HOLY MOTHERS OF ANCIENT CHINA
A New Approach to the Hsi-wang-mu Problem.*

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Appendix I. Chinese texts

Very few members of the Chinese pantheon have received (and still receive) the attention paid to Hsi-wang-mu—usually translated as Queen Mother of the West and hereafter abbreviated as HWM—but, in spite of all efforts,¹ many questions are still awaiting an answer. As far as the Han period is concerned, a big step forward was made with the publication of the extensive study included by Michael Loewe in his Ways to Paradise (Loewe (1979), ch. IV); however, much still remains to be said on the origins and early development of the different traditions existing in early literature, thus conveniently summarized by Loewe (op. cit., p. 89):

¹ Archaic pronunciations are from GSR, unless stated otherwise.

Abbreviations and editions of the classical works are listed in the Bibliography; Chinese texts are given in a separate appendix. My warmest remerciements go to J.A. Lefebvre, who kindly shared his library, his knowledge and so many of his afternoons introducing me into the world of Shang inscriptions; were it not for his friendship, part II would never have been written. My gratitude goes also to Michael Loewe, Alfredo Cadonna and Mary Heerin for kindly reading through the typescript.

we hear first of the Queen as a timeless being who has attained the Tao. She is described as a hybrid, semi-human figure, possibly possessing power to control some of the constellations. Soon she is associated with Mount K'un-lun, although she is sometimes said to reside within a cave. Her realm possesses numinous qualities and boasts material pleasures which, together with her own magical powers, are sufficient to attract an earthly ruler to seek meetings or contemplate taking up his abode in her domains. The Queen's powers are such that she can enjoy, or even confer, the gift of deathlessness, and she may be able to disrupt the even operation of the universe."

The aim of this study is to analyze separately all the elements used (and overlooked) by Loewe in building up his highly suggestive, but perhaps too syncretic, portrait of the Queen, and to see which of these elements actually came to coalesce and, if possible, to decide how and when this happened. The study has been divided into three parts.

Part one is a short exposition of the data supplied by Chan-kuo and Western Han sources, organized into four separate paragraphs. Needless to say, this work of "recompilation" is intended not as a mere repetition of well-known data but rather as a necessary step for introducing, and possibly proving, some new theories.

Part two is focused on the problem of the possible identification of the HWM of later times with the Hsi-mu mentioned in oracle-bone inscriptions, a crucial issue usually neglected or covered in a few words, but certainly worth a deeper examination.

Part three consists of a general summary of parts one and two and of some tentative hypotheses and conclusions.

Part I. Hsi-wang-mu in pre- and early Han literature

I.1. Hsi-wang-mu and Hsi-wang-kuo 西王國 as geographical names

In a number of pre-Han and Han sources the name HWM is used to indicate a territory, and is sometimes written Hsi-wang-kuo. According to Hsün-tzu, XIX, 5–6 (text 1):

"Yao studied under Chun Ch'ou, Shun studied under Wu Ch'eng-chao and Yu studied under [the ruler of] Hsi-wang-kuo." 

Even more explicit is a famous passage in Erh-ya, VI, 6r (text 4), where we read:

Sin/Si-en'nu, the Sumerian/Accadian moon goddess.

2 The last sentence can also be rendered as "Yu studied in the State of the Western King." More or less extensive lists of sovereigns and masters are to be found in several works from Han to Sung times. See, e.g., the list of seventeen sovereigns included in LSCC, IV, iii, 4v–5r (Hsi-wang-mu and Wang-mu are absent) and the other long list in the fifth ch. of the Han Shih wai-chuan 韓詩外傳 by Han Ying 韓嬰 (W. Han) (text 2): "Tzu Hsia said: 'I have heard that Huang-