



Immortality

In early Chinese mythology the dividing line between immortality and mortality is often blurred, and there are degrees of both states. The great primeval gods are presumed to be immortal. Yet the Flame Emperor, brother of the Yellow Emperor, besides Ch'ih Yu and K'ua-fu, are all killed and die a death, though parts of them live on in a metamorphosed state. Metamorphosis is also the final destiny of other mythical figures who have died by execution or drowning, such as Kun, who becomes a bear (variants: turtle, dragon), Kang-hsiang, who becomes a river god, and Ching Wei, who turns into a bird. In the myth of the cosmological human body, P'an Ku is transformed into the universe at the moment of death. Some mythical figures exist on the border between life and death, such as Woman Ch'ou, who was born a corpse, and the hero Hsing T'ien, who continues to fight after his head has been lopped off. Clearly, the terms *mortality* and *immortality* are inappropriate for the nebulous existence and transformational powers of the gods known as Ti, Huang, Shen, Ling, Kuei, and Po, terms for divine beings, besides variously named elves, goblins, and monsters.

The more usual meaning of the word *immortality* in mythology has to do with attaining the divine state of a god by shuffling off mortal coils. The earliest reference to immortality occurs in *Chuang Tzu*, with

a description of a holy human, *shen jen*; or perfect man, *chih jen*; or sage, *sheng jen*. *Chuang Tzu's* description goes as follows:

He said there is a Holy Man living on faraway Ku-she Mountain, with skin like ice or snow, and gentle and shy like a young girl. He doesn't eat the five grains, but sucks the wind, drinks the dew, climbs up on the clouds and mist, rides a flying dragon, and wanders beyond the four seas. By concentrating his spirit, he can protect creatures from sickness and plague and make the harvest plentiful. (Watson 1968, 33)

Several themes emerge here: a hermit existence on a mountain, which denotes proximity to Heaven; dietary abstention; transformed gender behavior; pure elements as food; the technique of riding the dragon; ability to travel at will; transcendental meditation; ability to perform miracles (basically to do with sickness and food); and bringing benefits to humankind. Although this account belongs to the realm of philosophy, it has obvious overtones of myth and local cult religion.

The passionate pursuit of the idea of physical immortality in humans is discernible in the late Chou and Ch'in dynasties, and is epitomized by the fascination with elixirs and paradisiacal worlds which characterized the short reign of the First Emperor of the Ch'in Dynasty, Ch'in Shih Huang Ti (221-210 B.C.). He was the first ruler to appropriate for himself the sacred titles of Huang and Ti, which previously had been applied only to gods. He sent adepts and magicians in search of the isles of the immortals, Fang Wu, Ying-chou, and P'eng-lai (Graham 1981, 176-77). In the Han era the cult of immortality, or deathlessness, became particularly identified with the philosophical school of Taoism, which by the early Han period had incorporated from the philosopher Yang Chu (ca. 350 B.C.) concepts of nurturing life, longevity, and self-preservation. Thus two strands of thought emerge in the Han era: the pursuit of deathlessness and the art of longevity. The first could be acquired through a gift from a god, such as the Queen Mother of the West, or through self-cultivation leading to sainthood, or through alchemical potions and pills. Longevity could be sought through diet, drugs, meditation, breathing exercises, and sexual rites. But in the Han period a shift in belief is noticeable: less emphasis was placed on the pursuit of immortality, and more interest was paid to the idea of longevity, living one's life span to the full. This conceptual shift indicates that belief in the primeval and ancient deities was diminishing and that the values of primitive mythology were being eroded.

The Mountain Paradise of K'un-lun

The first reading that follows is from *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, a chapter dating from the first century B.C. It presents one of the earliest and most elaborate descriptions of the earthly paradise of K'un-lun, and as such it constitutes a valuable mythological text. The passage is full of mythic themes and motifs to do with immortality. The highest mountains of K'un-lun in the west were believed to form an epicenter of the universe, an *axis mundi*, where Heaven and earth meet in a perfect equipoise. Like Mount Olympus, it is the place where the gods descend from the sky to that part of the human world which most nearly replicates the paradisiacal state of Heaven. The *Classic* contains numerous other references to earthly places favored by the gods, such as God's City, God's Resting Place, God's Bedroom, and so forth. The K'un-lun earthly paradise has a sky-ladder in the form of a giant tree, the Tree Grain, so that earthly beings who have achieved a near perfect state and the heavenly gods may commune. Idealized concepts of size, space, and distance are conveyed through mystic numbers, especially the cosmic number nine representing the heavens and the number eight representing the mythic ideal of harmony, and also through detailed measurements of the gigantic and the profound. The color motif of scarlet predominates in the descriptive passage, emblematic of immortality. The pure substance of jade is associated with the divine, being the finest stone known to humans.

This earthly paradise is guarded from intrusion by a fierce array of mythical beasts, such as the K'ai-ming, which, with its nine heads and feline body, recalls the fabled nine-tailed fox, and the nine-headed Hsiang Liu monster slaughtered by Yü. Other guardian beasts are serpents, the dragon, felines, and birds of prey. Polycephality is repeated in the three-headed man guarding a tree of life, and the six-headed hawk. The Shih-jou is a mythical beast symbolizing renewal of life; elsewhere in the *Classic* it is described as a creature that looks like a lump of liver and that eats itself but then grows again. Besides the mythical birds and beasts, there are twelve fabled trees, including the Never Die tree, trees of precious jewels, and unknown trees with fabulous names.

The text moves from a general description of this earthly paradise to a detailed account of a rite enacted by six shamans (*wu*). They are guarding the corpse of the mythical figure Cha Yü, who was murdered by two lesser gods, and are keeping it from corruption. (The myth of Cha Yü appears in chap. 4.) In his study of the shaman tradition in

ancient China, Chow Tse-tsung lists three sets of shamans' names, including the set in this reading, and these three sets overlap. They number twenty-two individual shamans. Basing his research on ancient dictionaries, inscriptions, and textual sources, Chow interprets the names of the six shamans in the reading as follows: P'eng denotes a "drum sound"; Ti means "needling with a stone" or a "thorn," "pierce," or "a straight root," or "slander," hence "to invoke curses"; Yang "refers to the sun," but can also mean the "moon," or a "lunar eclipse"; Li means "treading on" or "stepping on"; Fan "may have symbolized the square object used in such a [shamanistic] dance"; and Hsiang denotes "a drum and drumstick" (Chow Tse-tsung 1978, 72-83). Schafer noted that the name Fan, identified as a female shaman, is engraved on Shang oracle bones in connection with a rain ceremony or with ritual exposure (1951, 132, 184). The six shamans in the reading are custodians of the secret of preserving life. They are probably thought of as being immortal themselves, but this is not overtly stated. Although the word *wu* usually applies to female shamans, the gender of the six shamans in this reading is not given or implied. A curious omission from this text is the Queen Mother of the West, who elsewhere in the *Classic* is said to be the presiding deity of Jade Mountain in the K'un-lun void.

This narrative of the mountain paradise in the west is a valuable document for mythology because of all these themes and motifs. It is also important for its account of the shamanistic rite of preserving a corpse, the body of the god Cha Yü. The narrative may represent the vestige of an archaic rite of inducing deathlessness which was enacted in the age of belief in immortality.

Within the seas the K'un-lun wastes are in the northwest, and this is God's capital city on earth below. The K'un-lun wastes are eight hundred leagues square and eighty thousand feet high. On top there is the Tree Grain; it is forty feet tall and five spans wide. On all sides there are nine wells with well-sills made of jade. On all sides there are nine gates, and at the gates there is the K'ai-ming beast on guard. The dwelling place of the gods is on a cliff with eight nooks. The boundary of the Scarlet River has a cliff on the ridge which no one could ascend unless he were the Good Archer. . . . The gulf south of K'un-lun is two thousand, four hundred feet deep. The body of the K'ai-ming beast is mostly that of a tiger, and it has nine heads, all of which have human faces that look eastward. It stands on top of K'un-lun. To the west of the K'ai-ming are the male and female phoenix

and the *luan*-bird. They all carry a serpent on their head and tread a serpent underfoot, and there is a scarlet snake on their breast. North of the K'ai-ming there is the Shih-jou creature, the pearl tree, the patterned-jade tree, the *yü-ch'i* tree, and the Never Die tree. The male and female phoenix and *luan*-bird all wear armor plate on their heads. And there are the Li-chu bird, the giant Grain Tree, the cypress, the Sweet Water, and the Wise Man tree, the Man-tui, also called the T'ing-tree-cross-fanged. To the east of the K'ai-ming there are Shaman P'eng, Shaman Ti, Shaman Yang, Shaman Li, Shaman Fan, and Shaman Hsiang, who bear the corpse of Cha Yü, each holding the drug of immortality to protect him. Cha Yü has a serpent's body and a human head. He was killed by Double Load and his officer. There is also the Fu-ch'ang tree. On its crown there is a three-headed man who watches over the red *lang-gan* jade tree. To the south of the K'ai-ming beast there is the Tree Bird with its six heads, and the scaly dragon, the cobra, the serpent, the long-tailed ape, the panther, the *niao-chih* tree, Splendid Pool tree, the hummingbird, the *shun*-hawk, and the Shih-jou creature. (*Shan hai ching*, *Hai nei hsi ching*, SPPY II.2b-5b)

The Island Paradises in the East

A different paradise from mountainous K'un-lun is described in the reading below, from the late text *Lieh Tzu*, circa fourth century A.D. Here the paradise is in the east and consists of islands inhabited by immortals known as *hsien* and *sheng*, or transcendent beings. These terms emerged in the post-Han era, and a considerable literature—part mythological, part legendary, part lore, and part fiction—grew up around the concept of the *hsien*-immortal. Examples among a proliferation of such books are *Biographies of Immortals* (*Lieh hsien chuan*) and *Biographies of Holy Immortals* (*Shen hsien chuan*), ascribed to Liu Hsiang (79–8 B.C.) but now thought to date from the fourth to the fifth century, and to Ko Hung (A.D. 254–334). *Lieh Tzu* belongs to this category of books. Purporting to be the work of Lieh Tzu, or Lieh Yü-k'ou, a mythical figure who features frequently in the fourth-century B.C. text *Chuang Tzu* as a sorcerer and a perfect man, the text of *Lieh Tzu* is now believed to be a forgery by the Chin dynasty author Chang Chan (fl. A.D. 370).

The long narrative from *Lieh Tzu* contains numerous themes: concepts of infinity and perfect equilibrium, epitomized by Kuei-hsu, a bottomless pool; isles of the immortals; fruit of the tree of immortality, or the Tree of Life; the crime of a titan and his punishment by God; and

an explanation for the size of titans and giants. The account is set *in illo tempore*, before the gods Fu hsi and the Farmer God. Despite the proliferation of mythological motifs, the narrative style betrays the late provenance of the text and its trend toward legend rather than primeval myth. The story has a sophisticated framework: it consists of a series of imaginary discussions between T'ang the Conqueror of the Shang/Yin, who poses several questions about the origins of things, and one Chi of the Hsia, who replies with lengthy explanations.

Emperor T'ang of the Yin dynasty asked another question: "In nature, what are the giant and minute things, the longest and the short, similar and different kinds?" Chi of the Hsia dynasty said: "To the east of Po Sea, countless thousands of millions of miles away, there is a vast pool, a truly bottomless valley. Its bottomless depth is called Kuei-hsu. All the waters of the Eight Sides and the Nine Wilds and the courses of Heavenly Han flow into it, yet it neither increases nor decreases. There are five mountains in it. One is Tai Yü. The second is Yuan Chiao. The third is Fang Hu. The fourth is Ying-chou. The fifth is P'eng-lai. These mountains are thirty thousand leagues high and around, and their flat crests are nine thousand leagues across. Each mountain is seventy thousand leagues apart, yet they are neighbors. The terraced viewpoints on them are all of gold and jade. The birds and beasts on them are all pure silky white. The pearly garnet trees all grow densely; their blossom and fruit are richly flavored. Whoever eats them will never grow old or die. The people living there are all immortals and sages. They are innumerable as they flit to and fro all day and all night. But the bases of the five mountains are not firmly secured, and they constantly ebb and flow with the waves of the tides, unable to pause even for a short while. The immortals and sages hated this and complained about it to God in Heaven. God feared they might drift into the West Pole and lose the dwellings of the host of immortals and sages. So he commanded Yü Ch'iang to use fifteen giant sea turtles to bear the mountains on their raised heads. By alternating three to a group they took turns every sixty thousand years. For the first time the five mountains stood still. But in the Dragon Earl's kingdom there was a giant who, by just lifting his feet a few steps, reached the place where the mountains stood. With each single throw of his line, he caught six of the giant sea turtles in succession. He bundled them onto his back and hurried back to his own country, where he burned their shells to tell his fortune.

As a result, the two mountains Tai Yü and Yuan Chiao drifted toward the North Pole and sank in the vast ocean. The immortals and sages who scattered in exile numbered in their millions. God in Heaven was very angry and he shrank the Dragon Earl's kingdom to narrow confines and shrank the Dragon Earl's people to a small size. Right up until the time of Fu Hsi and the Farmer God, the people of that kingdom were still only a hundred feet tall. (*Lieh Tzu, T'ang wen*, SPPY 5.3b-5b)

The Myth of P'eng-tsu's Longevity

The two readings below narrate the myth of P'eng-tsu, which combines both themes of immortality and longevity. The first is a brief passage from "Questions of Heaven," which states that P'eng K'eng "received the gift of eternal life" from God. It is intimated that this was a reward for P'eng K'eng's special sacrificial offering, but because the mythical context is not known and is not referred to in any other text, it remains obscure. The brief passage mentions both longevity and immortality, which are different concepts. A text also dating from the fourth century B.C., *Chuang Tzu*, refers to one P'eng-tsu, Ancestor P'eng, who was long-lived rather than immortal, living from the twenty-sixth to the seventh century B.C. (Watson 1968, 82 n. 12).

The ambiguous mythic narrative in "Questions of Heaven" is later reinterpreted to mean a myth of longevity, as in such texts as Ko Hung's *Biographies of Holy Immortals*, from which the second reading is taken. Ko Hung was an alchemist and philosopher of the Chin dynasty and was the author of *Master Embracing-Simplicity* (*Pao-p'u Tzu*), his sobriquet. This work is a quintessential expression of fourth-century A.D. belief in immortality, longevity, and supernatural beings. In it, Ko Hung explains the methods and techniques for acquiring immortality, with several recipes for drugs and potions. One of his recipes for making gold is: a pound each of red bole, saltpeter, mica, calcareous spar, and red hematite, plus half a pound of sulphur and a quarter-pound of malachite, all blended with vinegar, to produce a lining for the alchemical receptacle; then mix a pound of mercury, half a pound each of cinabar and amalgam (mainly lead); process, heat, and stir, and "it will immediately turn into gold" (Ware 1981, 274-75). Ko Hung assures his devotees that one pound of this gold will cure many illnesses and make the "Three Worms cry for mercy" in the body. Three pounds consumed will ensure longevity as long as nature itself. One pill placed in the

mouth of a corpse, plus some spit from the mouth of the living, will ensure that the body will return to life immediately (*ibid.*, 275-77).

The reading on the P'eng-tsu myth is a shortened version of the original, and it opens with the account of the long-lived *hsien*, or transcendental being. The graph for the name P'eng is the same as that of Shaman P'eng (Wu P'eng) in the first reading, on the K'un-lun paradise. It is ironic that P'eng-tsu's description of his state of longevity consists of the typical list of complaints of any very old person, except that in this case P'eng-tsu lived to be almost eight hundred years old and had suffered the loss of one hundred and five relatives, including parents, wives, and children. The parallel between P'eng-tsu and Methuselah is often drawn because of the similarity of their age. It is noteworthy that in recent times the myth of longevity has been immortalized by medical science, since the name the Methuselah gene has been given to a gene identified in some human beings as a longevity gene.

When P'eng K'eng poured out pheasant soup, how did God enjoy his sacrificial offering? He received the gift of eternal life, so how did he achieve such longevity? (*Ch'u Tz'u*, *T'ien wen*, SPTK 3.32b)

P'eng-tsu's surname was Chien. He was named K'eng at his death. He was the great-great-grandson of Chuan Hsu. At the end of the Yin [Shang] he was already 767 years old, but he never declined into old age. . . . Therefore the king ordered an imperial concubine to ride in a closed carriage and go to P'eng-tsu to question him about the Way. When she arrived, she bowed several times and asked about his methods for extending one's life span and about longevity. P'eng-tsu said: ". . . I had been orphaned while I was still in my mother's womb. Then I was born, and at three years of age I lost my mother. I suffered during the revolt of the T'ai Jung and was exiled in the western regions for over one hundred years. In addition, I was a widower at an early age. I buried forty-nine wives and lost fifty-four children. I have frequently experienced sorrow and tragedy. My good Humor in my guts has been broken, my cold flesh and my hot flesh are not glossy and smooth, and both the blood circulating through my body and my still blood have grown dry. I am afraid that I am not long for this world. My knowledge is shallow and inadequate. I am not able to put it into words for you. . . ." And then he was gone, and no one knows where he went. Over seventy years later I heard that someone had caught a glimpse of him out west in the kingdom of Flowing Sands. (*Shen hsien chuan*, HWTS 1.7b-11b)