



ASPECTS OF SPIRIT

ELISABETH ROCHAT DE LA VALLÉE

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HUN AND PO IN MEDICAL TEXTS

Lingshu chapter 8

In the classical medical texts, we will begin with *Neijing*, *Lingshu* chapter 8, which is a fundamental chapter for many reasons. It is important to remember that even within the medical texts it is possible to find many different kinds of uses of *hun* and *po*. In the first part of this chapter, the *hun* and the *po* are mentioned with the essences and spirits, *jing shen* (精神), as allowing human life to manifest itself and to build an individual concept of self, which is the heart. The intent (*yi* 意) and the will (*zhi* 志) follow the heart in the text.

"The coming forth of living beings (life, *sheng* 生)
is called essences.

故生之來謂之精
gu sheng zhi lai wei zhi jing

"The embrace of two essences,
is called spirits.

兩精相搏謂之神
liang jing xiang bo wei zhi shen

"That which follows the spirits in their going and coming
is called *hun*.

隨神往來者謂之魂
sui shen wang lai zhe wei zhi hun

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external reality and something within each being, which includes all the transformations which make life. The visible reality of life manifests the invisible presence of the spirits.

After that we will look at the medical texts to see how the same kind of expression is seen in medicine. The vital spirit is linked to health because it is the very basic condition for life and for the *qi* to function well. It allows each person to follow the evolution and transformation which makes up individual life; it governs interactions with surroundings, so that it is possible to live correctly, remain true to the innate nature, and make the best of life's potential. This is not only good health, but clarity of mind, which is vital for every practitioner in order to make a clear diagnosis and to give an accurate treatment.

Spirits and wind

Before the first appearance of the character *shen* (神) itself, there was a strong belief in the spirits of the ancestors as well as in the spirits as natural forces. The two concepts were very close and sometimes the same: a powerful ancestor might become a god attached to a natural phenomenon. In heaven, the ancestors submitted to the supreme deity, called the High Sovereign or emperor above (*shang di* 上帝), who probably was also the first ancestor of the dynasty, or of the king's lineage).

One of the most important themes found on the ancient inscriptions (*jia gu wen* 甲骨文) is the combination of the idea of spirits and winds – more precisely, the four phoenix-winds, four spirits represented by phoenixes (*feng* 鳳) who sent influences to earth in the manner of the wind (*feng* 風). They were sent by the High Sovereign to the four territories which formed the earth, bringing life to each of them according

to their natural position.

What appears nowadays as a metaphor was then most probably believed to be a reality: the wind brings life from heaven to earth; it penetrates the earth through its openings, which were seen as caverns in the mountains (*feng xue* 風穴), which are also where the phoenixes settled at sunset. Blowing in the spring, the phoenix winds triggered the process of transformation, leading to germination, growth of vegetation, and the maturation of crops.

There was not only one wind, but several, traditionally called the eight winds, corresponding to the directions of the compass. Each wind brings life to each space on earth, according to its own specificities, and determined by its position. The wind is both one and multiple, as is the spirit (*shen* 神) or the *qi* (氣). It is one because it comes from one source and shares the same nature and features; multiple because, when it is expressed on earth, it is always specific: the north wind and the east wind are different, one may bring rain another drought.

Wind and spirit (and later *qi*) share the same basic qualities: they bring life from heaven to earth, they start the process of transformation, leading life to take form according to its innate quality. They allow the manifestation on earth of what is above.

As it is said in the *Shuowen Jiezi* :

'The spirits are the spirits of heaven (*tian shen* 天神) which cause all beings to appear.'

The character shen (神)

Ancient forms of the character *shen* (𤛝) can be found on bronzes of the Western Zhou (1046-770 BCE), where it has the meaning of the spirits of the ancestors. The ancestors are in heaven in the company of the supreme deity, or the supreme ancestor, literally the emperor above Shang di (上帝).

The later character *shen* (神) has two parts. The left part of the character (示), is also very old. The image is of something descending – and the character is found in oracular inscriptions where it indicates a descent from heaven to earth, a manifestation from above. It appears in the Jiaguwen, the earliest Chinese writing, with the meaning of the place where the spirits manifest themselves during a sacrifice – possibly an altar for ancestral worship. But as early as the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770-221 BCE), the character has the meaning of manifestation, especially of a manifestation from heaven, such as an omen, a portent or a warning, as well as the manifestation of the ancestors through ritual. This part of the character (示) took on the meaning of something becoming perceptible, and it gradually came to mean to manifest, to show, to give a sign or even a teaching, or to make someone alert to something. Later, it simply has the meaning to show, to become manifest or known.

The right part is the phonetic (申), and has been used since ancient times to indicate a date or a period of time; it is the name of the ninth of the twelve earthly branches. The ninth earthly branch corresponds to the seventh month of the year, the limit of expansion and extension and hence the beginning of the *yin*, the beginning of autumn and the decline of the sun. This is the time when everything – in both nature and human beings – naturally moves from stretching and extension (the expansion of the *yang*) into the contraction of the *yin*. In commentaries written some

ASPECTS OF SPIRIT

HUN PO JING SHEN YI ZHI
IN CLASSICAL CHINESE TEXTS

ELISABETH ROCHAT DE LA VALLÉE

In 'Aspects of Spirit' Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée explores the development of human consciousness through the classical Chinese literature. From a primal understanding of spirits as forces of nature, and ancient rites to appease the ghosts and spirits of ancestors – the texts indicate a gradual movement away from superstition towards a recognition that human beings are responsible for their own destiny. In the texts of Daoism and Confucianism, the 'aspects of spirit' came to be understood as facets of the human psyche. Within the Chinese medical texts they are referred to as 'the five spirits' (*wu shen* 五神), and are correlated within the five phase system of correspondence with the five internal organs; the *hun* and *po*, the *yin yang* expression of the human soul; the *yi* and the *zhi*, intent and will, the ways in which the human heart/mind begins to construct reality. As human beings, we work with these aspects of spirit in order to become more 'spirit-like' – or closer to our 'true nature'.

*'In our physical life, the spirit needs physical reality in order to express itself,
and that physical reality needs to be controlled and inspired by spirit.'*

ELISABETH ROCHAT DE LA VALLÉE holds masters degrees in Philosophy, Classics and Chinese Studies. She worked closely with Claude Larre s.j. at the Ricci Institute, Paris and directed the completion of the Grand Ricci Dictionary. She is currently Dean of Studies at the European School of Acupuncture.

The cover image is adapted from a detail of the Mawangdui funeral banner from the 2nd century BCE. The seven *po*, or earthly souls, receive offerings of food and drink before being guided on their descent to the underworld.



MONKEY PRESS
ISBN 978 1 872468 16 7