THE HEIRS OF GAO-YANG

BY

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The title of this paper is taken from the first line of Li sao: 'Scion of the high lord Gao-yang, Be-yong was my father's name' (帝高陽之苗裔兮朕皇考曰伯庸). In preparing it, I have assumed that the author of Li sao and probably also of Tian wen ('The Heavenly Questions') was the Chu poet Qu Yuan, contemporary of that unfortunate king Huai of Chu who reigned from 328–299 B.C. and died a prisoner in the hostile kingdom of Qin. The tradition linking the Li sao with Qu Yuan is a persistent and, though not referred to in any pre-Han source, a comparatively early one, and the confusions and inconsistencies of Si-ma Qian's biography seem to me insufficient grounds for denying the historicity of its subject.

Let me remind you of some of the things that Si-ma Qian says about Qu Yuan in that biography. He says that Qu Yuan was a nobleman distantly related to the king of Chu and holding high office at his court; that he was skilled in drafting laws and in debating policy; and that he frequently represented his country, both at home and abroad, in an official capacity.

The Qu lineage to which Qu Yuan belonged was one of three collateral branches of the Chu royal clan, the Zhao, the Jing and the Qu (昭景屈), who supplied many of the Chu statesmen and generals of the Warring States period and more than one of its poets. (In the generation after Qu Yuan there was a well-known Chu poet called Jing Cuo 景瑳.) The kings of Chu, like those of Qin, Zhao and Qi and the ruling house of the little state of Chen, of which the royal house of Qi in the Warring States period was an offshoot, traced their descent from Gao-yang, or Zhuan-xu 真墟 as he was also called (the two names were, from an early period, used interchangeably), and so a poet belonging to the Qu lineage could boast, as Qu Yuan does in the opening line of his poem, that he was a kinsman of the three greatest monarchs of the age, the kings of Qin, Chu and Qi. In Li sao the poet does in fact address the king of Chu as an equal, and Han critics, living in an age when the old aristocracy had long since passed away, were as shocked by the forthrightness with which Qu Yuan attacked the shortcomings of his royal patron as we should

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be if a prisoner in the dock were to begin haranguing the judge.

Something else besides the poet’s divine ancestry can be deduced from the opening lines of the poem. Something else besides the poet’s divine ancestry can be deduced from the opening lines of the poem. Li Sao tells us that the poet, like Bao-yu’s elder sister in *The Story of the Stone*, was born on a very auspicious day at the beginning of the year. But not only that. It does so in language which leaves us in no doubt that we have to deal with an expert, someone who is more than averagely well-informed about astronomical and calendrical matters. And as we read on farther into the poem, it becomes clear that it was written by someone who was an expert not only in astronomy but also in that amalgam of mythology, legend and remembered past on which the genealogies and rituals of ancient Chinese society were based and to which we rather weakly give the name of “ancient history”. Indeed, *Li sao* and *Tian wen* between them constitute one of the most important sources of Chinese mythology that are available to us.

If the learned astronomer of the *Li sao* and *Tian wen* poems with his inexhaustible knowledge of the histories and genealogies of men and gods seems an unlikely person to identify with the aristocratic statesman and diplomat of Si-ma Qian’s biography, consider for a moment this passage from *Zuo zhuan* (左傳昭公元年 = 541 B.C.):

Hearing of the marquess of Jin’s illness, the earl of Zheng sent Gong-sun Qiao公孫僕 on an official visit to Jin to inquire after him. Shu-xiang 叔向 (speaking as the marquess of Jin’s representative) told Gong-sun Qiao that the diviner, when consulted about the marquess’s illness, had told them that it was being caused by Shi-chen 施辰 and Tai-tai 奚始 but that none of the marquess’s learned clerks had ever heard of these gods. “Perhaps you could tell us who they are?” he asked Gong-sun Qiao.

“Yes,” said Gong-sun Qiao. “In the olden time the high lord Gao-xin 高辛 had two sons, E-be 顓頊 and Shi-chen 寧辰, who dwelt in the wood of Kuang-lin 量林. They could not get on together and were constantly running to take up arms and falling on each other with shield and spear. The Lord God was displeased. He banished E-be to the hill of Shang 商 to be the warden of the Da-huo 大火 constellation. Afterwards the Shang people inherited that land; and that is why Da-huo is the constellation which corresponds to Shang (i.e. Song 宋). Shi-chen ��en he banished to the land of Xia 夏 to be warden of the Shen 参 constellation (in Orion). The Tang 唐 people inherited that land and continued to hold it both under the Xia kings and under the Shang. In this latter age it has belonged to the descendants of your lord’s ancestor, Tang Shu-yu 唐叔虞. When King Wu’s queen, Jiang Yi 姜邑 was near her time, the Lord God appeared to her in a dream, saying, “The child you bear shall be called ‘Yu’ and shall be given the land of Tang, which is under the sign of Shen; and he shall be fruitful and have many heirs.” When the child was born, he had a mark in his hand like the character “yu”; and so “Yu” became his name. Afterwards, when his elder brother King Cheng extinguished the line of the old ruling house of Tang, he gave the land of Tang to Yu, as had been foretold. Tang became Jin 脅, and so Shen is the constellation which corresponds to Jin. So the Shi-chen mentioned by the diviner must be the god of that constellation.