Chapter 1 _____

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Toward a History of the Everyday, Personal Religion of Ancient China

Historians face one of their sternest challenges in the attempt to explain religions and beliefs. This is especially critical when dealing with ancient civilizations: how should religion and belief be defined, who were the participants, and what caused religious change? We often study the formation of religions by analyzing the political, social, economic, and intellectual background of the societies in which they arose. Major disorder and disintegration in social and ethical structures indeed contributed to the development of new religions. For example, the rise of so-called mystery religions during the Hellenistic period, religions that emphasized personal salvation, has been attributed to the disintegration of the city-state system, new hardships in everyday life, and the disappearance of the previous religions.[1]

In the case of China, the situation is further complicated because religious practice was bifurcated wherever it touched upon the central government, which maintained a tradition of imperial ritual programs, sacrifices, and worship whose main features were established, even before the Han (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.), by Ch'in Shih-huang-ti (the "First Emperor" of Ch'in dynasty). It is difficult to determine with certainty how cults and private beliefs outside the imperial court came to be, and which ones were approved, merely tolerated, or expunged by the court. Officialdom, especially during the Western Han period, changed its mind frequently about the underpinnings of its own pro-

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grams of worship, as well as its relationship with noncourt worship. Furthermore, historians have yet to agree on exactly the relationship between nonofficials and their families (often called "the people," or "the peasantry and artisans") and the families of officials, who became increasingly aristocratic toward the end of Han. It is hard to tell which religious practices might have been universally vilified as vulgar and dangerous and which were deemed so but were nonetheless accepted. Conversely, it is hard to tell which ones spread out everywhere, so that we can state confidently that all under the sway of Chinese civilization participated in them.

Ancient China, into Han times and even later, was an active religious society, with personal religions and beliefs, an official religion, and innumerable links between the culture of royal power, writing, divination, ideas and ideology, art, and magic, on the one hand, and personal beliefs, on the other. This is all the more true in a society like China's, which had no separate priest class until the appearance of Buddhist and Taoist priest lineages in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. Even then, the active and diffuse world of Chinese religions continued on, adopting and expanding.

Discussions of the religious developments in China of the late Han to Three Kingdoms era (roughly 150–250 A.D.) have generally focused on two factors. First is the combination of social and economic problems, including war, epidemic, and political breakdown; and second, the end of the monopoly of Confucian thought and the rise of Taoist, nihilist, and other intellectual trends. The first factor led to the desire among the common people for a new political dispensation; and the second factor urged the development of skepticism and extremism among the educated elite.[2]

Concerning the establishment of Buddhism in China slightly later in time, historians similarly explain that the turbulent situation of Chinese society created a perfect environment for the spread of a religion that offered the common people a way out of seemingly endless misery.[3] Some suggest that the early proponents of Buddhism attracted Chinese intellectuals by deliberately borrowing distinctly Chinese ideas, especially those from Taoist literature. Thus, it was easier for the Chinese to accept Buddhist ideas in a Chinese guise.[4] Studies on the rise of the Taoist religion, on the other hand, also stress the economic hardship and political struggle of the waning years of the Eastern Han.[5]

While these interpretations may all be valid to some degree, one factor remains. In any ancient society, the vicissitudes of ordinary life, from birth to death, and the interplay between natural and human environments already constituted a rich background for the development of religious beliefs. Thus M. P. Nilsson on the religious scene of the Hellenistic period: "The study of the syncretism of late antiquity . . . has concerned itself mainly with beliefs and doctrines, while the spiritual soil from which these growths arose and drew their nourishment has been touched on only in passing and in general terms; yet that is the heart of the matter, its weightiest element."[6] The motivations for the acceptance and development of a new religion (or religions) are found not only in grave social or intellectual crises or in doctrines, but also in the daily life of a stable and prosperous society.[7] By studying relatively "ordinary" factors, one reaches the basic stratum of the religious mentality of everyday, private life.[8] How else might we explain why in times of peace or prosperity religion still constituted an essential part of society, and how it persisted?

This book will examine such a religious mentality in ancient China. It is my contention that the most enduring substrate of religion in China, one that perhaps has tendrils and roots in certain ancient beliefs of the surrounding non-Chinese peoples, is the religion of personal welfare and personal access to mantic knowledge. The context in which this religion, or system of religion, was represented includes, on the material side, religious buildings such as temples and altars that were used for both nature deities and ancestors; funerary establishments, including tombs, funerary objects, tomb paintings, and artistic representations in numerous forms. On the behavioral side were various techniques involving magic, omens, and mantic divination, or prayers for the protection of the individual and family. Finally, we find written documents such as talismans and sacred writings and other texts describing ideas, ideologies, and practices concerning all the above.

These were widely distributed and are to be distinguished from court religious activity, which involved ritual programs of imperial authority and ancestor worship, as well as the textual precedents for them. It is to be assumed that when men of the court went to their homes and estates, they practiced not the imperial religion, whose precinct was narrowly defined, but the religious beliefs of everyday life, often involving their kin, guests, bonded and semifree workers,

and the artisans and merchants with whom they came into contact. People of all walks of life, then, shared these general contexts of religious life and instantly recognized the religious goals of other individuals in society.

Important though it may be, a survey of the religious beliefs of everyday life from the beginnings of Chinese history until the end of the Han dynasty is not well represented in the existing scholarly literature.[9] Without such an understanding, any explanation of the successful spread of Buddhism and Taoism in the centuries after the Han, why both religions evolved the way they did, and why so-called popular religion in modern China assumed its present shape would lack a firm foundation. Taoism, as we know, evolved from various types of belief that can be traced to before the Ch'in. Its culmination in a distinct religion at the end of the Eastern Han was not only the result of a long historical development, but also the beginning of an enduring Taoist church; and both were intertwined with divergent elements of everyday religious life. Buddhism, on the other hand, did not enter a religious vacuum when it was first introduced into China. Its acceptance by all social groups depended more upon its ability to cope with various elements of the substrate religion than its theological arguments. It is clear, therefore, that a basic understanding of ancient Chinese religion is important not only for our understanding of the nature of ancient Chinese society, but also for a sound assessment of later religious phenomena. This is a challenging task, because almost all contemporary documents of the period are written by and for the social and governing elite. We are immediately confronted with the familiar problem of how to understand popular culture through texts that are essentially the product of the elite. We shall return to this question later in the chapter.

Similar problems are encountered in dealing with material evidence. For example, archaeological discoveries show that the Han elite often possessed funerary equipment similar to, although of better quality than, that of the nonelite. Does this mean that the elite shared with the wider community the religious ideas represented by the objects? How should one regard the religious ideas reflected in funerary paraphernalia? Should they be considered "popular" (or, of the people, or peasants), or are they "official/elite?" It is indeed difficult to isolate analytically an elite culture from a nonelite, or even "popular," culture.

Funerary equipment from rich tombs often represented a religious mentality that had little to do with Confucian ideas.[10] One doubts, of course, whether they can be considered "Confucianists." Yet if we admit that during the Han period Confucian values belonged mainly to the ruling, or administrative, elite who usually possessed the richer tombs, there is good reason to believe that many of the so-called Confucianists were influenced by a wide spectrum of religious mentality.[11] Thus, it is possible to approach the beliefs of the commoners by examining the culture of the elite. Furthermore, recent anthropological discussions on Chinese religion show that there was, or is, no simple division between "elite" and "popular" culture, or "great" and "little" traditions in Chinese society. The interaction between the "upper" and "lower" strata of culture presents a complex problem that should be studied carefully.[12] However, these works have not yet made a serious impact on the study of ancient China. Consequently, the notion of the everyday religion of personal welfare in ancient China still needs to be more subtly articulated.[13]

The present study is a historical investigation of broadly shared religious beliefs and goals in ancient China, from the earliest period to the end of Han. Methodologically, of course, it is practically impossible to conduct a purely descriptive investigation without exercising interpretations. It is expected that, in our inquiry into ancient religion, many questions will arise concerning the origin and nature of the beliefs, and many questions will probably remain unanswered or even unidentified. I have tried to investigate the various aspects of this religion of private life as outlined above. However, since there is no established model for such a history of religion in ancient China, this investigation must be a preliminary one both in the scope of the questions raised and the materials used.

Religion and Extra-human Powers: Working Definitions

First, we must formulate a working definition of "religion" in the proposed context. Then must come a definition of the term "personal welfare," which is at the center of our attention.

Despite a host of existing definitions,[14] the term "religion" is to be understood as referring to belief in the existence of extra-human

5

powers.[15] These powers were seen as exerting upon man and society tangible outcomes concerning human and extra-human events. Under such a definition, extra-human agents, animate or inanimate, natural or supernatural, also exerted certain powers over individual human beings. This agency may have been something other than "the powers," such as royal ancestors, ghosts, or gods. It could also have referred to natural phenomena, although it is not clear if there were beliefs in agents of natural phenomena.

In denoting the central concern of religious belief, writers often use the term "supernatural," the efficacy of which has seldom been questioned. Occasionally, scholars have viewed this term as inadequate and substituted "superhuman." Religion, according to one, is "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings."[16] The terms "culturally patterned" and "culturally postulated" are adequate to denote the nature of religious phenomena. There is also the attempt to avoid touching the nature or mode of existence of religious entities. Instead, the nature of religious action is emphasized: "Religion can be looked upon as an extension of the field of people's social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society . . . in which human beings involved see themselves in a dependent position vis-à-vis their non-human altars."[17] I prefer, however, to use the more modest term "extra-human," instead of "superhuman." "Supernatural" and "superhuman" both betray the world view, or conception, of the modern researcher and are inconclusive and cannot characterize the ancient Chinese contexts. I would argue that, in ancient China at least, the "powers" were recognized as something outside human beings. They were not necessarily "supernatural"—in the sense of "above" or "beyond" the natural world. They were not necessarily "superhuman" either—in the sense of having greater power than man. Some amounted to no more than minor irritations and were effectively checked with the performance of exorcistic acts. While both "supernatural" and "superhuman" entail the sense of "superior," "better," or "stronger," the term "extra-human" only refers to the sphere of existence of the powers without reference to their quality, strength, or nature. "Supernatural" or "superhuman" are terms that hardly find an equivalent in the vocabulary of ancient China. As long as the powers are recognized as extra-human and not to be found among "normal" animals, objects, or sociopolitical groups,

they become the concern of man, and actions are to be taken to deal with them. As one scholar says: "Religious beliefs are present when non-human agencies are propitiated on the human model."[18] This is an interesting and important aspect of the Chinese religious experience. Having stated my position, however, I shall often use such terms as ghost, spirit, god, etc., in the following discussions as convenient variants.

Finally, we have the observable evidence of people's effort to express their recognition of and rapprochement with such powers. This, as we mentioned above, may include various kinds of communication, worship, or exorcism that involved magical, ritual, or ceremonial activities in public or private. The objective of all these was mainly personal welfare (that of the suppliant and/or his relatives), which was also a primary motivation for keeping worship and cults alive. In the context of ancient Chinese society, this meant every means that could lead to longevity and comfortable life and a well-provided death. I have, therefore, adopted a loose definition of religion that includes organized and rationalized establishments, as well as localized and unarticulated cults and beliefs. Our present interest, obviously, is mostly in the localized and unarticulated cults and beliefs. However, we should never lose sight of what the more rationalized system offered; thus, where appropriate, mention will be made as well of court religious complexes and ideologies.

The Popular-Religion Paradigm in Earlier Research and Theory

In this study, I prefer to develop a set of terms that will provide analytic room for the inclusion of types and categories, rather than to exclude. My premise is that the substrate of ancient Chinese religion took in members of all areas of economic and political life and a wide variety of elements of belief. The previous two generations of scholarship on Chinese religion, however, perceived the problem differently from the way pursued by modern writers, due mostly to the overwhelming revisions in our perception of early China resulting from archaeology. Before this sea change, the most prevalent way of looking at Chinese religious life posited a division into popular (or

commoner) and official (or intellectual, elite, ruling) categories of belief and practice.

Our age is the age of "the people"—anything that can shed light on the laboring, nonelite people of the past is likely to be received with considerable interest. To see how an ordinary person lived his life may be more interesting than exploring the intrigues of kings and politicians, or the speculations of philosophers. Further, the religious faith of the ordinary people of another era may help us gain insight into the nature of our own beliefs. "Popular religion," in this perspective, has come to mean the religious beliefs of the common people. Yet the term also arouses suspicion, since it is doubtful that a historian can reach the souls of the commoners of a past era. For, by definition or by common sense, the term "commoners" usually refers to people who were ignored by the educated, ruling ranks of society, and who are often also ignored as subjects of modern scholarship because of the lack of written documents concerning their own thoughts and activities.[19] For the more recent past, this is not too great a problem. Anthropologists, by direct participation and personal communication, describe how the people of a given society live their religious life. Work on "popular religion" in China so far has been done mostly by anthropologists concentrating on modern Chinese society.[20] For the remote past, historians of religion are only beginning to explore the possibility of depicting an outline of the religious life outside the imperial court. For example, Valerie Hansen examines the changing images and status of local pantheons in medieval China.[21] Stephen Teiser explains the circuitous ways in which a Buddhist scripture intermingled with popular beliefs and festivals.[22]

Not only do we doubt even the possibility of studying the religion of commoners, the term "popular religion" itself provokes further questions. "Popular" connotes a relatively wide basis among the total populace, but it does not necessarily imply that only the lower echelon of society was concerned or affected. "Popular religion," therefore, seems to carry an inherent ambiguity concerning the social constitution of the worshipers. If, on the other hand, we define "official religion" as those religious beliefs or doctrines that received the recognition and formal protection, or promotion, of secular rulership, what is the essence of this official religion, and what is its relationship with popular religion? Stephan Feuchtwang maintains that popular

religion "is of the common people in the one sense that it contains a crucial relation, a political relation, to official religion and to other claimants to control and therefore orthodoxy in China."[23] This points out the political nature of the relationship between official and popular religions. The question is, are the two different in structure, content, cosmology; different in the relationship between the worshippers and the deities; or simply different in their constituents? Finally, are the terms "official" and "popular" appropriate enough for the investigation of religion?[24] As analytical tools in approaching the subject, these terms may cause difficulty. For what is "popular" might not be confined to non-elite laboring or mercantile people. Moreover, it is unlikely that the non-elite were ignorant of official doctrine. In this study, therefore, I will employ such terms as "popular," "commoner," "the people," or "folk," but only do so for convenience.

To use "popular religion," and oppose it to "official religion," then, admits a basic assumption that for analysis it is possible and useful to divide a culture into two or more strata. Here we enter the often traveled yet still thorny road of "great and little traditions." After Redfield's exposition of the concept of the "great tradition" versus "little tradition,"[25] many scholars in the human sciences used it in various contexts in one way or another. Redfield held that the so-called great tradition was created by the elite who consciously and actively passed it on to their successors. The little tradition, on the other hand, was the culture generally accepted and preserved by the people unwittingly, the so-called peasant culture in a traditional peasant society. While this was not an uncommon concept, Redfield did not dwell on a simple bifurcation of culture and society. Instead, he noticed that in traditional peasant societies, China included, the great and little traditions overlapped and gave rise to mutual influences. This acknowledged the complexity of cultural reality and the provisional nature of the concept as an analytical tool.

Although Redfield presented his theory with reservation, the interpretive power of the "great and little" concept was so attractive that, in a number of subsequent studies on the culture or religion of China, the paradigm of "two traditions" was sometimes carried to the extreme.[26] The religion of the elite was considered far removed, or even very different, from that of the populace.[27] Even some modern Chinese intellectuals share the view that in traditional China the rational

literati had no need of religion, while the ignorant populace were blinded by superstition.[28]

Long before Redfield, however, scholars had presented different views on the relationship between the elite and the popular in Chinese religion. Marcel Granet, one of the pioneers in this area, repeatedly expounded his view that the elite culture of ancient China was nourished by, and ultimately derived from, popular religion.[29] Granet's view, despite some valuable insight into the meaning of early Chinese poetry, has since been criticized as giving free rein to imagination.[30] Sifting through the ancient literature and drawing on modern ethnology, Granet claimed to have discovered traces of ancient popular religion, such as the primitive rite of sexual union, in the poems of *Shih-ching* or *Book of Poetry*, traditionally dated to the Western Chou period (c. 1045–841 B.C.).[31] He believed that the poems were originally records of such festival rites and songs, a hypothesis that led to his "popular to elite" theory of the development of Chinese culture. In some respect, his view is similar to the Chinese traditional view that a portion of the poems was collected from the countryside by officials to serve as admonitions to the court. However true this may have been, the act of collection was a conscious political strategy, thus the poems collected could hardly have exerted any significant influence in the development of the established elite culture. This is not to say that court rituals were totally unrelated to folk religion: some may have reflected ancient and already forgotten religious customs. The subsequent political uses and twists of the original meaning of the poems in *Shih-ching*,[32] however, only demonstrate that the ancient "popular culture" as represented there did not really become the foundation of elite culture in the way Granet suggested. That Granet was unable to use the crucial evidence provided by the oracle bone inscriptions and Shang bronze art was also a major drawback for his theory.

An older contemporary of Granet, the Dutch sinologist de Groot, also contributed a major work on the religion of China. In contrast to Granet, he started by collecting materials on beliefs and customs among the non-elite in contemporary southeastern China, i.e., Fukien, in the late nineteenth century. He then compared his findings with ancient texts and concluded that there was little change from the ancients to the moderns.[33] His main assessment of Chinese culture in

general and religion in particular was that they were static—devoid of innovations and improvements since the ancient time. Despite the wide spectrum of his effort in collecting relevant materials, de Groot's study was marred by a prejudice against Chinese religion and society, as well as methodological deficiencies.[34] Both Granet and de Groot shared a common assumption: the development of Chinese culture and religion was essentially one-directional, either from elite to popular or from popular to elite.

In reviewing the method and theories of Granet and de Groot, Freedman proposed that peasant culture and elite culture were not two different things, but represent "two versions of one religion that we see as idiomatic translations of each other."[35] This is to say that the basic unity of Chinese culture does not come from a single historical origin or a single social stratum, but from a general system of religious ideas, which developed through continuous exchanges of ideas and customs between elite and non-elite. Freedman did not, however, elaborate how this development came about historically.

In this connection, Benjamin Schwartz, when discussing the ideas of ancient Chinese philosophy, touched upon the problem of "popular culture" from another angle. Although he admits that there were basic similarities between the popular and elite culture, "out of the same broad Neolithic matrix" the later development of the two diverged in crucial ways. Further, the relationship between non-elite and elite is not "an unproblematic 'parallelism' of two versions of the same culture but a constant dynamic interaction involving both mutual influence and mutual tension between at least partially separate realms."[36] He further elaborated on this point by discussing the absorption of *yin-yang* and Five Phases theories into non-elite religion.[37]

Recognizing the mutual influence of the popular and the elite, and trying to demonstrate their complex relationship, David Johnson formulated a kind of grid system by dividing the people of late-imperial China into nine social-cultural groups. He uses literary/educational and political/economic statuses as criteria, with the legally privileged literate group representing the high-elite culture, the illiterate/dependent group representing low culture, and others in between of varying statuses.[38] While somewhat mechanical, Johnson's model helps us see the complex image of Chinese culture.[39]

The complex nature of popular culture and religion is made explicit

11

in a recent study of the local cults of modern China. Jordan and Overmyer point out that Chinese popular culture presents both unifying and divergent aspects. Because of the vastness of China, people of different areas have tended to have different cult practices. Yet through historical as well as political forces, divergent local customs have also shared basic ideas and cultural values. Popular culture, at least in the case of China, was itself a congregation of many different, small, regional cultural circles. The interaction between the popular and the elite depends upon some intermediate elements such as secret religious sects, which, transmitting the ideals of the elite to the common folk, also transform and unify the beliefs and values of the local society into a new social organization.[40] To take another example, Stephen Teiser's study of the ghost festival of medieval China shows how the festival, as well as ideas of hell and salvation, were received by the non-elite, Buddhists, and educated writers of differing perspective, and yet constituting a unified system.[41] This demonstrates the inherent mixture of groups and statuses in the cultural reality. While nonofficials were, by and large, set off legally and socially from officials, they met culturally. Furthermore, to be Buddhist cut across several cultural lines.

The theme of "unity" versus "diversity" was further explored by Robert P. Weller in his study of the Taiwanese ghost festival.[42] While criticizing Weber's characterization of Chinese religions as "traditional" and "rational" for being too simplistic,[43] Weller proposes two different styles of interpretation that he argues existed in non-elite religion: ideologized interpretations, i.e., religion understood in an institutionalized and explicit ideology; and pragmatic interpretations, i.e., less explicit and less tied to specific institutions, and more concerned with everyday social relations. Although still carrying the Weberian imprint of "traditional (pragmatic)" and "rational (ideologized)," Weller breaks away from Weber by emphasizing "the flexibility of interpretation as people remake their religion in changing social conditions," therefore the ideologized and pragmatic interpretations are not mutually exclusive but only "two ways of giving meaning to experience."[44] This observation, one may add, is on the whole in accord with C. K. Yang's proposal concerning "diffused" and "institutional."[45]

Steven Sangren explores a theoretical basis for the holistic under-

standing of Chinese religion. In a study of a local community in contemporary Taiwan, he observed that

> [N]o given supernatural entity means the same thing all the time; the nature of its power and meaning depends upon the ritual context in which it is addressed, who is worshiping it, in what role the worshipper addresses it (as individual, officeholder, member of a family or community, and so forth), and with what other supernatural entities it is being implicitly or explicitly contrasted.[46]

As will be demonstrated in the following discussions, this observation is particularly relevant to understanding the nature of the religion of the common people in ancient China.

In summary, the political, social, or economic status of a person, although important, was not necessarily the decisive factor governing his religious beliefs and practices. It follows that members of the ruling elite could still be believers within the religious system of personal welfare and access to mantic knowledge.[47] Official religion, as I understand it, is what the ruling class formally announced or practiced as the cult of the state, with a system of cosmology and moral ethics derived from it. Its purpose was mainly for effecting authority and for maintaining the orderliness of the state and its subjects. The vast system of personal religion, on the other hand, had a more direct bearing upon people's lives; the practical benefit of religion to the individual was invariably a central concern.[48] The difference between the official and the nonoffical might even have existed not in basic cosmology, but rather in the nature of the physical precincts and the secular problems that concerned each of them. We cannot even be sure about a distinction based entirely on the content of a religious element, such as the ideas of ghosts and spirits or the act of ancestor worship. Rather, it is people's attitudes and goals, as occasionally recorded, or as deduced, that give us subtler clues.[49] Thus, a religious system could have more than one aspect. As E. Zürcher points out, Eastern Han Buddhism could be described as having three sectors: a hybrid cult centered upon the court and the imperial family; the first nucleus of "canonical" monastic Buddhism; the diffuse and unsystematic adoption of Buddhist elements in indigenous beliefs and cults.[50]

This understanding is an important principle in our study of the world of personal religion in ancient China.

The Sources

Rich archaeological discoveries in the past half-century have provided us with numerous details of the material culture of ancient China.[51] Among these finds, tombs are by far the most frequently encountered kind of evidence. The persistent practice of inhumation provides a basic reference for the belief in certain types of existence after death. Furthermore, the change in burial customs, including the funerary objects and tomb styles, throughout the long period studied here provides us with important clues concerning the change in people's conceptions of death and the afterlife.

The significance of archaeological evidence, therefore, can be weighed in two ways. First, individual finds may be employed to illustrate a specific point concerning the religious belief of the people. Statues of monsters or protective demons found in many Ch'u tombs of the late Warring States period, for example, may be used to indicate a belief that evil spirits attacked tombs. The wall paintings and reliefs found in Han-era tombs, to give another example, are relevant to the conception of the netherworld.

Second, the long-term development or change of cultural styles may be used to illustrate a more subtle shift in people's overall conception about the netherworld, and men's fate after death. For example, the shift from vertical-shaft wooden-casket tombs to horizontal brick tombs, a change that started sometime during the late Warring States period and continued throughout the Han dynasty, may be seen as a material manifestation of a corresponding change in the conception of the actual layout of the netherworld. As I argue later, when it became clear that this netherworld was similar to the world of the living, there was a corresponding increase in people's desire to create for the deceased an environment closer to the world of the living.[52]

An inevitable question in this regard is how to determine what kind of archaeological finds can reflect popular beliefs. First, we need to differentiate at each instance between the archaeological context—whether the object was found in the tomb of a commoner or noble-

man, which sometimes is guesswork—and, second, the sociological significance an object or a tomb style carries. We cannot automatically assume that everything found in a rich tomb necessarily reflects the ideology of the elite or ruling class.

The same attitude is also our principle in using literary or inscriptional evidence. Traditional texts such as the Five Classics, the *Tso-chuan* 左傳 and *Kuo-yü* 國語, the works of the Confucianists and other thinkers of the Warring States period, or the histories and essays of Han savants, are doubtless the product of the elites. What they have recorded, however, contains not only philosophical treatises and literary inventions, but also reflections of the feelings and beliefs of a wider population. This latter function of their writings is often not an intended purpose, but is nevertheless marked with the imprint of their time and culture. My reading of these traditional texts, therefore, aims not at reworking the refined arguments about the nature of the Confucian idea of humanity, nor at reconstructing the cosmological structure of the Han scholars, but at discovering those unintentional implications of their statements that pertain to the life and experience of the populace at large. What the elite ridiculed in expounding their ideas is often illuminating for the understanding of beliefs. It is up to the researcher to determine at each instance whether a statement carries such unintentional meanings. He must, however, always be skeptical of recorded thought, even when it is a person's opinion about his or other's beliefs. He must make quite clear whether he is describing something he believes to have been false or cynically manipulated, or something that seems to have been true. He must try his best to determine which speaker in a text is the cynical one and which were innocent believers, if in fact such parties can be differentiated.[53]

Some of the newly discovered texts, such as the daybooks (i.e., almanacs, *jih-shu* 日書) from Shui-hu-ti, or the "Fifty-two Recipes" *wu-shih-erh ping-fang* 五十二病方 from the tomb of Ma-wang-tui, since they treat mundane subjects, seem to bear closer relations with the private life of people.[54] The tombs of Ma-wang-tui or Shui-hu-ti certainly belong to the "ruling class," although the actual statuses of the tomb owners vary. The religious beliefs represented in these texts, however, seem to reveal the characteristics of those of a wider populace. This aspect of textual evaluation constitutes a challenge. Other

texts found in Han tombs, such as the "tomb quelling texts," which reveal more directly the popular conception of the afterlife, are also invaluable source materials for our understanding of religion in ancient China.

With a concern for the religious experience of the commoners, and with a special eye on the available evidence, we begin our search for a new page in the history of Chinese religion.