han dynasty, the influential Confucian scholar Zheng Xuan glossed: “*Shangdi* is another name for Heaven”. Dong Zhongshu said: “Heaven is the ulti-



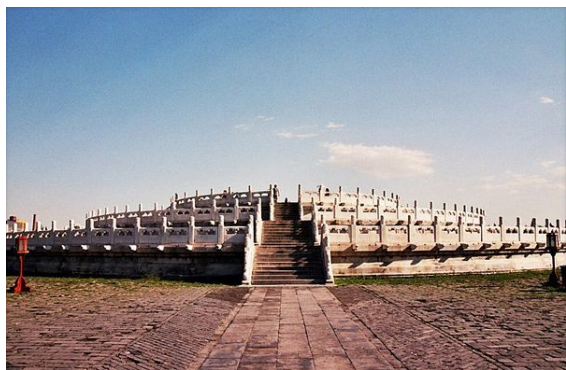
Shangdi as Yuanshi Tianzun in Taoist theology.

mate authority, the king of gods who should be admired by the king”.*[10]

In later eras, he was more commonly referred to as the **August Highest Emperor of Heaven** (皇天上帝, *Huángtiān Shàngdì*) and, in this usage, he is especially conflated with the Taoist Jade Emperor.

3 Worship

As mentioned above, sacrifices offered to Shangdi by the king are claimed by traditional Chinese histories to predate the Xia dynasty. The surviving archaeological record shows that by the Shang, the shoulder blades of sacrificed oxen were used to send questions or communication through fire and smoke to the divine realm, a practice known as scapulimancy. The heat would cause the bones to crack and royal diviners would interpret the marks as Shangdi's response to the king. Inscriptions used for divination were buried into special orderly pits, while those that were for practice or records were buried in common



Sacred altar at Temple of Heaven.



An official of Yuan Shikai worshipping at the Temple of Heaven in 1913.

middens after use.*[11]

Under Shangdi or his later names, the deity received sacrifices from the ruler of China in every Chinese dynasty annually at a great Temple of Heaven in the imperial capital. Following the principles of Chinese geomancy, this would always be located in the southern quarter of

the city.*[12] During the ritual, a completely healthy bull would be slaughtered and presented as an animal sacrifice to Shangdi.*[13] The *Book of Rites* states the sacrifice should occur on the "longest day" on a round-mound altar. The altar would have three tiers: the highest for Shangdi and the Son of Heaven; the second-highest for the sun and moon; and the lowest for the natural gods such as the stars, clouds, rain, wind, and thunder.

The ten stages of the ritual were:*[14]

1. Welcoming deities
2. Offering of jade and silk
3. Offering of sacrificial food
4. First offering of wine
5. Second offering of wine
6. Last offering of wine
7. Retreat of civil dancers and entry of military dancers
8. Performance of the military dance
9. Farewell to deities
10. Burning of sacrificial articles

It is important to note that Shangdi is never represented with either images or idols. Instead, in the center building of the Temple of Heaven, in a structure called the "Imperial Vault of Heaven", a "spirit tablet" (神位, or shénwèi) inscribed with the name of Shangdi is stored on the throne, *Huangtian Shangdi* (皇天上帝). During an annual sacrifice, the emperor would carry these tablets to the north part of the Temple of Heaven, a place called the "Prayer Hall For Good Harvests", and place them on that throne.*[15]

4 Christian use

See also: [Chinese Rites controversy and Christianity in China](#)

"Shangdi" has also been used to translate the word *God* (*Elohim* in Hebrew, *Theos* in Greek) into Chinese by some Christian missionaries. The point has been contentious, with some preferring "Shangdi" and others "Shen" (神, lit. "[a] god").*[16] British missionaries and some Catholics preferred Shangdi as a connection with a presumed ancient and primitive native monotheism, while American missionaries and other Catholics preferred to avoid it as such a specific term may associate the Christian God with actual Chinese polytheism.*[16]

5 See also

- Chinese folk religion
- Chinese mythology
- Shen
- Tian
- Tao
- Haneullim
- Amenominakanushi
- Taiyi Tianzun
- Hongjun Laozu

Other

- Chinese rites controversy
- Chinese terms for God
- Names of God
- Religion in China
- Tianzhu

Comparison

- Allah
- Brahma
- Ishvara

6 Footnotes

- [1] Zhao, Yanxia. *Chinese Religion: A Contextual Approach*. 2010. p. 154
- [2] Jeaneane D. Fowler, Merv Fowler, 2008, *Chinese religions: beliefs and practices*, Sussex Academic Press.
- [3] Wu, 8
- [4] Wu, 173
- [5] “Shangdi” , *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2011.
- [6] *Book of Documents*.
- [7] “Chinese Philosophy” . China Renmin Univ., 2006.
- [8] The *Book of Documents* says: “August Heaven has no partisan affections: it supports only the virtuous” .
- [9] The *Zuo Zhuan* says: “Unless one is virtuous, the people will not be in harmony and the spirits will not partake of one's offerings. What the spirits are attracted to is one's virtue” .
- [10] Dong Zhongshu. *Chunqiu Fanlu*.
- [11] Xu Yahui. Caltonhill, Mark & al., trans. *Ancient Chinese Writing: Oracle Bone Inscriptions from the Ruins of Yin*. Academia Sinica. Nat'l Palace Museum (Taipei), 2002. Govt. Publ. No. 1009100250.
- [12] For instance, the *Classic of History* records the Duke of Zhou building an altar in the southern part of Luo.
- [13] Although the Duke of Zhou is presented as sacrificing two.
- [14] Lam, Joseph S.C. 1998. *State Sacrifices and Music in Ming China: Orthodoxy, Creativity, and Expressiveness*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- [15] “JSDJ” .
- [16] Lee, Archie CC (Oct 2005), *God's Asian Names: Rendering the Biblical God in Chinese*, SBL Forum

7 References

- Creel, Herrlee G., *The Origins of Statecraft in China*. ISBN 0-226-12043-0
- Wu, K. C. (1982). *The Chinese Heritage*. New York: Crown Publishers. ISBN 0-517-54475X.

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