UNSPOKEN WORLDS

Women's Religious Lives

Third Edition

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Harmonizing Family and Cosmos: Shamanic Women in Chinese Religions

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within a domestic system dominated by women. Among the elite, these may well have included her mother, her father's concubine or second wife, sisters of the same mother and father, half-sisters of the same father borne by a concubine or second wife, the wives and concubines of her father's brothers, their daughters, and her father's own mother and grandmother. Even in smaller families, a girl would have been taught precisely how to behave towards each member of the household, and these lessons would have been applied in parallel when she entered a new family as a young bride. Her domestic responsibilites ranged from weaving and sericulture, to management of family funds. She also participated in daily religious rites of the ancestral cult, as well as prayer to local deities at neighborhood temples and regular participation in community festivals.[1]

The idea that women belonged at home, and that their lives were bound by the intricate ecology of the "inner chambers," while men defined themselves primarily in interaction with other men who were not kin, became sharper over the course of Chinese history,[2] especially as governmental service and commercial trade expanded increasingly across country and provincial boundaries. The examination system, instituted in the first centuries of the Common Era, was national in scope, meaning that successful candidates travelled farther and farther from home at each level. Success in the exams ensured a career in public service, carried out in provinces some distance from one's own home in order to ensure national over local allegiance. Consequently, education provided not only "opportunity," but exposure to the world at large, and the writings of the scholar-official elite often took the form of travelogues, documenting local histories and customs far from home.

The outwardly oriented male sphere required education; life in the inner chambers did not. For women, education was a luxury and an indicator of family wealth, and although literati women are included among China's greatest poets,[3] their writings focussed characteristically upon home and family. The subject of most poetry by women is family ties: parents, husbands, and children.

However, despite the fact that Chinese culture and gender roles predisposed women to remain illiterate in the inner chambers, nevertheless, women *do* make literary and public appearances, as we shall see in the remainder of this chapter. They do so at the behest of the spirits, for spirits are more powerful than social conventions, and can overturn them in some circumstances.

SACRED WRITINGS OF INSPIRED WOMEN

For most women of the past in China the ability to write was so rare that it was considered miraculous. Look at the story of Seng-fa, a remarkable nun who died in 505 C.E. at the age of sixteen, as recorded in a Buddhist catalogue compiled by the monk Seng-yu only ten years later.[4] Seng-yu's catalogue, the first comprehensive list of Buddhist scriptures in Chinese, lists twenty-one works attributed to the young girl: composed between 499 and 505, when she was between the ages of nine and sixteen, they totalled twenty-eight fascicles. Seng-yu did not trust the girl's abilities, or find the texts credible, and so he listed them in his "Registry of Doubtful Scriptures." He explains:

> The titles listed above were produced by the young daughter . . . of Chiang Pi, a scholar of the Grand Academy of the late Ch'i Dynasty. At the time when she was still losing her baby teeth (accounts say she was 8 or 9 years old), there were occasions when she would close her eyes and sit in meditation, reciting these scriptures. It is said by some that she ascended to heaven to receive them; others claim that they were

given to her by spirits. Her speech was fluid and effortless, as if she had practiced ahead of time. She let others write down what she recited. And then she would suddenly stop. Ten days after the first of each lunar month, the same thing would happen again, just as before.

From this description, it would appear that Seng-fa could not write—she composed her scriptures literally by reciting them in trance. Seng-yu refers to the case of a Lady Ting in which inspired speech was set down on paper by the medium herself:

> Long ago, at the end of the Chien-an reign period of the Han Dynasty (196–220 C.E.), the wife of a man named Ting of Chi-yin [in modern Shantung Province] could suddenly, as if struck by a seizure, speak in a barbarian tongue, and would request paper and pen and compose texts in a foreign script.

Seng-yu comments in closing:

> Searching back into antiquity, there was never a time when such things did not exist. But the texts are unorthodox and were not translated by Buddhist masters. So I have assembled them together under the category of doubtful scriptures.

Later cataloguers also excluded Seng-fa's works from the canon, describing them as "false" or "suspect." They reiterated Seng-yu's phrase that Seng-fa "practiced ahead of time," and concluded that her acts "had nothing to do with spirits."[5] They argued that her receptivity to suggestion was attributable simply to "a weakness in the passions of women."[6]

Throughout Chinese history, this "weakness in the passions of women" has made women particularly receptive to the influence of gods and spirits, aiding them in the practice of divination both oral and written.[7] In contemporary Taiwan, girls between the ages of eight and fifteen are chosen by gods and spirits to compose scriptures for the Unity Sect (*I Kuan Tao*). They are called "savants"—*T'ien-ts'ai, Ti-ts'ai,* and *Jen-ts'ai* ("Heavenly," "Earthly," and "Mortal" savants)—and the composition of scripture by automatic writing is termed "wielding the phoenix." A sect history describes the procedure:

> When the offerings at the altar have been made, the three Savants take their places. The Heavenly Savant grasps a wooden brush; the Earthly Savant takes up paper and pen; and the Mortal Savant holds a rake. Each stands on one side of a tray of sand. . . . In silent worship, they request the Immortals and Buddhas to draw near. After a short time, in response to the will of Heaven, the spirits approach the altar, via the Mysterious Gate; they come to rest upon the person of the Heavenly Savant, and, moving the wooden brush with a flourish, they begin to write. Usually they begin with a poem of five- or seven-character lines, in anywhere from eight to sixteen verses. The brush itself announces the Buddha's name. . . and the assembly receives him by kneeling in worship and pronouncing ritual incantations, as a show of respect. During this reception, the spirit temporarily suspends moving the brush. Then, the audience rises and draws near, and the spirit resumes writing.
>
> In most cases, the text written by the spirit is in verse, of 5, 7, or 10 characters per line. A 7-character verse might read,
>
> The wind approaches the water's surface, awakening the potential for enlightenment.
> The moon approaches the mind of Heaven—the Way is here!
>
> First appear the four characters, "The wind approaches the water's surface." The Mortal Savant sees this, and immediately announces the phrase in a loud, clear voice, at the same time smoothing out the sand in the box with her rake. The Earthly Savant,

in the meantime, having seen the characters in the sand and having heard the words pronounced by the Mortal Savant, promptly records them in writing. Immediately the spirit writes the next three characters, "awakening the potential for enlightenment," and again the Mortal Savant makes the announcement and the Earthly Savant records the characters in writing. And in this way the writing continues. . . .

Once the text is complete, the spirit retreats from the Mysterious Gate and departs, and only then does the Heavenly Savant regain consciousness. While wielding the Phoenix, the Heavenly Savant feels nothing whatsoever. So, the poetic verse of the Flying Phoenix is written by the Immortals and Buddhas using the hand of the Savant; it can be said to be a spiritual composition. . . .

In most cases the teachings revealed by the spirits take up about one thousand characters, and can be completed in less than an hour. . . .

The teachings revealed by the spirits encompass all things. . . They move us deeply, and we can only sigh in admiration.[8]

The sectarian manual goes on to discuss the qualifications and character of the Heavenly Savant. She must be "pure in thought, supremely clean in character, without a hint of vice." Though she is taught the peculiar calligraphy of revelation, sectarians insist that she lacks the education required to compose the scriptures without divine assistance.

In the spirit-writing session that I observed, the god spoke through the Heavenly Savant with a message of reconciliation after a divisive local election. The congregants who benefited from this revelation were urged to begin a process of communal healing, and to lead by example: by practicing virtue and avoiding vice, working hard, and maintaining harmonious relationships within their families. Though the means of expression were extraordinary, the message from these shamanic girls was explicitly domestic and communal.

It is remarkable to see the similarities between the shamanic performances of Seng-fa in 499 and the spirit writing of girls the same age some 1500 years later! At the conclusion of the session, I was invited to the home of the "Heavenly Savant" by her father, who had assisted in the rite. The sixteen-year-old girl—I will call her Aiyun—appeared wan and dehydrated. The spirit-writing performance had lasted over two hours, and the close, sticky air of a summer afternoon in southern Taiwan had sapped her strength. During our interview, she sat quietly in the family's traditional "four-square" courtyard, sipping orangeade, and her father spoke for her.[9]

He recounted that Aiyun had begun her training as a "Mortal Savant" (of medium, reader, and recorder, the Mortal Savant is the reader) from the age of nine. This Savant is not in trance, though from my observation the interpretation of written characters inscribed in sand by the mediumistic Heavenly Savant is at least as mysterious as the possession itself. He insisted that she had had no education in Classical Chinese, and, even at sixteen, could not have learned in any conventional sense to write in the elegant style of the revealed texts.

"Why did you want to become a Savant?" I asked Aiyun.

The question may have been inappropriate. There was an awkward silence. "I didn't," she replied.

Her father explained. "She was very resistant from the beginning. She doesn't like it, and at first she didn't want to do it. This kind of thing is hard, and she is so tired that sometimes she can't get up for days. At school, some of the other girls keep their distance, and my daughter complains that she doesn't have friends. But the gods are powerful, and she can't resist them." Despite Aiyun's desire for an ordinary childhood, the pressure from the gods and the community of believers was too great.

After several years as an Earthly Savant, Aiyun experienced her first shamanic possession, and has served as the group's spirit-writing Heavenly Savant for the past two years. Soon, she will be replaced by one of the younger girls, as she is nearing the age when her powers will diminish.

I asked her father about the "grandmothers who speak to spirits"—older shamanesses who ply a nightly trade of shamanic intercession with ghosts and ancestors in village and neighborhood temples. Aiyun's father scoffed. "Oh, they really are low-class. They can't read and write at all, and they're just a mouthpiece for minor spirits, with all that gutteral groaning and spitting. Our Savants are courtly and refined, and they have to be pure." The Savants are obviously unmarried, and, I suspect, pre-adolescent, though I did not inquire directly.

SHAMANS AND THEIR CLIENTS

These women who write through the power of the spirits can be viewed in the larger context of shamanism—both male and female—in Chinese culture. The history of female shamanism is older still than Seng-fa, dating long before the Common Era. Shamanism in ancient China most commonly took the form of deities and spirits possessing receptive human beings. Female mediums were called *wu,* a word related to "dancing," and ancient poetry suggests that it was the beauty and grace of the shamaness's dance that made gods choose and possess her.[10] These spirit mediums were women who participated in various aspects of the religious life of the court: invoking the descent of the gods, praying and dancing for rain, and ceremonially sweeping away harmful forces.

With the establishment of Confucian values as the standard of orthodoxy by the Han Dynasty, the ecstatic shamanism of earlier times was actively discouraged—in fact, punishable by death. Shamanism blurs the boundaries that the Confucian tradition seeks to clarify. Confucius is recorded as saying, "Revere the ghosts and spirits, but maintain a proper distance." And, with the emerging consensus that women's religious lives should be limited to the home, the culture pushed charismatic women to the peripheries of society. This is still largely true today, as the "grandmothers who speak to spirits" operate from darkened temples in back alleys in the middle of the night, and young girls like Aiyun are seen—and see themselves—as peculiar and out of place.

Shamanesses link the living and the dead. The anthropologist Jack Potter describes "grandmothers who speak to spirits" in the New Territories of Hong Kong:

> They act as intermediaries between the villagers and the supernatural worlds of heaven and hell. . . . [The mediums] send their souls to the supernatural world, where they communicate with deceased members of village families. They also know how to recapture the souls of sick village children, and they can predict the future. They take care of the souls of girls who die before marriage, and protect the life and health of village children by serving as . . . fictive mothers.[11]

Potter writes that several of the women he interviewed became shamans after the deaths of their own children. The spirits of these children were among their helpers.

Unlike Aiyun, who serves a community of believers, Chinese shamanesses are typically consulted by families, reinforcing the cultural link between religious women and family life. In most instances, the mediums are consulted when families are faced with medical crises, and clients are presented with pharmaceutical prescriptions in addition to counseling. The shamanesses communicate directly with the dead, and are often possessed by the parents