REVIEWS

Ways to Paradise: The Chinese Quest for Immortality *by Michael Loewe.* London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979. Pp. xiii+ 270. $34.00.

Derk Bodde, University of Pennsylvania

Traditionally, the approach of most Western scholars to ancient Chinese civilization has been by way of texts, while a smaller number has chosen the approach via art and artifacts. All too often each group has tended to ignore the work and techniques of the other. Even today this bifurcation sometimes persists, despite the assertion—now so often reiterated as to become a cliché—that ancient China can no longer be properly understood without a proper knowledge of its archaeology.

The present book, in my opinion, is probably the most successful attempt to date to combine the two approaches. On the archaeological side, it enumerates and analyzes numerious pertinent Chinese finds of recent decades as well as others going back more than half a century. On the textual side, it examines a wide diversity of relevant ancient writings. On both sides, it extensively cites modern scholarship in Chinese, Japanese, and several European languages.

The book contains five chapters, followed by six appendices, a bibliography, a Chinese/Japanese character glossary, and an index.

The bibliography and index, good though they are, might have been made better yet had the former listed the ancient texts cited in the book in addition to its modern studies, and the latter its modern studies in addition to the ancient texts. Twenty-eight black-and-white plates and twenty-six text figures substantially enhance the book's general attractiveness, though to some its price may seem a little high considering its relatively short length.

Thematically, the book deals with some of the shifting ideas current in Han China concerning death, the hereafter, and the cosmos, as exemplified in successive complexes of art and iconography. Whenever possible, further elucidation is provided by pertinent textual citations. Chronologically, the book extends from the second century B.C. to the time, beginning in the second century A.D., when Buddhism, with its radically new conceptions, was gaining ground in China. Although the topics treated are by no means wholly new to scholars, the author's interpretations of them are often original, always interesting, and for the most part convincing.

The book's first chapter consists of an excellent general survey, "The Han Frame of Mind." This is followed by a chapter analyzing the famous T-shaped painting recovered in 1972 from tomb no. 1 (approx. 168 B.C.) at Ma-wang-tui 馬王堆, Hunan province. Although the ascending stages portrayed in this painting have already been interpreted by earlier scholars as probably being those through which the soul of the departed progresses on its journey from earth toward heavenly paradise, Dr. Loewe's detailed discussions throw much new light on the identities and significance of the many human and animal forms that are depicted. Chapter 3 then discusses the similarities in cosmic symbolism commonly found in the patterns on TLV mirrors, those on Han divination boards, and those on the Han gaming boards known as *liu-po* 六博. Thereafter, the fourth chapter turns to Hsi Wang Mu 西王母, Queen Mother of the West, tracing her evolution from "a hybrid, semi-human figure," perhaps connected with pestilence or with certain constellations, to a goddess presiding over a paradise of deathlessness located at the mythological K'un-lun 崑崙 mountain in Central Asia. Finally, Chapter 5 deals with a theme often found in Han approaches to paradise: a bird (usually a three-legged crow) who occupies the sun, a hare

who occupies the moon, and their respective correlations with the *yang* and *yin* principles. Of the six subsequent appendices, five provide lists and classifications of mirrors, especially TLV mirrors, while the third does the same for Han divination boards.

Inevitably, the handling of topics as complex and uncertain as these must sometimes result in unanswered questions as well as solutions. First of all, any study of this nature must face the inherent difficulty (recognized by Loewe himself on p. viii) that unless ancient textual evidence can be found corroborating the modern interpretation of a given ancient painting or other artifact, such interpretation will at best usually remain no more than an attractive possibility, never a certainty. A single example must here suffice. The funerary Ma-wang-tui painting is topped by a human figure—seemingly that of a female—surrounded by the coils of a serpent seemingly issuing from where her legs should be. This figure (discussed on pp. 57–59) has been variously interpreted by earlier scholars as the mythical culture hero Fu Hsi 伏羲, his sister or consort Nü Kua 女媧, or an obscure spirit called Chu Lung 燭龍. Dr. Loewe, after rejecting all these possibilities for good reasons, goes on to suggest that the figure is actually that of the tomb's occupant (the countess of Tai), who, having reached her heavenly destination, is there "sloughing off her mortal coil as easily as a snake sheds the skins that he discards." This hypothesis is tempting and conceivably correct. Nevertheless, it seems ill-advised to paraphrase a line from Shakespeare[1] as support for a hypothesis about a Chinese painting of the second century B.C.

A second difficulty has to do with an attitude rather than an artifact. The school of philosophy officially dominant during much of the Han dynasty was, of course, that amalgamation of earlier Confucianism with other strands of thought propounded early in the dynasty by Tung Chung-shu 董仲舒 (179?–104? B.C.). At several places Dr. Loewe speaks of the "deficiencies" of this thought system (pp. 83, 87, 96–97, 101), and once of its "aridities" (p. 87). "The system," he writes, "was gravely weakened by two major deficiencies: it provided no answer to the question of man's destiny after death; and it encompassed no direct means of contact or

[1] "When we have shuffled off this mortal coil," from *Hamlet*, Act III, scene 1, in the speech, "To be, or not to be . . ."

physical access between the three realms of heaven, earth and man" (pp. 96–97). There is no doubt that Tung's philosophy is susceptible to criticism on several counts. However, to censure him for failing to talk about paradises in the next world or for not advocating magical techniques for reaching such paradises seems to me less than fair. Tung, after all, was an intellectual writing for intellectuals, and the tradition he represented was far removed from the cult of the Queen Mother of the West or the belief that a TLV mirror in one's tomb would help one's quest for immortality. Very probably such cults and beliefs enjoyed a good deal more popularity among most Han Chinese than did Tung's somewhat austere ideas. Yet to denigrate Tung on this account seems almost as unjustified as to denigrate Wang Ch'ung 王充 (A.D. 27-ca. 100) for arguing, in his iconoclastic *Lun heng* 論衡 (*Doctrines Evaluated*), that there is no continued existence of the soul after death instead of contentedly accepting the prevailing beliefs of his day.

The following are a few more particular comments:

1. Although Dr. Loewe is usually meticulous in going back directly to the original texts for his citations, there are a few occasions (p. 139, n. 76; p. 148, n. 6; p. 156, n. 6) when he takes the easier road of citing such texts only at second hand as quoted in the studies of other modern scholars. In one such instance he even fails to identify by title the text he thus refers to (p. 38). Instead, he merely says that it comes from the fourth-century writer Kan Pao 干寶.[2]

2. Because the vertical portion of the Ma-wang-tui painting is capped by a lid-like covering and has certain contours vaguely reminiscent of a vase, Dr. Loewe believes it to be a graphic representation of the island of P'eng-lai, one of the mythical isles of the immortals in the sea east of China (pp. 34 f. and esp. p. 38). A major reason for this supposition is the fact that P'eng-lai 蓬萊 is also very occasionally referred to as P'eng-hu 壺, "the P'eng Vase." This appellation, however, does not seem to appear in texts earlier than the mid-fourth century (among them the just-mentioned Kan Pao

[2] Presumably it comes from Kan Pao's well-known *Sou-shen chi* 搜神記 (*Researches into the Supernatural*), a work completed by around A.D. 350 (see my article in *HJAS*, 6 [1942], 343–44). Loewe states less precisely that Kan Pao "wrote in the early part of the fourth century."

statement). The resulting gap of more than four centuries between these references and the Ma-wang-tui painting of ca. 168 B.C. provides a rather tenuous basis for asserting a correlation which has some importance for Loewe's general theory. According to this theory, the Han cults of immortality were initially focused on the isles of immortality believed to lie off the east China coast, but in Later Han times interest shifted from there to Hsi Wang Mu and her K'un-lun paradise in the west.

On the other hand, support for the theory comes from another passage closely parallel in its implications to the equating of P'eng-hu with P'eng-lai. This passage, though ignored by Loewe, is important because it occurs in Pan Ku's 班固 (A.D. 32–92) *Hsi-tu fu* 西都賦 (*Rhapsody on the Western Capital*), which means it is probably almost three centuries earlier than the first enunciations of the P'eng-lai/P'eng-hu equation. In this poem, Pan Ku describes how within the imperial gardens stone miniature replicas of the isles of the immortals were set up at a certain spot. Among the original isles, in addition to P'eng-lai, was one well known in other texts as Fang-chang 方丈, but which Pan Ku, describing its counterpart in the imperial gardens, choses to refer to as Fang-hu 壺, "the Fang Vase."[3]

3. Still with respect to the Ma-wang-tui painting, the suggested equation of a pair of human-headed birds with a little known spirit, Yü Ch'iang 禺彊, seems to me far from certain (pp. 42–43). Or again, it is said that eight suns, represented as eight small disks, appear in the painting (p. 48 and later). However, upon looking at the reproduction of the painting on p. 36, I found it hard to see more than six or at the most seven of them there.

4. Turning now to the TLV mirrors, the striking similarities noted in the book between them and the Han divination boards are countered by two dissimilarities. The first, which is immediately apparent, is that, in the case of each mirror, its central square, symbolic of earth, always lies within the mirror's outer disk, symbolic of heaven, whereas in the divination boards the reverse is true: the wooden square of each board, symbolic of earth, is always *wider*

[3] See *Wen-hsüan* (*Literary Anthology*), 1/18b (*SPTK* ed.); tr. in George Margoulies, *Le "Fou" dans le Wen-siuan* (Paris, 1926), p. 48; not included in Erwin von Zach, tr., *Die chinesische Anthologie*, ed. by I. M. Fang (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958).

than the wooden disk, symbolic of heaven, on which it is pivoted. Loewe notes this difference but fails to account for it (p. 79).

5. Finally, with respect to the Queen Mother of the West (pp. 88–89), the possible reference to her on Shang divination inscriptions as Hsi Mu, "Western Mother," seems rather unlikely in view of the great interval between it and the earliest definite mention of Hsi Wang Mu in the *Huai-nan-tzu* (ca. 140 B.C.). Again, at p. 89 and notes 11–12 on p. 148, where the dating of the *Shan-hai ching* 山海經 (*Classic of Mountains and Seas*) is discussed, Karlgren's opinion is cited that the entire work is a product of the Han era. Then, however, without further reference to Karlgren, Loewe concludes that the first portion of this text (chap. 1–5) "contains material that may be dated some two centuries before the Han period." Karlgren's opinion, it seems to me, should not be dismissed so summarily. To cite only one peculiarity found within the *Shan-hai ching*'s first chapter (1/5a-b of the *Ssu-pu pei-yao* ed.): the word *hsien* (district or prefecture) occurs there no less than four times within a single double-page, on one occasion in the expression *chün hsien* 郡縣 (commanderies and prefectures). It is very hard to believe that such terms could appear, especially so frequently, in any text that really predates the Ch'in creation of empire in 221 B.C., when all of China was first divided into commanderies and prefectures. Fortunately the matter is of no great consequence as far as Dr. Loewe is concerned because his book deals only with the Han period. However, when at a later point he quotes the *Lieh-tzu* in the translation of A. C. Graham (p.93) and still later states that this text was perhaps compiled around A.D. 300 (p. 149, n. 36), it seems strange that he makes no reference to Graham's important article on the subject (*AM*, n.s. 8 [1961], 139–98), wherein detailed evidence supporting such a dating has been assembled.

These comments do not obscure the overall brilliance of a book whose technical detail may be an obstacle to quick and casual reading, but which, for anyone willing to read it carefully, will yield a rich harvest of ideas and facts that are new, arresting, and masterfully presented.