Chapter 6

Beliefs and Practices in Everyday Life of the Han Dynasty

> And begging priests and soothsayers go to rich men's doors and make them believe that they by means of sacrifices and incantations have accumulated a treasure of power from the gods that can expiate and cure with pleasurable festivals any misdeed of a man or his ancestors, and that if a man wishes to harm an enemy, at slight cost he will be enabled to injure just and unjust alike, since they are masters of spells and enchantments that constrain the gods to serve their end.[1]

> What sacrifices these scoundrels make! They bring their picnic boxes, their wine-jars, not for the gods, but themselves. The incense and barley-cake is holy enough. The god gets all that, put there on the fire; and they put on the tail bone and the bile, because they are inedible, for the gods—then they gulp down all the rest.[2]

We discussed in the last chapter how political unification under the Ch'in and Han dynasties brought changes to the official cults. At the same time, the statuses of both official and popular cults changed. On the local level, because of the destruction of much of the old clan system after the prolonged period of war that ended the Warring States and finally the Ch'in,[3] Chinese society, at least at the rural level, had un-

dergone a more or less thorough reorganization. The basic unit of peasant society in Han times was the *li* 里, or hamlet, which usually consisted of about one hundred families and had its own settlement area. Above the *li*, the administrative unit was the *hsiang* 鄉, or district, which might have included several *li*. At the lowest level of court-appointed officials were those of the *hsien* 縣, county, still one step higher than the *hsiang*.

The world of the non-ruling, local farmers, artisans, and laborers was situated within the *hsiang* and *li*, which the ideology of the central government could only reach in an indirect way.[4] In this world, life was dominated by work in the fields, and work in the fields was tied to the cycle of the seasons.[5] Some old customs related to the natural order persisted even in the new environment. Besides the natural cycle, there was the human life cycle, i.e., birth, marriage, sickness, and death, the basic contours of which remained more or less the same. Here was a fertile ground for the continuous growth of various beliefs, the roots of which stretched back to pre-imperial times.

Religious Activities Related to the Agricultural Cycle

Beliefs related to the cycle of seasons occupied a central position in the religious world of many ancient civilizations, including China. In a primarily agricultural economy, the livelihood of peasants in ancient China depended heavily upon well-balanced seasons. Religious activities related to the agricultural cycle were observed by both ruling and ruled segments of society, both in pre-imperial and imperial times. Unlike the earlier period, however, relatively more Han-era documents exist concerning these activities. The main sources are the "Treatise on Ceremonies" (*li-i chih* 禮儀志) and "Treatise on Sacrifice" (*chi-ssu chih* 祭祀志) sections of *History of Later Han*, which are mostly records of official cult activities. However, although some of the official festivals and ceremonies do not seem to have directly involved the life of the commoners, they were often based on ancient traditions that had deep roots in agricultural life. The rituals and ceremonies relating to the seasons were, on the one hand, signs of the official recognition of the importance of agriculture to society, and, on the other, tools to establish a government-initiated social order. For example, the "plowing ceremony" was performed at the beginning of the first spring

month. The emperor led the court officials in the symbolic act of plowing a field. It was no doubt a recognition of the importance of agriculture, an official act to encourage people to begin field work, as well as a magical act to ensure a good harvest.[6]

Activities related to the season, furthermore, can be corroborated by other sources, such as Ts'ui Shih's *Monthly Ordinances for the Four Classes of People* (*Ssu-min yüeh-ling* 四民月令), or Ying Shao's *A Penetrating Account of Manners and Customs* (*Feng-su t'ung-i* 風俗通義), as belonging to the sphere of religion and belief. Ts'ui Shih (c. A.D. 103–171) came from a family with a long tradition of learning and government service. He was certainly not a "commoner." His *Monthly Ordinances for the Four Classes of People*, however, was written for a self-sufficient manorial estate, which involved the actual workings of peasant life.[7] Ying Shao (c. A.D. 165–204) was a scholar-official living at the end of Eastern Han. His famous work, *A Penetrating Account of Manners and Customs*, was a collection of stories, factual or anecdotal, about the manners and customs of Chinese society to his time. It is a rich mine of information for social and religious historians of ancient China.[8] Because a study of Han official festivals has already appeared,[9] I shall concentrate on activities celebrated by non-elites outside the court.

The New Year Celebration

Derk Bodde has pointed out the different ways of calculating the beginning of the new year in Ch'in and Han times.[10] According to the Han calendar, as recorded in *History of Later Han*, the beginning of the official year was set at the first day of the first month.[11] The official celebration consisted of court audiences, amusements, and processions, with little indication of religious practice, unless one considers the congratulations to the emperor, the son of heaven, an expression of piety. According to Ts'ui Shih, the common people celebrated the new year more solemnly:

> The first day of the first month is called the New Year. [The head of the household] personally leads his wife and children reverently to offer sacrifice to ancestors and [deceased] parents. Three days before [the ceremony], the head of the household and those who

have assignments should have observed [a period of] purification. On the day of the ceremony, wine is served to cause the spirits to descend. After the ceremony is over, the whole family, including the old and the young, sit according to seniority in front of the ancestors. The sons, their wives, the grandchildren, and the great-grandchildren each presents pepper [blossom] wine to the head of the household, to toast to health and longevity. They do so happily.[12]

Thus, appropriating the blessings of the spirits, gods, and ancestors was the most important act of reverence at the beginning of a new year.

First ting-day (shang-ting 上丁) of the first month

The official calendar mentions this date concerning "the Five Offerings": the Son of Heaven performed offering rituals at the South Suburb, North Suburb, the Hall of Light (*Ming-t'ang* 明堂)[13], and the shrines of Kao-ti and Wu-ti.[14] Thus, basically the ancestors and the ether, or *ch'i*, of south and north were honored. *Monthly Ordinances for the Four Classes of People* gives an explicit explanation for the occasion as celebrated outside the court:

> The hundred kinds of plants sprout. The dormant insects emerge. On the first *ting* day of the month, the guardian deity of travellers is worshipped at the gate side so that the *yang* atmosphere (i.e., aura) is ushered in and the stagnant atmosphere is expelled; [thereby] one prays for blessings and good luck.[15]

The meaning of the offering is clear: with the first sign of the sprouting of the plants, the deity was invoked to ensure the smooth transition between the seasons and the development of the plants, i.e., by guiding the course of the *yang* power to a positive conclusion. The record of the official rituals does not give any such explanation. One may surmise that sacrifices to the south and north suburbs signified piety toward heaven and earth, thus ensuring a good year. In any case, the difference between the official and the non-official cults demonstrates their different orientations.

Similar to the first *ting* day, on the first *hai* 亥 day of the first month, the peasants made offerings to the spirit of farming, First Farmer

(*hsien-se* 先穡), and the ancestors, to pray for a successful harvest.[16] The focus of the peasant in their religious life is thus clear: to secure a good harvest and the blessing of the ancestors.

Offering to the t'ai-she, in the second month

On a certain date (not mentioned in our sources) in the second lunar month, people prepared offerings to their ancestors at the *t'ai-she* 太社, the local communal altar.[17] Another offering was placed at the family gravesite the next day. It is interesting that on this occasion people had to consult a "daybook" to determine if it was an auspicious day: the Shui-hu-ti daybook lists various days suitable for making such offerings.[18] Thus, if a certain day was not auspicious for placing offerings on the grave, one had to search for another day.[19]

The offering at the local communal altar is likely to have been part of the supplication offerings that began with the *shang-ting*: farmers first made offering to their ancestors and the spirit of farming at each other's houses, then they gathered at the local community shrine to pray for the welfare of the entire community. The offering of leeks and eggs in this ceremony is symbolic of a good harvest: leeks grow easily and abundantly; and eggs symbolize fertility.

Lustration, or fu-hsi 祓禊, the first ssu-day of the third month

According to the official calendar, on this day,

> All the officials and the people should wash themselves in a river that flows eastward. It is said to clean and purge [evil spirits] and clear old dust and fever. This is the great purification. The reason for the purification is that the *yang*-ether has begun to spread forcefully, and myriad of creatures have begun to appear. Thus [it is necessary] to purify them.[20]

Both Granet and Bodde traced this festival to Chou times, suggesting that there was a connection between it and a poem in *Book of Poetry* where young men and girls were said to play by the river in the spring

and send each other love messages.[21] Granet even went so far as to suggest that the poem reflected a mating rite. Bodde, presenting materials concerning *shang-ssu* in Han times, found that the ritual mainly reflected the cleansing of evils and impurities, or funerary rites, such as recalling the soul.[22] Granet's theory about a mating rite, though it has gained support from modern ethnographical data,[23] remains only hypothetical, as is his interpretation of *kao-mei*.[24] The text in the *Book of Poetry* only refers to a joyful outing, without mention of date or ritual activity:

> The Chen and Wei are in full flood,
> The gentleman and the girl are picking
> *lan*-flowers;
> The girl says: "Have you looked [at the
> scenery]?"
> The gentleman says: "Yes indeed."
> "Shall we go look?
> "Beyond the river Wei [the field] is wide
> and joyous."
> Then the gentleman and the girl went
> cajoling with each other,
> And one gives the other a peony.[25]

Thus, even if there was a lustration ceremony that existed both before and during the Han, as Bodde's study shows, its meaning was understood as having to do with "clearing the old and starting the new" rather than with courtship.[26] In Eastern Han lexicographic sources the word *fu* in the title *fu-hsi* means: "ritual sacrifice to wipe away evil."[27] Lao Kan suggests that the ceremony was held on the particular day because in the system of Chien-ch'u 建除 divination, the *ssu* days are for "ch'u," i.e., for removing things, thus the "removing of evil spirits (i.e., lustration)."[28] Why in the third month? It was held then probably because of the first warmth and the rise in river levels. Yet perhaps the temperature of the water might have precluded bathing, unless we consider the act symbolic. An Eastern Han scholar, Hsüeh Han, commented on the *Book of Poetry* passage thus: "During the time of the third month, when peach blossoms flow on the river, it is the custom of the (young people of the) state of Cheng to go out to

the banks of the rivers Chen and Wei. They hold *lan* (in their hands) and recall the spirits and expel the inauspicious."[29] Bathing directly in the water is not mentioned.

The summer solstice

History of Later Han offers an unusually detailed account of activities related to the summer solstice and the midsummer month, i.e., the fifth lunar month. The main activities consisted of using red thread to tie together vegetables with pungent smells and placing five-colored amulet-seals made of peachwood at the doorway to ward off evil on the fifth day of the fifth month. On the day of summer solstice, it was forbidden to make large fires, or to make charcoal, work metals, or smelt minerals.[30] The account does not mention whether these were official activities, yet the use of vegetables and amulets strongly suggests that they refer to the life of the common people. Ying Shao's *A Penetrating Account of Manners and Customs*, for example, mentions that

> On the fifth day of the fifth month, presents are made of "silks of the five colors for prolonging life." It is popularly said that these will increase a man's lifespan.[31]

Another passage from the same work reads:

> The multicolored silks that are bound to the forearm on the fifth day of the fifth month serve to ward off weapons and demons and to save people from epidemics. It is further said that this is done because of Ch'ü Yüan.[32]

Ying Shao's work, to a considerable extent, was devoted to the life of the general populace, thereby corroborating my observation that the text in *History of Later Han* refers to popular belief. The paragraph mentioned above was probably included in the "Treatise on Ceremonies" because the midsummer month had always been agriculturally important, as it was the culmination of the *yang* heat at the beginning point of the new onset of *yin*.[33] Because heat caused spoilage and

disease, and since people believed that sickness could be caused by evil spirits, it is only natural that during this time of year apotropaic actions were taken to prevent evil from entering the house. The ban on large fires and metal working might have also been meant to curb the heat. Also, according to Bodde, it was a scholarly device to exemplify *yin-yang* theory,[34] as we have seen in Chapter 5 concerning the rain prayers described by Tung Chung-shu.

In contrast to the detailed account in *History of Later Han*, *Monthly Ordinances* has only a simple description of the summer solstice:

> Wheat and fish are presented to ancestors and [deceased] parents. When that day dawns, the sacrifice is offered. The day before [the ceremony], [one follows] the procedures for food preparation, purification, and cleansing, all of which are similar to [the ceremony for] presenting leeks and eggs [in the second month].[35]

There is no explanation of the symbolism of the wheat and fish, although one surmises that abundance in farm production was implied in the offering.

The concealment, *fu*, in the sixth month

The day of *fu* 伏, literally "to prostrate," is first mentioned in the Ch'in annals in *Shih-chi*, when the duke of Ch'in sacrificed dogs at the gates of the city to ward off the disease-causing evil spirit or venom (*ku* 蠱).[36] During the Han, the *fu*-day seemed to have been a day for lying down, or staying in the house, presumably to avoid having contact with the evil spirits outside.[37] That the term "three *fu*" refers to a period from the mid-sixth to the mid-seventh lunar month, the hottest period of the summer,[38] indicates that people were encouraged to keep cool at home.[39] Although the official festivals recorded in *History of Later Han* did not mention the *fu*, evidence shows that during the Eastern Han period, the *fu*-day was observed by the government as a day of rest.[40] In western locales, such as Han-chung, Pa, Shu, and Kuang-han, local officials chose the *fu*-day according to local climate.[41] This strongly suggests that the *fu*-day was basically a "summer holiday." The people, nevertheless, developed the custom of offering wheat and melon to the ancestors, similar to the procedures for the summer

solstice.[42] The use of dogs or other animals in the exorcistic ritual for driving away evil spirits probably at an earlier point involved the apotropaic power of blood to ward off evil. Ying Shao employed *yin-yang* and Five-Phases theory to explain the use of dogs:

> The dog is the animal of the element of metal, and the act of exorcism (*jang*) was to repel. They repel the element of metal, so that it will not harm what the spring season produces, and allow all creatures to develop according to their own natures.[43]

Kao Yu's commentary to *Lü-shih ch'un-ch'iu*, however, added sheep to the sacrificial animals.[44] Under different circumstances, other animals could be used as sacrifice in exorcistic rituals. Ying Shao mentioned that in his time people used chickens to ward off evil spirits and illnesses,[45] as did Ts'ui Shih in *Monthly Ordinances for the Four Classes of People*.[46] These rituals can be traced back to earlier documents, such as *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, in which are mentioned the use of rooster,[47] dog,[48] sheep,[49] and pig[50] as sacrifices to various deities. These suggest that the use of animals in exorcistic rituals was a deep-rooted tradition that could not be completely replaced by the relatively late *yin-yang* and Five-Phases theories.

Offering to the *t'ai-she*, in the eighth month

We read in *Monthly Ordinances for the Four Classes of People* that on a selected day in the eighth lunar month, people made offerings (millet and pig) to the ancestors at the communal altar and before the family graves, as they had done six months earlier. The exact date is unspecified, but the text says: "Divine for an auspicious date after the moon festival (*yüeh-chieh*), and make offerings to the revered gods that require worship in the year."[51] We receive no clues as to its significance. Its intention, however, may be a gesture of thanksgiving for the success of the previous prayers for the harvest. The reference to *yüeh-chieh*, which can be read as "moon festival" or "month festival," suggests that a mid-autumn festival was already in existence. Shih Sheng-han suggests that this is the "white dew" (*pai-lu* 白露), one of the twenty-four agricultural "nodes," falling in the eighth month.[52]

Winter solstice, in the eleventh month

The cosmological significance of the winter solstice is found in the return of the *yang* force, represented by the reversal of diminishing daylight. As Ts'ui Shih says: "In this month, the *yin* and the *yang* elements are contending for dominance, and the energy of the blood is dispersed. For five days before and five days after the winter solstice, the husband and the wife should sleep separately."[53] To avoid sexual contact during this period was obviously an application of *yin-yang* theory. It is, however, uncertain whether people would indeed have followed this instruction. Official activities also elaborated on *yin-yang* theory, and produced prognostications for the coming year, weighing of earth and charcoal, and the tuning of the pitch-pipes.[54] For the ordinary people, however, "sacrifices are offered to the water deity at the well, and then to ancestors and [deceased] parents. Purification, food preparation, cleaning, and washing—all are similar to [the procedure for the ceremony of] offering millet and pigs . . . in the first month."[55]

The Great Exorcism, *ta-no*, in the twelfth month

The *History of Later Han* "Treatise on Ceremonies" describes a display of exorcistic activities called the Great Exorcism, or *ta-no* 大儺, in the twelfth lunar month, one day before the *la* (see below). It involved hundreds of participants, including sons of the ennobled officials, some disguised as demons, some as demon-eaters.[56] The purpose of the exorcism was to expel the evil spirits that had accumulated throughout the year, presumably since the lustration in the third month. Bodde explains the ceremony as an "attempt to depict, in theological terms, this annual drama of death and rebirth, and, through this depiction, to insure the repetition of the natural cycle."[57] Although an official event by this time, the scale of the performance made it a public show, and thus it might be considered as a popular festival. According to other sources, furthermore, the act could have existed earlier, perhaps in the Shang dynasty.[58] Confucius once observed *no*-performance by the rural people.[59] *Rites of Chou* mentions the work of the major character in *no*, Fang-hsiang 方相, as driving away diseases from the house, and expelling evil spirits from the tomb chamber during the funeral.[60] It was not until the Han that *no* was performed at the year-end. This is also confirmed by the poet Chang Heng in his "Rhapsody on the Eastern Capital" (*Tung-ching fu* 東京賦).[61] According to Wang Ch'ung, the year-end exorcism was widely imitated,[62] suggesting that it was performed in agricultural locales.[63]

The *la*, in the twelfth month

The last of the annual festivals was the *la* 臘, in the twelfth lunar month. It was held on the third *hsü* 戌 day after winter solstice.[64] Bodde has given a detailed account, and has suggested that it was originally the people's New Year.[65] Its significance is stated in *History of Later Han* in a general fashion: "In the last month of winter, the constellations return and the year ends. As the forces of *yin* and *yang* cross one another, the great celebration of la is performed to soothe the farmers."[66] It was the celebration of the end of the agricultural cycle and the preparation for the coming of a new one, a most important stage for farmers. Already in *Book of Poetry* we find a description of the general sentiment in the Chou period regarding such a festival, in "The Seventh Month (*ch'i-yüeh* 七月)" quoted before:

> In the tenth month, it is cold, with frost;
> The two bottles of spirits are enjoyed,
> And they say, "Let us kill our lambs and sheep,
> And to go to the hall of our lord,
> There raise the cup of rhinoceros horn,
> And wish him long life—that he may live for ever."[67]

The tenth month of the Chou corresponds to the twelfth month of the Han calendar. *Monthly Ordinances for the Four Classes of People* describes the process of celebration, which lasted at least nine days, and in which pigs and sheep were killed for offerings. The spirits honored included ancestors and household gods, as in the new year celebration.[68] In addition, it was believed that in this month a multitude of spirits incessantly moved around; thus, a special ceremony was held to secure their blessings.[69]

Supplementary beliefs related to agriculture

The year-round religious activities discussed above are clearly centered on the agricultural life of farmers. Besides these regular activities, other, supplementary, religious activities were important. One of those was the prayer for inducing or stopping rain. We discussed Tung Chung-shu's thoughts on this in Chapter 5. It is worth noting that the extensive preparations described by Tung, although placed in an official context, were in part joined by local people:

> Order the people to close the south gate of fortified towns or farming districts, and place water outside. Open the north gate, prepare a male pig, place it outside the north gate. Prepare another male pig in the market place. When hearing the sound of drums, burn the tails of the pigs, and take the bones of a dead person and bury them. . . .[70]

There is no doubt that prayers for rain were ancient, and were practiced in a variety of ways. The text indicates that the ritual was performed at the local level. The burning of pig's tails and the burying of the bones of the dead, furthermore, may indicate rites of exorcism. The "Treatise on Literature" in *History of Han* lists a work entitled "Praying for Rain and for Stopping Rain" in twenty-six books, which, if extant, would yield more information than what Tung Chung-shu's essays offer.[71] The existence of such works, together with ones in the *shu-shu* (magic and fortune-telling) category, such as *Shen-nung's Instruction for Farming, Soil Inspection, and Cultivation*, or, *Tree Planting, Storing Fruits, and Inspecting Silk Worms*, suggests that a number of cultic or magic treatises related to agricultural life circulated in Han society. Although little of their contents is preserved, one can gain some idea from such sections as "Taboos for the Five Seeds (*wu-chung chi* 五種忌)" or "Horses" in the Shui-hu-ti daybook.[72]

To sum up, the major concern of these rituals and festivals was to secure good harvests and a prosperous life. The idea of *yin-yang* theory was clearly influential in the structure of ritual activities, yet the belief in the efficacy of ancestor spirits and gods was still the underlying element in religious life of the peasantry.

Religious Activities Related to the Life Cycle

Similar to the yearly cycles of the changing seasons, social life was made up of the cycle of birth, marriage, old age, sickness, and death. Religious beliefs developed naturally around these subjects. An Eastern Han writer, Wang Ch'ung, hailed as a rare rationalist thinker, left a number of vivid descriptions of, as well as vigorous attacks on, these popular beliefs. Thus, he wrote:

> It is a common belief that evil influences cause our diseases and our deaths, and that in case of continual calamities, penalties, ignominious execution, and derision, there has been some offense. When commencing a building, moving residence, in sacrificing, mourning, burying, and other rites, or in taking up office or marrying, if one does not choose a lucky day, and inauspicious years and months are not avoided, one falls in with demons and meets spirits, which at that ominous time work disaster.[73]

Wang Ch'ung regarded such concepts as false, however, and proceeded to argue against them. Although we do not know whether his voice was heard and heeded, since he was largely unknown to his contemporaries, it should be clear that his argument serves to illustrate that by his time many kinds of religious beliefs concerning people's lives and daily activities permeated society.

Birth

One cannot under normal circumstances choose the date of birth of a child, but there is no logical barrier to divining a child's future based on the day and hour of birth. The Shui-hu-ti daybook already provided us with a section on "childbirth," wherein the future of the child was predicted according to the date of birth in the sexagenary system.[74] Similar beliefs can be found in a Western Han text excavated from a tomb at Yin-ch'üeh-shan, Shantung province.[75] In addition to the daybook predictions, various taboos concerning childbirth also circulated in society. Ying Shao wrote that, "According to a common saying, among those born on the fifth day of the fifth month, the

male will harm his father, and the female will harm her mother."[76] Wang Ch'ung also mentioned the belief against bearing a child in the first and the fifth months, for fear of parricide.[77] If what we read in the *History of Later Han* biography of Chang Huan was true, then the taboo may sometimes have been followed to an extreme. According to this account, in the region of Ho-hsi, at the western border, people had the custom of killing children born in the second and fifth months, as well as those who were born in the same month as their parents. It was due to the intervention of Chang Huan that people discontinued this custom.[78] Corroboration of similar taboos for childbirth in the western border regions is found in the bamboo slips from Tun-huang.[79]

Not only did people wish to learn about the future of their children, they also wished to influence the fate of their children by magical measures. One of the methods, known in the medical books as "Yü-tsang 禹藏," (Yü's [placenta] burial method) involved the burial of the placenta according to a certain direction, so that the child would lead a long life.[80] This method was confirmed by a text discovered in the early Western Han Ma-wang-tui tomb, including a diagram of the various possible positions for burying placentas and a special explanatory text.[81] The mother was instructed first to locate the month of the child's birth on the diagram, then to bury the placenta in the direction indicated on the diagram. The idea was that the placenta was believed to be part of the infant's person. When it was buried according to an appropriate direction, it was believed that the life of the child was protected by the related constellation and lengthened life. It was a sympathetic magic based on the principle of correlative cosmology.[82] There were also taboos related to pregnancy and delivery. Several sources held that prohibitions existed with regard to the food that a pregnant woman should eat, one of which was rabbit meat, which caused the child to have deformed lips.[83] Another taboo forbade the eating of ginger, which would cause the appearance of extra fingers on the infant.[84] It is interesting that these medical books make no attempt to distinguish "superstitious" information from material that strikes the modern reader as "scientific." The relatively idealized and rationalized text of *Monthly Ordinance* mentions that,

> During the mid-spring month, . . . three days before the roaring of the thunder, one should sound the bell and advise the people:

> "The thunder is about to roar. Anyone who does not attend to his personal hygiene and behavior will not have a healthy child, and bring disaster upon himself."[85]

Although the assertion that personal hygiene could influence the health of the child sounds like modern medical knowledge, it is nevertheless clear that these taboos were mainly based upon the idea of like forces and sympathetic magic. Likenesses were found not only in such concrete things as rabbits or ginger, but in abstract, personal behavior as well. While the *Monthly Ordinance* text is no doubt expounding a type of correlative cosmology, the food taboo can be seen as a materialized version of this cosmology.

Given the state of medical knowledge, many of the measures that people at this time took to influence the sex of the fetus before it was born,[86] as well as some of the food taboos for the mother, must be seen as belonging to the sphere of beliefs rather than empirical medical knowledge, although we cannot assert that people made a clear distinction between the two.[87]

Marriage

Everyday activities were also believed to have had direct correspondence with the auspiciousness of days. Marriage was no exception. Texts such as *Record of History* and *Lun-heng* mentioned the popular custom of divining for the proper day of marriage.[88] The scholar Cheng Chung, when writing his commentary to *Book of Rites*, also remarked that the practice of divining for a marriage day was standard in his day.[89] Archaeologically excavated texts similar to the Shui-hu-ti daybook also provided appropriate days for marriage.[90] The tenacity of such beliefs is shown by an anecdote: during the reign of Wang Mang, Wang wanted to change the taboo days of marriage and adult initiation, but was opposed by the common people.[91]

Sickness and healing

As early as the Shang period, people attributed illness to spirits or ancestors.[92] During the Eastern Chou, however, we first see evidence

of arguments denying the role of gods or ghosts in illness. An ancient doctor attributed a certain illness to lascivious behavior;[93] and the earliest medical classic, *Huang-ti nei-ching*, discussed the irregularity of *yin* and *yang*, promoting a mechanistic view of physiology.[94]

But old ways of thinking and healing loomed large in the life of the common people. Toward the end of the Warring States period, the author of *Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annal* remarked that people were using *wu*-shamans and poisonous drugs to cure sickness.[95] The author tries to invoke the authority of "the ancients," presumably the sages, to disprove contemporary phenomena. This effort, however, only reflects the prevalence of such behaviors among the people, for the author, being a rational intellectual, was certainly among the minority in society. The common people, unused to sophisticated, literate doctors, probably did not distinguish magic from science (both terms, of course, in their modern senses) as divergent activities.

The mixture of empiricism with faith concerning the causes of sickness is also reflected in the daybooks. On the one hand, people could make judgments based on observations, such as the toxicity of spoiled meats. On the other hand, the ancestors, not to mention ghosts and spirits, are still blamed, as in Shang times.[96]

This ambivalence was still seen during the early Han, and is best shown in the medical texts discovered in the Ma-wang-tui tomb number three. In the "Wu-shih-erh ping-fang 五十二病方," or "Prescriptions for Fifty-two Ailments," a number of cases recommended practical treatments and magical spells for the same illness.[97] For example, to stop a simple wound from bleeding, one of the remedies is "to burn hair and press [the ash] on the wound," while another prescribed a magical formula.[98] To use incinerated hair to treat a wound may have had some real effect;[99] incantation, however, was effective only as part of belief.

What kinds of spirits could cause illnesses? Some of the prescriptions indicate that the illnesses themselves are considered forms of evil spirits that could be driven away by exorcism. One prescription for warts says:

> Let the person who has a wart hold a grain stalk, and let someone else shout: "What are you that caused this?" [The sick person should] answer: "I am the wart." Then put away the grain stalk, do not look at it.[100]

Another method:

> On the last day of the month, go to a well on a mound, one that has water in it, use a broken broom to brush the wart twice seven times, then chant an incantation: "Today is the last day of the month, brush the wart to the north." Then drop the broom into the well.[101]

Sometimes the "heavenly god" (*t'ien-shen* 天神) was invoked to drive away the personified sickness:

> On the day of *hsin-ssu*, pronounce the incantation "*Pen*! The day is *hsin-ssu*" three times. Recite: "A heavenly god comes down to interfere with the illness. The sacred maid (*shen-nü* 神女) leans on the wall and listens to the words of the god. This hernia (*hu-shan* 狐疝) is at the wrong place. Desist. If you (i.e., the hernia) do not desist, [I will use] the axe to kill you." Then you should use a piece of cloth to strike [the patient] twice seven times.[102]

The skin disease *ch'i* 黹, which could be caused by coming into contact with lacquer (*ch'i* 漆), can be treated by pronouncing the following magic spell:

> "Oh lacquer, the heavenly emperor let you come down to paint bows and arrows. Now you have caused people illness, I will smear you with pig's excrement." Use the bottom of a shoe to hit it.[103]

As we have seen several times before, the excrement of animals was considered efficacious for apotropaic actions. Some illnesses were thought to have been caused by a creature called "*yü* 蜮," which spit water on people, causing various kinds of illness. Magical spells and acts were employed either to prevent it from shooting at people, or to cure those who were infected by it.[104] For illnesses caused by the "child-ghost" *ch'i* 魊, exorcism was best. One prescription says:

> To treat the child-ghost: Perform the Pace of Yü three times, take a twig from the eastern side of a peach tree, split it in middle and make [figurines], and hang these on the door, one on each side.[105]

Another paragraph provides the incantation:

> Oh you, the father and mother of the child-ghost, do not hide to the north of . . . , the female *wu*-shaman is looking for you and will certainly catch you, and [bind] your limbs, tie up your fingers, and cast you into the water. It is man, it is man, and yet he pretends to be a ghost(?)[106]

The text is difficult to comprehend, but the general meaning is discernible. Clearly, people believed illness to have been connected to gods, or a Heavenly Emperor, since the evil spirits that inflicted illness came under the jurisdiction of the heavenly god. Here, one recalls the Shang Dynasty ruler's frequent inquiries on the identities of the ancestor-spirits who had caused the king's disease. Unlike the daybook, however, the higher gods in our Han text could not be held directly responsible for people's illness. To cure illnesses, people had to perform exorcistic acts to expel the evil spirits. That magical-medical texts were buried with other, more scholarly, medical texts, such as the *Classic of the Eleven Circuits of Foot and Arm* (*Tsu-pei shih-i-mai chiu-ching* 足臂十一脈灸經), *Classic of the Eleven Circuits of Yin and Yang* (*Yin-yang shih-i-mai chiu-ching* 陰陽十一脈灸經), *The Principle of Pulse* (*Mai-fa* 脈法), not to mention the well-known philosophical texts, *The Four Classics of Huang-ti* (*Huang-ti ssu-ching* 黃帝四經) and *Lao-tzu*, poses a problem: what was the relationship between magical and empirical-scholarly medical texts? Since they were discovered in the same tomb, we may assume that the texts were intended for users of the same social status. Yet how much did the owner of these various texts understand the difference between rational and magical medicine? If he did, did he prefer to believe in both methods? Could we, on the other hand, say that the so-called magical-medical texts cannot represent "popular" attitudes at all, since they are "literary" and appeared in the tomb of a noble? Problems such as these appear when corroborating documents on ancient medicine and religion are sparse.

In ancient Greece, concomitant with such "rational" medical treatises as *The Sacred Disease*,[107] there were various kinds of "healers" who, besides empirically based medical knowledge, employed all sorts of magical treatments on their patients. Among these, the evidence provided by the cult of Asclepius at Epidaurus clearly shows that the god sometimes used food or drugs, besides magical touching, for example, to treat the sick.[108] The cult was undoubtedly part of "popular

religion," yet the treatments offered by this god (or its ministers) also contained rational elements. On the other hand, many of the so-called rational medical texts, although claiming to have been freed from religion, contained various unsupportable presuppositions and fantasies.[109]

In the case of China, then, I prefer to think that the Ma-wang-tui "Prescriptions for Fifty-two Ailments" text was closer to the inscriptions of the cult of Asclepius than the Hippocratic *On the Sacred Disease*, which is more akin to *Classic of the Eleven Circuits of Foot and Arm* and others. Although we do not know for certain whether "Prescriptions for Fifty-two Ailments" reflected the personal beliefs of its owner, that it was written down in the format of a practical manual suggests that it was intended for everyday use. It was true that in many instances, shamans were the people's choice for exorcism, yet the existence of such manuals as "Prescriptions for Fifty-two Ailments" suggests that people also performed the acts themselves by following textual instructions. I see this as an example of how far everyday religion could penetrate the lives of both non-rulers and the ruling elite.

Death and burial

Among the various beliefs related to death and burial, I will first discuss those related to burial customs and leave the idea of death and the netherworld for a later chapter.

Concerning the time for burial, *Book of Rites* states that the Son of Heaven should be buried seven months after death, the feudal lords five months, and officials, scholars, and commoners three.[110] This was one way to distinguish social classes. In the Han dynasty, however, this rule was not followed at all, and we see various criteria to determine auspicious days for burial sometimes causing delay in burial.[111] According to Wang Ch'ung,

> The calendar for burials prescribes that the nine holes and depressions of the earth, as well as odd and even days, and single and paired months are to be avoided. The day being lucky and innocuous, oddness and evenness agreeing, and singleness and parity tallying, there is luck and good fortune. The non-observance of this calendar, on the other hand, induces to bad luck and disaster.[112]

When no appropriate days could be found, people preferred to wait:

> In cases where several persons die in rapid succession one after the other, so that there are up to ten coffins awaiting burial, they are not concerned about contagion through contaminated air, but only that the day chosen for interment might be unlucky.[113]

The site for the tomb should also be selected with care, something that may also contribute to delayed burial. A story in *History of Later Han*, however, gives us a different perspective. A young man was very poor when his mother died. He buried her in a simple fashion, without divining for either the tomb site or the date. Local *wu*-shamans predicted that this would cause great disaster for the family, but the young man did not heed their warnings. Later, instead of bad fate, his son and grandson reached high positions in government.[114] Such stories show the extent to which some cultured people abjured superstitions about death and burial. They also revealed what most people, represented by the *wu*-shamans, actually believed in.

In close connection with beliefs about life and death was the worship of the deity Ssu-ming, or the "Lord of Fate," who was in charge of life spans and could revive the dead. He appears as early as the Warring States period.[115] In the T'ien-shui Ch'in tomb text, mentioned in Chapter 3, Ssu-ming effected a resurrection, as controller of lives.[116] *Book of Rites* implies that Ssu-ming was worshipped by the royal family and the feudal lords, but not by the commoners.[117] Yet according to the Eastern Han scholar Cheng Hsüan,

> [Ssu-ming was] a lesser god who lives among the people and examines lesser evils. . . . Ssu-ming was in charge of the three kinds of fate (proper life span, injust life experience, and proper retribution). . . . The common households today often make sacrifice to Ssu-ming in Spring and Autumn.[118]

Thus, at least in the Eastern Han period, Ssu-ming was worshipped by nonelite households. Ying Shao concurs: "Today people only worship Ssu-ming. They carve a wooden human figure, about one foot and two inches long. This is put into the trunk of a traveller or in a small shrine in the house. He is greatly worshipped in the region of Ch'i

(齊, modern Shantung province) and also in many commanderies in Ju-nan (汝南)."[119] A statue discovered some years ago shows a man holding a small child, and the context suggests that it was a cult image of Ssu-ming.[120]

Religious Activities in Everyday Life

Along with beliefs and practices of the agricultural and life cycles, various problems arose in people's daily lives that were often solved through religion.

As already seen in the daybooks, religious beliefs were applied to foods and medicines and correlative ideas were at the root of certain taboos. Drinking on the day of a lunar eclipse (*shih* 蝕), for example, would cause one's mouth to become corrupted (semantically the same as the word "eclipse").[121]

Making new garments was an important event, as evidenced by the existence of special divination books for this purpose, which have turned up as special sections in daybooks.[122] In the Eastern Han period, such handbooks still circulated. Wang Ch'ung mentioned that there were "books for tailors, giving auspicious and inauspicious times. Dresses made on inauspicious days could bring misfortune; made on a lucky day, they attracted happiness."[123] Wang Ch'ung's words are corroborated by documents discovered as far west as Kansu.[124] Related to taboo days concerning manufacture of garments were days for bathing. There was a "Book for baths," as mentioned, once again, by Wang Ch'ung:

> In writings on baths we are informed that if anybody washes his head on a *tzu* 子 day, his appearance is enhanced, whereas if he does so on a *mao* 卯 day, his hair turns white.[125]

Since there were "books" about such taboos, elaborate systems must have been involved in determining auspicious days.

One of the more important issues in daily life concerned living environments. Following the Warring States period, metaphysics of the Five Phases and Four Directions gradually became integrated with geomancy. We have seen geomantic ideas on house building, especially the relative positions of various parts of the house and adjacent

structures, given in daybooks.[126] In the Han period, beliefs related to building and siting mainly consisted of the choice of an auspicious day, whether to build or to move, and the choosing of correct positions for houses according to the cardinal directions. In the bamboo texts found in the early-Han tomb at Yin-ch'üeh-shan, we read:

> [On such and such a day one cannot work] on ditches, dikes, or ponds. One cannot work on a city wall of a hundred *chang* or a thousand *chang*, for it will certainly not succeed. One cannot build houses, for there will be disaster.[127]

A story in *Record of History* recounts the words of Meng T'ien, a Ch'in general, before he was forced to commit suicide. Meng T'ien reflected upon his building the Great Wall, and attributed his own misfortune to the disruptive effect of the act of construction upon the earth:

> It [the Great Wall] begins from Lin-yao, and ends at Liao-tung, with more than ten thousand *li* of walls and ditches, could it not have cut through the veins of the earth?[128]

The phrase "veins of earth" is evidence of a belief in the organismic and sacred nature of the earth and its formations. When the "veins of earth" are cut through by artificial means, the area's *ch'i*, or life source, is also extinguished.[129] The belief in the inherent auspiciousness of certain locations is exemplified by the story of Yüan An:

> When An's father died, his mother wanted him to find a burial site. On the road, he met three scholars who asked An's destination. An told them his intention. The scholars then pointed to a spot and said, "Make the burial at this place and your family members will become high officials for generations." After a while, they disappeared. An marveled at this. He then buried his father at that place. This is why his family became prosperous for generations.[130]

That geomancy had become a specialized craft already by Western Han is evidenced by titles in the *History of Han* "Treatise on Literature." *Golden Cabinet for Geomancy* (*K'an-yü chin-kuei* 堪輿金匱) in

fourteen books and *Layout for Houses and Residences* (*Kung-chai ti-hsing* 宮宅地形) in twenty books were obviously handbooks for geomancers.[131] In the Eastern Han period, Wang Ch'ung mentioned other methods for geomancy. For example, "The Principle of Moving" (*I-hsi-fa* 移徙法) employed the positions of the constellations as indications in determining the auspiciousness of a change of domicile.[132] Moreover, "The Art of Charting Houses" (*T'u-chai-shu* 圖宅術) says:

> There are eight schemes, and houses are numbered and classed according to the names of the cycle of the six *chia* 甲. . . . Houses have the Five Sounds, because the surnames (of the owners) are provided with the Five Tones. When the houses do not accord with the surnames, and the latter disagree with the house, people contract virulent diseases and expire, or undergo criminal judgments and meet with adversity.[133]

The art of geomancy went beyond merely observing the positions of buildings and was a system that employed correlative metaphysics in many ways. However, that geomancy was based on *yin-yang*, Five Phases, and correlative cosmology does not mean that supernatural beings were excluded. Wang Ch'ung mentioned *K'an-yü-li* (堪輿曆), a calendar for geomancy: "A great variety of spirits are referred to in the calendars embracing Heaven and Earth (i.e. *K'an-yü-li*), but the sages do not speak of them, the scholars have not mentioned them, and perhaps they are not real."[134] Presumably, these unmentioned spirits were worshipped by common people who had limited access to popular literature like the calendars, but not by the high elite. How such spirits affected people's choice of appropriate days, however, is not clear.

Finally, we deal with travel, about which various beliefs or taboos were already mentioned in connection with daybooks. One imagines that even during the Han period travel in the countryside was rather hazardous.[135] The possibility of encountering monsters, demons, or bandits was always a threat to the traveller. Before setting out, therefore, the Shui-hu-ti daybook advised sacrifice: "When travelling to the east and south, make sacrifice at the left side of the road; when travelling to the west and north, make sacrifice at the right side of the road."[136] The days for setting out as well as coming home also had to be chosen with care. In other texts we see fragmentary passages

that deal with auspicious days for travelling.[137] In the "Biographies of the Tortoise and Yarrow Diviners" in *Record of History*, the subject of "divining for travelling" was among the business of the diviners.[138] Although condemned as superstitious by some, diviners nevertheless flourished in marketplaces and were popularly consulted.

A belief in the necessity of choosing auspicious days for travelling existed in all strata of society. The most oft-mentioned taboo days for travelling were the "return of the stem" (*fan-chih* 反支) days, on which any travelling was prohibited, not only for private but also for government business. In the Eastern Han period, as Wang Fu observed, official messengers did not receive and deliver reports to the government offices on *fan-chih* days.[139] Although Wang Fu was criticizing the inefficient aspects of government, the *fan-chih* taboo had a long tradition. *History of Han* mentioned that a prohibition on travelling on *fan-chih* days was observed by some among the elite.[140] The origin of this belief may even go back to the pre-Ch'in era, as seen in daybooks.[141] The taboo for returning home from a journey, since it also concerns travelling, was probably one of the "*fan-chih*" days.[142]

Clearly, most of the beliefs concerning daily activities were built around date-taboos. Thus, various calendars were employed for different purposes: those of burials, sacrifices, taking baths, tailoring, building, or geomancy.[143] The "Biographies of Diviners with Tortoise Shells and Yarrows" provides an impressive list of topics of divination: travelling, fighting bandits, removal from office, success in office, life at home, the harvests, plague, wars, interviews with high officials, chasing fugitives, hunting, rain, etc.[144] Many, of course, appeared in the daybooks. Among the Han documents discovered at the western border fortress of Wu-wei is a "book of date-taboos" for the use of soldiers, and advice is given on such topics as housing, travelling, medicine, garments, having guests, raising cattle, and marriage. The principle for finding auspicious days is based, as expected, on the sexagenary system.[145]

Local Cults

Given the enormous territory of the Han empire, it was natural that differences existed among locales, those remnants of pre-imperial

feudal states and their cultures. For example, the Ch'u area culture has often been mentioned as having strong shamanistic elements, although there is no reason to claim that shamanistic activities were solely Ch'u phenomena.[146] Such local customs did not change easily,[147] and it is often difficult to decide whether local religious cults, customs, or taboos originated from a regional difference or from specific situations that had little to do with "regional culture" per se.

Take the custom of "cold foods" in the T'ai-yüan area as an example. Tradition claims that people feared that the spirit of Chieh Tzu-t'ui 介子推, a filial son who let himself be burnt alive together with his mother while hiding in the mountains rather than serve the duke of Chin, did not like to see fire on the anniversary month of his martyrdom; thus, they observed the practice of eating cold meals for an entire month each winter. As a result, we are told, many people died of coldness (in the technical sense defined in Chinese medicine) during this period.[148] In fact, Chieh's story as first told in the *Commentary of Tso* did not contain the scenario of a flaming martyrdom.[149] It was somehow added later, perhaps to give an explanation of the origin of the custom of eating cold food. While it is debatable whether the custom originated from the ancient ritual of "changing the fire,"[150] the basis for the local custom was simply the belief in the involvement of the spirits of the dead with the affairs of the living. There is no way to tell if this belief had any particular affinity with the culture of the old Chin state. The brief description given in the *History of Han*'s "Treatise on Administrative Geography" provides no significant corroboration.[151]

Chieh Tzu-t'ui was perhaps not deified, even though people built a shrine for him after his death. An earlier case concerning general Tu-po, however, is clearly a case of apotheosis, perhaps the earliest recorded one in ancient China. As mentioned in Chapter 5 above, the cult of Tu-po originated from the story of the ghost of Tu-po shooting King Hsüan of Chou. People later worshipped his spirit, and a number of shrines were established in the central Ch'in area. As he was described as "one of the smallest ghosts that are efficacious (i.e., *shen*, having spiritual power),"[152] there presumably were other similar cases. Another example is the deification of the king of Ch'eng-yang, Liu Chang 劉章, who flourished under emperor Wen of Western Han. After his death, the local people of Lang-yeh commandery built shrines to wor-

ship him. In time, this cult spread to other regions, and the rituals grew increasingly elaborate.[153] According to Ying Shao,

> From Lang-yeh (the old Ch'i state) to Ch'ing-chou and other commanderies, as far as the towns, villages, and communities of Po-hai, all were erecting shrines for him. They made five carriages for officials of the two-thousand-*tan* rank, supplied by merchants, with official garments and decorations, and staffed with (mock-) officers. People celebrated with feasts and songs for several days. They then spread false rumors, saying that there was a deity who responds quickly to inquiries about one's fortune. This has been going on for many years and no one can correct it.[154]

Ying Shao did not specify the time period covered by his description. During the civil wars at the end of Wang Mang's rule, the king of Ch'eng-yang's cult was popular not only in the countryside, but also in the army of Fan Ch'ung 樊崇, the leader of the "Red Eyebrows (*ch'ih-mei* 赤眉)." It was said that the king of Ch'eng-yang appeared to the shamans in the cult and said: "(You) (i.e., Fan Ch'ung) should be the emperor, why are you acting as a bandit?"[155] This gave Fan Ch'ung a pretense to set up a puppet emperor, Liu P'en-tzu 劉盆子, a descendant of the king of Ch'eng Yang, and establish a new regime.

Another source relates that the king of Ch'eng-yang had descended several times to send messages to his shrine in Lang-yeh, which was attended by officials and people alike, and had caused "disturbances for the palace."[156] We are not told what the "disturbances for the palace" were, but they might have had political implications. Since those who worshipped the king of Ch'eng-yang included officials, the god's messages might have run counter to the interests of the government, thus causing problems when they followed the instructions or messages of the god. From this, we can see that the cult had the potential to be a political force: according to Ying Shao, it was supported by merchants, and assumed symbols of political power, i.e., chariots, official garments, and staff members. This, in fact, prompts one to ponder the possibility that we see here the buds of political uprising disguised under, or in connection with, popular cults, as with the Yellow Turbans at the end of Eastern Han, and numerous cases of sectarian uprising in subsequent dynasties.[157]

Such accounts not only give us an idea of how a local cult spread to other areas, but also some of the details of the actual format of popular cults. In the spread of this cult, however, it is difficult to establish whether the regional culture of Lang-yeh had significant influence. On the other hand, it is a good example of the influence of a popular cult on the non-religious or political affairs of a region, and how a religious cult could involve rich merchants or local forces, whose motives most likely were complex.

In addition, various local officials were worshipped for their benevolent deeds. They had proven themselves able administrators, just and impartial in managing local businesses or in improving livelihoods.[158] However, they were not the only mortals given cults. As we shall see below, others were worshipped by people for their supposedly magical or supernatural powers.

One of the most popular cults was the *she* 社, or local communal altar. The origin of *she* has been traced back to the Shang dynasty, and was explained as the worship of the earth.[159] It was often mentioned together with *chi* 稷, or the worship of grain, in official cult practices. During the Chou period, people with different statuses in the feudal system may have had their own *she*.[160] In Han times, the lowest level of officially established *she* was the county. People thus organized their own *she* through local village and hamlet organizations.[161] According to one source, twenty-five families could establish one communal *she*-altar, and there were cases where five or ten families established a still smaller "private *she*" for the blessing of the fields.[162] During the time of emperor Yüan, the "private *she*" in Yen-chou was banned, although the precise reason is not clear.[163] Local *she*, however, must have developed into various forms of worship that were not confined to the worship of earth. Luan Pu, one of the followers of Han Kao-tsu, for example, was worshipped by the people of Yen and Ch'i after his death. His shrines were called "the *she* of Lord Luan." Thus, in reality the *shes* that were devoted to the worship of individuals were not much different from other personal cults. However, it was during the Han period that an anonymous "Lord of the *she* (*she-kung* 社公)" gradually became the main spirit residing in the *she* shrines and protecting local populations.[164] It was believed that this Lord of the *she* could be manipulated by those possessing shamanic, magical power. Fei Ch'ang-fang 費長房 reportedly "was capable of curing all

manner of illnesses. He could exorcise a hundred demons and was master of the deities of the local soil god altars (i.e., *she-kung*)."[165] Sometimes the spirit of a *she* could also be addressed as "the ghost of the *she*."[166] This Lord of the *she* eventually evolved into the "Lord of the Earth" (*t'u-ti-kung* 土地公) in later eras.[167]

Fei Ch'ang-fang was one such shamanic figure who was later accorded the status of an immortal by Ko Hung in *Biographies of Immortals* (*Shen-hsien-chuan*). The immortals, to be sure, were also often the object of worship. A number of shrines known as "shrines of the immortals" (*hsien-jen tz'u* 仙人祠) are known to have existed in the Han period. Some of these were given official status at various times and places, although few details are known.[168] According to Ying Shao, during the time of emperor Ming of the Eastern Han, a certain Wang Ch'iao, who served as the magistrate of Yeh, was known to possess various types of magical power. Local people established a shrine for him after his death. It is said that all who prayed at his shrine were blessed, while those who did not incurred immediate misfortune.[169] Wang Ch'iao is thought to have been the famous immortal Wang Tzu-ch'iao, whose biography is in the *Stories of the Immortals* (*Lieh-hsien-chuan* 列仙傳).[170] Two others, Hsü Yang and Kao Huo, who showed extraordinary magical power, were also worshipped by local people and given shrines,[171] examples perhaps of how "shrines of the immortals" originated.[172]

The personal cult is a chief characteristic of Chinese popular religious piety. The rationale behind such activities was the belief in the spiritual power of the dead. This power came from different sources: Chieh Tzu-t'ui's was from personal moral integrity; Luan Pu's and the king of Ch'eng-yang's were from their social status and benevolent deeds; that of Wang Ch'iao, Hsü Yang, and Kao Huo were from magic. Still others seem to have gained power from human acts like vengeance, as was the case with general Tu-po. On the other hand, the reputation of a personal cult may have had less to do with the worshipped than the worshippers. The "divine lady of Ch'ang-ling," promoted by Wu-ti, for example, was simply an ordinary person whose ghost was supposed to have appeared to her family members.[173]

Compare this with a passage of *Book of Rites*:

> According to the institutes of the sage kings about sacrifices, sacrifice should be offered to those who have given (good) laws to the people; those who have labored to the death in the discharge of his duties; who have strengthened the state by laborious toil; boldly and successfully met great calamities; or warded off great evils.[174]

Clearly, official cults emphasized deeds of "political benevolence." It is worth noticing, however, that not all the examples of personal cults are to be interpreted as apotheosis. After all, there is little difference between the Chinese conceptions of ghosts and gods, as discussed before. One man's ghost could be more influential or powerful than another's, and thus be considered "*shen*," which means "having spiritual or godly power." A similar concept is "*ling*," which is the efficacious power of the numinous being—the power to effect tangible results.[175]

Finally, a popular cult may originate not only from the worshipping of certain historical figures, as discussed above, but also from people's misunderstandings, fears, greed, or credulousness. Ying Shao recorded the following story:

> A man from Ju-nan caught a deer in a swampy field. He did not take it away (but left it there). Meanwhile, a caravan consisting of more than ten carriages passed by the swamp. The merchants, seeing that the deer was tied, took it with them. Then thinking this improper, they put a salted fish in its place. After a while, the man went back and could not see the deer. Instead, he saw the salted fish. Since the swamp was not the (ordinary) road for people, and yet the deer somehow changed into a salted fish, he thought it was very strange, and believed that there was a certain deity involved. He turned to tell other people, who thereafter came to pray for cures and blessings, and these often were efficacious. So they built a shrine, with tens of shamans performing their craft in the nearby tents. People from several hundred *li* away all came to pray and make offerings. The cult was named God of Mr. Salted Fish. Several years later, the one who left the salted fish passed by the shrine, and asked about the story. He then said: "This was my fish, how could there be any god?" He went up to the shrine and took the fish. The cult was destroyed after this.[176]

This illustrates my discussion perfectly. Local shamans took the opportunity to profit, thus revealing the complex economic aspect of cult activities discussed in Chapter 5. Once a shrine was established, interest groups also began to grow up around the shrine, and tended to perpetuate the cult.[177] In fact, shamans are known to have associated with local shrines or *she* since before the Ch'in.[178] The story about the salted fish may be a typical example of how popular cults formed.[179] They need not have been based on ancient traditions or legends, but simply impromptu developments.

Omens and Portents

Ever since the Eastern Chou period, ample documents have attested the belief in omens, portents, and prodigies as a characteristic of religious piety. As discussed in Chapter 3, the basis of this was often correlative metaphysics. During the Han period, a particular trend of thought developed that made the interpretation of portents and omens an important part of classical, textual exegeses. Tung Chung-shu was the major proponent of this tendency in the Western Han period. In his system, portents and omens were signs that Heaven sent to admonish rulers, to keep them, so to speak, on the right track.[180] Later developments, however, resulted in the rise of "apocryphal texts" (*ch'en-wei* 讖緯), which were mainly used as tools to justify particular political actions under the pretext of heavenly will.[181] The first precedent was set by Wang Mang, who usurped the Han regime (from A.D. 8 to A.D. 23) by claiming to have received the heavenly mandate through political portent texts, which were but one sort of apocrypha. His example was followed by a host of military contenders and passive recipients of thrones (both imperial and local) all the way into the next century.[182]

Our concern is not specifically with the apocryphal texts, nor whether they were used to curb or bolster imperial or personal power. Here, we consider the belief in the efficacy of the omens and portents and the intellectual weight it carried. The texts may have been created for political purposes, and the portents may oftentimes have been fabricated, yet their occasional dramatic political effect suggests that they struck a deep nerve in people's mentality. Emperor Kuang-wu's

victory is a good example. He was assisted by the spread of portent texts that favored his imperial mandate. This suggests that both military leaders and their followers believed in the efficacy of the portents.[183]

It has been argued that information concerning portents and prodigies contained in the two major histories of the Han dynasty, the *History of Han* and *History of Later Han*, was reported and furnished solely in order to control court politics, i.e., to warn the emperor or officials about impending disasters, or, if they were good signs, to flatter.[184] Nevertheless, we can use such records to gain an overview of the most common categories of portents.

The "Treatises on the Five Phases" in both *History of Han* and *History of Later Han* list many different kinds of portents. First are unusual meteorological phenomena: eclipses of the sun and the moon, excessive rain, drought, severe cold, hail, thunder in winter, strong winds; then there are natural disasters: avalanches, floods, earthquakes, fire; third, unusual biological phenomena: deformed trees or plants, swarming locusts, rooster-looking hens, man-eating wolves, dogs copulating with pigs, huge fish, cattle plagues, even men transformed into women, or babies with two heads and eight limbs. Finally, certain unusual or unconventional behavior, such as great surges in fashion and unrestrained behavior, could also have been seen as carrying portentous messages. Explanations of portents were made mainly along metaphysical lines, however forced they may have been. Oftentimes the logic of divination was temporal, i.e., explanations assumed that events that happened in a temporal sequence were also causally related. Here, we are not concerned with how persuasive these explanations were, but whether we may call the phenomenon part of the religious mentality of the times.

From the four general categories of portents, we can at least be certain that a fascination with abnormal phenomena, natural or human, prevailed in society. *History of Han* records that during the reign of Emperor P'ing, the governor of Shuo-fang commandery reported a case in which a woman came back to life after being dead lying in the coffin for six days. She claimed to have seen her dead father, who told her that she was "(only) twenty-seven years old, and should not have died (so young)."[185] The event came to be considered as portentous, though the source does not give any associated prophecy.

It does not seem to have been fabricated by the governor, since he believed that it was portentous. Yet had the governor not reported it to the court, it might never have become significant. There is no way to know if the people involved in the story also considered it portentous. Yet the scholar who placed it into the official record gave it an explanation according to the *I-ching* exegesis of Ching Fang, an important scholar in the formation of *ch'en-wei* oracle-texts.[186] It was probably not the tale's significance as portent, but rather the news that lifespans were bureaucratically allotted, and subject to revision and restitution on occasion, that had originally raised people's interest in this story. Similar stories of revival are recorded in *History of Later Han*.[187]

Another example shows how portents evolved from news of strange events far from centers of power into court-interpreted metaphysics. During the reign of Emperor Ch'eng, some people heard the screech of owls in the mountains and went to investigate. They saw that the nest in an enormous tree had been burnt and had fallen to the ground, burning three chicks to death. The governor reported the incident to the court. The explanation given was: "The color of the owl is black. It is close to the black-portent, which signifies events of greed and cruelty." The events referred to cryptically were the killing of potential heirs of the emperor Ch'eng by his concubines under the order of the jealous queen Chao Fei-yen and Wang Mang's usurpation.[188] The burning nest incident probably had some basis or other in fact. But this was soon changed into a dangerous political weapon, according to a long tradition of omenology. Could some of the portents be fabricated? The answer is positive. The *History of Later Han* records the following case:

> In the eighth month (of A.D. 167), it was said that a yellow dragon appeared in the commandery of Pa. When the official Fu Chien heard that the office decided to report it to the court, he went to see the governor and said that it was a joke created by a local runner, and should not be taken seriously. The governor did not listen to his advice. Chien told others: "It was a time when the weather was hot and people wanted to bath in the pool. When they saw that the water was muddy, they jokingly told each other, 'there is a dragon in the water.' And so word spread among the people."[189]

It is very likely that this and possibly many other "auspicious portents" reported to the court started innocently and later turned into supernatural stories, if they were not faked outright for various reasons. Nevertheless, they reflected a widespread belief in the validity of portentous events.

The discrepancy between everyday beliefs and court interpretations can best be illustrated by another example. In the first month of 3 B.C., during the reign of emperor Ai,

> It happened that people were disturbed and running around, passing a stalk of grain or flax from one to another, and calling it "the tally for transmitting the edict." More than a thousand people met and passed on the road, some with disheveled hair and bare feet. Some crossed barrier gates (to cities and major roads) during the night; some climbed over the wall to get in; some rode in carriages, and used the courier system to pass on the message. They moved through twenty-six commanderies and kingdoms and reached the capital. That summer, people of the capital and the commanderies gathered in local lanes and fields, made offerings and set up gambling paraphernalia (*po-chü* 博具).[190] They sang and danced in worship of the Queen Mother of the West. An order was transmitted with the words: "The Mother tells the people that whoever carries this order shall not die. If you do not believe my words, look under the door hinge. There will be white hair." The commotion subsided in the fall.
>
> At that time, the grandmother of the emperor, the dowager queen Fu, was arrogant and controlled court politics. Thus Tu Yeh said (concerning the event): "When the *Ch'un-ch'iu* talked about portents, it used symbolic incidents as language. The tally is used to count numbers. The (nature of) people is *yin*, which belongs to the category of water. Water flows east as its natural course. Now it is flowing west, which is like revolting against the court. This symbolizes the uncontrolled ways and wanton procuring of profits (by the court) against the wishes of the people. The Queen Mother of the West is a name for a woman. Gambling is the business of a man. To gather in lanes and fields signifies leaving the interior and giving over to the outside. To seek fun during worship signifies the surge of the *yang* element.

The white hair signifies old age, with a revered body but weak reason; hard to rule but easy to confuse. The door is the passage for the people; the hinge, its pivot. This means presiding over the passage for the people and controlling its pivot. The meaning (of the portent) is quite clear. The families of Ting and Fu are now serving the inner court, and their members occupy important positions. Guilty ones have not received punishment, and those without merit were all accorded offices and titles. Even the examples of Huang-fu and the three Huans, who were mocked by the poet and scorned by the *Ch'un-ch'iu*, do not exceed this. The symbols are amply clear in order to warn the holy court, how could it not have been answered!"

When Emperor Ai died, the mother of Emperor Ch'eng, the Dowager Queen Wang, presided over the court; Wang Mang became the Marshal of State, and the Ting and Fu families were executed. Another explanation says that the evils committed by the Ting and Fu families are small matters. The portent actually refers to the deeds of Dowager Queen Wang and Wang Mang.[191]

The whole event had a significance for noncourt religious participants that was utterly different than for scholars such as Tu Yeh, or the author of *History of Han*. It shows that belief in the Queen Mother of the West was widespread, and that people worshipped her in the hope of gaining immortality. The scholarly interpretation, however, considered only the welfare of the country, the court, or the royal family.

Chapter 7

Immortality, Soul, and the Netherworld

He for whom this scroll is recited will prosper, and his children will prosper.
He will be the friend of the king and his courtiers.
He will receive bread, beer, and a big chunk of meat from
the altar of the great god.
He will not be held back at any gate of the west.
He will be ushered in with the kings of Upper and Lower Egypt.
He will be a follower of Osiris.[1]

. . . .

Charidas, what is below?
Great darkness.
What about resurrection?
A lie.
And the God of the Dead?
A myth. We perish utterly.[2]

The Conceptions of Immortality and Soul

The preceding examples of various religious activities and beliefs have shown that, in everyday life outside of the political center, spiritual beings, ghosts, and gods were important factors in beliefs. People's aspirations and hopes were achieved through the help of spiritual beings. This simply continued the development of religious traditions