EARTH GOD WINE AND THE MEETING OF THE FLUTTERING BUTTERFLIES LOCAL CUSTOMS OF EARLY SPRING IN LATE IMPERIAL CENTRAL CHINA

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As spring was approaching in the lake lands of Southern Hubei and Northern Hunan, people became increasingly involved in the new agricultural season. Once snow and frosts were part of the past, the new season for rice began. In the first place the irrigated seedbeds were prepared to receive the sowing of the grain, and later to see the sprouting of the first thick green carpet of the young shoots. Irrigation systems had to be looked over and repaired in anticipation of the period when the large paddy fields were to be set under water.

After the celebration of the Lantern Festival as the finale of the New Year season, on the fifteenth of the first moon of the lunar year, there was a bit of a ritual slack season. The advantage of this for people was that there was then a period of uninterrupted time necessary for the urgent agricultural spring tasks. What followed after New Year was a string of smaller seasonal events, somewhat more modest than the big cardinal festivals.\(^1\) Even so these celebrations were certainly of some importance—at least they provided a few short but joyful breaks in days otherwise filled with heavy loads of work. In this essay I shall examine two relatively minor festive events which were celebrated in the early spring, in the second lunary of the year or around that time.

We must remember that Chinese reckoning of time in Imperial days was structured by two main and different annual calendars. One was based on the phases of the moon and comprised twelve lunaries. The other took account of the annual behaviour of the sun and contained twenty-four solar phases. The lunar dates varied in terms of the sun calendar, but it was the latter which gave the pragmatic landmarks in terms of seasonal weather and rural tasks for the countryman, whereas various celebrations of agricultural achievements and social events were held in accordance with the moon year. The lunar New Year could fall any time from the twenty-first of January to the nineteenth of February, Gregorian reckoning, and thus varied a great deal from year to year in

\(^1\) I have dealt with these elsewhere: Aijmer 1964; 1968; 1979; 1991; 2002.
its relationship to the relatively stable solar year, which could deviate from the true astronomical cycle only by three days. This discrepancy between the two cycles brought the advantage that what people carried out practically, in accordance with the reckoning of the sun's passage through a zodiac, could be celebrated after the practical event, and then the moon calendar offered the opportunity. Feasting did not interfere with work. But this was not always so. Some important festivals were tied to the position of the sun. The existence of two calendars also offered the possibility of double celebrations - each feast emphasizing one of two different aspect of some phenomenon. By such a separation in time, equal weight and dignity could be given to notions that did not easily tally inside one singular ritual frame.

In solar terms, the period of 'Establishment of Spring' set in on (approximately) the fifth of February. There was a great festival at that time, which was really part of the long New Year duration, but also connoted with expectations for the coming agricultural year. The spring season in central China lasted through the periods of 'Rain Water,' 'Arousal from Hibernation,' 'Vernal Equinox,' 'Clear and Bright,' 'Grain Rains' and up to 'Establishment of Summer' on the fifth of May. In terms of the varying lunar calendar, spring would correspond roughly with the period from the middle of the first moon up to the beginning of the fourth lunary.

What were the festive concerns of people in the Lake Dongting area in the early part of the long Chinese spring? One prominent feature was a continuing divination about coming crops and the weather upon which these were dependent. Already New Year was a great period for forecasting and these predictions were continued in the course of the spring. We can find some glimpses of such activities in our sources. But there were also some more prominent days which saw a lot of ritual activities.

One day in early spring was of special importance. According to the official almanac it fell on the fifth day that followed Li Chun. Wu is the fifth of a set of twelve 'Earthly Branches' that in combination with twelve 'Celestial Stems' formed a system for calculating time and days. Li Chun is the mentioned solar period

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2 Aijmer 2002: Ch. XV.
‘Establishment of Spring’ starting on the fifth of February, Gregorian reckoning. A wu day would have been a day which showed a stem-branch combination that contained the character wu. The day of interest here would occur some forty to fifty days after the first day of the Li Chun. So this day would have fallen sometime by mid-March, generally in the second moon, but at varying dates there. This day was called She Ri 社日—‘She Day’. It seems likely that it was celebrated according to the date provided by the official calendar-chronicles from Yingshan Magistracy 應山縣 (in De’an Prefecture 德安府), Suiyang Magistracy 崇陽縣 (in Wuchang Prefecture 武昌府) and Wuchang Magistracy 武昌縣 (also in Wuchang Prefecture) place the festival in the second moon.

It is not so easy to say what the She was in late imperial times in this lake land in Central China. In terms of State rituals there was still an imperial sacrifice in the spring on an altar southwest of the palace in the capital, devoted to She Ji 社稷. Sometimes this two-character name is understood as referring to one deity, sometimes as to a combination of two—She being the god ruling the land and Ji the divine controller of grain crops. There was a hierarchy of provincial, prefectural and magistratial She Ji, who were all part of the imperial official state cult. The imperial offering was the exclusive privilege of the Emperor. Before his sacrifice the altar was covered with earth of five colours - a colorific togetherness which expressed the total universe, and thereby the generative and destructive power of the five activities, wu xing 五行. A special stone tablet was erected in the middle. After the ceremony this was taken down and buried in the ground until the next occasion for worship.

In some areas in the south, present-day villagers tend to see the She as a chthonic registrar of deaths and births, an earth god who is thus associated with both death and human fecundity. More generally it appears as if the She in many areas of China signified a notion of locality. Both the Imperial cult and the present day Cantonese example may serve us as pointers, but what the demotic ideas about the She, and the She Day, actually were in the area surrounding Lake Dongting a few hundred years ago, is something we must try to glean from the

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1 古今國書集成, 1888. VI, 1166: 風俗考 4a; 1120: 風俗考 2b, 4b.
2 Bredon & Mitrophanow 1972: 63-64.
sparse evidence we have from local chronicles.

In Gong’an Magistracy (in Jingzhou Prefecture 荊州府) people hoped for rain on the She day as this was a good omen.² In the same vein we find a note from Tongshan Magistracy (in Wuchang Prefecture) to the effect that if it rained on the She Day, it was said: *She Weng yu* 社翁雨—‘rain of the Worthy She’. A rustic proverb had it that She Gong 社公—‘Mr. She’—and She Mu 社母—‘Lady She’—‘do not drink old water’.³ The metaphor here was that the fresh water of the spring rains was drunk by the earth. It is interesting to note that the proverb insists on a female counterpart to the She.

In Yingshan Magistracy there were *si* 祀 offerings to the She; these were spoken of as *qi gu* 祈谷—‘prayer for grain’.⁴ Similar offerings, but this time described as *jiao* 献 libations, occurred here in Yingshan on the third day of the third month, later on in the spring.⁵ On the She Day we encounter offerings taking place in Zhongxiang Magistracy (in Anlu Prefecture 安陸府), and here we get some more detail concerning the rustic population.⁶ The chronicler describes how the celebration engaged *wu* 巫 and *xi* 祀—male and female sorcerers—who appeared with drums and singing, thus welcoming the *shen* 神 spirits. With ‘arms joined’ they were stamping on the ground, all this being a *ge jie ji* 歌節祭—‘an offering of rhythmic singing’. Everyone drank She wine and shared She meat. The wine was supposed to cure deafness. Sacrificial meats (*sheng* 牲) and sweet wine (*li* 酒) are also mentioned from Wuling Magistracy (the capital of Changde Prefecture 常德府).⁷ From Jiangling Magistracy (江陵縣), the capital of Jingzhou Prefecture (荆州府), we get a description of She fan 社飯—‘She food’—which was a mixture of pork and mutton put inside a pumpkin.⁸ The magistracy of Suiyang is said to have been a place where four neighbourhoods combined to *ji* 祭 offer to *ben jing She shen* 本境社神—‘the local She spirit’. People shared out delicacies

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² 古今唐書集成. 1888. VI, 1193: 風俗考 3b.
³ 古今唐書集成. 1888. VI, 1120: 風俗考 6ab.
⁴ 古今唐書集成. 1888. VI, 1166: 風俗考 4a.
⁵ 古今唐書集成. 1888. VI, 1166: 風俗考 4ab.
⁶ 古今唐書集成. 1888. VI, 1142: 風俗考 2a.
⁷ 古今唐書集成. 1888. VI, 1259: 風俗考 1b.
⁸ 古今唐書集成. 1888. VI, 1193: 風俗考 2a.
and sacrificial meats (zuō 牲) that had been used in the ji sacrifice.\(^{13}\)

The oldest source we have is from the Liang dynasty (502-556 AD), a thematically organized chronicle accounting for the customs of the lake land in Central China, called 荊楚歳時記 Jing Chu sui shì ji, or Records of the Seasons in Jing and Chu. It is very apparent that this text has had an influence on later scribes. For instance, it is quite clear that the compiler of the record of Suiyang has copied from the old Records the note saying that four neighbourhoods combined to celebrate the She. This description of social organization might not have been very accurate in late Imperial times, nor can we assume that it was anything more than an idealized picture in early medieval China. Perhaps it only means that a vicinage had one centrally located She altar. The Liang source also mentions sacrificial meats and strong wine and in this there may have been more of a true historical continuity through the centuries.\(^{14}\)

The chronicler of Wuling magistracy juxtaposes the celebrations of the She with the vernal breaking of the earth in agriculture and the inundation of the fields in the second moon.\(^{15}\) Some names also indicate an agricultural connection: In Yingshan the offerings to the She were called qi gu 祈穀—‘prayers for grain’\(^{16}\) and the day seems to have been known as gu rì 穰日—‘grain day’. As was noted above, the peasants of Suiyang were on this day forecasting inundations, droughts and tao 稻—‘rice growing in the fields’. There was a saying here: She zhòng xīn 社種新—‘to sow the new [crop] at She [time]’. There can be no doubt that the day of the She and its celebrations were connected with the new agricultural season, the breaking of the earth in the spring and the sowing of the rice grains.

In a sense the Li Chun festival was a precursor of the She Day. The latter was officially calculated on the basis of the occurrence of the former. Both festivals were concerned with the breaking of earth, but it seems clear from this juxtaposition that Li Chun was more ‘prospecting’ and anticipating-an official recognition of the arrival of

\(^{13}\) 古今圖書集成. 1888. VI, 1120: 風俗考 4b.
\(^{14}\) On the Jing Chu sui shì ji, see Turban 1971: 3-46.
\(^{15}\) 古今圖書集成. 1888. VI, 1259: 風俗考 1b.
\(^{16}\) 古今圖書集成. 1888. VI, 1166: 風俗考 4a.
spring within the wider New Year duration. At Li Chun ritual acts signalled various agricultural tasks. The She festival was more timely in relation to actual agrarian operations starting up at this season, but rituals did not directly depict the cultivation of the earth.

Shamanistic activities were common at several ritual celebrations in the area under scrutiny here. A chronicler from Hanzhou Magistracy 漢州縣 in Hanyang Prefecture 漢陽縣 says that the people along the Jiang and the Han love wu sorcerers and regard demons as important. Singing, dancing and drumming wu and xi contributed to the efficacy of the rituals in that they summoned the shen spirits. The mention here of both wu and xi is best understood as indicating that the shamanistic acts were performed by officiants recruited from both genders—but we cannot be sure. What kind of shen spirits were invited by their activities is, again, not clear. If in the singular, the word might refer to the She, if in the plural, it might have been spirits in general, or, perhaps, the spirits of the dead. We have seen above that sometimes the She was connoted with death and the dead. Invoking and inviting the dead—should that be the correct understanding—would then, no doubt, have had further agricultural connotations.

What speaks in favour of the former interpretation is a note deriving from Yiyang Magistracy 益陽縣 (in Changsha Prefecture 長沙府), but which actually refers to a practice of the third day of the third moon, a day called Shang Si 上巳 or ‘Upper Si’. On this day there were splendid processions in the country villages by the She altars where people sacrificed to the du shen 土神—‘the earth spirit(s)’. Droning drums were prominent instruments in these processions. This was called qi nian 祈年—‘to pray for the year’. A similar report, already mentioned and referring to the same day, is found in the records of Yingshan where it is said that people worshipped the She by jiao libations.

We may note that there was another occasion for celebrating the

17 Aijmer 2002, Chapter 15.
18 Hanzhou is situated by the confluence of the River Yangzi (the Jiang) and the River Han.
19 古今國書集成. 1888. VI, 1130: 風俗考 1b
20 古今國書集成. 1888. VI, 1142: 風俗考 2a
21 益陽縣志. 1874. 卷 2: 4b.
She further on in the year, by the summer solstice, when people in Changsha Prefecture sacrificed to the She and provided the earth god with wine.\(^2\)

In some places the She Day was also associated with visits to the graves of the dead. This was so already in the early Liang dynasty in the sixth century when the chronicler notes that there were sheng-meat-offerings to the dead on the She Day.\(^23\) A much later account describing Yuanjiang Magistracy 沅江縣 in Changde Prefecture tells us that on the She Day and earlier, people suspended paper—possibly ritual paper stripes or paper money—on the graves and swept them. There was a maxim saying: 'For new graves, one should not pass the She; for old graves one suspends [paper] when thirty nights have passed'.\(^24\) In Wuchang Magistracy people si sacrificed fresh things on the graves on the She Day of the second moon.\(^25\) In Suiyang the graves were decorated with twigs and banners on the She Day and there were ji offerings.\(^26\)

In an earlier essay\(^27\) I have discussed the visit to graves at springtime in the lake area of southern Hubei and northern Hunan. Grave rituals were most prominent in the solar period of Qing Ming and seems to have been one of the cardinal activities in a grand exchange of visits and counter visits between the dead and their living descendants. This ritual scheme of reciprocity over time was parallel with the agricultural year and integrated into the major structure of the annual progression of festivals. The graves were swept and cleaned, which paralleled the weeding and preparation of the soil in the rice nurseries. There were offerings to the dead of food, generally in some sort of commensality. There was a gift-giving combined with the insertion of bamboo branches with hanging paper money on top of the graves. These bamboos can be seen in the area even today. Gifts corresponded to sowing—the dead and the soil were closely related in iconic symbolism. These visits to the graves and the dead were later rewarded by counter-visits of the ancestors to their living progeny, which occurred on the

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\(^{22}\) 古今圖書集成, 1888. II, 1142; 山川考 8b.
\(^{23}\) 沅江縣志, 1807-19, 卷 18, 風俗 2b.
\(^{24}\) 古今圖書集成, 1888.VI, 1120; 風俗考 2b
\(^{25}\) 古今圖書集成, 1888.VI, 1120; 風俗考 4b
\(^{26}\) Aijmer 1979.
\(^{27}\) Aijmer 1964.
Dragon Boat Festival when in various ways the dead helped to secure the successful transplantation of rice.\textsuperscript{28}

In that essay on the cult of the ancestors in spring time I also addressed briefly the fact that in late Imperial days we find these grave visits dispersed in time, occurring on several dates in the progression of the spring, even if the day and the period of Qing Ming seem to have dominated. Taking account of the fact that Qing Ming and worship at the graves were phenomena not mentioned in our earliest source from the sixth century, I proposed that perhaps grave worship was introduced into this area as part of an ongoing sinicization process in the course of a somewhat later phase in history. If this was so, there may have been some local options as to when the graves should be visited.

The She Day was a day of agricultural renewal with offerings on the altar of the She. Like the dead, the She was a chthonic phenomenon. Both god and ancestors were active forces beneficial to the sowing of rice. How the dead actually related to the She-directly or indirectly-is not known for this area. The spread over time of vernal worship at the graves may best be seen as a set of local variations on a theme, the standard Qing Ming practice. These alternatives in terms of points in time do not seem to have posed a problem for the robust iconic architecture of the annual ritual cycle as a whole.

The She Day seems to have been one of merriment, parties \textit{al fresco}, and social games and competitions. In Baling, the capital of Yuezhou Prefecture, there were competitions and people congregated to feast and drink.\textsuperscript{29} In Zhongxiang it was the custom to drink 'earth god wine' and eat 'earth god meat.'\textsuperscript{30} This custom seems to indicate some commensality in which the sacrificial gifts-wine and meat-were shared between the donors and the divinity. No doubt such feasting was combined with the processions and the shamanistic performances mentioned earlier.

Reviewing our findings, we observe that the She Day was a day for celebrating the earth and praying for good results in agriculture. It

\textsuperscript{28} 古今图书集成. 1888. VI, 1223: 风俗考2a.
\textsuperscript{29} 古今图书集成. 1888. VI, 1142: 风俗考2a.
\textsuperscript{30} 古今图书集成. 1888. VI, 1120: 风俗考6ab.
could also be a day for worshipping at the graves—a spring practice spread over several possible days. There is likely to have been a link of association between the She and the dead—in a way similar to what can still be discerned in some southern parts of China today. The offerings on this day were sometimes made in a grand style with cavalcades and officiants engaging the spirits. It was an occasion for feasting, drinking and games.

There was another festivity in the second lunary of the year which was called Hua Zhao 花朝 or ‘Flower Dawn,’ which occurred on the full moon day, the fifteenth of the moon. The festival is mentioned in chronicles from Tongshan, Baling, Yingshan, Zhongxiang, and Gong’an. If the sky was clear on this day in Baling, then the cotton plants would have a good harvest. In Gong’an there were similarly good prospects for cotton if there was a clear full moon on this night.

The Flower Dawn as a social event is not extensively described, but we learn that in Zhongxiang there were outdoor activities in the open country outside the town, and so there were presumably also picnics. It is said that gentry and commoners ta qing 踏青—‘trod on the greenness’—and they dou bai cao 蒟草—‘gathered one hundred grasses.’

Ta qing is a name for a spring outing, and the designation for this festive picnic is in the wider Chinese world associated with various dates, like the eighth day of the first moon, the second day of the second moon and the third day of the third moon. It is also generally held to be among the customs of Qing Ming in early April, even signifying grave visits. In this present corpus of ethnography we find mention of ‘treading on the greenness’ at the Flower Dawn. Dou bai cao was a game in which people armed themselves with stalks of grass. From each of a pair of stalks was pressed a drop of liquid and the two drops were
brought into contact. The stalk which in this way drew up the drop of the other was declared the winning party. Perhaps this was an élitist thing to do and we have no description from the central lake land to improve our knowledge. At least the name suggests games in the open under festive conditions. Another designation used for this day was, in Tongshan, pu die hui 採蝶會—‘the meeting of the fluttering butterflies.’

A note from Yingshan claims that Hua Zhao was a day when young women got their ears pierced. It was also a day when girls who had reached the age of twelve, thirteen or more, started allowing their hair to grow long. In the same place, this day of Flower Dawn was also an occasion for sending presents to a (future?) bride’s home, and to arrange- or con-firm-betrothals (na bian 纳采). Alternatively, it was a day for wen ming 問名 or ‘to ask names.’ This was a preliminary ceremony leading to a likely engagement to be married, generally implying a comparison of the two candidates in terms of the combinations of celestial signs going with their respective birthdays. The Flower Dawn was generally regarded as an auspicious day for this. We can see that this festival was marked by femininity-girls were coming of age, passing into womanhood by starting using jewellery and letting their hair grow long. Female reproduction is also stressed in the arrangements for coming marriages. Also, full moon days were generally associated with femininity.

Turning to Zhongxiang we find that the full moon day of the second lunar was an occasion for the flying of paper kites (feng yuan 風箏) and this custom implied some games—but we are not informed as to the rules of these. There is the possibility that these competitions were in terms of appearance and beauty.

The flying of paper kites in southern China was not only a children’s pass-time, but was done in a ceremonial way in certain seasons and on specific days. In Fujian Province, around the city of Fuzhou it was an activity associated with the autumnal Chong Yang 重陽 festival on the ninth day of the ninth moon. In a different context I have suggested

38 古今國書集成. 1888. VI, 1166: 風俗考 4a.
41 Aijmer 1991.
in brief that kite flying may have been an iconic expression for the reaching of Heaven. People strove on that day for affinity with what was celestial by climbing hills and mountains. The upwards direction was a characteristic feature of this festival associated with the male cosmic principle of yang 陽.\textsuperscript{42} So here in Zhongxiang people were also devoted kite flyers, but on the fifteenth day of the second lunary, a day followed by a full moon night, which like all full moons had female implications. Furthermore, it was a day associated with betrothals, awakening of flowers and also the re-appearance of butterflies. Perhaps it is in this ‘awakening’ aspect of spring that we might find a clue to the flying of kites at Flower Dawn. In the second moon two categories of beings woke up after hibernating all through the winter—insects and dragons. We are on loose ground here. In Tongshan the solar day and period of ‘Arousal from Hibernation’ was a time for forecasting the seasonal weather. Jing Zhi 靖智 is, however, not only a name for the solar period corresponding to the fifth to the twentieth of March, and often also for the first day of that duration; it is at times used as a name for the second day of the second moon. That particular day is sometimes and in some places also known as ‘the dragon raises his head’.\textsuperscript{43} This designation does not occur in our present corpus of ethnography, nor have we found any explicit references to dragons in the material. Even so, it could be that the notion of risin—striving upwards—referring to flowers and insects, and perhaps also dragons, was alive in this area. At least in the magistracy of Zhongxiang the idea was dramatized in the rising kites. This is nothing more than a suggestion.

The second moon in the year was one inspired by spring and the release of vernal generative forces. There were two festive celebrations at this time which were both connected with the theme of growth and remuneration, and there were many concerns about the coming agricultural season. It was a time for the plowing of the fallow fields and the sowing of rice in the seedbeds was soon to follow. It was also a period when farmers wished for rain and there was customary divination, both about weather and coming crops, the latter of course dependant on the former. The two festivals which have been described

\textsuperscript{42} Bredon & Mitrophanow 1927: 176; Tun 1987: 25.
\textsuperscript{43} Bodde 1975: 56. 252; see also ch‘ü 1972: 31.
here were the main social occasions at this time of the year when both rustic and urban people tried to benefit from the seasonal life forces of Nature.

The She Day was a fairly complex affair when people visited what appears to have been special public altars, to worship by making offerings of meat and wine. What these altars devoted to the She were like, we cannot know for sure. Probably they were not too different from their latter day counterparts made of concrete. What deity was the She? Sometimes the She was combined with the Ji into a more complex phenomenon. Demotically it seems likely that this agricultural earth god was conceived as one being. Sometimes it was male and had a female companion, perhaps a wife. At this point it seems advisable to consult what Sinology has to say.

Derk Bodde’s studies of festivals in early China are helpful here. He describes how in the days of the two consecutive Han dynasties (AD 206-220 BC) the She and the Ji were thought of as a pair presiding over the country with ‘sub-versions’ presiding in a corresponding way hierarchically in every single administrative unit in the realm. The cult of the She Ji was a State ritual at the centre of the polity, in the hands of the Emperor in the capital and handled by his administrators and officials in the periphery. This cult of the She, or She Ji, can be traced back to ancient and even into archaic China, and it appears to be a very old institution in Chinese public life. Even in the pre-Han period of contending fiefdoms under the umbrella of a ritually defined Imperial dominance, the She or She Ji was-if seen as in unity-a deity that not only had a reference to agriculture and harvests but, furthermore, to death; there was an intimate connection between the altar of the She and the Imperial ‘ancestral temple.’ It has been noted that in these ancient offerings the presentations to the altar was of raw meat, whereas the ancestors received food that had been cooked.

Looking into medieval China we find that the worship of the She

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44 In this the She is strikingly similar to the Stove God, prominent at the celebration of Little New Year in the region; see Aijmer 2001: Chapter 4.
45 Bodde 1975: 56, 252; see also Ch’ü 1972: 31.
46 Chavannes 1969: 507, 516, 519.
or She Ji was still a political manifestation up through the Tang (618-907) and the Song (960-1260) dynasties, articulating neighbourhood and local belonging. In the Ming (1368-1644) period of early modern China, government regulations required that every hundred households maintain one She shrine and the ceremony conducted there should include the slaughtering of animals. It was then a day of feasting.48

There is reason for caution here. While it cannot be denied that the ancient rituals of the remote Zhou dynasty share something with those performed more than two thousand years after in late Imperial China, the similarities must be deemed to be no more than a certain family resemblance. There is no reason to assume that the late counterparts of pristine sacrifices were caused by a true structural continuity through the ages. Forms are similar, so are the offerings of meat and wine, and a political component was permanently involved; but having recognized this, we must also remember all those agrarian, religious, social and political changes that have had such a profound impact on life in China in these millennia. Whatever ideas and notions that informed the rites of ancient and early China, these must have been modified and transformed in the course of these two thousand years of history. Still, these resemblances over the millennia continue to fascinate.

The observation that the archaic links between the cults of the She and the dead re-appear in contemporary rituals in southern China, invites some further speculation. If death was an essential semantic component in the ancient notion of the She, a robust structure of meaning may well have survived—or been generated and generated again—despite ever changing symbolic environments; if it was true that the She could not be separated from the dead, or, possibly, was a manifestation of collective death, this close connotation [death<>vegetative force] may have been a presupposition for any ritual activity concerned with the earth and its generative power.

What can be said here, in our present context, is that in some places in the central Yangzi valley there were visits to the graves of the dead in connection with the celebration of the She. The rituals to the agricultural god of the soil solicited blessings for the coming season by offerings and prayers which were sent in a downward direction to reach

the divinity of these chthonic domains. That underworld was also the universe of the dead in their graves. In a sense the altar, or shrine, of the She (She Ji) may have been intuited as a symbolic epitome of the collective of graves, but this would then have been a synthesis of death and the dead with a difference. In grave worship it was explicitly dead individuals who were addressed, and possibly also a multitude of such individuals, all of whom were discursively brought together by a grammar of agnatic kinship. It may be significant that, as in Yuanjiang, the recently dead should be worshipped at their graves before the She Day—when they were still ‘uncollectivized’ individuals. Perhaps they were incorporated into the She and the common ground of the vicinage on this very day. In a social landscape filled with localized lineage communities, it may be that the dead of an area or a neighbourhood were always former members of a particular localized lineage. But that may not always have been true.

We might hypothesize that the She was a manifestation of the collectivity of the dead in an area, an aggregation of ‘death force’ without discrimination in terms of agnatic kinship. The She brought his worshippers the blessings of the vegetative power of the underground and its inhabitants for the coming crops, for the production of rice and the reproduction of society. This train of thought would also account for the political component, the She being the centripetal energy in a demarcated space—in contrast to ancestors and their cults which were articulated in idioms of time, to enhance various particularized claims of specific kinship communities. The She was, like the Imperial administration, for everyone and, in the final analysis, the Emperor was the mediator of the blessings of the underground for his Imperial realm.

About the same time, and in the same annual phase of spring and vernal tasks in the agricultural cycle, people in the Dongting area also celebrated the Flower Dawn. This was a festival of certain female presuppositions, being connected with the full moon. People observed the awakening Nature, the re-emergence of butterflies and other insects and the sprouting vegetation. They sought out areas outside of towns and villages for outings with picnics and games. On occasion, this seasonal striving upwards from the ground in the direction of Heaven, was made symbolically explicit by the flying of paper kites. The day was one on which initiatives were taken to betroth young women and,
if they were already engaged to be married, to exchange gifts with their future affinal relatives. Flower Dawn was a day which marked young girls' attainment of womanhood. Ears were pierced for wearing jewellery and from this day, marking the same shift, adolescent women let their hair grow long to announce their entry into the world of female concerns.

Early spring in the plains and hills of Hubei and Hunan was a period of beginnings and anticipations. The return of life force in Nature was a process drawing from symbolic codes and involving various rituals, as well as a giving rise to a sequence of practical concerns in the mundane work in the rice fields. It is in these spring days that we find the celebration of two different festivals, each in its own way attuned to the season: the festivals can be seen as mutually complementary, the two handling different dimensions of the same world.

The ritual activities on this day reflected a social grammar of reciprocity in which gifts-meat and wine-were expected to generate a response from the She. The counter-gift would be an abundance of rice in the fields in late summer. A cognate ritual procedure would be staged some weeks later, but this time the rites would engage the mortal remains of the individual dead and the combinations of ancestral graves that formed the stock of memorabilia of particular lineages. These rituals would aim at a similarly beneficial effect on the coming crops, but would also be forward-looking, inviting the dead to return to the living in early summer.

The She Day was celebrated on a date calculated according to the sun's movement though the celestial zodiac, a procedure providing a relatively stable seasonal appearance. Its ritual liturgy related the occasion to the yin 阴 cosmic principle and stressed a downward direction, further associated with female forces, darkness and death. It is interesting that this festival of clear yin associations was calculated in accordance with the movement of the sun, the foremost exposition of the male, life-giving and celestial cosmic principle of yang. The festival appeared on the first wu day after the Li Chun day. Wu is, as already mentioned, the seventh of the 'Earthly Branches,' which, apart from being used to represent cyclical time, was associated with the midday hour and the southerly direction. It seems that a conventional calendar discourse, by the use of the wu branch, tied celestial progress
to a state of the earth. The same paradox is also apparent in the celebration of the other seasonal festival, the Flower Dawn with its emphasis on an upward yang direction. The latter festival was observed according to the lunar calendar, and so relating to the main yin manifestation in Heaven, the moon. To intensify this sense of femininity it was celebrated under the full moon of the second lunar. The second moon, being of an even number, also has female associations.

The Flower Dawn day highlighted the awakening Nature and the end of the cold season’s hibernation. It celebrated arousal and the drawing out of life from the underground in an upward direction. It was a day to be spent in the open with picnics in ‘the wilderness’, away from built up areas. This was in contrast to the centripetal She celebrations, which were focused on one particular, centrally located altar. Flower Dawn was a day of contesting games, food and kite flying. Female sexuality was one main theme of the festival, people following old conventions as to the coming of age of young women, their betrothals and coming marriages.

The latter point is somewhat puzzling. The period for betrothals of young people, and also marriages, started generally at, or after, the Chong Yang festival on the ninth day of the ninth moon, the culmination of the wedding season being on New Year’s Day and around that time. This autumnal period was the social season that followed after the harvest of rice when the fields were left fallow and the life force of Nature withdrew into the ground.  

It seems then as if the Flower Dawn was a spring alternative for the celebration of relations of affinity. Both She Day and Flower Dawn appeared in a period of the year that saw a seasonal near-balance of the cosmic forces of yin and yang-complete at the Spring Equinox. Yin had now started to wane and yang was growing into dominance. In the world of death, the deceased in their yin guise in the graves were growing in ritual importance, while the dead in their yang semblance, as celestial phenomena and manifest in the form of ancestral tablets, were coming out of focus. These two festivals each explored one dimension of Nature’s seasonal balance:

49 The autumnal equinox gave towards the end of the year.
both. The She Day sought abundance in terms of rice from chthonic generative forces, while Flower Dawn solicited wealth in terms of human proliferation from the celestial  

yang  

forces of the season. Early spring was a ritual season of releasing life by way of offerings, engagements for marriage and games of contest which, taken together, brought new life to both local communities and domestic groups. Together the two festivals sought a general enjoyment of double blessings.

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