New Evidence on the Early Chinese Conception of Afterlife—A Review Article

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The spectacular discovery of the three Han tombs at Ma-wang-tui in Ch'angsha, Hunan, in 1972–1974 is indeed an event of singular importance in the history of Han studies. Of the three tombs, 1 and 3 particularly aroused worldwide attention. Tomb 3 is known for its preservation of a large quantity of silk manuscripts, some of which were long assumed lost. Tomb 1 made headline news at the time of its excavation, primarily for the well-preserved body of its occupant, wife of the Marquis of Tai, who probably died around 168 B.C. However, when the full report was published in 1973, it turned out that the tomb is unusually rich with furnishings of all sorts, including textiles, lacquerware, musical instruments, pottery, inscribed bamboo slips, and food remains. But the single most significant discovery from this tomb is that of a polychrome painting on a silk banner that was presumably used in the funerary processions of the dead. Since the painting reveals a great deal about early Chinese mythology, art, religion, and ritualism, it has been extensively studied by specialists of several disciplines in China and Japan, as well as in the West. It is also this painting that forms the core of Michael Loewe's *Ways to Paradise: The Chinese Quest for Immortality.*

In *Ways to Paradise,* Loewe examines three related subjects: the conception of paradise as shown in the silk painting from Ma-wang-tui; the Han views of the cosmos as revealed in the so-called TLV mirrors, which were particularly in fashion between about 50 B.C. to A.D. 100 or 150; and the rise of the cult of the Queen Mother of the West since the later part of the Former Han dynasty. There is nevertheless a common thread that runs through all the three separate subjects of this study, namely, "the underlying beliefs of the Han Chinese regarding death and the hereafter" (Preface). It is also this unifying theme that makes the reading of *Ways to Paradise* an extremely thought-provoking experience.

As is customary with all his scholarly writings, Dr. Loewe's treatment of each of the three topics in the book is careful, thorough, detailed, and technical. He uses every bit of literary and historical evidence at his disposal to make the otherwise silent archaeological data talk, often sensibly. It is also commendable that the author occasionally brings a comparative perspective into this study. For instance, in chapter 5, the symbols of the bird and the hare in other mythologies are compared as well as contrasted with the Chinese case. The result is both fruitful and illuminating.

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Ways to Paradise: The Chinese Quest for Immortality. By Michael Loewe. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979. xi, 270 pp. Plates, Figures, Notes, Appendixes, List of Books Cited and Abbreviations Used, Glossary of Chinese and Japanese Proper Names and Terms, Index. £15.

In my opinion, the discovery of the silk painting and of other related funerary objects in the Ma-wang-tui tombs is of revolutionary importance to the study of religious thought in ancient China. For the first time we have unmistakable and direct evidence that testifies fully as well as vividly to the indigenous Chinese imagination of death and afterlife in pre-Buddhist antiquity. The dominant modern theory that there was no "other world" in Chinese thought until the advent of Buddhism is thus proved to be untenable. For example, the late Dr. Hu Shih (1937: 224–25) held Buddhism responsible for giving Chinese the idea of tens of heavens and many hells. Recently, Dr. Joseph Needham (1974: 98) also expressed a similar view. According to him, there was no heaven or hell in ancient Chinese thought; this was altered only after the permeation of Buddhism. It is one thing to say that the indigenous Chinese conception of heaven or hell is different from its Buddhist counterpart, but it is quite another matter to suggest that the idea of heaven or hell was totally alien to the Chinese mind. Now, thanks to the Ma-wang-tui discovery, this problem has been fundamentally solved.

Loewe agrees with most scholars that the silk painting is a description of the pilgrimage of the soul of Lady Tai to heaven. In light of a similar painting found in Ma-wang-tui Tomb 3, this identification may be considered as firmly established. Interestingly enough, Tomb 3 also provides us with an important piece of evidence concerning the Han Chinese belief in the underworld. There is a document on wood written in the name of a "Family Assistant" *(Chia-Ch'en)* of the Marquis of Tai and addressed to an official in charge of the dead *(chu-tsang lang-chung)* in the underworld. It may be translated as follows:

> On *wu-ch'en* [24th] day, second month, the twelfth year [of Emperor Wen's reign, 168 B.C.] Household Assistant named Fen to *Lang-chung* in Charge of the Dead: A list of mortuary objects is herewith forwarded to you. Upon receiving this document please memorialize without delay to the Lord of the Dead *(Chu-tsang Chün)*. (*Wen-wu* 1974: 43)

Clearly, here Household Assistant Fen is notifying his counterpart in the underworld bureaucracy of the arrival of the newly deceased. Recent archaeology has shown that the belief in an underworld bureaucracy taking care of the departed souls was already widespread in China by the second century B.C. In 1975 two similar pieces of evidence were found in Han Tombs 10 and 168, respectively, at Feng-huang Shan, Chiang-ling, Hupei. The document from Tomb 168, dated the 13th of 5th month, 167 B.C., was issued in the name of the Assistant Magistrate of Chiang-ling *(Chiang-ling Ch'en)* and sent to the Underworld Assistant *(Ti-hsia Ch'en)*. As in the Ma-wang-tui case, this Han local official of Chiang-ling was also notifying his counterpart of the immigration of the occupant of the tomb, a man under his jurisdiction, to the underworld and requesting the case be reported in due course to the Lord *(Chu)*. The document from Tomb 10, dated 153 B.C., is of a slightly different form. It was a memorial presented directly to the underworld Lord *(Ti-hsia Chu)* by the deceased named Chang Yen (*Wen-wu* 1975a: 4; 1975b: 13). There can be little doubt that this underworld Lord *(Ti-hsia Chu)* or Lord of the Dead *(Chu-tsang Chün)* was the predecessor of the famous Lord of Mount T'ai *(T'ai-shan Fu-chün)* of the later Han period who was to be, eventually, transformed into one of the ten kings or judges of Buddhist hells.

At this point, however, an interesting question arises: Why was it that, as shown

especially in the case of the Ma-wang-tui Tomb No. 3, the ancient Chinese made arrangements for the departed soul to go to the heaven and the underworld at the same time? The answer may best be sought from the dualistic Chinese view of the soul. As Loewe rightly points out, the Chinese of the Han period distinguished two souls in every individual human being, the *hun* and the *p'o*. The *hun* was characterized as *yang*—male and active—and the *p'o* as *yin*—female and receptive. Moreover, it was also believed that at death the *hun* and the *p'o* separated, with the result that the former went to the paradise and the latter to the underworld. (See pp. 9–10.) This idea, it may be pointed out, is most clearly formulated in a passage in the *Li Chi:* "The soul-breath *(hun-ch'i)* returns to heaven; the bodily substance *(hsing-p'o)* returns to earth. Therefore, in sacrifice-offering, one should seek the meaning in the principles of *yin* and *yang*" ("Chiao t'e sheng"). Although this particular formulation is of Han date, the idea itself can be traced back to a statement of Prince Chi-cha of Wu made in 515 B.C. (*Li-chi chu-su* 1815: *Ch.* 10, 19b).

The evolution of the *hun* and the *p'o* in the mind of pre-Han China is a long and complicated story, which cannot be fully told here. Suffice it to say that, originally, the term *p'o* alone had been used by the primitive Chinese to denote the "soul." Etymologically, *p'o* means white, whiteness, or bright light and probably derives from the growing light of the new moon. In the *Shu Ching* as well as in many Chou bronze inscriptions, we often encounter the expressions *chi-sheng-pa* (*pa* being a variant of *p'o*) meaning "after the birth of the crescent" and *chi-ssu-pa* meaning "after the death of the crescent." As Hu Shih rightly observed, "The primitive Chinese seem to have regarded the changing phases of the moon as periodic birth and death of its *p'o*, its 'white light' or soul" (1945–46: 30). On the other hand, textual evidence seems to suggest that it was from the middle of the sixth century B.C. on that the idea of *hun* began to gain currency and eventually replaced *p'o* as the more important and active part of the soul.

This primitive association of the soul with the growing light of the new moon is of tremendous importance to our understanding of certain myths related to the seventh day of the months discussed in the *Ways to Paradise.* As a matter of fact, it is a key to both the story of the Weaving Maid and the Oxherd and that of the Queen Mother of the West. As the two Han stories go, the annual meeting of Emperor Wu of Han with the Queen Mother of the West took place on the seventh day of the first month and that between the Weaving Maid and the Oxherd on the seventh day of the seventh month. Loewe is certainly correct in seeing the two stories as part of a much larger myth—one which "saw the continuity of the universe as depending on two annual meetings that took place in summer and winter" (p. 119). On the authority of Kominami Ichirō, he further calls our attention to the interesting fact that, in the light of early Japanese folklore, "the importance of the seventh day of the month lay partly in its function as marking the phases of the moon" (p. 120). This is indeed an insightful observation.

However, it seems somewhat odd, to say the least, that the meaning of the myth has to be grasped by way of folklore of a much later date. In fact, the classical Chinese expression *chi-sheng-pa* ("after the birth of the crescent") has already provided us with the most important key to understanding the myth. According to Wang Kuo-wei's four-quarter theory of the lunar month (1959), in early Chou times, *chi-sheng-pa* probably stood for the second quarter from the 8th or 9th to the 14th or 15th. Wang's theory ties in extremely well with the fact that the two annual meetings

actually took place in the midnight of the seventh day.[1] There can be little doubt that in the minds of the ancient Chinese the midnight of the seventh day marked the beginning of the *chi-sheng-pa* quarter of the month. It is also significant that, in referring to the birth of the *p'o*-soul in man, the passage in the *Tso Chuen,* dated 534 B.C., actually uses the expression *chi-sheng-p'o.*[2] This proves conclusively that the primitive Chinese conception of the soul was derived analogously from the birth of the crescent.

In conclusion, it may be noted that the recent anthropological analyses of death ritual also bear importantly on our understanding of the subjects with which the *Ways to Paradise* is centrally concerned. For death as transition concerns not only the dead, but the living as well. "During the burial ritual itself," as Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf point out, "the deceased, the living, and even the cosmos go through a period of transition" (1979: 117). As a result, the themes of rebirth and sexuality often dominate the symbolism of funerals. Only by bearing this in mind can we then grasp more fully the symbolic meanings of the silk painting from Ma-wang-tui, the designs of TLV mirrors, and the myth of the Queen Mother of the West as these are all burial-related objects found in Han tombs.

With regard to the woman's figure with a serpentine tail in the upper part of the silk painting, Loewe has made the interesting suggestion that it may have been the artist's intention to represent the final stage of Lady Tai's journey to heaven when she has reached her destination sloughing off her mortal coil (p. 59). This interpretation particularly makes sense when death is viewed as "the transition of the deceased from the world of the living to the realm of the dead." It seems permissible to take the final scene of the painting as a symbolization of the fact that the difficult and risky process of transition is at last completed (Huntington and Metcalf 1979: 116). The cosmic significance of the TLV mirrors is also worth noticing, because they were intended, as Loewe says, "to set a man permanently in his correct relation with the cosmos and to escort him to a life in the hereafter" (p. 83). I am inclined to think that one of the symbolic meanings of the mirrors may have been to assure the restoration of a cosmic order that has been upset by death.

Finally, in the myth of the Queen Mother many layers of symbolic meaning can be readily discerned. To begin with, the Queen Mother was conceived as possessing the power to renew the cosmic cycle as well as life. In the second place, the pairing of the Queen Mother of the West with the King Father of the East, which often appears in stone reliefs and bronze mirrors found in Han tombs, clearly symbolizes sexuality and rebirth. The same may also be said of the symbolic representation of Fu Hsi and Nü Kua with interlaced tails, which has an equally wide archaeological distribution in Han tombs. (See Wen 1948: 3–68; Chung, 1979: 78–80.) Last, but not least, the story of the meeting of Emperor Wu of Han and the Queen Mother of the West also suggests something more than meets the eye. On the basis of archaeological evidence, Kominami has offered the interesting interpretation that in the original myth the Queen Mother may have been an androgynous figure representing primordial cosmic unity and order (1974: 62–74). I am not quite convinced of the Queen Mother's hermaphroditism. However, there is reason to believe that the myth of the Queen Mother may indeed have had something to do with unity and order. In view of the Han frame of mind, which stressed the harmony between the two cosmic forces of Yin and Yang and the intimate relationship between Heaven and Man, the meeting of

[1] See the various versions of the myth quoted in Kominami (1974: 36–40).

[2] See the Chinese text in Legge (1960: 613).

Emperor Wu of Han with the Queen Mother seems to suggest symbolically the balancing of Yin with Yang, Heaven with Man, as well as life with order. According to the *Han Wu ku-shih,* in their meeting the Queen Mother only discussed matters pertaining to the human world with Emperor Wu of Han and refused to talk about affairs concerning the supernatural world. (See pp. 117–18.) This may well be taken as evidence that the Emperor stands for the human order.

On the other hand, the symbolic representation of the Queen Mother in this story is unmistakably that of life and immortality. In this connection the pairing of Fu Hsi with Nü Kua also helps us to grasp the meaning of this symbolic meeting. In Han popular culture, Nü Kua is conceived as a female creator of man and therefore symbolizes life, whereas Fu Hsi is described as possessing the power to maintain cosmic unity and order.[3] It is clear that in both cases a fundamental balance between life and order is maintained. Thus, the various death-related myths of pre-Buddhist origins not only reveal early Chinese beliefs about the hereafter, but they also express basic Chinese values regarding the nature and meaning of life, as does the symbolism of funeral rituals in practically all cultures.

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[3] See Chung (1979: 30), quoting a fragment of a lost Han work, *I ch'ien-k'un ts'o-tu.*