

Technicians of the Sacred

In the old ritual World of Change, communication with the ghosts and spirits (*guishen*) was handled through several kinds of Intermediaries. They basically fell into three classes, though these functions could and did overlap in practice: Intermediaries and Exorcists (*Wu*) who handled spirits directly; Diviners (*shi*) who read the signs and kept the ancient virtue (*de*) inherent in the oracle books; and, experts on ritual (also *shi*) who knew the formulae and procedures involved in important ceremonies.

The Wu or Intermediaries

The *Wu* or Intermediaries are without doubt the oldest and the most enduring of the technicians of the sacred, originating far back in the mists of pre-history. The power of the *Wu* was used to see, feel and know the spirits. The *Wu* could call the spirits down to be present at a ceremony or a healing and dissipate malign influences. They were involved with the cult of the Moon Almost Full (*yuejiwang*) and the masked animal-transformation dances, early forms of change-divination. Three times a year the exorcists or *fang-xiang*, a particular type of *Wu*, would perform the great exorcism, driving the outmoded and baneful spirits from palace, house and countryside.

As time went by, the *Wu* were allowed a smaller and smaller part in official cult, their official functions taken over by experts on ritual and their presence edited out of the classic texts. They continued to play an indispensable role in the life of the people where their vivid spirituality was an antidote for an increasingly arid official worship.

The Shi or Diviners

The *Shi*, a particular form and function of the *Wu*, were diviners, historians and scribes, men of the book or bamboo-*wu*, imaged as a “hand that holds the

center.” They were painters of word pictures and their work with the oracle books was described as eating ancient virtue (*de*). They became the wandering *fangshi* of the Warring States period, “book-*wu* of the Hidden Lands.” The word that describes them is cognate with another character pronounced *shi* that meant “signs from heaven that reveal the activity of the shen and instruct humans.”

The King

The King was the single great ritual channel through which communication and blessing flowed from the High Ancestors and the High Lord. He shared basic functions with both kinds of Intermediaries and there were certain ceremonies only he could perform. He was responsible before the High Lord or Heaven, who had given his family the Mandate, to assure the proper functioning of the cosmic order. The King, through his person and his actions could put the messages from the spirits into effect, fixing the omens and spreading the blessings to all. His court was the center of literacy and the oracle books used by the *shi*-diviners, who often acted as his advisors.