

***Birth in Ancient China:
A Study of Metaphor and Cultural Identity in Pre-Imperial China***
By C. A. Cook and X. Luo (2017)
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In this small, dense book, Constance A. Cook and Xinhui Luo critically analyse ancient Chinese texts to reveal how the topic of birth was of key importance to understandings of lineage and cultural heritage in ancient China. Offering their readers a unique lens into early comprehension of the female experience of childbirth, the authors also explore the more abstract themes of birth as connected to issues of mythical creation, internal transformation, genealogy and cosmic reproduction. Focusing on material in China's earliest birthing records, which date back to the Shang period (second millennium BCE), the book also includes translation and exegesis of the *Chu ju* 楚居, a fourth-century BCE bamboo manuscript devoted to the topic of birth and its relationship to royal lineage. The book shows how birth and the birthing body, though deeply marginalised and underrepresented topics within the humanities today, were focal to the cultural and philosophical developments of ancient Chinese thought and practice.

Chapter 1 opens with a study of oracle bones dating to China's Shang period (1600 BCE–1046 BCE), the markings upon which represent themes of childbirth and pregnancy. The significance of the body is clear when looking at graphs depictive of embodiment and birthing. Cook and Luo explain that one Shang graph for 'to give birth', for example, appears to

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represent a womb-like enclosure within which rests a small square, possibly a baby's head, and two hands reaching out towards the child (pp. 4, 9). This interpretation of the graph is supported by early records of royal family events, which indicate that midwives aided the labouring woman and also acted as shamans during the birthing process. Some of the other graphs studied in this section, such as those for 'pregnant', 'mother', 'child', as well as 'person' and 'corpse', similarly show the impact of the body's form on material representations in writing and imagery.

In another graph depictive of birth and commonly used by the time of the Warring States period (475 BCE–221 BCE) to mean 'to give birth' (*yu* written both as 育 or 鬻), the emergence of a child from a woman's profile is clearly represented. However, Cook and Luo explain that the character carried a different meaning during the Shang period, referring not to the act of birth, but instead to deceased ancestors and to genealogy. The authors make the case that the complex version of this *yu* character for birth (鬻) became linked to Chu ancestral names (pp. 2–9).

The early Neolithic period, which dates as far back as the fifth millennium BCE, produced even earlier images related to these themes. The authors devote several pages to investigating these images, which may have had some influence on the creation of representations found during the Shang period. There are no written records from the Neolithic, however, thus the connection cannot be certain.

Chapters 2 and 4 examine how fertility, marriage, pregnancy and birth were of primary concern in ancient China, and the female body was viewed as a powerful site, directly associated with the continuation of ancestor lineage branches. Divination, prayer and ritual were utilised as manners of controlling both reproduction and the pregnant body. The authors provide extensive evidence from Zhou-period (1046 BCE–256 BCE) bronze inscriptions to show this emphasis, which manifested in prayers to the ancestral spirits for reproductive fertility. Royal houses valued women specifically for their bodies' physical and spiritual abilities to continue the family line (p. 26). As in the case of the Zhou-period inscriptions, material from the Warring States period, including the *Zigao* (子羔), a bamboo text currently preserved in the Shanghai Museum, also provides the authors with evidence that the topic of fertility was of central importance during this ancient time. Utilising a variety of textual and anthropological resources, Cook and Luo explore mythical tales related to rites and rituals connected to fertility, pregnancy and birth (pp. 30–42). At times dense with detail, this section also includes interesting comments about topics such as phallic imagery, fertility goddesses and mythical creation.

Oracle bones also provide records of how royal women gave birth in ancient China. Although scholars have typically assumed that records indicating an ‘unfortunate’ birth refer to the birth of baby girls, Cook and Luo provide evidence that whether a birth was considered ‘fortunate’ (*jia* 嘉) or not may have referred to the difficulty of the birth (pp. 55–6). Calls to female ancestral spirits were also made during a woman’s pregnancy and birth itself, and in certain cases, exorcisms or purification rituals were deemed necessary to protect the bodies of the mother and her child (p. 56). Certain days were judged more auspicious for diviners to crack the bones or for the casting of a bronze to occur in relation to fertility and birth. The *Shifa* 筮法, a fourth-century BCE stalk divination bamboo manuscript containing detailed material on trigrams used in divination, also holds a body diagram in section 24. This diagram marks the inner spaces of the body with female trigrams and the outer spaces with their male trigram counterparts (p. 60).

Chapter 3, which explores representations of mothers and embryos during ancient China – both as actual entities and as symbolic forms – finds broad parallels between Chu material and other early religious and philosophical texts. Details about the mother figure from a Chu text called *Taiyi Gives Birth to Water* (*Taiyi sheng shui* 太一生水), for example, brings to mind some elements of Daoism as found in Daoist classic texts, including the *Daodejing* 道德經. The parallel in the case of the *Taiyi sheng shui* relates to Daoist representations of the mother as a source of cosmic origin or cyclical renewal (pp. 44–5). Similarly, stages of actual embryonic development as found in ancient texts, such as the Tsinghua *Tang at Chi Gate* (*Tang zai Chimen* 湯在啻門) or the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, relate also to symbolic representations of internal transformation (pp. 47–51). Such metaphors are found later in early medieval Daoist literature that pertains to the rebirthing of the transcendent self (p. 48).

Chapter 5 provides readers with both an in-depth study of the *Chu ju* text, and a look at numerous other historical texts. Some of these materials include genealogical histories and hagiographies, and the authors pinpoint areas that focus on the relationship between birthing myths, royal lineages and founder kings, especially as pertains to the Chu people. In several instances, the birth of the people is traced to a major event occurring in which the body of either the male founder of the family line or that of his female partner splits open and one or more children emerge (p. 87). Aside from the *Chu ju* text, some of the other material translated, studied or discussed in the chapter include the ‘Chu shijia,’ 楚世家, or chapter 40 of the *Shiji* 史記, Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 first-century BCE record of Chinese history written during the Han period (206 BCE–20 CE); second-century

BCE genealogical accounts in the *Shiben* 世本; details on rituals from the second-century CE collection, the *Da Dai Liji* 大戴禮記; ancient narrative history of the *Zuozhuan* 左傳; classic mythology from the *Shanjaijing* 山海經; and the 'Liu Guo' 六國 chapter of the *Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義. Cook and Luo assert that the 'birth of the name of the founder, lineage, or polity is more important than the health of people involved, the mother, or even the child/progenitor itself' (p. 88). In the case of the Chu people, for example, the name 'Chu' 楚 signifies 'thorny', and this meaning derives from the split-side birth described in the *Chu ju*. Thorns were used as part of shamanist medical practice during the event of birth (pp. 73, 84, 88).

Interestingly, while archaeological and textual evidence shows that patriarchy was a solid part of ancient China, Cook and Luo also emphasise the importance of female ancestors associated with powerful patriarchs (pp. 76–7). Looking closely at the Chu mythical lineage, they furthermore examine certain gender-bending qualities of its ancestral names, finding links back to both male and female figures (pp. 89–92). The authors develop some aspects of this theme in Chapter 6, explaining that the mythological link in the *Chu ju* between Chu and Shang cultures is found in the figure of the Shang princess mentioned as having a 'split-side' (*xie sheng* 脅生) birth (pp. 92–3). The authors emphasise the importance of the *Chu ju* as the only text of its kind to make this connection to the Shang, and this cultural link is made not through the figure of the father but through the body of the mother (p. 105). Pointing to the work of other scholars who maintain that Chu references to 'split-side' births may have found their origins elsewhere (e.g. South Asian myths about gods born in this way as found in the *Rigveda*), however, Cook and Luo state that they cannot prove that the Chu people saw their history as traced to the Shang (pp. 106–7).

This book is no doubt of primary interest to specialists in the area of Ancient Chinese history and culture, or to those with deep interests in texts related to philosophy, genealogy, religion, material culture or linguistics in the context of China. The data presented are intricate and at times less accessible to the non-specialist. However, the book's broader themes related to mythology and the birthing body as metaphor for cultural identity are intriguing even to those not trained in the areas of Chinese history and culture.