Ku appears in several variations in Chinese literature, but the basic concept is as follows. A human “host” fills a container with various poisonous insects, worms, or snakes, which after a period of time, generally 100 days, destroy or deour one another until only one animal remains. It is assumed that the survivor contains the concentrated poison of all the original beasts. The human host then places this last animal, along with another, into a vessel containing water, where the two mate. The seed of the male floats on the surface and constitutes the so-called ku poison. The host picks up the seed with the eye of a needle and must now locate, on the same day, a person to whom he can administer the ku seed in food or drink. As soon as the recipient has swallowed the ku seeds, they develop into worms that resemble their parents. The worms gnaw on the viscera of the victim, producing pain, a swollen abdomen, progressive emaciation, and, ultimately, death. The proof of ku poisoning is visible following the demise of the victim, when worms crawl out from orifices in the corpse. As a reward for providing the ku parents, which are merely manifestations of a spirit that can only reproduce in this manner, with a secondary host, in which the seeds can mature, the ku spirit presents the primary host with all possessions of the deceased victim. If the primary host is unable to find a secondary host the same day, or he permits some sort of harm to befall the ku worm, he is killed by the ku spirit. (...) There is only one way for a primary host to rid himself of the obligation to the ku spirit. He must gather together in a basket a large amount of valuable objects, such as silk, silver, and gold, and the ku worm, leaving it in a field or at an intersection. The person who finds this treasure and is unable to resist taking it home, is considered the new primary host by the ku spirit. (pp. 46-47)

The familiar character for ku, a vessel with two (three since the Ch’in period) snakes or worms, appears, as I indicated in the previous chapter, as early as the Shang period on oracle bones and tortoise carapaces inscribed in the fourteenth century B.C. From the second century until the last imperial dynasty, laws prohibited, under severe penalties, the production and use of ku poison.

It appears that the attitudes towards ku outlined above are rooted in the observation of certain symptoms of human illness – swollen abdomen, emaciation, and the presence of worms in the body orifices of the dead or living. Such symptoms allow a great number of possible explanations and interpretations; in my view, very specific social conditions are necessary for the rise and general acceptance of the ideas encompassed by the concept ku. Particularly striking is the constant fear of one’s fellow man, an omnipresent suspicion that is reflected in the view that some people are constantly striving to take over the possessions of others. This is, of course, the social atmosphere of envy that one can still see today in societies whose organization and economic structure can be equated in principle with the corresponding structures of the Shang. But the concept of ku is unknown outside of China. Instead, one finds what may be its conceptual equivalent, the “evil eye,” present in all “envy societies.” (pp. 47-48)

The nature of ku poisoning (...) changed over the course of centuries from an internal threat to a conflict between the Chinese and their less civilized neighbors, a relationship under constant strain. In the south, non-Chinese peoples suffered continually under the incessant expansion of the Chinese Empire. The cultural gulf between the southern tribes and the approaching Chinese was obvious. The conquered territories were administered by Chinese officials, and the original inhabitants either exterminated or driven out, or tolerated in enclaves under Chinese suzerainty. Whether consciously or subconsciously, there were sufficient grounds for the Chinese to expect some kind of resentment and retaliation from their disadvantaged neighbors, and it is not surprising that these fears eventually took the form of etiological concepts.

Chinese children were the preferred victims for ku poisoning by members of non-Chinese tribes, as the following remarks from the nineteenth century indicate:

‘During the fall, the Miao women carry pears in cloth bags, selling the pears to children. Many children are poisoned by ku in this way.’

Reports of ku poisoning in China often contain the implied desire of the disadvantaged to live under the same conditions as those who are better off. However, the ku concept contains suspicion of clean and wealthy households. In this manner, a stigma was gradually attached to those who were wealthy and clean, since they had possibly achieved their position only with the aid of criminal methods, such as the use of ku. These kinds of attitudes lead to precautionary methods similar to those found in societies where the “evil eye” is prevalent, such as the concealment of possessions and a preference for neglected external appearance. (pp. 48-49)