

2.11 SPIRITUAL BELIEFS AND REGIONAL RELIGION

During the Classical Period, religion was practiced on many levels and with significant differences in the various regions of China. While our knowledge of certain elements of religious practice is extensive, in certain other areas, including those of greatest imaginative interest, our information is disappointingly scanty.

Classical religious practice may be analyzed as divided along lines of class or of geography and ethnicity, but some basic universal features of religious attitudes can be outlined. It appears that Chinese people generally believed in the existence of a world of spirits that was located above in heaven, below in a subterranean region called the Yellow Springs, and in the space that human beings occupied. Many, if not all, spirits had initially been human beings. People were born with two types of spiritual substances as parts of their corporeal endowment. Upon death, the lighter of these ascended and the heavier descended. It would be simple to think that the “heaven-bound” portion became an ancestral spirit of benevolent disposition, while the portion that descended to the Yellow Springs formed a potential revenant or spook. There is some indication that this view existed, but the evidence is mixed enough to suggest that the situation, not fully comprehensible to us, was far more complex.

Patrician religious practice

The focus of patrician religious practice was the cult of ancestor worship. Patricians followed a regular schedule of sacrificial ceremonies through which their ancestors were nourished and appeased. This system involved the careful maintenance of clan genealogies, which determined the proper ritual roles of clan members in ceremonies, the construction of ancestral shrines, the employment of masters of sacrificial *li* to serve as directors of major ceremonies, and the maintenance of a household staff that knew how to prepare the prescribed ritual foods and wines.

The lineal relationships of clan members and the structure of power within the larger clan kinship groups were articulated through the structures of religious practice. It does not appear that clan members generally offered up any but formulaic prayers to their ancestors at religious ceremonies, or that any value was placed on internal, sub-vocalized prayer. The emotional content of ancestral sacrifices appears to have concerned feelings of devotion to those among the departed ancestors whom one had known personally, feelings of clan solidarity, and involvement in the aesthetic aspects of ritual.

Rules concerning the allowable size and number of ancestral shrines existed, and these differentiated among the ranks of the patrician class. The Zhou king, for example, was said to have been allowed to maintain seven ancestral shrines, major patrician clans five shrines, and lower patricians three. The alignment of these shrines is of considerable interest to those who explore anthropological issues of kinship organization. Regardless of the number of shrines allowed, patricians clans always had one grand shrine dedicated to their founding ancestor. In this shrine, tablets to all but the most recent generations of ancestors were housed. Recent ancestors were worshipped in the remaining even number of shrines. These were aligned in two rows to either side of the grand shrine. According to Zhou kinship rules, succeeding generations were designated by

an alternating set of two terms, *zhao* and *mu*: if a father belonged to a *zhao* generation, his son belonged to the *mu*. The two aisles of shrines represented these two clan moieties. Although we are unclear of all the implications of this system, it clearly shows that lineage structures expressed a deeply dualistic consciousness.

It appears that most patricians thought that the function of sacrifices was principally to nourish or propitiate the world of spirits. Aside from certain standing requests for posterity, prosperity, and so forth, sacrifices do not seem to have been conducted in a “demand” mode – spirits were not presented with wish lists, they were kept fat and happy, and good things would then flow naturally from their benevolent satisfaction.

State religion

State religion may be considered a subset of patrician religious practice. Zhou culture envisioned a certain range of spiritual entities of great generality that were believed to have wide-ranging effects on people of different clans. Foremost among these was Tian, or Heaven. Tian, which called up the image of the sky (which is a meaning of the word Tian) was also referred to as “Di,” a term which came to mean “emperor,” but also denoted an anthropomorphic image of a universal god. (It is possible that this Classical high god Heaven was the outcome of a blending between a Shang high god Di and a pre-conquest Zhou tribal god Tian. In this course, the term Di has generally been rendered “Lord on High.”)

Only the Zhou king was supposed to have direct “contact” with Heaven through sacrifice and ceremony, although there are indications that this rule grew loose during the Spring and Autumn period. Heaven – the bestower of the royal Mandate – was the pivot of state religion.

Other gods of universal or at least regional significance included the spirits of the major mountains and rivers of China. The maintenance of relations between the human world and these spirits was parceled out to the patrician lords, whose entitlement by the Zhou kings had provided them with the religious legitimacy to conduct these ceremonies.

In addition, every state possessed outside the capital walls altars to the earth and to the harvest spirits which were under the care of its patrician ruler. These altars were, in fact, so closely identified with the notion of a state that the state was often referred to simply “the altars of the earth and grains.” Sacrifices carried out there were large public affairs which served to symbolize the power of the ruler and his indispensability as the intermediary between the world of spirits and the people of his realm.

Religion among the non-elite

We have little information concerning the religious practices of the common people – the illiterate write few books. It seems safe to assume, on the basis of a scattering of relevant remarks in the texts, that all households offered sacrifices to their ancestors, even though poor people did not maintain shrines. There exist texts which specify that *li* did not extend down to the level of commoners, and this would suggest that formal religious ceremonies were not to be practiced except by patricians, but other texts assert that *li* included all levels of society, and it is most likely

that well articulated rituals, whether sanctioned by the patricians or not, were associated with ancestor worship at all levels.

Apart from ancestor worship, the non-elite seem to have possessed a very lively religious tradition, generally spoken of under the rubric “popular religion.” What popular religion consisted of during the Classical period is difficult to say. The traditions of shamanism, immortalism, and the mantic arts which are discussed below certainly flourished at the popular level, and also at the patrician level. These are areas of religious practice that crossed class lines, although their forms may have differed according to class. When we speak of popular religion in the Classical period, however, we are sometimes pointing towards a regional rather than a class distinction.

At some time in the pre-Classical past, the various regions of China that later became incorporated into the Shang and Zhou polities were in many ways culturally distinct, as archaeological exploration has shown. The Shang may be imagined as a loose confederation of tribes, and many regions of the successor Zhou state lay beyond the Shang’s borders. Moreover, throughout the Classical age, non-Chinese peoples lived in pockets of the landscape of China. In sum, Classical China was an ethnic mix, some levels having largely assimilated into a single group (generally referred to as the “Han people”), while others remained clearly exotic.

In religion, what these regions were assimilating to was mainstream Zhou practice – the lineage shrine system of the Yellow River Valley. Patricians of all states gradually tended to conform their practices to this “metropolitan” Zhou norm, which represented the highest standard of *wen*, according to the arbiters of propriety among the patrician lords and the class of *shi*. If a state’s patricians conformed to these norms, they were in a better position to be granted prestige and influence in interstate politics.

Non-patricians, however, had little incentive to abandon the unique regional practices that their ancestors had handed down to them. They gained nothing by adhering to the norms of metropolitan religion, and their beliefs were not, in any event, things they were willing to exchange for a price. Although “new” Zhou ideas would have become more familiar and acceptable as time went by, the lower ranks of society were more psychologically dependent upon established religious certainties – even religious fears – than were the economically and socially secure patricians. Hence, popular religion is probably best pictured as a widely variant and unsystematic set of local beliefs, conservative, but in a state of constant development, influenced both by ever increasing awareness of the popular traditions of other regions, and by the gradually more compelling Zhou beliefs and practices.

Nevertheless, certain forms of popular religious belief appear to bridge local cultures. For example, many regions of China seem to have shared beliefs in a group of household gods – the god of the kitchen, the god of the dark corner (the front hall). Thus there may have been some degree of family resemblance even among the regional religious traditions.

Religious arts and superstitious beliefs

The following descriptions of shamanism, immortalism, and the mantic arts pertain to practices that were of interest to all levels of Classical society. While it is correct to say that the patricians were dedicated to metropolitan religious culture and the other members of society were not, it

would be an error to think that the rituals of clan and state religion in any way debarred patricians from strong attachments to the popular beliefs of their regional environment. Indeed, from our sources it sometimes appears that the most superstitious of all people in China were the rulers of states, and, perhaps above all others, the most powerful of these, the man who became First Emperor of the Qin.

1. Shamanism

“Shamanism” refers to religious practices that rely centrally upon the agency of spirit possession, particularly where the agent, or “shaman,” is led into a trance state by certain ritual practices such as dance or music. Spirit possession was not a feature of metropolitan Zhou religion, but it seems nevertheless to have played a significant role in late Zhou religion, particularly in certain regions, such as the Yangzi River Valley.

There has been sustained debate about what forms of ancient Chinese religious practice should be denoted as shamanistic in the strict sense. The term is often loosely used to describe a variety of religious roles, including liturgist, diviner, ritual dancer, healer, and so forth. A word commonly encountered in early texts, *wu* (巫), is routinely translated as shaman, and this may be adequate for many purposes. But in the study of world religions, shaman is used as a technical term to denote individuals capable, through trance or similar states, to have direct personal contact with spirits and their world. In the cases of the roles named above, this power may or may not have been entailed, and casual use of the term shaman evades important questions. Nevertheless, the evidence for true shamanism in certain parts of Warring States China is strong, and it may have been important in earlier eras as well.*

Shamans (or more strictly, *wu*) included both men and women. Sometimes shamans seem to have been occupied as priests at the shrines of particular local deities. Shamans were sometimes employed much the way “witch doctors” were in other cultures; the healing arts in China developed from their esoteric practices. Their social status seems by Warring States times to have been very low, but they were nevertheless looked upon as special or dangerous, and given considerable practical respect. This ambiguous social position can be expressed by citing a recent theory by a famous Japanese scholar who marshaled considerable evidence to argue that Confucius’s mother was a shaman. If his theory were correct, it would allow us to say that a shaman’s son could rise to become a patrician of considerable influence, if not high rank.

We will discuss shamanism further below, in connection with the culture of Chu, where a regional shamanistic tradition seems to have been particularly strong.

2. Immortalism

We earlier saw how the *Zhuangzi* describes in one passage a strange sage who lives on Guyi Mountain. He is ageless and possessed of many marvelous powers, and he eats only the wind and dew. Belief in the existence of men such as these was extremely common in early China, particularly in the regions of the east coast.

* We will discuss these issues in the context of Shang religion in reading 3.6.

The people of Classical China seem to have been more than unusually anxious about issues of longevity. Of course, most people in all cultures would prefer long life to early death, but the concern in ancient China still seems rather emphatic. From inscriptions as early as the first years of the Western Zhou we see patricians praying for life spans of ten thousand years, and by the late Classical era this is clearly more than simply a manner of speaking. While the Chinese did not ever speak of eternal life per se, the belief arose that there was a class of men who had found a way to live forever without aging: the “immortals.” Their achievement was in no way a matter of birth, it was a matter of art. Anyone could become an immortal, if only one knew how and had the discipline to master the art. This idea coexisted with an apparently contradictory notion that was very widespread to the effect that individuals were all born with a fixed allotment of years (in some slightly later texts, it appears that this allotment was recorded by certain spirits in great register books). Indiscrete or ignorant conduct could lead to death before one’s allotment was reached, but even if one lived prudently enough to live out one’s destined lifespan, there was nothing that could prolong life beyond its limits. Clearly, these two outlooks contended for people’s beliefs, and it is likely that most people simply believed both without becoming unduly concerned about the conflict between them.

The belief in the existence of immortals, in “lands of immortals” at some geographic remove from central China, and in the arts of immortalism became an increasingly prominent aspect of Classical culture during the Warring States period. Any number of men claimed to be immortals, and an even larger number claimed to have met immortals and learned from them various magical arts that came to be associated with the cult of immortals: the art of levitation, of making things materialize, of summoning and riding on dragons (which lurked everywhere in ancient China, just out of sight).

There appeared in the state of Yan a man who persuaded the king that he was an immortal and the king assigned a courtier to learn the art of immortality from him. But the courtier was slow and before he began to undertake his studies the immortal died. The king was so furious that he had the courtier executed. (*Han Feizi* 32)

Immortalists flourished in the states of Qi and, most prominently, Yan. The *Shiji* traced the origins of the school to the naturalistic thinker Zou Yan, who, as we have seen, was much celebrated when he dwelt in Yan.

Men like Zou Yan wrote treatises about the endless revolutions of the “five powers”. . . His followers Sung Wuji, Zhengbo Qiao, Zhong Shang, and Xianmen Gao were all from Yan. They practiced the magical arts of immortality, the dissolution of the body, and the ways of ghosts and spirits. Zou Yan gained honors from rulers by expounding on how the forces of yin and yang controlled the revolutions of the cosmos, but the masters of arts along the coasts of Yan and Qi transmitted his arts without understanding, and in this way there arose the countless numbers who merely invoked strange and prodigious ideas to meet the expectations of those whose patronage they would attract (*Shiji* 28.2344-45)

As this passage makes clear, the arts of immortality became conflated with a host of other traditions, including the shamanistic arts of “the ways of the ghosts and spirits” and the mantic arts.

In fact, by the end of the Classical era, all of these traditions were beginning to inform one another, and practitioners of these arts began to be referred to by a single term: *fangshi*, or “masters of the methods.” This term will become important for us in the last section of the course, when we pursue this religious trend into the Han Dynasty.

3. *The mantic arts*

“Mantic arts” refers to the arts of fortune-telling or soothsaying that proliferated in Classical China. Among all the religious traditions of China, ancestor worship and divination have the longest attested pedigree. The variety of mantic arts that we can discern in the Classical texts is truly astounding.

The best established mantic arts were soothsaying by means of turtle shells and yarrow stalks, and it is from this tradition that the sacred text known as the *Yi jing* derives (we will discuss the *Yi jing* in the context of Han society). Other fortune-telling arts included astrology, phrenology (reading an individual’s fortune from his or her head form), calendrics, dream interpretation, divination by bird call, wind angles, solar and lunar halos, land forms, and others too numerous to mention.

Little serious planning was done in ancient China without consulting an oracle of one sort or another, and this pertained as much to patrician society as to popular practice. The mantic arts were a source of constant imaginative invention and gave fruitful employment to a great cohort of men.

4. *Unsystematic beliefs*

So fertile were late Zhou Chinese beliefs in types of spirits, human ghosts, mysterious unseen forces, and magical practices that it would appear impossible to exhaust them through study. Almost every chapter of every text we encounter seems to include sections that appeal to a body of unsystematic spirit lore or notion of the workings of providence or fate. We saw in the story of Duke Huan of Qi how he had succeeded an elder brother whose downfall began with the revenge of a dead man inhabiting the body of a boar. There is not the slightest hint that such an occurrence was any more than out of the ordinary – ghosts and spirits did not intrude in human affairs every day, but when they did it was not a matter of astonishment.

The Classical Chinese, and a hundred generations of Chinese who lived after them, simply understood that the human world cohabited spatially with the spirit world, and the members of the two worlds interacted as called for. Moreover the world of the spirits was also the world of the “spirit-like.” Supernatural omens such as flaming crows could appear without the agency of a single ghost or spirit – the entire cosmos was alive to the human world and sensitively responsive to unusual situations within it.

Chu Religion

Of all of the regional cultures of ancient China, the state of Chu stands out for the colorfulness of its religious traditions. Although it is by no means certain that Chu religion differed in substance from that of other regions, its flamboyant expression goes beyond what we find for any other regional culture. It exemplifies more than any other regional religion practices that resemble shamanism, involving specially empowered individuals who were able through some sort of altered state to mediate directly with the world of spirits. Texts associated with Chu, such as the *Lyrics of Chu* (*Chu ci*, discussed below), sometimes frame this contact in terms of a type of spirit journey – either physical or conveyed through physical metaphors.

The origins of the Chu people is a mystery, although several solutions have been proposed. When Chu first appears in the historical record during the eighth century it is clearly a culture very distinct from the Zhou norm. The monarch of Chu called himself a king from the start, and the names of individuals and official titles clearly suggest that the spoken language being represented in Chinese characters was very different from the language of the Zhou heartland. Some scholars have suggested that the Chu nobility was established by refugees from the Shang, who, mixing with an indigenous local people, evolved a rich cultural tradition that was both Chinese and non-Zhou.

The region of Chu culture, which encompassed a broad band stretching the length of the middle reaches of the Yangzi River valley, included many small states that maintained degrees of independence from the state of Chu until late in Warring States era. One of these, unrecorded in historical chronicles but discovered archaeologically, was the state of Zeng, located about 100 miles northeast of the Chu capital. The tomb of one of its rulers, Marquis Yi, dating from about 433 B.C., is one of the richest ever excavated for the Warring States era, and its many decorated mortuary objects give us some sense of the religious vision of southern China in this era. Among the tomb's most striking images are patterns on the Marquis' casket depicting what seem to be dancers in masks and animal costumes.



Casket of Marquis Yi of Zeng



Casket imagery

Whether these images are depictions of shamans, in the strict sense of people who possess the ability, through a form of trance, to travel on a spirit journey or serve as mediums, channeling spirits directly, is beyond what we can know. The depictions may simply be of ritual dancers whose personal contact with the world of spirits simply entailed performance of sacred ritual. But the association of these images with the region of Chu culture does make it reasonable to infer that the ceremonial forms pictured here were in some way connected with shamanistic religious tradition.

There are three texts that are closely associated with the religious beliefs and practices of the people of Chu. The *Lyrics of Chu* is a collection of poems or songs which may be read on one level as political lamentations and ritual celebrations, but on another level appear to be shamanic chants, perhaps sung to induce trances or to recount the trance experience.

A second text is called the *Classic of Mountains and Seas (Shanhai jing)*. It is collection of accounts of the fantastic, organized as a geographical survey of China and the “continents” that surround it. The populations of these places are fantastic beings of all sorts, and in describing them the text incorporates a host of ancient myths.

The last text is one that was only brought to light by a group of grave robbers near the modern city of Changsha about 1934. It is an arcane survey of spirits associated with the months and seasons. The text is clearly a Warring States product, but it is unfortunately difficult to decipher the characters, which are written in an unusual style, and equally difficult to make out what they mean once their written form has been deciphered! It may be that the text reflects the Chu dialect more than any other text we know, and unfortunately, there are no native speakers of Chu available for hire as translators. Fortunately, this text, known as the “Chu Silk Manuscript,” includes a series of drawings of the spirits described by the text, with short, sometimes decipherable descriptions of each.

We will close this section on religion with translated portions of the *Lyrics of Chu* and the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, and then add a short section on the “Chu Silk Manuscript” in which we will introduce the spirits of the Chu calendar through picture and murky translation.

From the *Lyrics of Chu*

A number of poems in the anthology *Lyrics of Chu* are said to have been written by a man named Qu Yuan, who was a minister of Chu in the fourth century B.C. In legend, Qu Yuan was dismissed from high office by the king of Chu, who, from Qu Yuan's viewpoint, had rejected his loyal service in favor of slandering sycophants. The poems of the anthology were traditionally read as political laments, expressing in dramatic language the devotion of the rejected courtier to his lord.

Modern scholarship has come to see many of these poems as songs associated with the trance states of shamans. Their colorful imagery, expressed in a particularly obscure form of ancient Chinese, may suggest their ritual use in association with trance inducement, or may be a reflective expression of the aesthetic and supernatural exaltation of such experiences. They incorporate many allusions to myths, which appear to have played a particularly important role in Chu popular religion, and they make many references to plants that may have been used to induce trances or were believed to possess magical powers.

The following selections are from a portion of the collection called the "Nine Songs" (of which there are eleven). They appear to use the journeys of certain gods as a metaphor for the shamanic trance. As with many poems attributed to Qu Yuan, shamanic visions of a spirit journey are intertwined with the trope of the courtier's unrequited love for the ruler who has rejected him.

Many of the *Lyrics from Chu* employ a distinctive chant, each line punctuated with a rhythmic marker. That form is replicated in the translations below.

The Grand Minister of Fate

The title is the name of a spirit who governs the lifespan of each person on earth. Some commentators read in the poem two voices: one the shaman courtier's, the other the Grand Minister of Fate's, an interpretation followed here. In the translation, the Grand Minister's voice appears in quotation marks.

Fling wide – hey,
 the gate of Heaven!
 Black mass – hey,
 the cloud I ride.
 Call the whirlwind – hey,
 to drive before me
 Sleet rain – hey,
 to lay the dust.

Swirling gyres – hey,
 my lord descending.
 I'll follow you – hey,
 cross Mount Kongsang.*

*The home of Zhuanxu, who is, in some myths, the god of the north, and who dwells on this mountain, which is barren and snow covered the year round.

“Nine continents – hey,
 teeming with people,
 “Late or soon – hey,
 death’s in my hand.”

Fly high – hey,
 he soars so serenely,
 On clear *qi* – hey,
 steering yin and yang.
 I’ll speed with you – hey,
 we’ll guide together
 The Lord on High – hey,
 off to Jiugang.*

“My spirit coat – hey,
 it billows outward,
 “Pendant jades – hey,
 flash colors bright,
 “Here yin of death – hey,
 here yang of life,
 “None foresees – hey,
 the course that I take!”

I pluck hemp – hey,
 its jadelike bloom,
 To send him – hey,
 now far away.
 Beard of age – hey,
 grown long upon me,
 From him parted – hey,
 more each day.

Drive the dragons – hey,
 thundering wheels,
 Gallop high – hey,
 striking the sky.
 I stand twining – hey,
 cassia branches,
 Endless longing – hey,
 paining my heart.

* A mountain in Chu. The “Lord on High” renders the name Di, discussed earlier as similar to Tian.

My heart paining - hey,
 what can I do?
 Were the present – hey,
 full as the past.
 But man’s fate – hey,
 always is just,
 Meeting, parting – hey,
 who has control?

* * *

The Lord of the East

The Lord of the East is the sun, whose diurnal journey is pictured here. This poem appears to combine the voice of the sun spirit with a voice describing votive rituals that send off and welcome back the sun each day. I have placed what I take to be the spirit’s voice in quotes.

“First gleam of light – hey,
 I rise from the east,
 “Beams across - hey,
 my threshold Fusang.*
 “Urge my horses – hey,
 go gently forward,
 “Night turns bright – hey,
 now daybreak has come.

“Dragon chariot – hey,
 driving on thunder,
 “Cloud banners – hey,
 waving in wind,
 “Sighing deep – hey,
 I turn toward ascending,
 “Heart reluctant – hey,
 I look back and yearn.
 “Such allure – hey,
 their beauty and singing!
 “Gaze in joy – hey,
 and forget to return.”

Tune the lute strings – hey,

*A mythical tree in the east up which the sun climbs each day.

strike up the drums!
 Chime the bells – hey,
 set bell-frame rocking!
 Sound the flutes – hey,
 blow the pan-pipes!
 Shaman girls – hey,
 chaste and lovely,
 Hover low – hey,
 then soar up high,
 All in rhythm – hey,
 chanting and dance.
 Pitch and beat – hey,
 in perfect accord,
 Now the spirit – hey,
 covers the sun.

“Azure coat – hey,
 bright rainbow skirts,
 “My long arrow – hey,
 hits Heaven’s Wolf.*
 “Bow in hand – hey,
 I tumble below,
 “To the Dipper – hey,
 my cassia-wine ladle,
 “Reins in hand – hey,
 I fly through the air,
 “In night’s pitch – hey,
 ride back to the east.”

*The name of a star.

From *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*

The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* is an imaginative geography of the world which charts in prose the mountains and rivers with which legend endowed the distant corners of the earth, and also the bizarre array of plants, animals, peoples, and spirits which populated the imagination of South China in the late Zhou. Many of these are recognizable from mainstream myths of the metropolitan culture – the Yellow Emperor, Zhuanxu, Yao, and Shun all appear along with other familiar heroes and gods. But most of those whom we encounter in the text are not found in texts from the north and seem to reflect the ideas of popular religion.

The text begins with a less than scientific survey of the lands of China and then moves out towards more distant regions of the earth, beyond the experience of people (other than the authors). The section translated below, which includes a good variety of the types of phenomena that appear in the book, is from the section “The Great Wasteland of the West,” a region at the outer regions of the world. Because many of the names were obviously coined with great attention to their meaning, I have in such cases translated them into English equivalents.

In the midst of the Great Wasteland there is a mountain named Mt. Ever-*Yang*. It is the place where the sun and moon enter. A cold and barren state exists there, ruled by a woman liturgist and a woman shaman.

There is also the state of Long-Lived Hemp in that region. Southern Peak married a woman from Island Hill whose name was Woman Sincerity. She gave birth to Ge the Youngest who gave birth to Long-Lived Hemp. When Long-Lived Hemp stood upright, he cast no shadow, and when he shouted he made no sound. The heat in that place is terrific, and men cannot go there.

In those lands is a headless man who stands grasping his halberd and is called the Corpse of the Xia Ploughman. When the founder of the Shang Dynasty, Tang the Successful, conquered Jie the evil king of the Xia at Mt. Zhang, he beheaded the Ploughman who remained standing, though his head lay before him. Then the ploughman ran off to Shaman Mountain.

There is also a man there named Wu Hui whose left side is greatly developed, for he has no right arm.

The state of Covered Mountain is there. It has a tree with crimson bark and a branching trunk called the Red Tree. This is the land of the one-armed people.

In the midst of the Great Wasteland there is a mountain named Mount of the Great Wasteland. The sun and the moon enter in that place. There is a man there with three faces; he is the son of the Emperor Zhuanxu. He has three faces and one arm. Men of three faces never die. His place is called the Plain of the Great Wasteland.

Beyond the Southwest Sea, south of the Scarlet River and west of the Flowing Sands there is a man named Xiahou Kai. He wears two green snakes as earrings and he rides a pair of dragons. Three times Kai rose as a guest to Heaven, and he brought back down with him the “Nine Counterpoints” and “Nine Songs.”* His place is called the Plain of Heavenly Solemnity and it is sixteen thousand feet high. Here, Kai first began to chant the “Nine Incantations.”

There is also the state of the *Hu*-man.** The grandson of the Fiery Emperor was named Magic Tally and he was the *Hu*-man’s father. The *Hu*-man can move back and forth between Heaven and earth.

There is a fish there that is half withered; it is named Fish-woman. When the Emperor Zhuanxu died, a wind rose from the north and the heaven’s rained down a great flood. There was a snake which was transformed into a fish: this was Fish-woman. When Zhuanxu died he came to life again as a fish.

There is a green bird there called the Chu-bird. It has a yellow breast, crimson feet, and six heads.

There is also the Mount of the Great Shaman and Gold Mountain.

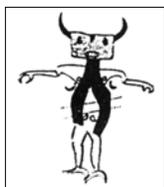
(*Shanhai jing* 16)

*These, like the “Nine Incantations” mentioned below, are sections of the *Lyrics of Chu*; selections from the “Nine Songs” appear in this section.

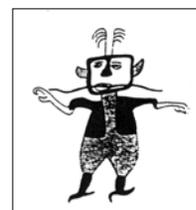
**Said to have a man’s face and the body of a fish.

The Spirits of the “Chu Silk Manuscript”

We meet here twelve deities that govern the months of the year, as they appear in the “Chu Silk Manuscript.” The translations are fragmentary, but we can clearly see that these spirits are conceived in terms of a calendar regulating action by the ruler according to the seasons and specific influences associated with each month and its spirit. Nevertheless, this document is perhaps the most direct expression of popular religious beliefs that we possess from the Classical period, and the spirits alone are worth meeting face to faces.



Gu divides the lengths of days [by means of the Winter Solstice (?)]. During Gu’s month, one may undertake war campaigns and lay siege to walled cities. One may call together one’s masses or assemble the patrician lords. One may carry out punishments for all types of crimes and destroy the unrighteous.

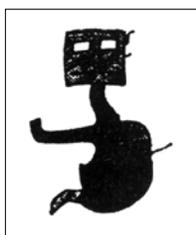
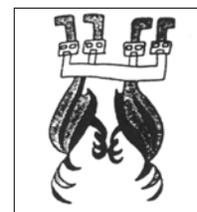


Tu governs winter. During Tu’s month, one may not attack walled cities. . . .



Zou resides below. During Zou’s month, the clouds first arrive; one should not kill During this month, days [of the sixty-day calendrical cycle] designated *ren-zi* or *bing-zi* will be inauspicious. If one campaigns in the north the general will be at fault. War . . . suspended.

Ru should be a time for war. During Ru’s month one may send out one’s armies and wall cities. One must not take a wife, nor take male servants or female concubines. If one is without captives or gain, one will have no regrets.

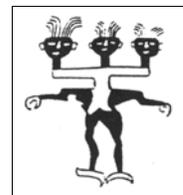


Bing governs Spring. During Bing’s month . . . wife, livestock, divide female . . .

Yu governs the taking of a wife. During Yu’s month, one may not engage in great affairs (warfare?). The Emperor Shao Hao (an offspring of the Yellow Emperor) will . . . Gou Long (an offspring of Gong Gong) will . . . To take a wife is to become a laughingstock in one’s state . . .

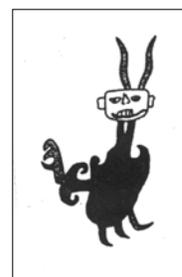


Gao dispatches the heat. During Gao's month, one may lead an army and succeed by means of what is hidden. If the moon's is not located in the constellation . . . one may not offer sacrifices; to do so is inauspicious. Take . . . as male servants or concubines.



Zha governs Summer. During Zha's month, one may not send forth troops. If troops are sent forth on the rivers they will not return, because they will be defeated, or they will be overturned, or they will be drowned (?). It is not permissible to make sacrificial offerings.

Cang excludes success. . . . During Cang's month, one may not stage a royal tour; to do so will lead to great misfortune for the state. There will be birds entering above and below.



Zang . . . During Zang's month, one must not construct buildings. One may not have any great undertaking (war); none will succeed, none will return, and there will be great civil disorder. It is inauspicious to take a wife.

Xuan governs Autumn. During Xuan's month, one may construct buildings . . . If one moves, then . . .



Yang . . . righteousness. During Yang's month, one may not undertake destruction. One may decide cases at court and drive out the unrighteous from the state.

KEY TERMS

shamanism

immortalism

state religion

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. *What sorts of versions of “other worlds” do you find as you survey the readings in this section?*
2. *To what degree have the Confucian, Mohist, Daoist, and Legalist texts we have looked at each drawn on or rejected the types of religious “background” we see here?*
3. *What is your sense about the way in which the people of early China looked upon the world of the spirits?*
4. *How might this reflect their vision of death?*

Sources and Further Reading

For issues concerning the state of Chu and its culture, a useful resource is Constance Cook and John Major, ed., *Defining Chu* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), especially Cook's full translation (together with a leading Chinese scholar, Li Ling) of the “Chu Silk Manuscript” (pp. 173-76).

For the *Lyrics of Chu*, which are quite difficult to understand because they combine allegorical narrative, specialized terminology, and unique forms of Chu dialect, a complete and readable scholarly translation exists by David Hawkes (*Songs of the South* [Oxford: 1957]).

Some of the ideas in this reading draw on general theories of religion and the history of religion that may be of interest to those who find this brief section engaging. For example, those intrigued with the role of Chu shamans may want to look at the classic general study *Shamanism*, by Mircea Eliade (1951; English trans., Princeton: 1964), which has been most influential in delimiting the features of shamanism in the strict sense. To follow up on the general religious function of ritual, it may be interesting to consult the somewhat more theoretical *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* by Catherine Bell (Oxford: 1992), whose scholarly background lies in the study of medieval Chinese religion.

For an account of traditional sources concerning shamanism (or, more accurately, *wu*) in ancient China, including issues of their social status, see Fu-shi Lin, “The Image and Status of Shamans in Ancient China,” in John Lagerwey & Marc Kalinowski, ed., *Early Chinese Religion* (Leiden: 2009), vol. 1, pp. 397-459. (Lin does engage the theoretical issue of whether the figures recorded in ancient Chinese religion conformed to descriptions of shamans in a strict sense.) The Japanese scholar who proposed that Confucius was a shaman's son was Shirakawa Shizuka, in his book *Kōshi den* (A biography of Confucius) (Tokyo: 1972).

Images of the casket of Marquis Yi of Zeng are from Tan Weisi, *Zeng Hou Yi mu* (Beijing: 2003).