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TENGRISM AND THE CULT OF THE SKY: PARALLELS OF DIFFERENCE IN TURKIC AND CHINESE TRADITIONS

In this article, the concept of worldview of ancient Turks is considered. The role and place of Tengrism (Tengrianism), defining this phenomenon as a worldview, including religious perception elements, which forms the basis of the spiritual culture of the Turks. The aim of the study is to analyze the concept of Tengrism as the ancient Turks' worldview and to draw a parallel between the Turkic 'Tengrism' and the Chinese 'Cult of Heaven.' As there are clear similarities in some aspects that give reason to wonder whether one worldview emerged from the other or whether these are two independent cults that existed each on its own in parallel. Main areas include an exploration of the pre-religious and cultural characteristics of the ancient Turks, particularly Tengrism and ancestor worship. The scientific significance lies in an in-depth examination of the Turkic worldview and its connections with other ancient cultures. Historical approach principle and descriptive method were applied in writing the article as tools for accumulating theoretical and practical data. Based on the material presented and previous studies conducted by scholars in this field, it can be assumed that the similarities between the concept of Tengrism among the ancient Turks and the Cult of Heaven in Chinese tradition can be explained by cultural interinfluence. The value of this study lies in expanding the understanding of the role of Tengrism in the culture of the ancient Turks and identifying new aspects of cultural interaction across Eurasia. The contribution of this research consists in a detailed comparison of the two worldviews, opening new horizons for studies in religion and philosophy. Tengrism and ancestor worship play a key role in Central Asian cultural identity. Additionally, the results presented in this article can serve as a foundation for further research in the field of the study.

Key words: Tengrism, Cult of Heaven, Ancestor Worship, Turks, Chinese People.

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Тәңіршілдік және Аспанға табынушылық: түркі және қытай дәстүрлеріндегі ұқсастықтар мен айырмашылықтар

Берілген мақалада ежелгі түріктердің дүниетаным тұжырымдамасы қарастырылған. Бұл құбылысты түркілердің рухани мәдениетінің негізін құрайтын діни қабылдау элементтерін қамтитын дүниетаным ретінде анықтайтын тәңіршілдіктің рөлі мен орны көрсетіледі. Зерттеудің мақсаты – Тәңіршілдік ұғымын ежелгі түріктердің дүниетанымы ретінде талдау, сондай-ақ түркі «Тәңіршілдігі» мен қытайлық «Аспанға табынушылығын» салыстыру, өйткені бір дүниетаным екіншісінен пайда болды ма, әлде бұл екі тәуелсіз табынушылық (культ) болды ма деген сұрақ туғызатын кейбір аспектілердің айқын ұқсастығын атап айтуға болады. Зерттеудің негізгі бағыттары ежелгі түркілердің наным-сенімдері және мәдени ерекшеліктері, атап айтқанда Тәңіршілдік және ата-бабаға табыну туралы көзқарасын қамтиды. Жұмыстың ғылыми маңыздылығы түркі дүниетанымын және оның басқа ежелгі мәдениеттермен байланысын терең зерттеу болып табылады. Мақаланы жазу барысында тарихи көзқарас принципін, сипаттамалық әдісті – теориялық және практикалық деректерді жинақтау құралы ретінде қолданылды. Ұсынған мәліметтерге, сондай-ақ осы тақырып бойынша бірқатар ғалымдардың бұрын жүргізген зерттеулеріне сүйене отырып, ежелгі түркілердегі Тәңіршілдік тұжырымдамасы мен қытайлықтардың Аспанға табынушылық арасындағы ұқсастық мәдениеттердің өзара әсерлесуіне байланысты деп болжауға болады. Бұл зерттеудің құндылығы ежелгі түріктер мәдениетіндегі тәңіршілдіктің рөлін түсінуді кеңейту және Еуразияның әртүрлі мәдениеттері арасындағы өзара ықпалдың жаңа аспектілерін анықтау болып табылады. Үлесі екі дүниетанымды егжей-тегжейлі салыстыруы болып табылады және бұл дін мен философия саласындағы зерттеулер үшін жаңа көкжиектер ашады. Зерттеу түріктер мен қытайлардың діни дәстүрлерінің өзара әсерін, сондай-

табынушылығының Орталық Азияның мәдени бірегейлігі үшін маңыздылығын ашады. Сонымен қатар мақала нәтижесі зерттеу саласындағы алдағы зерттеулер үшін негіз бола алады.

Түйін сөздер: тәңіршілдік, аспанға табынушылық, ата-бабаға табынушылық, түркілер, қытай халқы.

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Тенгрианство и культ неба: параллели различия в тюркской и китайской традициях

В данной статье рассматривается концепция мировоззрения древних тюрков. Роль и место тенгрианства, определяющее это явление как мировоззрение, включающее элементы религиозного восприятия, которое составляет основу духовной культуры тюрков. Целью исследования является анализ концепции тенгрианства как мировоззрения древних тюрков, а также проведение параллели между тюркским «Тенгрианством» и китайским «Культом неба», поскольку существует явное сходство некоторых аспектов, которые дают повод задаться вопросом, возникло ли одно мировоззрение из другого или это два независимых культа, которые существовали каждый сам по себе параллельно. Основные направления исследования включают рассмотрение картины о дорелигиозных и культурных особенностях древних тюрков, в частности Тенгрианства и культа предков. Научная значимость работы заключается в углубленном исследовании тюркского мировоззрения и его связи с другими древними культурами. При написании статьи был применен принцип исторического подхода, описательный метод – как инструмент накопления теоретических и практических данных. Исходя из изложенного материала, а также ранее проведенных исследований рядом ученых по данной теме, можно предположить, что сходство между концепцией тенгрианства у древних тюрков и культом Неба у китайцев объясняется взаимовлиянием культур. Ценность данного исследования заключается в расширении понимания роли тенгрианства в культуре древних тюрков и в выявлении новых аспектов взаимовлияния между различными культурами Евразии. Внесенный вклад заключается в детализированном сравнении двух мировоззрений, что открывает новые горизонты для исследований в области религии и философии. Исследование раскрывает взаимное влияние религиозных традиций тюрков и китайцев, а также значимость Тенгрианства и культа предков для культурной идентичности Центральной Азии, наряду с этим, информация представленная в данной статье может стать основой для дальнейших исследований в области этнологии, религиоведения и истории.

Ключевые слова: тенгрианство, культ неба, культ предков, тюрки, китайский народ

Introduction

As we know, Islam was officially recognized as the dominant religion in the territory of modern Kazakhstan in 960 during the rule of the Karakhanid dynasty. One of the significant literary works from that period is Kutty Bilik (Gracious Knowledge) by Yusuf Balasaguni. This treatise embodies the essence of the Islamic worldview, emphasizing religious tolerance and the recognition of freedom of belief. Since then, and up to the present day, Kazakhs, along with other descendants of the ancient Turks, have followed Islam and upheld its traditions. However, pre-Islamic cults and rituals should not be overlooked, as they form an essential part of the cultural identity and historical heritage of the Turkic peoples. These early belief systems provide valuable insights into the spiritual worldview of the ancient Turks before the advent of Islam.

The relevance of this study is further underscored by the ancient and rich history of the Turkic peoples, which spans thousands of years. They have made substantial contributions to various spheres of world civilization, and their cultural heritage continues to shape global history. As the Kazakh scholar Shokan Valikhanov noted: «In Europe, a false perception still prevails, portraying nomadic tribes as ferocious hordes and ruthless savages. The concept of a nomadic people is often closely associated with the image of crude and beast-like barbarians».

Justification of the choice of the topic, aim and objectives

The ancient Turks played a key role in the ethno-cultural history of the Eurasian steppes, as they were able to subjugate almost all nomadic tribes of the Eurasian steppe belt to their rule. This led to the

process of Turkisation of the population of the conquered territories and, consequently, to the widespread dissemination of Turkic culture. Similarly, the territory of Kazakhstan served as both a catalyst and a bridge linking different civilizations, cultures, and peoples. Both sedentary and nomadic cultures flourished here, with a mixture of Turkic, Iranian, Slavic, Chinese, and Mongolian influences.

The Turks' contribution to human history and culture is no less significant than that of the Persians, Greeks, or Romans. They played a decisive role in introducing Eastern culture to Europe. Vernadsky particularly emphasized their contribution to the discovery and spread of the printing press, which greatly increased the power of individual thought by recording, preserving, and transmitting accumulated knowledge from generation to generation. This era of the printed word essentially ushered in our modern scientific and technological era. Regardless of its size, every Turkic state had a common goal: to provide security and justice. This was achieved by establishing an orderly system of governance, an efficient administrative and customs structure, and securing trade routes both within the empire and with neighboring states.

The purpose of this article is to study and identify similarities and differences in the pre-Islamic cults and rituals of the Turks, which gave rise to the culture and life of modern Turkic-speaking peoples, as well as their connections with the beliefs of the ancient Chinese. Additionally, this study seeks to determine the reasons for these similarities in order to establish the relationship between culture and religion. Proceeding from the aim of the research, we put forward the following tasks:

1. Identify the peculiarities of Tengrism and ancestor worship among the ancient Turks;
2. Examine the characteristics of the Chinese Cult of Heaven;
3. Identify the similarities and differences between the two belief systems;
4. Determine the reasons for the existing similarities.

Scientific research methodology

As a source base for this article, we used translations of ancient Turkic inscriptions, including those dedicated to Kultegin, as well as the Dictionary of Turkic Dialects by Mahmud Kashgari, *Dīwāni Lughāt at-Turk*. At the initial stage of the research, we analysed scholarly works on ancient Turkic cults and rituals to identify their key characteristics. Sub-

sequently, we conducted a comparative analysis of similar belief systems found in Chinese historical sources.

In writing this article, we applied a historical approach to trace the development and transformation of religious beliefs over time. The descriptive method was utilized to collect and process theoretical and practical data. Additionally, the comparative analysis method allowed us to identify both overlapping and distinct features of the two religious traditions. An interdisciplinary approach was also employed, integrating insights from anthropology, religious studies, and history to ensure a comprehensive examination of the subject. By synthesizing multiple perspectives, we analysed not only the external similarities between the religious practices of the ancient Turks and Chinese but also their deeper cultural and philosophical foundations.

As a result of our research, we discovered significant parallels in the pre-religious beliefs of both civilizations. These similarities suggest a long history of cultural interaction and mutual influence, facilitated by trade, migration, and political engagements between the ancient Turkic and Chinese peoples. Through this comparative study, we aim to provide a more nuanced understanding of how religious beliefs evolved in response to socio-political changes and how they continue to shape contemporary cultural identities.

Result and Discussion

A significant number of studies have been conducted on the cults and rituals of the Turks. The theoretical foundation of this study is based on the works of both Kazakh and foreign scholars, which have allowed for a comprehensive understanding of pre-religious cults and rituals. In the process of preparing this work, we utilized materials from Michal Biran's book *Mongols, Turks, and Others*, which explores the role of nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppes in the lives of sedentary civilizations.

In studying the concept of Tengrism, we also analysed articles by Hungarian scholar Edina Dallos, who examines whether this religious phenomenon was exclusive to the ruling elite and whether it was transmitted within the ruling classes in the constantly shifting political landscape of the steppe empires. Slovak scholar Ksenia Chelnarova has similarly researched the religious beliefs of the ancient Turks. French historian and sociologist Marlène Laruelle has studied modern interpretations of Tengrism, arguing that transformations in statehood

have influenced all religions, including institutionalized ones such as Islam and Christianity, as well as traditional spiritual movements. She suggests that Tengrism represents a significant intersection between perceived national revival and ethnic denominational resurgence.

In Turkey, scholars such as Yılmaz Yeşildal and Harun Güngör have explored pre-Islamic Turkic cults and sacrificial rites, providing extensive insights into the significance of the Ancestor Cult in ancient Turkic societies. Another Turkish researcher, Emel Esin, has examined Turkic cultural exchange with China, noting that interactions were particularly intense when China was ruled by non-Chinese dynasties of Inner Asian origin, including Turkic-speaking groups.

The evolution of Tengrism in the 13th century, a religious worldview with roots stretching back to the Sumerian era, has also been studied by scholars from the Eurasian National University, including Shamakha S. and Yesim G. Their research focuses on how Tengrism transformed under the influence of Genghis Khan into the Cult of the Eternal Heaven (Tengri) (Shamakhay: 55).

Among scholars who have studied the cults and ritual practices of ancient China, one of the most comprehensive works is that of the prominent twentieth-century Sinologist Hurley Glessner Creel. In his book *The Becoming of State Power in China: The Western Zhou Era*, Creel provides a detailed examination of the earliest period in Chinese history, focusing on the formation of Chinese civilization. He explores philosophical, socio-political, and religious doctrines during the era when the foundations of statehood, ideology, and ethics – key factors in China's development – were first being established. Additionally, we analysed *History of China* by the American scholar Wolfram Eberhard.

Among Kazakh researchers, we relied on *Collected Works by Ch.* and also reviewed the studies of Russian scholars, particularly L.S. Vasiliev and L.I. Duman, who have contributed significantly to this field. In his research, L.I. Duman provides a detailed analysis of the Cult of Heaven and the concept of the Son of Heaven, emphasizing their role in China's foreign policy and state formation. His findings highlight the striking similarities between the Chinese concept of the spirit of Heaven and Turkic Tengrism, demonstrating the mutual influence of these distinct cultural traditions.

Throughout their history, the Turks practiced and embraced multiple religious traditions. Among them, Shamanism played a particularly significant

role, focusing on communication with spirits through a mediator – the Shaman – who would enter a trance state. Shamanistic practices were not exclusive to the Turks; they were also prevalent among other indigenous groups, including the Native Americans of North and South America. Despite the widespread use of the term shaman, different Turkic peoples had their own names for these spiritual figures. In Khakass, Tuvinian, and Altaic traditions, they were known as Kam; among Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, they were called Baksy; and in Yakut culture, they were referred to as Oyun. The tambourine played a central role in shamanic rituals, serving as the primary instrument for invoking spirits during ceremonial practices.

The fundamental and most enduring religious belief among the Turkic peoples was the worship of the God of Heaven, known as Tengrism. This spiritual tradition is reflected in the Orkhon inscriptions and experienced a revival following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In addition to the God of Heaven, early Turkic beliefs also referenced Zher-Su (Earth-Water) and Umai, the goddess of fertility and protector of women and children (Barthold, 1993:10).

According to most scholars, the Turkic cosmological worldview was based on a tripartite structure of the universe (Biran, 2005: 328).

- a) Heaven
- b) Earth
- c) The Underworld

At the highest level was Tengri, the supreme deity. Humans inhabited the Earth, while the souls of the dead resided in the Underworld. This three-tiered cosmological framework is reflected in the inscriptions dedicated to Kultegin, which state: «When the blue sky was created, and the gray earth below, man was created in the middle. Man was ruled by our ancestors Bumun Kagan and Istemi Kagan» (Committee, 2005).

One of the main elements of the worship of the Sky God and spirits is the ritual of sacrifice. Harun Güngör mentions this in his article, stating that this tradition has continued from the Huns to the present day. Sacrifices could involve strangling animals or releasing them into the wild, leaving them unattended to be taken by God or spirits. The ancestor cult, which involves honoring ancestral spirits, is also an important aspect of the religion of the Sky God (Güngör, 2013: 65).

Another scholar, Yılmaz Yesildal, also emphasizes the key role of ancestral spirits in his article, *The Influence of Belief in the Call of Ancestors on the Naming Beliefs and Traditions of Turkish Peo-*

ple. The ancestor cult is a belief system among the Turkic peoples, referenced in literature under names such as Religion of the Sky God, Kamlik Religion, and Shamanism. People in ancient times feared the spirits of their deceased ancestors and developed a sense of respect toward them based on fear and despair. To appease these spirits, they created various rituals and practices. Today, names of deceased ancestors are given to newborn family members, a practice believed to be rooted in respect. However, the cultural background of this tradition is linked to the historical belief in fear-based reverence for the dead. Even now, Turks seek to keep the spirits of their ancestors alive by including their names in sacrifices (Yesildal, 2018: 51).

Tengrism shares similarities with the ancient Chinese concept of Tian, or Heaven. Defining Tengrism as a worldview that includes religious ideas, we can identify some key aspects of Tengrism that form the foundation of the spiritual culture of the Turks:

1. Belief in Tengri as God.
2. Worship of nature as a universal source of life, including the veneration of rivers, mountains, and celestial bodies. The Creator conveys his will through nature – through the Sun, water, Earth, and stars. As a result, nature is to be honoured and respected as divine.
3. Worship of ancestral spirits, known as aruakhs, belief in the afterlife, and the immortality of the soul. It is believed that after death, the human soul ascends to Heaven and protects its living descendants.
4. Honoring elders, elderly parents, the cult of children, the continuity of generations, and the integrity of the family (Ayupov, 2012: 9).
5. As in China, the khagans of nomadic peoples were recognized as Sons of Heaven and served as high priests. Thus, the cult of Heaven was closely linked to the cult of the monarch, legitimizing his power as sacred (Ulanov, 2023: 106).

Sites for collective prayers and sacrifices could include places where unique natural formations existed, such as a single-stemmed, multi-trunk tree or sacred mountains. For example, one of the peaks in the Zailiyskiy Alatau mountain range is called Khan Taniri, meaning Khan, the King of Tengri (Kulsarieva, 2015).

The word Tengri and its etymology also provide insight into the ancient Turkic worldview. According to Mahmud Kashgari, it was written as Tangri. There was no contradiction between the ancient Turkic cult and Islam, so Kashgari freely translated

all phraseological expressions and sayings that included the term Tangri as Allah. For example, he translated *tun kun tabun tan tanenrika* as pray to Allah day and night. Among Tuvinians, it is written and pronounced as Tengir, among Altaians as Tenri, and among Yakuts as Tara. In Kazakh, it is pronounced as Tanir or Tanri. The word *tan* in Old Turkic means sunrise or dawn. Another significant term is *kok*, which is interpreted as sky blue or blue, signifying divine holiness and referring to Heaven itself. In Old Turkic, the phrase *achuk kuk* means clear sky (Kashgari, 2005: 29).

Additionally, it is important to note some unique characteristics of the cult of Heaven in ancient China. The Chinese people also worshipped Heaven as a deity, and the ruler of the Celestial Empire was regarded as the Son of Heaven and Heaven's trustee on Earth. Like the ancient Turks, the Chinese also had a strong tradition of ancestor worship, which cannot be ignored when examining similarities between Tengrism and the cult of Heaven. To appease the spirits of their ancestors, the Chinese conducted sacrifices and prayer ceremonies to seek their support in times of difficulty. The will of Heaven was considered absolute law. If any misfortune occurred, it was believed to be a sign that Heaven was displeased with certain human actions. These similarities strongly suggest that China and the Turkic tribes were in close contact, leading to parallels in their worldviews.

Fedorova also notes that Tengrism is a religion of nomadic forebears that emerged from the worldview of ancient pagans, a category into which, according to her, all early peoples belonged (Fedorova, 2007).

The last Chinese emperor, who was deposed in 1912, was still referred to as the Son of Heaven. However, this term is absent from inscriptions found on oracle bones, as the deity Tian, or Heaven, was a Zhou-era concept rather than a Shang dynasty belief.

After the Zhou conquest of the Shang, they identified Shangdi with their deity Tian. Chinese historical records claim that Shangdi had been worshipped as the Tian deity since the beginning of time. However, the idea that Tian entered Chinese religious tradition only with the Zhou was first suggested by H. G. Creel. In his 1954 article, Chen Meng-Jia argued that the Yin people had a deity called Di, which means that Heaven-Tian was not originally a Yin deity, at least not by name.

In concise inscriptions, mainly of a fortune-telling nature, found on animal bones and turtle

shells, the concept of Tian in the sense of Heaven or a divine heavenly power had not yet emerged. This concept appeared only during the Zhou era (9th–3rd centuries BC). The terms «Di» and «Shang-Di» (Supreme Lord or deity) were essentially equivalent to the later concept of «Tian» (Heaven). As noted by the Chinese scholar Hu Hou-hsuan, who specialized in the study of Yin inscriptions, what was referred to as «Di» under the Yin dynasty was later called «Tian» in the Zhou era (Krill, 2001: 40–41).

The ancient Turks regarded their rulers as heaven's chosen ones, sacred figures who acted as intermediaries between supernatural forces and their people. Everything a monarch did was perceived as an act of divine will, fulfilling the orders given by God (Celnarova, 1997: 105).

From the Zhou era onward, Heaven became the principal deity in Chinese tradition. The Zhou believed that the great Heaven could punish evil and greedy individuals while favouring those who performed good deeds. To be a legitimate ruler, Chinese emperors had to possess «di» (virtue). If an emperor became corrupt or tyrannical, Heaven would withdraw its favour, leading to his downfall.

During the Zhou period, 天 (Tian – Heaven) concentrated the main characteristics of the deity Shangdi and occupied the supreme position as a symbol of justice and divine wisdom. By emphasizing their connection to Heaven, the Zhou rulers referred to their state as 天下 (Tian xia – Celestial) and to themselves as the 天子 (Tian zi – Sons of Heaven). Thus, the Cult of Heaven became the dominant religious ideology in China.

If the supreme transcendence in the Shangdi cult was transferred to the Cult of Heaven, then the practice of deifying deceased rulers extended beyond the royal family to include ancestors in general (Vasiliev, 2004: 114–115).

The doctrine of the «Son of Heaven» (天子 Tian zi) played a crucial role in Chinese history. By portraying rulers as earthly gods, it reinforced their status as inviolable, supremely wise, and sacred figures above all mortals. This doctrine was closely linked to the religious concept of the Supreme Lord (Shangdi) and later evolved into the Cult of Heaven (Duman, 1976: 30–32).

According to the Zhou doctrine of the Heavenly Mandate, the ruler of China enjoyed the trust of a supreme deity who allowed him to reign. If the ruler failed to justify Heaven's trust, another person was commanded to rise up and overthrow him. This doctrine became the main ideology of the Chinese state. Each new dynasty that succeeded the previous one

claimed to possess the Mandate of Heaven. Heaven decided who should ascend to the throne and punished those who disobeyed its will.

In Tengrism, everything was believed to happen at the command of Heaven. Similarly, in the Chinese tradition, Heaven could punish a ruler for failing to uphold justice. If the rule of the Son of Heaven was successful, then after his death, he occupied a place in the honoured lineage of ancestors, who from Heaven continued to oversee earthly rulers. If he failed in his mission, he was condemned, and his name was forever disgraced.

The Zhou also believed that the ruler derived power not only from Heaven but also from his ancestors. If pleased, ancestral spirits would aid their descendants, but if dishonoured, they could severely punish them. This made it essential to appease them with proper offerings and to interpret their wishes through divination. In Zhou culture, divine power was closely associated with ancestral veneration and connected to Heaven. To honour Heaven, sacrifices were solemnly conducted on behalf of the ruler, but human sacrifices were eventually abandoned (Meliksetov, 2002: 35–40).

According to the Tatar researcher R. N. Bezertinov, the nomads had no slavery, and they called themselves the Sons of Heaven, while in China, there was a hierarchical slave system. Another piece of evidence supporting this distinction is that nomadic traditions rejected human sacrifices, whereas early Chinese practices included them. In the Shang kingdom, human sacrifices were common, but with the adoption of the concept of the Spirit of Heaven, sacrifices were replaced with animals.

Many of these ancient beliefs have survived in Kazakh traditions to this day. Before embarking on an important journey or undertaking, elders often say: «Тәңірім жолыңды оңғарсын» (May Tengri guide your way) or «Тәңірім қолдасын» (May Tengri support you). This shows that echoes of Tengrism are still present in daily life.

Hungarian researcher Edina Dallos, in his article *On the Concept of Tengrism among Nomadic Turks*, states that the «blue sky» and the «sky god» were fundamental religious experiences for nomadic steppe Turks. He notes that Tengri was the highest deity, free in its actions, capable of rewarding and punishing. Tengri represented both a god and the boundless, eternal sky itself. Since steppe nomads constantly moved between winter and summer dwellings, they were not tied to a single location. However, above them, the sky remained ever-present – vast, unchanging, and eternal.

Dallos argues that climate, lifestyle, and social structure all played a role in shaping the religious beliefs of nomadic communities. While Tengrism may have gained additional significance during certain imperial periods, it was always rooted in the fundamental experience of the sky (Dallos, 2019: 68).

As the Turkish researcher Emel Esin writes, the settlement of early Turkic tribes in central Inner Asia brought them into contact with various foreign cultures. Northern China has long been home to both Chinese and non-Chinese peoples of Inner Asia, among whom were some of the ancestors of the Turks. In the south and southwest, the Turks bordered the people of Tibet, the Indian subcontinent, and the Iranians. Cultural exchange with China was particularly intense when China was ruled by non-Chinese dynasties originating from the northern part of Inner Asia or by Turkic-speaking rulers. Examples include the Zhou dynasty in the first millennium BCE and the Turkic-speaking Tabgach (Toba-Wei: 385–556), among others (Esin, 1986: 435).

Esin references Wolfram Eberhard's History of China, where the author states that the Toba

ruled the largest state in East Asia, controlling all of Northern China. The term «Tobalar» is derived from «Tabgach», which is mentioned in ancient Orkhon inscriptions and understood to refer to the state of Toba. Eberhard also provides an explanatory dictionary entry for «Tabgach» (=Toba), identifying it as a Turkic tribe (Eberhard, 1947: 166).

Conclusion

Based on the findings of Esin and other scholars, we can conclude that the similarities between the concept of Tengrism among the ancient Turks and the Cult of Heaven in Chinese tradition can be attributed to mutual cultural influence. These interactions were primarily shaped by the prolonged coexistence of the two ethnic groups from the earliest periods of history. Furthermore, frequent military clashes and territorial raids led to a significant exchange of cultural, linguistic, and religious elements between the Turks and the Chinese. This continuous interaction undoubtedly contributed to the parallels observed in the pre-religious beliefs of the two peoples.

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