

Words and Images

For the root sense of childbirth, we will look at the first written words and the earliest images. The first written words appear on Shang oracle bones dated at the earliest to the thirteenth century BCE, about the time of suggestive decor on bronze sacrificial vessels. Both text and imagery were tied to the Shang ancestor worship system and thus were fundamental to what evolved into a sophisticated Central Plains civilization, which had spread by the beginning of imperial times in the late third century BCE throughout the middle and lower valleys of the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers. The earliest images suggestive of a concern for childbirth and fertility and, hence, social reproduction date back to the early Neolithic period, around the fifth millennium BCE. Although these prehistoric cultures may have had an influence on what became Shang civilization, the eras are too distant to make direct cultural links. However, we include some of these, since they appeared within the borders of modern China and may have contributed in some fashion to later culture layers. Although these artifacts occurred at sites geographically peripheral to where the Shang would rise in power (the modern city of Anyang in Henan Province), they represent colorful aspects of the East Asian heartland's past. On the other hand, even the Shang bronze decor from Anyang seems somewhat alien from the texts, especially the later texts, and thus remains only suggestive of larger conceptual frameworks.

A number of graphs represent the human and human body in ancient texts (see chart 1 for reference). One graph seems to depict a side view of a person bent over with arms outstretched, an image that can be read as a living "human" or "person" (*ren* 人) or as a group of


2 / Birth in Ancient China


people associated with a place or lineage.¹ The archaic graph for “person” is slightly different from the graph with the bend in the opposite direction, which is read as “dead person” or “corpse” (*shi* 尸). The next two graphs in the chart represent female and male ancestors. The former (*bi* 匕 for 妣) is an image of a “person” holding some sort of implement. The latter (且 for *zu* 祖) is a phallic image. Graphs related to “person” in the next two lines include “body” (*shen* 身) and “pregnancy” (*yun* 孕). The earliest recorded texts, on Shang oracle bones, talk about the body mostly in terms of supernaturally afflicted illness. Was it a curse from a particular ancestral spirit, such as Father Yi 乙 or Ancestress Ji 己? Should they present an exorcism sacrifice to Ancestor Ding? A graph depicting the body with a baby represented the verb and condition of “becoming or being pregnant.” An affair of great concern to the Shang king and his diviners was whether a particular wife would become pregnant and whether the pregnancy would successfully produce a male heir. Variations of the graphic representation of pregnancy include ones emphasizing the female aspect of the body with folded arms or a belly, standing or seated. These variations are seen as enhancements of the graphs for female and mother (see the next line in chart 1). “Mother” 母 was sometimes distinguished from “woman” 女 by marks indicating her breasts. Generally, the graph for “woman” (without the breast marks) was used in names or to mark the gender of a baby. The term “mother” as marked with the breasts was generally applied to recently deceased elite women, who as mothers of lineage heirs could receive sacrifice from their descendants.²


In later times, the graphs for body and pregnancy became somewhat confused. In the late Western Zhou period (late ninth through mid-eighth century BCE), for example, variants of the graph for “body” (*shen*) might include just a dot in the protruding belly (see the bronze inscription examples in chart 1). By this time, too, the graph represented the word for one’s “person” or “self,” and it becomes increasingly abstract over time.³ Interestingly, the ancient pronunciations of the words for pregnancy (*liŋ-s), body (*ŋiŋ), and human being (*niŋ) were quite close, suggesting perhaps that pregnancy was seen as a cognate extension of the embodiment of self.⁴


There were two ancient graphs that meant “to give birth” (see chart 2 on page 4). One used commonly in later times (*yu* 毓) was used rarely in Shang times in the direct sense of a female giving birth (top line in chart 2). But because of its relationship to ancestors’ names and genealogy, we discuss it first. The Shang word more often used for “to

Chart 1. Shang and later graphs for embodiment

Person (人 *niŋ) 

Corpse (尸 *ʃ[ə]j) 

Female ancestor (妣 *pij?) 

Male ancestor (祖 *[ts]ʰa?) 

Body, self (身 *ŋiŋ)



Bronze inscription versions



Pregnant, “to become pregnant” (孕 *liŋ-s)



Woman and mother (女 *nra?, 母 *mə? or mʰo?)



Child (子 *tsə?)

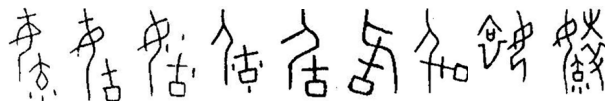


give birth,” which seemingly has no descendant graph, is directly related to our understanding of early birthing and will be discussed second (second line in chart 2). First, we will examine the connection between the graphs used in later times for birthing and how the Shang use of it as a reference to a recently deceased ancestral spirit may help explain the names of Chu progenitor deities.

The Shang graph of the word later used routinely for “to give birth” 毓 (*yu*, also written as 育 or 鬻 in the Warring States period) was a Shang term for recently deceased ancestors. It depicted a child emerging out of the woman’s body from a side view, sometimes with fluid. Although this word was commonly used in later times in the direct sense of “to give

Chart 2. Shang words related to birthing

To give birth, recently deceased ancestors (毓 *m-quk)



To give birth (no post-Shang versions, read as 冥 *m'ej, 媿 *mror?, or 宛 *ʔor?)



Source, spring (泉 *s-N-g'ar)



Specially raised sacrificial animal (牢 *r.ŋ'aw)



Graphs possibly depicting female and male genitals:

Abyss (淵 *ʔ]w'i[ʔ])



Graph 也 *lAjʔ for pouring vessel 匜 *laj or name 它 *l'aj



Birthing



Mystery word with blade and phallus



birth,” and by extension “to produce,” during the Shang period it was primarily reserved to refer to a hierarchy of male and female ancestors dating back several generations. The word could refer to one particular ancestor or to a group such as the Many Yu (*duo yu* 多毓) or the Five Yu (*wu yu* 五毓).⁵ A connection between this ancient usage and the later use of the complex graph 鬻 (also meaning “to nourish” and “grain soup”)

may help explain the use of this latter graph as one of the names for a Chu progenitor. Although there is no oracle bone version of this graph, a very close version with “wood” 木 instead of “grain” 米 in between the sides of a cooking vessel is seen at the top of chart 3 on page 6. This graph was also used as a name, but, because of the fragmented nature of the oracle bone record, we know nothing about it. There are no other examples of similar names until the Warring States period (475–221 BCE). In the Chu bamboo divination texts from Baoshan 包山 (located in modern Hubei), this ancestor’s name is written as “birth” (yu 毓, although with a “female” 女 element rather than a 每; the 兪 element was misunderstood and written as a double 虫 element). In the Xin Cai 新蔡 texts (found in modern Henan), the same name is written slightly differently: the “female” element is replaced with a “divinity” element 示. The Chu materials from these sites are the only evidence preserved of the possible survival of the layered Shang readings of “birth” and “ancestor” during that later period. We now examine the names of the Three Chu Progenitors (*san Chu xian* 三楚先) listed on the Baoshan and Xin Cai bamboo records and examine their relationship to birthing.⁶

Chu Ancestral Names and the Word for Birth

A quick look at a title or sobriquet commonly applied to Chu royal lineage leaders reveals a possible ancient relationship between genealogy and myth. The title applied to Chu leaders in excavated Warring States Chu materials is written as “Drinker” (飲, a version of *yin* 飲 *qəm?). A look at the series of *yin* graphs in chart 3 shows that a human, probably female, element in the more ancient forms of the graph was over the years misunderstood as the element 欠. In transmitted texts, the Chu sobriquet is not Yin but Xiong “Bear” (熊 *C.gwəm, or perhaps a rare word for a sea creature 能 *n’a).⁷ Only in the Xin Cai divination texts does the sobriquet Xiong occur.⁸ The Three Chu Progenitors in all Baoshan and some Xin Cai examples are: Lao Tong 老童 “Old Boy,” Zhu Rong 祝融 “Invoker Melder,” and Yu Yin 毓飲 “Birth Drinker.” In a couple of cases in the Xin Cai list of the three, “Birth Drinker” is replaced with Xue Xiong 穴熊 “Cave Bear.” See chart 3 for how they are written in the Baoshan and Xin Cai materials.

In the *Chu ju*, the father of the baby born with the identifier of Thorn (Chu) was “Xue Yin,” a combination of Xue Xiong and Yu Yin, confirming that the two names for some people actually represented one

Chart 3. Chu progenitor names and related graphs

Shang word similar to 鬻 (*m-quk) but with 木 instead of 米:



Shuowen

Chu ju word for auspicious birth 毓 (*m-quk):

Baoshan and Xin Cai terms for the Three Chu Progenitors 三楚先:

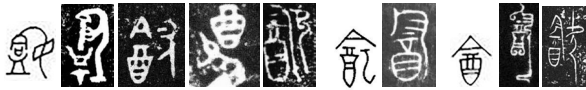
Lao Tong 老童 (*C.r'uʔ-[d]ʰoŋ) Xin Cai

Zhu Rong 祝融 (*[t]uk-luŋ) Xin Cai (alternative for Rong*lum)

Yu Yin 媮(鬻)龕(熊) (*m-quk-q(r)[ə]mʔ) Xin Cai

(Xin Cai) Xue Xiong (*[g]ʷi[t]-C.ɕwəm)

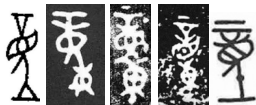
Versions of yin (Shang through Warring States periods):



Shang version of the element 欠:

A version of rong from the Late Western Zhou Chu Gongni bell:

Versions of tong from Shang through Warring States periods:



Shang and Xin Cai versions of xiong:

Qin word with “cave” and “toad”: Shang for “toad”:

Shang and Western Zhou versions of the 鬲 “vessel” element:

founder god. It seems odd that the scribes and diviners of the Chu religious tradition would not preserve a single name for a deity. If the alternative names were simply the result of phonetic loans, we might understand that the different graphs represented the reality of a variety of scribes attempting to draw upon different oral traditions, how we might imagine the tales of ancient founders were transmitted. However, if we look at the phonetically reconstructed pronunciations of the gods in chart 3, we see a much more complex situation. Each name consists of two syllables and with the exception of Xue, the first syllables all end with rounded vowels and velar finals (*-uʔ or -uk) and the second syllables all end with nasalized finals, mostly velars, two with rounded vowels and two with mid-central slightly rounded vowels (*-oŋ, -uŋ, -əŋ). If we were going to condense the three gods into a theoretical single, accounting for the dropping of some differences (dropping in some dialects is represented by the brackets) and collapse similarly pronounced phonetics, then we might end up with one or two deities named Ukeng, Dukong, Gukum (or some variant thereof).

The outlier is the name with the preface of Xue 穴 (“cave, hole”). It turns out that the graph *xue* appears in Shang and Western Zhou inscriptions only as a semantic element attached to other graphs, often but not always as a name.⁹ To explore the idea that Xue in the Chu names was originally just an attached semantic element to the Xiong, note that in the third and second to last two lines of chart 3 the Shang and Xin Cai versions of the graph for “Bear” are compared with an early Spring and Autumn Qin loan word for “early” (*zao* 早). The Qin word, most likely a loan from the graph “stove” (*zao* 竈), consisted of a “cave” semantic over the “toad” phonetic.¹⁰ Although it is unlikely that the graphs for “toad” and “bear” were in fact confused for each other in antiquity (although there are very few existing examples of either), we use the Qin graph to suggest that Xue was possibly simply part of an older graph for the Chu sobriquet and became detached during the creation of a written tradition by Chu scribes, perhaps even ones unfamiliar with the ancient names or the actual deities. It is unfortunate that there are no Chu religious texts earlier than the fourth century BCE that mention these deities’ names.

It is possible that the creation of the names for Lao Tong and Zhu Rong underwent a similar metamorphosis. Very little is known about these deities. Only in one place in the *Shanhaijing* 山海經 are they listed together, and elsewhere they are given a variety of identities and

8 / Birth in Ancient China

names (see discussion on p. 79).¹¹ It seems then that the transcription of the names of Chu progenitor deities varied according to the different scribes and traditions. If we examine the graphs that make up the names and look at the evolution of these graphs from the Shang through the Warring States periods (see the central section of chart 3), we can see where confusion might be possible, particularly with regard to the “vessel” elements, which seem to vacillate between variations of 鬲 and 酉 types, some with the phonetics 今 (*[k]r[ə]m) (for *yin*, an element also possibly confused with *xue*) and some with a double “insect” 虫 phonetic (*C.lruŋ) (for Baoshan and Xin Cai versions of Rong and Yu). Scholar Li Jiahao 李家浩 has shown that the double “insect” element was really a misunderstanding of the simplified graph for *yu* “birth,” which was originally depicted with an upside-down infant with fluid underneath (荒 *ru) (see the second line in chart 3 for the *Chu ju* version of “to give birth”).¹² The graph for Rong in Zhu Rong presumably had a double “vessel” element as well (something that could possibly have been confused with versions of Tong in the name Lao Tong). Other elements—such as the “female” 女, “divinity” 示, “releasing one’s breath” 欠, and “insect”—also seem to get confused. Although it is hard to imagine that Chu ritual officers would rely only on a written tradition for tales of their gods, I suspect that the names of old gods (or of a single god) were adapted to new purposes. For example, we see Zhu Rong defined by Han times as a god associated with the management of the cosmic process of Fire (with links to the supernatural influences of Mars and the South). Yu Xiong, on the other hand, was provided a distinguished lineage beginning with his work for the Zhou founder King Wen 文王. There are no pre-Han texts with these associations.

The complex form of the graph used for the deity’s name Yu 鬻 in transmitted genealogies for the Chu clearly also still carried the meaning of “birth” in the Warring States time. We see it used in the third-century BCE Fangmatan 放馬灘 *Day Book*, discovered in Gansu Province, to refer to healthy deliveries by animals and birds when they listened to the right music:¹³

毛者孕鬻，胎生者不殯，而卵生者不殯，則樂之道歸焉耳。

The mammals get pregnant and give birth (*yu*), the fetuses will not be stillborn (or miscarried) and, as for those who give birth with eggs, they will not be infertile (or broken), due to (maintaining the proper) Way of Music.

The Han-period *Shuowen* 說文 dictionary (*Explicated Patterns*, by Xu Shen 許慎, 58–147 CE) preserves an old version of the graph (see chart 3, top line) that included the graph for “to give birth” 毓 in place of the common Han use of the “grain” 米 element (clearly a simplification or complete misreading of the old graph). The tall sides of the “vessel” (evident in a Shang version) are preserved in archaic variants 鬻 and 鬻. It is possible that aspects of an ancient version of a word for birth with an outer enclosure (see chart 2, second series) were misread over time as a “cave” element.

The association of the Chu ur-god (or gods) with birth may be simply a matter of phonetic loan and not, as suggested earlier, the perpetuation of an old Shang term for the hierarchy of recently deceased ancestors. The names of elite Chu males associated with the ruling family included the sobriquet “Drinker” or “Bear” (obvious phonetic loans). We do not know if they received these titles at birth; if they had to earn them; or if, perhaps like the Shang use of the posthumous title “god” (*di* 帝), they were added only after death.

A Lost Word for Birth

The Shang commonly used a graphic and intimate image to represent the verb “to give birth” especially as applied to elite females (see chart 2, second line). The Shang graph shows what might be an enclosure or perhaps even a symbolic womb. Inside the enclosure was a small square depicting perhaps the crowning baby head and two hands reaching to hold on to it. Support for this idea is found in the graph for “child,” marking the head with the same type of square form. The ancient graph for “to give birth” does not emphasize the whole female body or the amniotic fluids coming out of it (as in *yu*, chart 2, first line, discussed on p. 3). Instead we see two hands reaching into the enclosure that suggest technical intervention. Most births recorded were royal family events and most likely involved birthing professionals, such as midwives, who in the earliest transmitted records also acted as shamans (*wu* 巫). The outer form, whether also indicating a special enclosure or even the womb, is found in a few other ancient graphs and may have been associated with earthly fluids and the provision of sacred animals for ancestral sacrifices.¹⁴

Similar Shang oracle bone graphs suggest cognate concepts with the ideas of enclosures that produce things, such as water or animals

raised especially for sacrifice. We see that the Shang graph for “source, spring” (*quan* 泉) with water and a “divinity” 示 semantic inside the same graphic element was associated with a womb above (see chart 2, third line). The idea of an enclosure is repeated in the word for a specially raised sacrificial animal (*lao* 牢) (chart 2, fourth line). Inside the enclosure, we see a graph representing a bovid or buffalo (*niu* 牛). Variant versions included different animals such as goats or pigs.¹⁵ The ancient words for “source, spring, and sacrificial animal” were close in pronunciation and may have been related words. The only other Shang graphic form that was graphically close was possibly ancestral to that for “cave” (*xue* 穴), but there barely exists any record of its use other than as an added semantic element to names. Also, as we noted previously, *xue* was not close in its archaic pronunciation.

The descendant graph and the underlying word for the Shang verb “to give birth” remain a mystery.¹⁶ Scholars have suggested that the image of the graph for “to give birth” was somewhat like Warring States–period versions of a word for “darkness” *ming* 冥 (*m^hɛŋ), but it must be read as “to give birth,” *mian* 媧 (*mror? or mran?).¹⁷ The choice of *ming* was influenced by the shape of the graph and by the Han use of “obscure darkness” (*mingming*) to describe the place where humans were conceived and out of which they emerged in birth, an image that was used in early Daoist texts.¹⁸ Unfortunately, a clear phonetic lineage from the Shang cluster of related graphs (*ŋ^war, s-N-G^war, r.ŋ^saw) cannot be easily connected to the later word “to give birth” *yu* 毓 (*m^h-quk) or to any of the Chu progenitors’ names. However, Yu Xiong is linked in myth in the late Warring States period with the creator couple Fuxi 伏羲 and Nüwa 女媧—discussed later—and the pronunciation of their names was closer to the Shang cluster (see chart 6). Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that the pronunciation of words and their usage inevitably changed dramatically over the millennium of time that passed between the Shang and the Warring States periods (for which the phonetic reconstruction system we are using can be considered most valid). And, indeed, new vocabulary replaced old.

In the Warring States period, such as in the case of our Chu text, the *Chu ju*, the word for birth (*yu* 毓) was used as the progenitor’s name in the Baoshan text and for the verb for the (auspicious) birth of the first set of twins born to the descended god-king Ji Lian 季連. Another word used for birthing in the text was the more common and generic term *sheng* 生, which was originally associated with spring growth in the natural (versus the human) sphere. First, referring to the natural generation of vegetative or astral forms, in Warring States philosophical discourse,

it was applied abstractly to when one phenomenon could “give rise to” (*sheng*) another phenomenon and, in genealogical narratives, when one male ancestor could “generate” (*sheng*) male descendants.¹⁹ This allowed genealogical narratives to suppress historical acknowledgment of the female role in social reproduction, which was represented by the word *yu*. We will discuss the genealogical narratives in chapter 5.

Suggestive Images

Since textual records were dominated by the need for social reproduction of the patriarchy and male scribes, it is difficult to recover a sense of women’s experience with childbirth from texts. Images from Neolithic through Han material culture can be suggestive. In the Neolithic, we have symbolic images on pottery, sculptures of pregnant women, and a phallus made of clay—all hinting at a concern with fertility.



Figure 1. Hongshan sculpture of a pregnant body, excavated in 1982 from Dongshanzui, Kazuo, Chaoyang City, Liaoning Province 遼寧省朝陽市喀左東山嘴. National Museum of China. Photo by Tian Shuai.

The Hongshan culture, of the fifth through third millennia BCE, located far to the northeast of what would be the Chinese heartland area, clearly worshipped the pregnant female body. There, archaeologists discovered a round shrine filled with statues of naked pregnant women, with obvious breasts and protruding bellies. As we saw from the analysis of the words for birth earlier, the protruding belly, symbol of the enclosure within which the fetus generates, represented “self” and the full human body. The reproductive capability of women ensured a key role in ancient society, one that would cause anxiety once patriarchal hierarchies and lineage politics began to form during the late Neolithic period. The sculptures in the shrine dedicated to the female body were likely used for fertility worship. Also from this culture came many bracelet-like jades of encircled dragon figures. Many of these found their way into the heartland Neolithic cultures, but no other versions of the shrine have been found.²⁰ Nor seemingly did the custom for the voluptuous depiction of sculpted naked female bodies spread.

In a roughly contemporary culture called Banpo 半坡, farther south in modern Shaanxi, and closer to the heartland where politicized hierarchies first became evident, we find abstract images that may be symbolic vulvas giving birth. Painted on the sides of ceramic bowls, vulva-like triangles sometimes also depicted a baby’s face emerging from

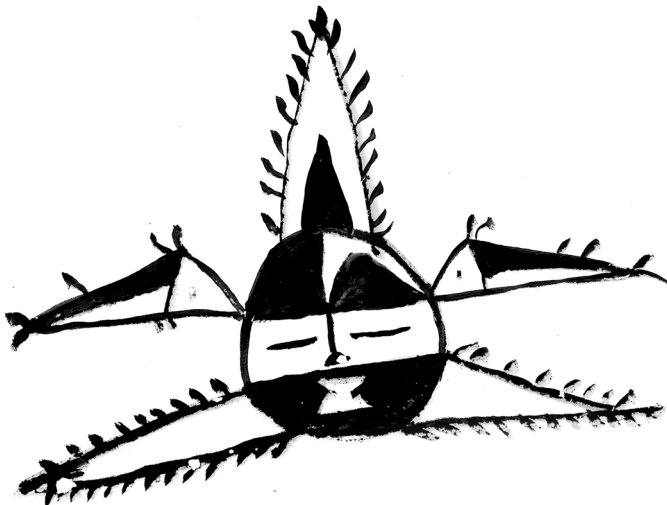


Figure 2. Banpo pottery bowl paintings with baby faces. Drawing by C. A. Cook (adapted from photographs by Cook taken at the Banpo Museum, Shaanxi Province, and by Tian Shuai at the National Museum of China).

the middle triangle shape. Sometimes fish were drawn as well. Fish in much later times were associated with fertility, and in other ancient cultures they were considered phallic. Not all scholars agree that such paintings represented birth images or that the bowl was used in fertility rituals. Some scholars suggest that the face was not that of a baby but instead a representation of a mask worn by a shaman. Of course, without written records from the Neolithic, we cannot be sure. Ceramic phalluses have been found at Neolithic sites in northern China suggesting early fertility rituals.²¹ Ceramic vessels with male-female body images have also been discovered (see figure 3), suggesting a particular power linked to hermaphroditic imagery.

The fertility of Fu Hao 婦好, a wife of Shang king Wu Ding 武丁 (ca. 1250–1192 BCE), was obviously important as many oracle bone birthing records concern her. Objects found in her tomb may also be



Figure 3. Possible fertility symbolism on a Neolithic pot excavated in 1974 from a Liuwán, Leduxian, Qinghai Province 青海省樂都縣柳灣 site. National Museum of China. Photo by Tian Shuai.

related to her reproductive role. Hand-sized jade amulets depicted male and female symbolism on reverse sides and may have been carried or used in prayer. One is bird-shaped with a phallus engraved on its chest on one side and a “cowry shell”—possibly symbolic of a vulva—form on the other. The other jade amulet was more overt; it depicted a naked girl on one side with a naked boy on the other. They are both wearing antlers, which according to scholars was a likely fertility symbol.²²

A square caldron (*dǐng*) placed in Fu Hao’s tomb was also cast with antler symbolism inside and out. Antlers were regular features in the Shang period, and later iconography and may have signified multiple meanings associated with death and rebirth, much in the way that snakes, cicadas, and other figures from the animal world do that shed skins, regrow appendages, or undergo metamorphosis.

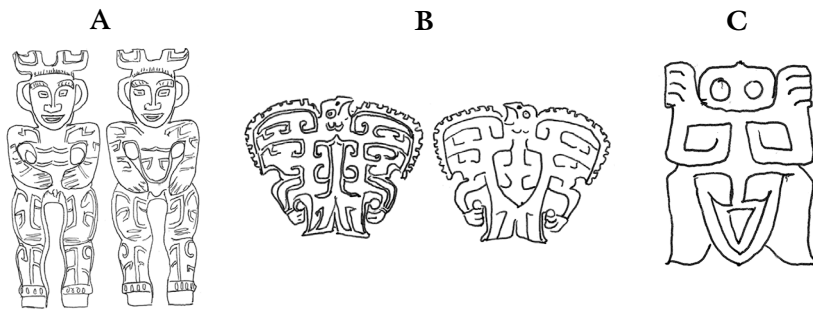


Figure 4. Fu Hao jade amulets with possible fertility symbolism (A, B, and C). Drawings by C. A. Cook (adapted from *Zhongguo sheke xueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo* 1994, figs. 202.3, 204.5, 205.3). A and B show both sides of the amulets.



Figure 5. Jade figurine of a woman in a birthing position from Fu Hao’s tomb. Drawing by C. A. Cook (adapted from *Zhongguo sheke xueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo* 1994, fig. 201.1).

We see too some evidence of the “sacred display” of female genitalia—an expression of female power over fertility (documented by Miriam Dexter and Victor Mair for Eurasia) in a small stone figurine leaning backward as well as in other figures.²³ Although we can only speculate on the function of the many figurines, both animal and human, in Fu Hao’s tomb, the concern over her fertility expressed in the oracle bones provides a suggestive context. The fact that these items were placed in her tomb suggests an ongoing concern with her role as an ancestor in social reproduction after death.

The tiny jade figurines in her tomb include images of women carved out of jade or stone with highly decorated bodies, often in kneeling positions, perhaps representing subservience or respect. Besides the engravings on their bodies that marked clothing lines and tattoos, they sported headgear and sashes that flew out backward like wing feathers or tail fins, suggesting a magical function. The tomb also contained a giant bronze tripod dedicated to an ancestress “mother.”²⁴ On the handle, the mouths of two tigers (or one “split” tiger) form what could be a symbolic birth opening, out of which a small head appears. Late Shang-period bronze sacrificial vessels in the shape of tigers (with their bodies covered with tattoos of snakes and birds) appear with baby-like humans standing in the tigers’ arms and with the human heads in the tigers’ mouths. Does this represent sacrifice, birth, death, or all the aforementioned? We can only speculate.



Figure 6. Jade figurine of a woman with tattoos and a bird tail from Fu Hao’s tomb. Drawing by C. A. Cook (adapted from *Zhongguo sheke xueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo* 1994, fig. 200.1).

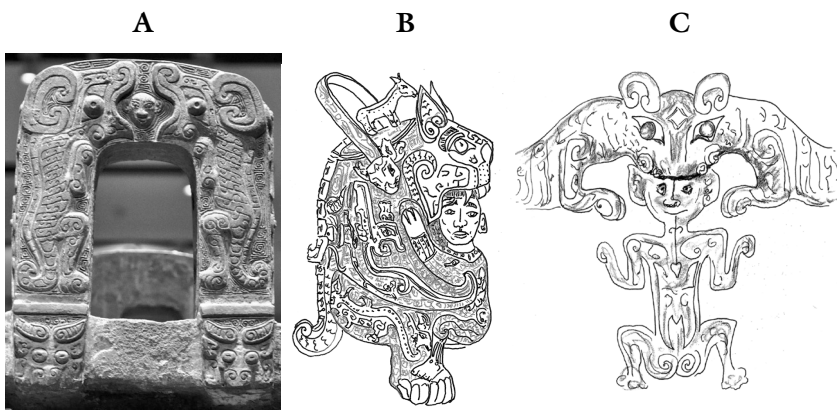


Figure 7. Humans in the mouths of tigers, images from bronzes (A, B, and C). A. handle decor on a large caldron vessel dedicated to the cult of Royal Mother Wu 后母戊 excavated from Anyang in the 1930s, presently in the National Museum of China. Photo by Tian Shuai.

B. Drawing of Shang *you* vessels found in the Sumitomo Collection in Sen-oku Museum (Kyoto) and in Cernuschi Museum (Paris). Drawing by C. A. Cook (adapted from the Shandong Museum website version of an image from the Shaanxi sheng wenwuju Han Tang wang).

C. Decor from a Shang *zun* vessel in Anhui Museum. Drawing by C. A. Cook (adapted from a photograph on http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_6987f00c0102wdrc.html).

Of interest to our reading of the “split” bodies of mothers from the Chu text is the fact that to show both sides of the tiger mother of the infant, the image was created in split-body form, suggesting an ancient conception of splitting and the birth of an heir. An axe-head dedicated to Fu Hao repeats the motif of the head emerging out of the split tiger mouth. Axes were typically used for cutting off the heads of sacrificial victims, suggesting again a possible connection between the portals of life and death. This shape, besides reminding us of the Shang word for female birthing, is also somewhat like that of the sacred 亞 shape, which Sarah Allan has identified with the shape of the Shang royal tomb, the shape of the tortoise plastron used in divination, and the image of the cosmic diagram of the Four Regions or directions (*sifang* 四方).²⁵

Since late Shang bronze inscriptions clearly specify that the vessels were used in the worship of human spirits (fathers, mothers, ancestors), imagery of faces on the sides of vessels, on the vessel handles, or on axe heads (some shown emerging out of enclosures) may be associated

with fertility and lineage reproduction. Many of the faces are mask-like with attendant animal pieces as part of their composition, suggesting the performance of shamanistic rituals involving symbolic transformation and communion with the spirit world.²⁶ In fact such imagery could be multivalent, with the baby or person representing the shaman in transition between the worlds of life and death. The fetal nature of this form, with bent limbs and curling fingers and toes, is particularly obvious in examples where the form emerges either head or feet first out of the mouths of tigers. Their half-animal forms suggest transition between animal and human, a physical metamorphosis suggestive of the times just before birth and after death, or even of a child versus an adult in the later Confucian ideology that a human must be educated to distinguish him- or herself from the more primitive animal state. During the late Shang and into the subsequent Zhou periods, fetal forms were joined with bird instead of tiger imagery and carved into hand-sized amulets of jade that could be worn.



Figure 8. Jade amulet with a fetal-like birdman from the Fu Hao tomb site. National Museum of China. Photo by Tian Shuai.

In much later times, there seems to have been a symbolic connection between the pollution of birth and the pollution of death and the purification and mortuary rituals used to mitigate the negative effects of the contamination.²⁷ Birth seems to have symbolized the emergence from a state that was equivalent to death. The connections between death, birth, and communication with the spirit world suggest the beginnings of the later Daoist idea of the “mother” as a portal between the states of life and death (an image explored in chapter 3). Shang-period images of fetal-like forms emerging from/going into tiger mouths on bronze vessels suggest a connection between sacrifices to ancestors and fertility prayers. This is particularly true for the variations of this form in which the front of the body is marked by a symbolic cicada body, representing perhaps a vulva-like form and eternal life.²⁸

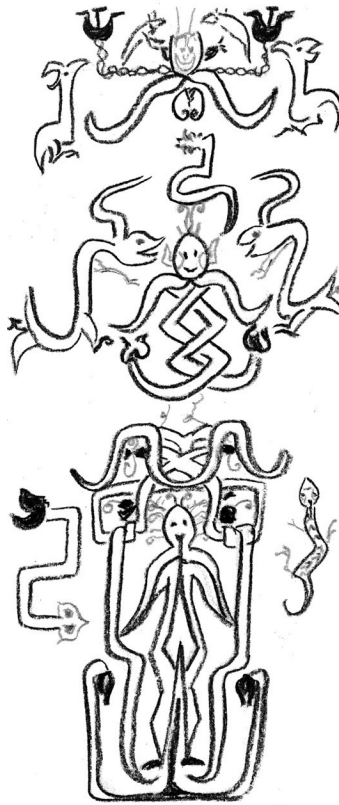


Figure 9. Figures with split bodies found on the inner coffin of Zeng Hou Yi (d. 443 BCE). Drawing by C. A. Cook (adapted from *Hubei sheng bowuguan* 1989, vol. 2, fig. 11.4, and *Hubei sheng bowuguan* 1991, figs. 281, 282, 284).

We find a curious extension of this type of form in the supernatural forms drawn outside the coffin of a Lord Yi of Zeng (who died in 443 BCE), an ally of the Chu royal family. The application of fertility symbols to mortuary architecture continues into the Han period, where we find tomb gateways marked with engravings of the intertwined snake-like dragon bodies of the creator god and goddess Fuxi 伏羲 and Nüwa 女媧. These figures (also found as coffin decor and on jades) symbolize the primal couple and are first mentioned in the Chu Silk Manuscript, dating to around the same time as the *Chu ju*. The fact that they would appear on tomb doors confirms their symbolic role as controlling the portal between life and death.

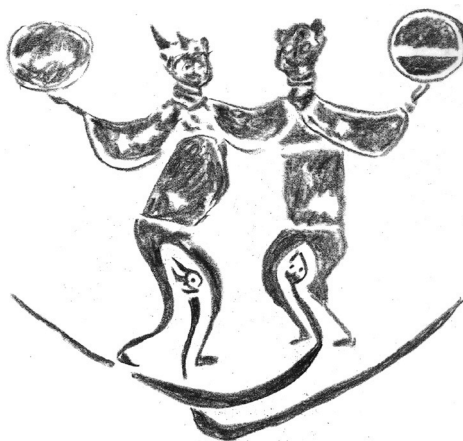


Figure 10. Fuxi and Nüwa with snake tails and holding the sun and moon, from a Han stone sarcophagus, excavated in Chongqing, Sichuan, in 1980. Presently in the Chongqing National Sanxia Museum. Drawing by C. A. Cook (adapted from Luo Erhu 2002, 136).