THE IMAGE AND STATUS OF SHAMANS
IN ANCIENT CHINA*

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At the end of the Eastern Han, the famous literatus Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200), in his annotation of the line in the Zhouli 周禮 (Rites of Zhou), “Whoever serves the gods is in charge of the laws that control the three heavenly bodies, in order to determine where the gods dwell and to distinguish the appropriate sacrifices,” writes as follows:

The Guoyu 國語 (Discourses of the states) says: “Of old, the gods descended into those whose spirit was focused, who were at once poised and centered, who knew how to ascend and descend and make comparisons, whose saintliness shed its light abroad, whose vision illumined matters, and whose hearing penetrated them. Men of this kind were called xi 僧, women wu 巫. They knew how to manage the hierarchical order and placements of the gods and to make for them sacrificial vessels and seasonal vestments.” Such was the knowledge shamans (wu) and invocators (zhu 祝) had of the gods, and they were also at ease with the laws of heaven. That is why saintly kings worshiped them. But today’s shamans are thoroughly benighted: where is their luminous intelligence? What laws do they follow? Orthodox gods do not descend. Befuddled by illicit ghosts, they covet material goods and so cheat gods and men and cause this Way to be extinguished. How distressing!

In his commentary on the line in the Liji 禮記 (Book of rites), “For the surnamed families the king established seven cults, namely, the director of destiny 司命, the impluvium 中霤, the gate of the capital 國門, state roads 國行, the dead without posterity 泰厲, the door 戶 and the stove 竈… For the lowest-ranking aristocrats and commoners he created one sacrifice, either the door or the stove,” Zheng writes:

* Translated by John Lagerwey in consultation with Mu-chou Poo.
These are not the major gods to whom prayers and thanksgiving are made for important matters. They are minor gods who dwell among the people, in charge of watching for small faults and making reports on them. The *Treatise on music* says: “In the illumined world there are rites and music; in the dark world there are gods and ghosts.” Is this not what is meant by gods and ghosts? The director of destiny inspects the three forms of destiny; the impluvium is in charge of halls and living quarters; the gates oversee comings and goings; the roads take care of roads and traveling; the unfortunate dead handle executions and punishments; the stove sees to eating and drinking. The “Funeral rites of gentlemen” states: “In time of illness, prayers are made to the five gods.” The times for worshiping the director of destiny and the unfortunate dead are not stated.

Nowadays, in spring and autumn, some people worship the director of destiny and associate with them the gods of travel, hills, gates, and the stove. They should worship the director of destiny in the spring and, in the fall, the unfortunate dead. Or else they should worship them together. The word “hills” refers to the unfortunate dead, but people don’t like to use the word “unfortunate dead.” When shamans and invocators identify this god as Lishan (Shennong), are they not in error? The *Annals commentary* says: “Ghosts have a place to return to. They are not unfortunate dead.”

Not only does Zheng Xuan explain the meaning of the Classics in these two lines, he also points out the changes that have occurred in the system of rites. Four of these changes are particularly important. First, in ancient times, when the “state” (or “society”) sacrificed to gods and ghosts (gods of heaven and earth and human ghosts), shamans were in charge. At the end of the Eastern Han shamans were no longer capable of ordering “orthodox gods” (zhengshen 正神) to descend or possess them. That is, the orthodox gods did not descend for them, and they only sacrificed to the ghosts of the unfortunate dead, who had become the focus of “illicit cults” (yinsi 淫祀) outside the state “register of sacrifices” (sidian 祀典). Second, the shamans of the past were very familiar with the appropriate rites for the worship of gods and ghosts, but those of the Eastern Han had lost the required knowledge and techniques. Third, shamans in antiquity were people of superior quality, with high intelligence, vision and hearing, but those at the end of the Eastern Han were not.

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3 Whence his use of the term “befuddled.”
4 Whence his referring to them as “benighted.”