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Name Taboo in Ancient China: The Role of the Supernatural in Its Origin

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ABSTRACT

This essay introduces the name taboo (*bihui*) phenomenon prevalent throughout China's imperial history. Under this convention, the names of sovereigns and a person's ancestors were proscribed from writing and speech. Past scholarship in Chinese tends to view the phenomenon as purely secular and explore merely its political and social implications, without exploring in depth the possible influences of the beliefs about the supernatural on the behavior of those that practiced name-tabooing. In this essay, we undertake an exploration of the hypothetical motives for name tabooing rooted in the supernatural dimension. At the same time, we will also examine the inadequacies in the rationalization tendency of past scholars, and furthermore reflect on the general difficulties that modern rationalism created for the study of the past.

Introduction

On a certain day in tenth-century China, a client of Minister Feng Dao (882-954) was about to lecture on the Daoist classic *Daodejing*, reputedly authored by the legendary sage Lao Zi. As soon as he opened the first page, however, the opening line, "*dao ke dao fei chang dao* (The Dao that can be spoken is not the enduring Dao)," [1] gave him pause. Uneasy that "Dao" was the same character as the one in his patron's name, he took care to avoid pronouncing the character and resorted to a euphemism, which consisted in replacing all cases the character with locution "not-dare-say." So when the opening of *Daodejing* was read to his students, it turned out to be literally "Not-dare-say that can be not-dare-say is exceptionally not-dare-say.", As it happened the tongue-twisting here created an amusing impression in Chinese.[2] Had he proceeded to the following chapters of *Daodejing*, the sentence "Dao can be hardly seen or heard" would have become "Not-dare-say can hardly be seen or heard." But not-dare-say, or the tabooing of names as this probably fictitious anecdote already demonstrates, was just the opposite in imperial China.

Name taboo, called *bihui* in Chinese, was a prevalent convention that persisted throughout China's imperial history. Under this convention, certain kinds of names were deemed ineffable, and hence unfit to appear in their original form. The two primary kinds of names that were regularly forbidden to be written or even spoken were first, the names of sovereigns; second, the names of family ancestors. And besides these, various other kinds of names were

[1] Another possible translation is "The Dao that can be trodden is not the enduring Dao." There is much controversy over the meaning of this profound sentence.

[2] The story was first recorded in *Leishuo* by Zengzao (d. ca. 1160) as an entry from *Jichuan Xiaolin (The Jichuan Collection of Jokes)*. See Jian Wang, *Zhongguo Gudai Bihui Xiaoshi (a Short History of Name Taboo in Ancient China)* (Beijing: Zhongguo chang'an chubanshe, 2014), 186. Also see Piotr Adamek, "A Good Son Is Sad If He Hears the Name of His Father: The Tabooing of Names in China as a Way of Implementing Social Values." (PhD Thesis, Leiden University, 2012), 11, where the details (Feng Dao teaching himself) the author judge to deviate from the original entry in *Leishuo*.

occasionally proscribed as taboos, such as the names of Confucius immortals, and gods, officials, and a miscellany of inauspicious characters. It is no exaggeration to say that the enforcement of the taboo resulted in countless woes and troubles for the populace of China, including, most notably, the alteration of thousands of personal and geographical names, corporeal punishment, and textual corruption. The changes ancient historians made to observe name taboo in Chinese historical records in particular created considerable obstacles to modern research. Such is the importance of *bihui* in the history of ancient China, that a separate branch of historical study was established on this topic, which is called, in Chinese, *bihui-xue* (study of name taboo).

The purpose of this essay is to explore the motives of *bihui* in ancient China, highlighting the supernatural dimension that has been downplayed in previous literature, and along the way give consideration to the difficulties in interpreting ancient history. To readers unfamiliar with our topic, we will first give an overview of the origin and effect of the *bihui* phenomenon. Then, we will examine and reflect upon past researches on *bihui*, where we discern the predominance of a rationalizing and reductive hermeneutical approach, especially regarding the supernatural factors behind *bihui*, which this paper will however call into question.

Early China was a time of religiosity, when "the world of ghosts and spirits overwhelmed that of the human."[3] In time, however, the thought of China's intellectual elites shifted towards rationalistic humanism, and a great part of them began to undertake anti-superstition campaigns, which continue to this day.[4] Under the influence of such tendencies of thought, later Confucians, especially the Neo-Confucians to be discussed near the end of our essay, as a rule overlooked the supernatural dimension in their interpretations of the events in the Classics that dated from China's early history. They also discredited the previously orthodox Heaven-Man interaction theory, which would appear from the contemporary scientific standpoint as groundless superstition. This form of rationalization is followed by modern Chinese scholars, who have not yet given the "superstitious" side of ancient people its deserved attention, including in the case of *bihui*. Actually, we will see later how this tendency of rationalization has its roots already in the ancient tradition of Confucianism, especially the strand of Neo-Confucianism, which tended to discount supernatural factors in its explanation of human phenomena. But it is essential to be aware that when we observe the practices and views of ancient people, our interpretation can be, at times, problematic and defective, especially if we use our own rationalism to rule out certain possibilities. For it might very well happen that by doing so we failed to understand how the ancient people understood themselves. Some exemplary cases of misinterpretation will be discussed in the essay.

After discussing past interpretations in the scholarly literature, we will set forth our hypothesis, namely that the ancients' perception of the supernatural was likewise a possible motive of *bihui*, to complement the possible political and social motives much studied. To support this hypothesis, we will prove the following three propositions: 1. The Chinese script was thought to possess the sacred power of communication. 2. A name contained intimate knowledge of the thing it denoted. 3. Knowledge *about* and *from* Heaven and ancestors (together "spirits," *guishen*) was considered by the elite classes as to be a private possession that should not be freely discussed let alone circulated in public. The three propositions, though seemingly far-reaching in scope, yet all throw light on the cause of the name taboo. For they give support to the central hypothesis of our essay. For one understands thereby how the convention of name taboo arose out of the concern with infringing on the sacred knowledge in the process of naming the emperor, or the "son of Heaven" as he is called otherwise, and a person's ancestors.

In the course of the essay, we will find ourselves facing certain philosophical questions, regarding how to interpret historical phenomena, and define terms rooted in specific historical context such as "supernatural" and "religion." So clarification of terms will precede our propositions. This essay does not aim to give a final answer to

[3] Jiegang Gu and Shuye Tong, *Guoshi Jianghua: Chunqiu (Speeches on National History: Spring and Autumn Period)* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2015), 234.

[4] Wenfeng, Li. "Why these party members went astray." Inspection Group at Ministry of Justice of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of China, August 10, 2020. http://www.moj.gov.cn/news/content/2020-10/10/444_3257723.html.

these questions, but rather we want to draw attention to certain problems that are likely to be misunderstood or overlooked in our time. A further note is that East Asian names will be written in the local surname-preceding-first-name convention. In the essay we incorporate the views from sinologists outside China, including Piotr Adamek and Shirakawa Shizuka, that can be different from those of Chinese scholars. In reference, English sources are prioritized.

An overview of the *bihui* phenomenon

The practice of *bihui* spanned all the dynasties of China, though its frequency varied significantly from one period to another. The first written record of *bihui* was by consensus dated from early Western Zhou period (11c.-8c. BC).[5] A concrete system of rules of *bihui* first appeared in Han dynasty (206 BC-220 CE), when the government specified substituting characters for emperors' names.[6] Tabooing peaked in Song dynasty (960-1279 CE) and ended with the abdication of the last emperor in 1912, though by then it was not entirely extinguished.[7]

Historical tabooing mainly fell into two categories: public or state taboo (*gonghui* or *guohui*), which in principle was to be enforced upon everyone, and private or family taboo (*sihui* or *jiahui*), which operated largely in households and clans. The former proscribed writing the name of an emperor in all contexts, during his reign and usually those of the six emperors that succeeded him. It was common for the founder of new regime to revise the extant conventions on *bihui* and proclaim a new set of taboo characters. [8] The reasons for designating a certain character as taboo were most diverse. *Bihui* was laid down in the Confucian Classic *Book of Rites* (*Liji*), but actual practice often violated its prescriptions.[9] Sometimes it was a whimsical preference on the ruler's part.[10] Other times, religious motives were at work. For instance, during the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom rebellion (1850-64), the leaders of the movement, who championed a teaching of Christianity based on their own understanding, prohibited the Chinese name of God alongside the names of the Kingdom's establishers.[11]

Names of historical persons were also subject to the taboo policy of the reigning emperor. When ancient historians were composing their works, they were careful to observe *bihui* lest they incurred punishment from the powers that be. For example, the most renowned historian of ancient China, the so-called "Grand Historian" Sima Qian, changed the name of a strategist, Kuai *Che*, to Kuai *Tong* in order to observe the taboo of Emperor Liu *Che* of Western Han dynasty (206 BC-9 CE).[12] The same reason would further lead to changes of place names, office titles, conventional expressions, and even characters in the Confucian Canons that the literati held to be sacrosanct.[13] For this reason, Sima Qian put down quotations inconsistent with the standard version of the Canon. In one of them,

[5] Adamek, "The Tabooing of Names in China," 13-14.
[6] Wang, *History of Name Taboo in Ancient China*, 40-43. With less detail see Adamek, "The Tabooing of Names in China," 130-31.
[7] Adamek, "The Tabooing of Names in China," 14. For circumstances after 1912 see Ibid., 236-43.
[8] Ibid., 55-56.
[9] Ibid., 76. There is a quotation of the passage in the *Books of Rites*. Implementation of the prescriptions in the work, often quoted as a standard, can be seen in Ibid., 76-85.
[10] Here I refer to the incident that emperor Qianlong (r. 1735 – 1796) of the Qing dynasty (1616-1911) ordered the name of emperor Wu (r. 140 – 86 BC) of the Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 CE) to be changed. However, the names of rulers of former dynasties should not tabooed, not to mention an emperor nearly two millennia before. See Chen Yuan, *Shihui Juli (Examples of Taboo Names in Historical Writing)* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2016), 226; Wang, *History of Name Taboo in Ancient China*, 291.
[11] Adamek, "The Tabooing of Names in China," 307-08.
[12] Chen, *Examples of Taboo Names*, 190.
[13] Ibid., 24-34.

Confucius' phrase on his premonition of death "*liang* ying *zhi jian* (between two pillars)" was changed to "*liang* zhu *zhi jian*" to avoid the name of former emperor Liu *Ying*.[14]

We know there were punishments for violating state taboo as early as Western Han dynasty.[15] The extant codification of *bihui*, concerning bureaucratic documents, dates from Tang dynasty (618-907) onwards.[16] However, incidents of overlooked violations and excessive punishments indicate frequent nonobservance of written law, which nonetheless could be overridden by the emperor.[17] Also of considerable impact was the unwritten law in ancient Chinese society.[18] Essayist Hong Mai (1123-1202) of Song dynasty (960-1279) observed that "answers in imperial examinations [...] once violating taboo [...] were secretly dismissed [...] the practice almost unchangeable."[19] A decree of the succeeding dynasty had the unwritten custom codified into written regulations.[20]

Outside the bureaucracy, we find both observances and nonobservances of taboo in ancient texts and literature.[21] Judged by present evidence, we do not know if there was specified punishment for violating *bihui* in private writing. The severest punishment incurred by *bihui* took place in the Qing dynasty, which was marked by frequent "Literary Inquisitions" where the Manchu rulers executed Confucian literati suspected of harboring disloyalty to the throne upon the slightest pretext. During one of those Literacy Inquisitions in 1769, philologist Wang Xihou was charged with transcribing the names of three recent emperors in his dictionary *Ziguan*. In his own defense, Wang pleaded that he only intended to help imperial examination candidates by informing them of those taboo characters, and tried to expunge the edition immediately upon hearing displeasure of local authorities. The court did not listen to his plea. Wang Xihou was executed, his relatives punished, and his provincial officials discharged.[22]

The other type of *buhui* was family taboo, where the names of one's father and grandfather were avoided in speech and writing. For instance, Sima Qian in his history changed figures named "Tan" to "Tong" because of his father Sima Tan.[23] In conversations, mentioning the name of the other person's father was an offense, and people broke taboos intentionally to make an insult.[24] It was custom to observe the family taboo of superiors. When subordinates asked the taboo of newly arrived officials, those who responded "corruption and injustice" were recorded as exceptional.[25]

The impact of *bihui* on historical records was considerable, to the extent that "neglecting the study of *bihui* makes one ill-equipped to read Chinese histories."[26] Besides the author's modifications, later revisers and historiographers rectified changes often incompletely or mistakenly, and applied their own taboos to the text.[27] Methods of avoiding tabooed characters included substituting another (often arbitrary) character, removing strokes of

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[14] Wang, *History of Name Taboo in Ancient China*, 44-45. The sentence comes from *The Book of Rites* (*Liji*), one of the Confucian Five Classics.

[15] "Now the people when presenting memorials often violate (my) taboo and become liable to punishment," from a Han dynasty decree quoted in Adamek, "The Tabooing of Names in China," 129.

[16] Ibid., 170, 258-260.

[17] Wang, *History of Name Taboo in Ancient China*, 161-62.

[18] "Code was one thing; custom another" in Chen, *Examples of Taboo Names*, 204

[19] These are recorded in the notes of South Song dynasty essayist Hong Mai (1123 – 1202). See *Quan Song Bi Ji (Complete Miscellaneous Notes from the Song Dynasty)*. Vol.5, bk.6. (Zhengzhou, China: Daxiang chubanshe, 2012), 128.

[20] Wang, *History of Name Taboo in Ancient China*, 263.

[21] Additionally, we need to consider the possibility of later rectifications. Ibid., 60-61.

[22] Ibid., 297-300, 302.

[23] But there are still untabooed *tan* characters in his history. Adamek, "The Tabooing of Names in China," 132-33.

[24] Ibid., 163-64.

[25] Wang, *History of Name Taboo in Ancient China*, 240-41.

[26] Chen, *Examples of Taboo Names*, 257

[27] Adamek, "The Tabooing of Names in China," 263. Historiographic consequences see Ibid., 263-270.

the character, omission, leaving a blank, and replacing personal names with titles, pronouns, and other indirect modes of denomination.[28] *Bihui* has thus created factual mistakes, textual corruption, and other obstacles to textual criticism. On the other hand, knowledge of the tendencies of *bihui* can help one to date texts and objects, verify their authenticity, determine the changes, additions, omissions, errors in ancient texts, and construct ancient pronunciation.[29]

Literature Review on the history of *bihui*

The importance and impact of *bihui* lay the foundation of the extensive researches on this topic by Chinese scholars, ancient and modern. In 1928, historian Chen Yuan published the first systematic academic work on *bihui*, entitled *Examples of Taboo Names in Historical Writing (Shihui juli)*. This important work laid the foundation of modern taboo studies (*bihuixue*), now an autonomous ancillary discipline of history. Since the 1990s, there has been a surge of *bihui* studies in China, especially concerning the name tabooing related to an author, work, period, or place.[30]
In western sinological studies, however, name taboo has been relatively under-explored. The first explicit study of *bihui* was Erich Haenisch's 1932 article "Die Heiligung des Vater- und Fürstennamens in China." And in the following eighty years, *bihui* was only mentioned in passing in studies on Chinese customs, such as without ever having received a thematic analysis.[31] In 2012, Piotr Adamek published *A Good Son is Sad if He Hears the Name of His Father: on Name Taboo as a Way to Implement Social Values*. As far as I can tell, this is the first, and up to now the only systematic study of *bihui* in the West.

In his dissertation, Adamek points out insufficiencies within the existing literature, noting that Chinese research "describes name taboo as an absolutely secular phenomenon with no relation to magic or religion."[32] Indeed, the motives given were social and political: to express reverence, to reinforce social hierarchy, and to consolidate political power. A second century scholar has voiced that "to have the noble and humble ordered, *bihui* is the prime factor."[33] Modern Chinese scholars envision *bihui* as a political device "used to proclaim the legitimacy and sanctity of sovereignty," and supposedly "consolidate power."[34] Here, the implication of *bihui* being sanctity is taken for granted, but it should not be. This negligence, which our essay sets out to redress, may have resulted from the evolutionist assumption that scholars made of the *bihui* phenomenon, especially regarding the origins of *bihui*.

The claims regarding origin made by ancient scholars, based solely on contemporary textual evidence, have challenged by modern archaeological discoveries, namely the oracle-bone inscriptions.[35] In contrast, modern scholars trace *bihui* to taboos in primitive societies, incorporating anthropological findings of "primitive" tribes and Chinese "primitive witchcraft:"[36]

> *Bihui* originated from primitive witchcraft and belief in ghosts, and gradually became the ceremonial and political culture of the civilized society. […] The witchcraft of using statues or names to harm other people also appeared in ancient China. […] While keeping their own names from being violated, primitive people were also careful not to pronounce others' names […] In

[28] Ibid., 69-75.
[29] Ibid., 271. Implementation of taboo see Ibid., 271-286.
[30] Ibid., 26-28.
[31] Ibid., 25-26.
[32] Ibid., 29.
[33] Ibid., 114-15.
[34] Wang, *History of Name Taboo in Ancient China*, 151, 335.
[35] Adamek, "The Tabooing of Names in China," 98, For a quotation of this claim see Wang, *History of Name Taboo in Ancient China*, 5-6. The time that bihui originated remains controversial. For the different conclusions see Adamek, "The Tabooing of Names in China," 96-99, based on Wang, *History of Name Taboo in Ancient China*, 2-7.
[36] Wang, *History of Name Taboo in Ancient China*, 8-11, 328-330; Xinhua Wang, *Bihui Yanjiu (Research on Name Taboo)*. (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 2007), 11-25.

Dutch New Guinea, if someone accidentally spoke a tabooed name, he must immediately prostrate himself and correct [what he said. … Indians] were afraid to call back the ghosts of the dead who hurt the living.[37]

These are sound explanations for the origin of *bihui*. However, in ancient China we do not find the violator of taboo fearful, like the "primitive" people quoted above, but the violated, on hearing his ancestor's name, feeling insulted; hence discrepancy. More importantly, scholars tend to disassociate *bihui* from supernatural factors after its alleged evolution from *jinji* (general taboo, not necessarily linguistic), that it "lost its connection with superstition," or "became completely social."[38] Some differentiate schematically between *jinji* and *bihui*, that the former is "primitive taboo" connected with "primitive religion," "based on a primitive thought," the latter is "Chinese" taboo connected with Confucian culture, "based on modern thought."[39] However, Adamek "is not persuaded by this argumentation," and considers *bihui* "a special case … and part of" *jinji*:[40]

There is no substantial difference between [*jinji* and *bihui*], but only a difference in legitimization of *bihui* by state authority […] We also see not substantial evolution between these two types of taboo, if they are different types to begin with […] Statements about one type of taboo being more modern than the other derive more from the inbuilt tendency of modern historians to consider literati customs more rational than popular customs than from a detailed analysis of the customs in question.[41]

Here, evolutionism is subject to a substantial critique; in our inquiry below, we likewise dispute the claim of "evolution" undergoing much of the claims of "progress over primitive thought and belief." Nevertheless, the supernatural factors behind *bihui* are not a primary concern for Adamek. Our essay, by contrast, focuses on these factors and provides a different set of arguments and evidence than those employed by Adamek. The general and highly complex *jinji* is beyond our scope of research. Moreover, not only do we see deviation from progressive evolutionism in practice, like characters constituting *jinji* proscribed in later times, but also in ancient thought. Chinese philosophers, including the Confucians, held a non-progressive view towards history, insofar as they thought that the golden age of man and ideal governance lay in the idealized past.[42] As a proof of the discordance between Confucianism and modern historiography, a twentieth-century movement seeking to analyze ancient Classics using the modern historiographical approach based on the theory of progress initially met widespread resistance, but eventually gained acceptance as the correct understanding of early China.[43]

Setting Forth the Hypothesis; Clarification of terms in ancient China

From the discussions above, we have seen how the supernatural dimension has been obscured in the scholarship, while political and social motives have been discussed in great detail. This essay seeks to shed light on what has been obscured. Our thesis is that the ancients' perceptions of the supernatural could also be a possible motive of *bihui*. Sequentially, we present our arguments for three propositions: first, The Chinese script was thought to possess the sacred power of communication; second. Second, a name contained intimate knowledge of the thing it denoted. Third, knowledge about and from Heaven and ancestors (together "spirits," *guishen*) was considered a private possession and should not be circulated in public. We therefore come to our conclusion. Because of the belief that using the

[37] Wang, *History of Name Taboo in Ancient China*, 328-29
[38] The former quotation from Adamek, "The Tabooing of Names in China," 25, on Haenisch. The later quotation from Wang, *Research on Name Taboo*, 19, 21. Also see Wang, *History of Name Taboo in Ancient China*, 33, 46
[39] Adamek, "The Tabooing of Names in China," 42-43.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid., 100.
[42] The Legalists, however, disagree with them. See Feng Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Youguang Tu (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2013), 153-54.
[43] See the preface of Gu and Tong, *Speeches on National History*, 2-5. The book's coauthor, Jiegang Gu, was one of the main protagonists of this movement.

emperor (whose other title is "son of Heaven") and a person's ancestors communicated, and thus infringed upon, this sacred knowledge, the practice was therefore tabooed.[44]

The arguments above are also an attempt to explain state and family taboo together through the exploration of sacred knowledge that they both pertained to. The two spheres were separately treated in past scholarship, former to consolidate power, latter to follow Confucian ethics.[45]

But before proceeding to the actual examination proposition; we must clarify the terms "spirit," "supernatural" and "sacred" in the ancient Chinese context, and disambiguate them from the conventional western conceptions.

Guishen "spirits" is a native term used since early China. There was no fixed pantheon, but *guishen* usually included the Heaven (*tian*) (or its anthropomorphized Lord-on-High (*Shangdi*)), decreased ancestor, and natural deities like mountains and rivers.[46] For the sake of *bihui* we are concerned with the former two. In the essay, we will find the interpretation of *guishen* changing through history. Just among the Confucians, there was already much dispute on *guishen* (like on other matters).

In this essay we have made many mentions of the word "supernatural." We should have been more cautious, however, of the risk of potentially misunderstanding that this was how the ancients described their world. Nowadays, the word "supernatural" implicitly contains the modern, scientific notion of "nature," against which the "supernatural" is delimited. But it is improper to assume that the ancients had scientific thinking as we do. In fact, they did not differentiate between "natural" and "supernatural," but between "conventional" (*chang*) and "abnormal" (*yi*). *Yi* encompassed a broad range of phenomena including earthquakes, astronomical events, droughts, also appearances of spirits, dragons, immortals. [47] Although it is essential to discuss in the ancients' own language, we use the modern sense of "supernatural" to clarify the focus of our study for the modern reader.

The words "sacred," "divine" etc. need to be perceived without their Christian connotations so common in Western-language contexts. Whether ancient Chinese thought had a transcendental dimension is still controversial, not to mention that the Chinse word used to translate "religion," *zongjiao*, is a nineteenth-century neologism.[48] Nonetheless, in deference to English-language convention, in the essay we will use this group of words to denote matters pertaining to spirits.

Chinese script with sacred power of communication

[44] In the case of verbal communication, we find the second and the third suffice. Yet, considering that *bihui* also firmly applied to writing, which does seem to be readily explained by observations of "primitive" societies, we need the first to show that script served for communication as well.

[45] "Confucian ethics" was the view of Haenisch, see Adamek, "The Tabooing of Names in China," 25. The motives for family taboo, also an important part of *bihui*, have received far less attention than those of state taboo, probably due to the claim that "family taboo was just the extension of state taboo:" Wang, *Research on Name Taboo*, 21. But we do not find "extension" supported by evidence, and should consider such view questionable.

[46] Jie Guo, "The spirit world," in *Routledge Handbook of Early Chinese History*, edited by Paul R. Goldin. (London: Routledge, 2018), 230, 241-42.

[47] These "abnormalities" were recorded by the official histories (*zhengshi*), for example that of Eastern Han dynasty (25-220 CE), see "Treatises on the Five Agents (*wuxing zhi*)" from (Southern Song dynasty, 5c.) Fan Ye, eds., *Hou Hanshu (History of Later Han)* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975) 17, 3265-3383, and from the history of Tang dynasty (618-907 CE), see (Later Jin dynasty, 10c.) Liu Xu et al, eds., *Jiu Tangshu (Old Tang History)* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975) 17, 1353-56. We will discuss the ancient belief of the Five Agents (*wuxing*) later in the essay.

[48] Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1993), 2.

Many aspects of *bihui* attest to its close connection with Chinese script. And if we accept that characters were attributed with a sacred power to communicate with the supernatural, we will be given a unique insight to the *bihui* phenomenon. A similar namesake taboo in the Islamic world forbade, in the presence of those in power, the mention by name of people who shared names with them.[49] But in ancient China *bihui* applied no less firmly in writing than in speech. In the case of state taboo, written violations in documents submitted to emperor incurred heavier punishment than oral mistakes in his presence.[50] Chen Yuan observed that in case of minority rulers, their names in Chinese were tabooed, but those in their own language were not. He thus considers the Chinese ideograms one reason why *bihui* was exclusive to ancient China.[51]

This connection tended to be overlooked in previous literature, probably due to the secularizing tendency.[52] However, the earliest forms of Chinese writing "almost always bespeak a ritual content." It is believed that over time writing spread beyond the religious domain to record people's affairs, history, and thought.[53] In this vein, the Japanese sinologist and philologist Shirakawa Shizuka (1910 - 2006) theorized the construction of early Chinese characters as symbols directly related to the supernatural, many of which denoting ritual instruments or practices. The script's connection with divine communication, according to his theory, was laid down with a view not to utility but to honor the ghosts and spirits.[54] Latter-age Confucians, however, tended to either downplay or overlook the role of the ghosts and spirits in the formation of the script.[55]

Another interesting aspect is the preference of word over image as the subject of veneration. Prayers were directed to ancestral tablets （*shenzhu*, literally settlement of the spirit） with the ancestors' names engraved on them. In contrast to ancient Romans who paid a similar respect for the *mos maiorum* (custom of the ancestors), placing images (*imagines*, as Romans called them), portrait or statue, in temples was considered inappropriate, and even "sacrilege" (*du*) by some people.[56] A 16th-century iconoclastic decree against statues of Confucius was met positively with by Confucian scholars.[57] The script, over image, almost gained exclusive privilege as medium of communication and thus divine knowledge.

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[49] Michael Cook, "The Namesake Taboo," in *Murqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Culture of the Islamic World*, Vol.25, edited by Gülru Necipoqlu and Julia Bailey. (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 11.

[50] See the codes of different dynasties quoted in Adamek, "The Tabooing of Names in China," 258-59.

[51] Chen, *Examples of Taboo Names*, 235-36.

[52] Besides Chen, Adamek also has a one-page discussion titled "the power of script," mainly about script in Daoist rituals. Adamek, "The Tabooing of Names in China," 52.

[53] Xinhui Luo. "Early Chinese Writing." In *Routledge Handbook of Early Chinese History*, edited by Paul R. Goldin. (London: Routledge, 2018), 221.

[54] This is the main argument of Shizuka Shirakawa, *Hanzi de Shijie Shang (the World of Chinese Characters I)*, trans. Qiang Chen (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 2018).

[55] Thus, the theory of Shirakawa is highly controversial, as it defies the more functional, and less religious reconstruction of early Chinese writing first established by Eastern Han dynasty (25-189 CE) scholar Xu Shen (58-147). Many of his reconstructions, different from those by Shirakawa, can be found in Shen Xu, *Shuowen Jiezi (Discussing Writing and Explaining Characters)*, ed. Xuan Xu et al. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015).

[56] For the Roman tradition see David M. Gwynn, *Roman Republic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 30–31. For the Chinese opinion, see (Ming dynasty) Yanwu Gu, *Rizhilu Jishi (Collected Commentaries on Record of Daily Knowledge)*, ed. Rucheng Huang (Beijing: Zhonghua shiju, 2020), 764–66. For a debate about whether to use ancestral portraits for rituals, see Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Confucianism and Family Rituals in Imperial China: A Social History of Writing about Rites* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 62; Shao, Fengli. *Zhuzi Jiali Yu Chuantong Shehui Minjian Jizu Shijian ("Family Rituals" by Zhuzi and Folk Ancestral Worship Practices in Traditional Societies)* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2019), 67.

[57] Yanwu Gu, *Rizhilu Jishi*, 766.

The Essential Bond between Names and Things

While taboo was common among ancient societies, systematic name taboo was exclusive to ancient China, where an exclusive name culture also existed. In contrast to Western societies, the custom of ancient Chinese held it improper to name a person after another person or thing, while one person could have many names. People were given and addressed by courtesy names (*zi*) rather than personal names (*ming*). Literati were also referred by their author names (*hao*), room names (*shiming*), and posthumous names (*shihao*) etc. Rulers were referred to by their posthumous names, temple names （*miaohao*）and era names (*nianhao*). The personal name, protected by these attributes, were perceived as embodying the essence of the person.[58]

While an English "name" must be a noun, the ancient Chinese *ming* categorizes every word regardless of its parts of speech. The relationship between "*ming*" (the name) and "*shi*" (actuality, the thing *ming* denotes), was one of the most debated topics in Chinese philosophy. The School of Names, also translated as the school of sophists or logicians, focused their study on *ming*, and "were known as persons who made paradoxical statements," such as "a white horse is not a horse." Their views were often challenged by different schools. As for Confucius, he is seen to also show a great concern for the question of names; hence he famously declared "the rectification of names" (*zheng ming*) was the first thing he would undertake to reform a polity. The theory of rectification implies every name indicates the essence of the class of things it applies. And the things named (for example a ruler) should agree with the essence indicated (ideal governance). [59]

The views of different schools, though conflicting, all share the premise that *ming* is closely connected with intimate knowledge of *shi* (things). We know that in pre-modern China there was a widespread belief that if a person knew the real name of other persons, spirits, or animals, he could control or injure them. Could this be derived from the thought that the name contained intimate knowledge of what it denoted? If so, we may regard avoid using the personal name as safeguarding, or concealing the essential knowledge about a person. Indeed, the many names a literati could be referred to creates much difficulty for the modern reader to understand works from the literati community. But why avoid the namesake of ancestors? After much discussion about knowledge, where did knowledge come from? Who possessed knowledge in ancient China?

The answer: spirits (*guishen)*. Eastern Zhou philosopher Mozi said that "the ghosts and spirits are wiser than the sages by as much as the sharp-eared and keen-sighted surpass the deaf and blind." [60]Though the interpretation of *guishen* changed over time, changes did not affect the fact that spirits (including Heaven) were thought to possess knowledge crucial to humans, and such divine knowledge were monopolized. Assuming these, we can arrive at a hypothetical explanation of *bihui*: the names of emperors and ancestors implied divine knowledge, which should be preserved yet could be communicated through script. Therefore, the names, if they had to be known, should not be mentioned, or communicated.

Sacred Knowledge and monopolization: state taboo

Following the division of *bihui* in to state taboo and family taboo, we will first trace divine knowledge and its preservation in the case of the ruling class. Our aim here is to explore factors behind state taboo, not history of thought. For clarity we roughly follow a chronological order. We do not assume our claims to be true from Song dynasty onwards. The changes in thought and *bihui* in Song dynasty will be addressed near the end of the essay. But we must

[58] For an interesting discussion on the supernatural aspects of name, see Adamek, "Name Taboo in China," 43-51. This essay seeks to present other evidence and analysis. Adamek also expressed in page 51 that "the rectification of names has been never explicitly linked to the subject of tabooing names by modern scholars."
[59] Feng Yu-Lan, *Chinese Philosophy*, 42, 79-90.
[60] Kwang-Chih Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 45.

be aware that, in the case of *guishen*, after the introduction of a new interpretation, the old one could remain popular, especially in but not restricted to the general populace.

As anthropologist K.C.Chang explains, in early China, "Heaven is where all the wisdom of human affairs lies."[61] Through pyromancy, the ancient elites consulted the Heaven, ancestors, and other spirits on a wide range of issues from ritual to military affairs.[62] The kings monopolized communication with Heaven through shamans (*wu*), who, knowledgeable about the spirits, were also scholars of that age.[63] The Chinese word for history, *shi*, originally denoted the court archivist-diviner-astrologers, also shamans, that served as prophets and consultants.[64] In ancient China, history, being knowledge from ancestors, was believed to foretell consequences of the present action, and invested in a moral authority.[65]

In the Spring and Autumn (770-476 BC) and Warring States (476-220 BC) periods saw profound changes in society, politics, and thought. We see the original give-and-take model challenged (though still popular for many centuries), spirits were believed to "only adhere to virtue."[66]

When Confucianism became the state orthodoxy in Western Han dynasty, it incorporated the cosmology of Yin Yang and Five Agents (*wuxing*). The natural and human world were thought to model each other. This formed the core of the famous teaching of "Interaction of Heaven and Man" (*tianren ganying*) held by elites and commons alike.[67] Misdoings of the ruler or government causes visitations of Heaven such as earthquakes, eclipses of the sun and moon, astronomical events, droughts, floods, and other "*zai yi*" (calamity and abnormality, the latter word we have discussed). Similarly, auspices were thought to be capable of being affected by human virtue.[68] The emperors, whose other title is "son of Heaven" (*tianzi*), legitimized their rule by the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*), bestowed and retrieved by Heaven judging from a dynasty's virtue.[69] What we consider superstition today made great impact

[61] Ibid., 47.
[62] Luo, "Early Chinese Writing." In *Routledge Handbook of Early Chinese History*, edited by Paul R. Goldin, 221.
[63] Gu and Tong, *Speeches on National History*, 230, 234-35. And it is interesting to note that divination *records*, which allows this knowledge to be passed down to posterity, was highly elitist in nature. While oracle bones were found scattered in many locations, almost all *inscribed* ones were excavated in Anyang, the ritual and political capital, see Guo Jie. "The spirit world." In *Routledge Handbook of Early Chinese History*, edited by Paul R. Goldin. (London: Routledge, 2018), 236. The ruler's monopolization of communication with spirits is directly manifested in the myth of "severance of heaven-earth communication" (*jue ditian tong*). The story found its entry into the Book of Documents (*Shang shu*), one of the Confucian Four Classics, and Sima Qian's *Shiji*. Its details were recorded in the *Speech of the States*, a fourth century BC text, partially quoted in Kwang-Chih Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 44-45.
[64] Ibid., 234-35.
[65] Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual*, 88-89. In *Shiji*, historian Sima Qian, who was one such *shi* in Western Han dynasty, recounted his lineage from Chong and Li, who in the "severance of heaven-earth communication" myth were appointed by the king to take charge of Heaven-Earth communication after this "severance," which means that ordinary people could no longer communicate with the Heaven.
[66] It is recorded in *Zuozhuan*, a history traditionally believed to date from late Spring and Autumn period, that minister Gong Zhiqi remonstrated to his lord that "*guishen* spirits are not true kin of the living and they only adhere to virtue." See Guo Jie. "The spirit world." In *Routledge Handbook of Early Chinese History*, edited by Paul R. Goldin. (London: Routledge, 2018), 250.
[67] Yinggang Sun, *The Weft Prophecy Texts and Political Legitimation in Medieval China* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2015), 21.
[68] Ibid., 16.
[69] Ibid., 8-9.

on actual society and politics.[70] Under the new circumstances, rulers still recognized themselves as the sole recipient of Heavenly knowledge.[71]

As the movement of stars were believed to predict happenings of the world below, rulers granted astronomy/astrology with special importance. Tang dynasty regulations of the astronomy department read: "access to observational instruments and astrology books outside one's responsibility are not allowed. Records of portents and auspices were handed to the government … and secured in the history-compiling department."[72] Books on astrology were banned in many dynasties, and personal practice of astrology was forbidden.[73]

Direct communication with Heaven—sacrifice to Heaven, or "Lord-on-high"—was solely the emperor's privilege. The Altar of Heaven that stands outside the Forbidden city in Beijing bears witness to the regular sacrifices performed under China's last two imperial dynasties.[74] The commons could sacrifice to minor deities, but sacrificing to Heaven was forbidden to them, as being an act of high treason.[75] The emperor's procession to the Altar served as political propaganda, but commons were not allowed to participate in the ceremony.[76] Sacrificing to heaven is a duty for the emperor, and performed regardless of his personal belief (Buddhist, Taoist, etc). Negligence of the duty was thought to provoke the punishment of Heaven, leading to calamities.[77]

Application of our hypothesis to deviant cases from state taboo and their possible explanations

The motives concerning supernatural for *bihui*, the focus for our essay, can also be possible explanations to the following exceptions of state taboo, which previous literature only explained as measures against excessive tabooing. Aside from the current emperor's name, state taboo proscribed the names of six former emperors and the dynasty founder. The seven of them were also the seven spirits venerated in the ancestral temple (*zongmiao*), where the emperor gave solemn sacrifices. Ancestral tablets of older ancestors would be moved to a distant temple (*tiaomiao*), and these rulers' names would no longer be tabooed (*yitiao buhui*).[78] We see this custom, based on an interpretation

[70] Ibid., 216.

[71] In 534 CE, star Yinghuo (Mars, "star of punishment") entered constellation Nandou ("temple of Heaven," associated with son of Heaven), a sign of rebellion and treason. The astronomical visitation coincided with the rupture of minister Gao Huan and Emperor Xiaowu of Wei, the northern dynasty divided into two in this incident. Contemporary emperor Wu of Liang, the southern dynasty, on hearing the news "felt ashamed and said: 'The barbarian should also correlate with heavenly signs!'" (Song dynasty, 11c.) Sima Guang et al, eds., *Zizhi tongjian (Comprehensive Mirror in Aid for Government)* (Beijing: Zhognhua shuju, 2013) 156, 4066-69. "Correlating with heavenly signs" means thrusted with the Mandate of Heaven. Emperor Wu of Liang, who believed in his orthodoxy over minority rulers of northern dynasty, clearly believed that he should be the only recipient of Heavenly knowledge.

[72] (Later Jin) Liu Xu et al, eds., *Jiu Tangshu* (Old Tang History) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975) 43, 1855-56.

[73] Sun, *Prophecy Texts and Political Legitimation*, 21.

[74] The temple of heaven likewise uses *shenzhu* (tablets).

[75] Ching, *Chinese Religions*, 61.

[76] The imperial sacrifices at 841 and 845 CE were also recorded by the Japanese priest Ennin. Shuuichi Kaneko, *Gudai Zhongguo Yu Huangdi Jisi (Ancient China and the Emperors' Sacrifices)*, trans. Shengzhong Xiao, Sisi Wu, and Caojie Wang (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2017), 21, 53.

[77] This one of the main arguments in a petition to the emperor, enthusiastically quoted by the historian, after flood of Luo River. See (Later Jin, 10c.) Liu Xu et al, eds., *Jiu Tangshu (Old Tang History)* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975) 17, 1353-56.

[78] Adamek, "Name Taboo in China," 81-82.

of *The Book of Rites*, carried out from the Han to Tang dynasties.[79] For us, the reason could be that once removed from ancestral temple, the knowledge from an ancestor could no longer be communicated through sacrifice. When the implied knowledge in the name was lost, the name thus could be circulated in public.

The Book of Rites prescribes no avoiding of names at sacrifices.[80] And indeed, we see the emperors' names written in prayers, even though the sacrifices were often undertaken by relevant officials (*yousi*).[81] It seems that in direct communication with Heaven, the name no longer needed to be tabooed. Such communication was forbidden elsewhere.

Another exception to state taboo was found in the auspices. On inscribed stones designating Heaven's approval of a person, which *we* know were certain people's forgeries, his name was clearly written among the obscure words in the inscription.[82] The stones were supposed to be sent by Heaven, and having the personal name written was a sign of divine knowledge and acknowledgement. The name of the son of Heaven ought to be communicated by Heaven, but not by anyone else.

Sacred Knowledge and monopolization: family taboo

The above account deal with only things on the ruler's end. The following explores hypothetical motives for family taboo, focusing on the commons. However, our knowledge of the old beliefs is scarce because of lack of pertinent documents.[83] And whatever documents are available now all came from the hands of the literati, whose descriptions of the life of the commoners should not be entirely trusted because of their inherent bias rooted in their sense of superiority.

In the popular realm, old beliefs retained a popularity. The practical give-and-take model of sacrifice often was not replaced by a rationalizing tendency on the part of the intellectuals in the court. The merits of community-preserved deities were not judged by their nature, but by whether they could fulfill people's prayers.[84] These practices were often participated in by the elite as well. Tang dynasty officials actively invoked the local deities at times of drought and flood. An area's governance was regarded the shared responsibility of officials and spirits.[85] Often praised as "intelligent and upright" in prayers, the deities were referred by their attributes or without a name.[86] Probably, as in the case of "popular religion," we should not overstate the difference between the elites and the masses in discussions of family taboo.

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[79] Wang, *History of Chinese Name Taboo*, 217-18. The original sentence in the *Book of Rites*, chapter Tan Gong II, reads: "Give up disusing the names of the former rulers, and henceforth disuse (only) the name of him who is newly deceased." A Tang dynasty petition for *yitiao buhui* be carried out quoted this sentence as justification.

[80] The passage in *Book of Rites* is quoted in Adamek, "Name Taboo in China," 111.

[81] We should also notice the fact that in prayers for "minor sacrifices" to less important deities, the emperor's name is not written in prayer. Kaneko, *Ancient China and Emperors' Sacrifices*, 42-45.

[82] We know examples from the Wei and Tang dynasties. Sun, *Prophecy Texts and Political Legitimation*, 101, 106-07. In the Three Kingdom period, prophecy texts were sent to local ruler Liu Bei, so to proclaim himself emperor. These texts featured the ruler's name, "endowing" him with Heaven's Mandate. These texts were not considered taboo violations. Wang, *History of Name Taboo*, 67-68.

[83] Ethnological studies provide information of later periods of Chinese history. So they have limited value when we explore older beliefs among the commons.

[84] Valerie Hansen, *Changing Gods in Medieval China, 1127-1276* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 47. For an incident of tabooing the homophones of "*zhen*," the name of Emperor Ren of North Song dynasty, see page 30 of the book.

[85] Junfeng Yang, *The State and Cisi between the Tang and Song Dynasties on the Interaction between the State and the Custom of Worshipping the Gods in the South* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2019), 58-63.

[86] Ibid., 59.

Family taboo (*jiahui*) usually proscribes the names of one's father and grandfather to be mentioned in his presence. People felt insulted on hearing even homophones of these names. Literati avoided using characters of the names in writing. There is evidence that family taboo was observed by commons as well, as in this twelfth-century record:

People in eastern Zhe area call each other by domestic animals, and they accept with laughter. But if one call their father or grandfather's name, they then harbor utmost hatred and shame. There are people who beat others to death [for this reason].[87]

The name taboo practiced on all levels of the society poses some questions to existing interpretations. *The Book of Rites* does prescribe that "a good son is sad if he hears the name of his father." This canon was inaccessible to the commons. However, the spirits were. As a reminder, ancestors were another entity belonging to "spirits" besides Heaven. As spirits, ancestors were also described as "bright, illustrious," (*pixian*) and "bright, intelligent" (*ming*). They "perpetually inhabit another dimension" and "since ancient time seem to look down on at their living descendants from 'up above.'"[88] In Han period, "Ancestral Intelligence" (*zuming*) and "Male Elder" (*xiongbo*) were among the spirits priests invoked to devour daemons in the festival The Great Exorcism (*da nuo*).[89] Derk Bodde suggests that the names of devouring spirits were "sobriquets," "concealing the real names of spirits, [...] intelligible only to the initiated."[90] In family taboo, knowledge of one's ancestral spirits was similarly concealed to the clan, who attended regular sacrifices.

Ancestral cult was in ancient times (no later than Han period and onwards) practiced by commons and elites alike, though elitist in origin.[91] Regular sacrifices were presented to ancestors, who enjoyed offerings and bestowed blessings of longevity and posterity. Sacrifices were known to promote filial piety and unite the clan, though the early forms of ancestral rituals in Shang period, when oracle-bone divinations were made to ascertain the correct ritual procedure, certainly had an aura of sanctity.[92] In the ancient ritual classics, the naming and coming-of-age ceremonies were also held under the witness of ancestors.[93] In every step of marriage, ancestors were supposed to be informed.[94] Although ancestral worship was a pervasive phenomenon, Valerie Hansen noticed that miscellaneous notes (*biji*) from the Song dynasty "contain little information about ancestor worship." This is because the notes "concentrated on miracles" performed by local deities while "ancestors were thought to watch over the well-being of their descendants" but "usually did not perform miracles."[95] This scarcity of records may also result from the personal nature of ancestral worship. Derk Bodde noted that "Chinese religious ceremonies—with the admittedly conspicuous exception of their cult of the ancestors—usually took place in the open air."[96] Descendants in the mourning period (supposedly always) and women (sometimes) were not allowed to participate in the sacrifices to ancestors.[97] For P.B. Kubuya, "interaction with ancestors is a central element in Chinese religiosity." "Ancestral worship, … sanctification rites … aim at

[87] Wang, *History of Name Taboo*, 242-43
[88] Constance A. Cook, *Death in Ancient China: The Tale of One Man's Journey* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 147, 151. *Pixian* literally means great brilliance.
[89] Derk Bodde, *Festivals in Classical China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 85-87.
[90] Ibid., 86.
[91] It was at first a privilege of the nobility, see Ching, *Chinese Religions*, 63.
[92] Ori Traver. "Religious thought." In *Routledge Handbook of Early Chinese History*, edited by Paul R. Goldin. (London: Routledge, 2018), 262.
[93] Ching, *Chinese Religions*, 64, 213.
[94] Ebrey, *Confucianism and Family Ritual*, 22.
[95] Hansen, *Changing Gods*, 14.
[96] Bodde, *Festivals in Classical China*, 1.
[97] Ebrey, *Confucianism and Family Ritual*, 23; Shao, *Family Rituals by Zhuzi*, 262.

communicating with a relative, though dead, is still felt as present."[98] As in the case of knowledge of Heaven, here we see people denied of this communication.

Now, we can apply the same reasoning we employed in state taboo to the family realm: uttering one's ancestor's name is communicating, thus violating, the sacred knowledge of his ancestors, which should be held off from others. The result was that person feeling insulted or sad. By exploring knowledge from spirits held sacred by ancients, we are able to account for both types *bihui*, regarding the ruler and the commons.

Bihui reimagined

In the succeeding Song dynasty, a profound change in Chinese thought took place. The Neo-Confucianists sought to elevate Confucian to its former supremacy by combating the tenets of Buddhism and Taoism. The teachings of Mencius (since then "second sage" after Confucius) who regarded Heaven as an innate principle in everyone, was exalted by the Neo-Confucians. Consequently they cast away the notion of Heaven as a mysterious and unfathomable being interacting with the earthly. Records of natural phenomena remained in histories compiled in the period, but no claim was made that these were the visitations sent by Heaven with a purpose to intervene in human affairs.[99] The government tightened control over local worship. Albeit the traditional prescription "rules of ceremony do not go down to the common people," the Song dynasty first implemented a set of (rationalized) rituals to civilize the commons.[100]

However, *bihui* did not disappear with past spiritualism. It instead reached a peak in the Song era throughout two thousand years of usage: "[then] really just a casual word would violate taboo!"[101] The prescription against tabooing ancestors removed from ancestral temple was no longer followed. The names of all past Song dynasty emperors were tabooed.[102] But before *bihui* was picked up and expanded by Song reformers as a civilizing embellishment (*wenshi*), it had already been reimagined as "reverence and love." Here, we see how the continuity of a custom was practiced independently of the continuity of its original motive. With its cause and sanctity lost, the tabooing excess was criticized by contemporaries as "obsessive preciosity" and "flattery" far removed from "filial piety" or "loyalty," and what confuses name (*ming*) and actuality (*shi*).[103]

Conclusion – interpretative difficulties then and now

In the essay, we have argued for possible motives concerning the supernatural behind the bihui phenomenon, to complement existing studies that downplay the supernatural side of ancients. But we are also aware that that our

[98] Paulin Batairwa Kubuya, *Meaning and Controversy within Chinese Ancestor Religion* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 7.

[99] However, visitations still had political significance in Song dynasty. The aforementioned "star Yinghuo entering constellation Nandou" continued to serve as catalyst for political struggles in that period. See Bin Wei, "Xingxing Xingzhan Yu Songdai Zhengzhi (Planetary Astrology and Song Dynasty Politics)," *Shehuikexue Yanju (Social Science Research)*, no. 06 (2012): 166–71, https://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?FileName=SHYJ201206030&DbName=CJFQ2012.

[100] Shao, *Family Rituals by Zhuzi*, 59-64.

[101] Wang, *History of Name Taboo*, 220.

[102] Wang, *History of Name Taboo*, 217-18

[103] They are the notes from *Qidong Yeyu (Rustic Words of a Man from Eastern Qi)* by South Song writer Zhou Mi, See *Quan Song Bi Ji (Complete Miscellaneous Notes from the Song Dynasty)*. Vol.7, bk,10. (Zhengzhou, China: Daxiang chubanshe, 2012), 69.

conclusions are hypothetical in nature, because as a rule, it is very difficult to establish conclusive evidence with respect to the psychology of the actors in history.

Our investigation proceeds from the premise that it is improper to assume that ancient human beings exercised the same form of rational thinking as we moderns do. And one contemporary scholar considered Heaven-Man interaction to be the "rational" choice of the ancients.[104] Interestingly enough, the opinion that a ruler should manipulate the spirits while having no belief in them has been voiced as early as first century BC.[105]

Still, how much impact this kind of rationalism had? Heterodox Tang dynasty scholar Liu Zongyuan discredited Heaven-Man interaction and preached a materialistic universe, yet wrote hymns to auspices and prayers for rain.[106] This high complexity calls against the reductionist mode of interpretation. Empathy and understanding of the ancients are difficult, though desired. A story by Han Fei, one of the Warring States philosophers, illustrates the conundrum of interpretation:

> A man from Cheng wrote a letter to the minister of state Yan. In the dark … he asked the candle-holder to hold up the candle, and wrote down "hold up the candle" in his letter. The Yan minister read the letter and said: "Holding up the candle means uphold brightness … which means appointing worthy people." … State Yan was thus well-governed, but that is not what the letter means. Scholars promoted today are mostly like this.[107]

Concerning that our interpretations of ancients are hypothetical, he may not be wrong. When we hold up the candle to shed light on the past, we can be illuminating things different from what the ancients saw or believed. And the illumination remains ours, rather than theirs.

Had the Song observers lived today and witnessed the avoidance of name (the literal sense of *bihui*) in online communication, would they also lament the "confusion of name and actuality"? Would future historians find our online identities an obstacle to their understanding when they try to make sense of the tendencies of our age, just like when we examine the past? Moreover, when endowed with a more advanced understanding of the world than ours, would they try to rationalize us in a way that is bizarre and bewildering to our own understanding? Honestly, the author even looks forward to this possibility.

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[104] Sun, Prophecy Texts and Political Legitimation, 21.

[105] Jue Guo, "The Spirit World," in Routledge Handbook of Early Chinese History, ed. Paul R. Goldin (London: Routledge, 2018), 253.

[106] Zongyuan Liu, Liuzongyuan Quanji (Complete Works by Liu Zongyuan), ed. Minggang Cao (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), 7–9, 133–34, 307–11, 343.

[107] Fei Han, Hanfeizi (Master Hanfei), ed. Huaping Gao, Qizhou Wang, and Sanxi Zhang, 2nd ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015), 415–16.

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