INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.
Childbirth customs in early China

Wilms, Sabine, M.A.
The University of Arizona, 1992
CHILDBIRTH CUSTOMS IN EARLY CHINA

by

Sabine Wilms

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
DEPARTMENT OF EAST ASIAN STUDIES
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
In the Graduate College
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

1992
STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

This thesis has been submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for an advanced degree at The University of Arizona and is deposited in the University Library to be made available to borrowers under rules of the library.

Brief quotations from this thesis are allowable without special permission, provided that accurate acknowledgement of source is made. Requests for permission for extended quotation from or reproduction of this manuscript in whole or in part may be granted by the head of the major department or the Dean of the Graduate College when in his or her judgement the proposed use of the material is in the interests of scholarship. In all other instances, however, permission must be obtained from the author.

SIGNED: 

APPROVAL BY THESIS DIRECTOR

This thesis has been approved on the date shown below:

Donald Harper

Professor of East Asian Studies

Date
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-Cultural Patterns of Behavior and Values Concerning the Treatment and Disposal of the Placenta</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childbirth Practices Related to the Burial of the Placenta in Early China</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ancient Chinese Ritual of Exposing the Newborn Child</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

The recent discovery of Chinese medical manuscripts in a tomb dated to the second century BC in Ma-wang-tui, Ch'ang-sha, has revealed extremely interesting new information on the subject of ancient Chinese childbirth practices. The scrolls contain detailed advice concerning a proper and auspicious treatment of the placenta, including an astronomical chart for choosing the perfect location for the burial of the placenta, and a description of the custom of exposing the newborn infant on the earth directly after birth. This paper offers a translation of these paragraphs and an interpretation based on a Japanese medical text that reflects Chinese medieval practices, basic knowledge of Chinese cosmology, society and religion and also general cross-cultural patterns for the treatment of the placenta that have been established through an anthropological research into placenta-related practices, beliefs and mythology from many different traditional cultures.
Introduction

The belief in the sacredness of life is one of the most ancient and basic human sentiments shared by all cultures at all times. The moment of childbirth as the coming into being of a new human life has therefore always been considered to be an event of greatest importance in the course of one's life. It is an event of religious significance marking the closest point of connection between the material and the spirit world especially since many cultures believe that the spirit of the new-born baby is actually a reincarnation of a deceased person and birth is thus seen as the return of a spirit from the after-world to the world of the living. At the same time, even with the advances of modern technology the time of birth and right thereafter continues to be the most dangerous period in one's life. In order to lessen the risks of infant mortality traditional cultures have therefore established a wealth of taboos and rituals concerning mother and child at the moment of birth as well as during a larger time frame before and after birth. Especially in the tightly-knit social network of traditional communities, moreover, a childbirth is not only central to the individual lives of mother and child, but it also marks the arrival of a new member in the group with clearly defined duties and privileges according to his or her social status and therefore also affects the group as a whole.

Modern civilization has replaced the ancient rituals related to this sacred event with advanced technology in order to minimize the dangers of childbirth for both mother and child. But although technological progress has managed to greatly reduce the original dangers and pain associated with it, it
has also distanced us from the wonderful original experience of consciously creating life and instead has lead to a common view of childbirth in the United States as a "crisis the culture defines as dangerous, polluting and obscene." At the same time it has neglected thousands of years of ancient knowledge concerning the spiritual aspects of birth. While investigating ancient rituals one has to constantly be aware of their great importance for traditional societies since they served as essential means to ensure the health, physical as well as spiritual, of both mother and child in the most dangerous period of their lives and at the same time took into consideration the social and political consequences of the event for the whole community. The numerous rituals surrounding this significant moment in the life of an individual as well as in the community are deeply rooted in particular religious belief-systems, social organizations and political structures and therefore offer precious insights into a culture as a whole.

This paper will shed more light on little-researched aspects of early Chinese culture by translating and interpreting certain passages related to childbirth practices from recently discovered Chinese medical documents from the second century BC. The silk scrolls and bamboo slips, which were unearthed from a tomb in Ma-wang-tui, Ch'ang-sha, which is dated to 168 BC, constitute one of the earliest available collections of medical documents in the world and among other things offer revolutionary insights into ancient scientific and ritualistic knowledge and practices related to childbirth. They also offer a unique opportunity to understand little-known popular beliefs and practices common in Warring States and Ch'in-Han China that

---

were neglected in the orthodox literature of the time and thus contribute to the sparse amount of material available on this subject of study in China. Among the manuscripts unearthed in Ma-wang-tui, the documents directly concerned with childbirth customs emphasize the significance of a proper burial of the placenta as the most important means to ensure health, long life and good luck of the child. For the same purpose the manuscripts also describe the practice of exposing the newborn child on a pile of soil directly after birth. The text concerning childbirth customs is found on two scrolls, assigned the titles *T'ai ch'än shu* ("Writing on Giving Birth") and *Tsa liao fang* ("Recipes for Miscellaneous Diseases") by the modern-day Chinese editors of the manuscripts. Of special importance for the topic of this thesis is an illustration on where to bury the placenta entitled *Nan fang Yu tsang* ("Southern Direction Yu's Burial"), placed in the upper left-hand corner of the scroll *T'ai ch'än shu*. The chart consists of a circle of twelve small squares representing the months and twelve subdivisions in each square. The auspicious and inauspicious positions are related to Chinese cosmological and astrological beliefs and are supposed to reflect the new-born child's future according to the direction where the placenta is buried. In addition to this illustration, the silk scroll contains another chart in the upper right-hand corner entitled *Jen tzu t'ü* and a text with advice on pregnancy, burial of the placenta, the safety and health of the mother and the new-born child and

---

related topics. Directions as to the usage or significance of the illustration for burying the placenta, however, are lacking in this text and are instead placed in the fortieth column of the silk scroll *Tsa liao fang* which is entitled *Yu tsang mai pao t'u fa* ("The method of the Chart for Burying the Placenta According to Yu's Burial") and obviously refers to the illustration entitled *Nan fang Yu tsang* in the *T'ai ch' an shu*. A Japanese medical treatise from the tenth century called *Ishimpo* that is extensively quotes from a medieval Chinese source no longer existent in its original form⁴ called the *Ch'an ching* ("Classic on Giving Birth") offers convincing evidence of the significance and continuity of these popular beliefs and will therefore also be quoted.

In order to complement these significant finds in China I will use information about rituals concerning childbirth practices from many traditional cultures throughout the world in an anthropological approach and establish certain commonly-shared cross-cultural patterns of behavior. These will then be applied to the area of ancient China and thus help to understand the content of the ancient Chinese documents. A correct interpretation of these childbirth rituals will enhance our understanding of general ancient Chinese beliefs and values concerning such diverse aspects of life as social and political organization, religious beliefs regarding the afterlife or concepts of medicine and will thus provide important information about the roots of one of the world's oldest civilizations.

---

³ On the *Ishimpo* and its author, Tamba Yasuyori, see R. H. van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, pp. 35-47. The book was completed ca. 984 and circulated in manuscript form until the nineteenth century. The translations in this paper are based on a reproduction of the 1859 woodblock edition.
Concerning the Treatment and Disposal of the Placenta

Before investigating rituals related to the treatment and disposal of the placenta after birth, it is useful to establish some general assumptions about the working of magic by which the performers of rituals are influenced in their actions. Sir James Frazer offered a definition of magic that might still be helpful for the rituals that this chapter is concerned with: He invented the term "sympathetic magic" which is based on the conviction that "things act on each other at a distance through a secret sympathy, the impulse being transmitted from one to the other by means of what we may conceive as a kind of invisible ether." This sympathy is in Frazer's eyes either caused by the fact that the targeted object or person is similar to the object that magic is performed on, in which case it is called "homeopathic magic" or by the fact that these two have at some time in the past been in physical contact with each other, which he refers to as "contagious magic". Furthermore Frazer distinguishes between positive magic or sorcery, which is performed to induce a desired effect, and negative magic or taboo, which means abstaining from certain actions in order to avoid undesired effects. When investigating magical rituals performed on the placenta, we have to be aware of the fact that the societies in which these rituals are performed are convinced of the validity of these rules of sympathetic magic. They take these laws which are


5 ibid., p. 14.
merely based on an association of ideas to be as valid and real as the natural laws which govern the cosmos and believe that they can be used by humans to influence the courses of their lives. The application of magic is especially relevant in those aspects of everyday life that are unpredictable and beyond regular human control and are therefore of greatest importance in the moments of birth and right thereafter, one of the most precarious periods in the course of one's life. Magic thus serves the important purpose of giving humans confidence in a world full of dangers that cannot be faced and influenced by other means. All these aspects of magic can easily be recognized in the customs of traditional communities related to the placenta. Although different practices of handling the placenta are dependent on a community's religious beliefs, societal organization and many other external circumstances we can nevertheless distinguish certain cross-cultural sentiments in which any particular local custom is rooted.

At the beginning of any investigation into placenta-related practices there has to stand an attempt to clarify the significance of the placenta for traditional societies. Whereas it is standard procedure in modern western hospitals to discard the placenta in the garbage without any second thoughts, the respectful handling and disposal of it by traditional communities has always been firmly integrated into the ceremony connected with giving birth and welcoming a new life into the society. The main reason for this reverent treatment is the widely-shared ancient belief that the placenta is in some way closely connected to the new-born baby, which can easily be seen in literal translations of indigenous names for the placenta. It has been reported as
being called the "second birth" in Northern Mexico and is known as the "second child" in Guatemala.

The intimate connection of the placenta to the child is also reflected in various ways of burying the placenta: In Nigeria the placenta is buried with a banana stem, a palm or sago tree, and the plant growing out of the pit is then named after the child and will always be intimately connected to the child. This explains the saying "to kill a banana tree is to kill small children." Similarly, among the Seri Indians in New Mexico an older woman washes the placenta, salts it or rubs it with salt to strengthen the baby and buries it at the base of a giant cactus together with five seedlings of any species. The custom of planting a tree or a similar plant on top of the placenta pit is common throughout the world and is even being copied by New Age cultures in the United States. Jeannine Parvati, a Native American midwife, offers a few examples: "Friends of ours buried their two [i.e. placentas] under trees that they planted and held sacred to their children. Sequoia and Willow were the trees and their son and daughter. I planted a friend's placenta in the center of a mandala vegetable/flower garden plot one full moon years ago."

---

6 Isabel Kelly, *Folk Practices in North Mexico, Birth Customs, Folk Medicine, and Spiritualism in the Laguna Zone*, p. 13.
In traditional Malay villages the placenta is believed to be the "older sibling of the baby"\textsuperscript{11} and is therefore treated with a symbolic burial that leaves no doubt about the intention of the participants as to respectfully burying a quasi-human being:\textsuperscript{12} The midwife washes the placenta thoroughly and wraps it into a bundle adding salt, tamarind, a small piece of white cloth and some absorbent cotton, all these serving the function of symbolizing the burial of a real human being. Salt and tamarind are used here as preservatives and also because they are believed to keep the spirits away from the world of the living, whereas white cloth and cotton are added because of their usage in regular burials to dress and cover the corpse. The father of the new-born baby then completes the ceremony by burying the placenta and performing prayers for the dead. The placenta is believed to be similar to a certain kind of invisible spirits that only consist of air and fire and lack certain external human characteristics because they do not contain water and earth, but are seen, similar to the placenta, as humankind's older siblings. The spirit of the placenta can appear to Shamans during ceremonies and through them complain of unequal treatment by its "parents" compared to its real siblings.

Another interesting belief is recorded from the aborigines in North-Eastern Australia:\textsuperscript{13} Here the Cho-i, one of the life-giving forces, is instilled into a child by the creator spirit Anje when still in its mother's womb and is during the actual birth divided into two parts. One of these will stay within

\textsuperscript{11} Carol Laderman, "Giving Birth in a Malay Village," in Margarita Artschwager Kay, \textit{Anthropology of Human Birth}, p.94.
\textsuperscript{12} The following information is based on ibid., pp.94-95.
\textsuperscript{13} The following paragraph is based on Montague F. Ashley-Montagu, \textit{Coming into Being among the Australian Aborigines}, pp. 135-137.
the new-born until his or her death whereupon it will leave the corpse to roam around freely forever as a malevolent spirit. The other part of the Cho-i will remain in the placenta which is buried carefully by the grandmother. The location of the grave is then clearly marked with a cone-shaped structure made out of twigs. This structure serves as a sign for Anje who takes it to one of the places that he haunts, like a tree or a lagoon, some of which are known to the community. When Anje creates a new person by putting a mud-baby into the mother's womb, he compliments it with a part of the Cho-i of the father (for a boy) or the father's sister (for a girl). A child's later "home" where it hunts and roams around is determined by the location where it's Cho-i has been released from. This is revealed through a ceremony in which the grandmother calls all the names for the known haunting places of Anje while cutting the umbilical cord. The location being called in the moment when it breaks is believed to convey the place where the child's Cho-i has been stored and thus signifies the child's future "home".

From an extremely different cultural background, the Indo-Germanic tradition, a related belief has been passed down: 14 Here it is not the placenta as much as the caul that receives special attention in popular belief. It is considered to be extremely auspicious and imbued with all kinds of particular powers, but especially relevant to our discussion is a belief found in Iceland. There the caul is called "Fylgja" or tutelary spirit, and it is believed to be the seat of this spirit or a part of the child's soul. Therefore it is treated with extreme care so as not to receive any damage, and is buried by the midwife. In

---

14 The following paragraph is based on Richard Beitl, Der Kinderbaum, Brauchtum und Glauben um Mutter und Kind, pp. 90-98.
case of the caul being thrown away or burned, the child loses its Fylgja and therefore precious protection.

From all these examples from different cultures we can easily see that the notion of the placenta being somehow intimately connected to the child is shared by many traditional societies throughout the world. Since the specific treatment of a child's placenta can according to the rules of contagious and homeopathic magic greatly influence the child's future, in a positive as well as a negative manner, it is not surprising that its ceremonial burial is surrounded by a wealth of extremely interesting magical prescriptions and taboos. A few examples randomly selected from greatly varying cultural backgrounds will help to substantiate this claim:

In most of the traditional cultures mentioned here it is common to bury the placenta under the ground in the earth. The most obvious reason for this is the fact that it should be disposed of in such a way that no evil-minded person or even animals could consciously or by accident affect it in a manner that would harm the child. Therefore great care is applied frequently to hide the location of the burial and to wrap the placenta and cover it with ashes or similar material to prevent animals from undigging it. A second reason for choosing the earth as permanent resting place for the placenta that might be less obvious for our cultural background, but is nevertheless at least equally important for traditional people lies in the religious belief in the nurturing qualities of the earth. The belief in the Earth as the sacred Mother of nature and the beginning and end of all life is one of the earliest and most basic religious notions throughout the world, easily graspable for traditional
communities that are firmly rooted in the cycles of nature and closely connected to the surrounding animal and plant life. It used to be widely spread among tribal communities in all continents, many of which also happened to be matriarchal, and constitutes the foundation for any major civilization. Mother Earth was revered as the primal Goddess, being female, nurturing and creatrix of all life. Based on this belief it is only natural that the placenta should be buried in her arms since all life ultimately comes from her and would so be reverently returned to her. Recalling the magical connection of the placenta to the newborn child, the mysterious nurturing power of the earth is also believed to be of the most positive influence for the child through the disposal of the placenta as the child’s sibling or external soul into the soil. It will become apparent in the next few paragraphs, that this practice is therefore, with slight local variations, found all over the world from America to Asia, Africa and Europe.

The Kwakiutl, a group of tribes dwelling on the northern Pacific coast of North America, follow an elaborate procedure for burying the placenta: The man of the household prepares it after four days by tying it with black bear sinew tightly to a stick of yew-wood, wraps it in a mat and then buries it late at night in the middle of a much frequented street, taking great care that no one can see him. Then he levels the ground above the placenta and pours water over it so that the place cannot be distinguished. In certain exceptional cases, however, the placenta is not buried in the ground but disposed of in a

15 For further information see Monica Sjöö & Barbara Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother, Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth*.
The placenta is sometimes placed on the beach in a location where ravens will pick at it, because it is believed that a person whose placenta has been picked at by ravens will understand their cries. Ravens are believed to report about the arrival of warrying enemies, and thus, the people will call someone who understands the ravens when they come so that he can interpret their cries and pass on their knowledge to the tribe.

In Egypt, there exist several customs all of which are based on sympathetic magic. In all cases the proper disposal is of greatest importance since the people believe that the child might be greatly harmed if the placenta should fall in the wrong hands. Therefore it is common to dispose of the placenta by throwing it in the sea or a river since "as the river flows, the child's life will continue to flow." The placenta can also be fed to the dogs, because "through a form of imitative magic, the running of the dogs is believed to confer longevity on the newborn child."

A similar belief is in Germany connected not with the placenta, but with the caul (i.e. fetal membrane that sometimes covers the head): The caul was carefully kept by the parents and then passed on to the child. Soldiers took out their caul in a fatal-looking battle as an amulet in order to protect themselves from the devil. It was also believed that parents could increase a child's luck and material fortune by attaching gold and precious stones to its

---

17 Ibid., pp. 606-607.
19 Ibid., p. 166.
20 Ibid., p. 166.
caul. The following story is recorded about the son of a count: Coal and dice were added to his caul in order to turn the child into a successful gambler and wild, adventurous horseman as it was seen fit for a Franconian noble. It is also recorded, however, that even this precaution did not succeed in interesting the young man in the pursuits suitable for his social position.

We can now easily distinguish a recurring theme in all these customs when we abstract their local variations based on such external factors as natural environment, societal organization or religious beliefs. At the root of every one of these practices is the conviction that the fate of the child is somehow mysteriously connected to the treatment of the placenta (or in case of Indo-Germanic customs, the caul). Based on the principles of contagious magic, the child will be affected by any actions performed on the placenta since it has in the mother's womb been in direct physical contact with it. This becomes even more understandable when we recall that the placenta is frequently considered to be either the child's sibling or the seat of its external soul. Thus we can find both forms of sympathetic magic applied, sorcery in order to induce a certain desirable effect as well as taboo in order to prevent certain events considered harmful to the child's future.

But the mysterious power ascribed to the placenta in popular belief transcends the effects of contagious magic which are merely based on the fact that it has at some point in the past been in physical contact with the child. Its direct association with the blood expelled by the mother during the process of birth and also with the miraculous act of creation itself lends a whole new
significance to the placenta and can offer further information and insights into rituals related to its treatment.

It is a widely spread belief among traditional tribal communities that the female blood expelled during menstruation as well as childbirth is extremely powerful, symbolic of life and death and thus of the primary wonder in nature, the cycle of recreation. It is considered to be sacred in the most literal meaning of the word, imbued with a superhuman power which can be used by the enlightened person, but at the same time it is extremely dangerous and even disastrous for the uninitiated. The process of bleeding during menstruation and childbirth, in early matriarchal societies seen as a privilege and source of special power for women, came with the advance of patriarchies to be regarded more and more as a great potential danger for the life of the whole community. The belief in the mysterious superhuman power of female blood probably originated in the ancient theory that female bleeding was the natural way of a woman's body to cleanse herself and to discharge internal pollution. Thus we find an abundance of taboos surrounding the times of menstruation and childbirth all over the world which prevent either only the men or any member of the community from contact with this dangerous and highly polluting substance. Women are often required to leave the community during these periods and keep to themselves and must not participate in any ritualistic activities since the sight of female blood would offend the spirits. This thinking has naturally left its traces in the ritualistic treatment of the placenta: Everywhere it is disposed of with greatest care not only in order to ensure that the child might not be harmed by any act of sympathetic magic performed on the placenta, but also
with the goal of safely removing and neutralizing this substance which is considered to be of greatest potential danger for the welfare of the entire community. The following example will help to substantiate this claim that the disposal of the placenta also served the important purpose of neutralizing the dangerous power inherent in the placenta because of its association with female blood:

Most obvious maybe is the aspect of female pollution in the extremely patriarchal societies of traditional Japan and China, where a woman's primary function was to create sons for her husband's clan. In Japan, the woman, merely regarded as a "borrowed womb"22, was forced to give birth either in "the darkest, dirtiest and least used"23 room of the house or she was even moved to a special communal or private birth hut removed from the community24, and the water used to bathe the mother and the child after birth was poured in a shaded place, according to some anthropologists in order to avoid offending the spirits with the sight of female blood. The placenta was buried near the house for a girl and immediately beyond the threshold of the house for a boy.25 The woman and the child were considered ritually contaminated for a period varying from seven days to one month or even 75 days and during this time confined to the birth hut, a period that was then ended by a ritual bath in the river to cleanse the mother and the child.26

23 R. J. Smith and J. B. Cornell, Two Japanese Villages, p. 70.
A similar custom is to this day found in Taiwan, a society with a closely related culture. There a woman is restricted by a wealth of taboos for a period of ritual contamination lasting for a complete month after childbirth. Several of the taboos consist of restrictions concerning contact with family members and the outside world in order to avoid polluting them. The woman is also not supposed to partake in ritual activities such as burning incense or go outside in order to avoid insulting the gods and thus attracting misfortune.

From a very different culture we can sense the same fear in the polluting power of female blood and therefore also of the placenta: The Mohave Indians claim that a woman's barrenness can be caused by burning menstrual blood or any substance that has come in contact with it. Similarly a woman will become barren when one burns the placenta or any other substance expelled at birth. Women, however, do not usually have access to these because they are buried immediately after birth.

The significance of the placenta is, however, based not only on the danger stemming from its polluting character, but like in any sacred object it also manifests itself as a positive power that can be used by the initiated person. The belief in the superhuman nature of the placenta and in a close relation of it to the spirit world might be rooted in its direct association with the mysterious act of creation. It is reflected very clearly in the tribal customs


and myths concerning the placenta from Orissa in India:\textsuperscript{29} Because of potential danger stemming from its superhuman power, great care is always taken to bury it securely, necessary in order to neutralize the inherent energy and also to prevent witches and other evil-minded people to get a hold of it.\textsuperscript{30} Therefore some tribes place a slab over the pit in which the placenta is buried and drive the arrow that the umbilical cord has been cut with into the ground above the pit. Others wrap it in leaves, place it in the pit and arrange branches around it. The mother of the newborn child will sit on a seat placed on top of it for her daily bath until the baby's stump of the umbilical cord falls off. After this is then added to the placenta in the pit, the pit is filled in and secured with the arrow. In other tribes the placenta and cord are buried inside the house with a special fire lit above the pit.

Of equal interest for our topic are the myths surrounding placentas from the same cultural environment of Orissa which can increase our sensitivity as to the particular nature of the placenta as a substance with a life of its own or at least the potential of life. Especially striking are the numerous stories that tell about sacred plants growing out of placenta pits: One tribe tells the story how a beautiful flower, the first marigold, grew out of a placenta pit behind the house in the family's absence.\textsuperscript{31} The father greatly pleased the sun when he offered him some flowers in a sacrifice. This is the reason why this tribe offers marigold flowers in sacrifices to the gods. In another tribe, the first tobacco plant grew inside a house out of the spot where a placenta had been buried.

\textsuperscript{29} The following information is gathered from Elwin Verrier, \textit{Tribal Myths of Orissa}.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p. 693.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p.102.
buried and where a special fire had then been lit on top of it.\textsuperscript{32} One last story records how the first bamboo sprang in the forest from the place where a placenta had been accidentally dropped, either because the mother gave birth in the jungle or because placenta and cord had been carried off by a crow.\textsuperscript{33} In all these stories the placenta serves as a medium through which the gods presented the humans with a plant of special significance for the tribe. Thus we can here see how the belief in a close connection between the placenta and the gods manifests itself in this potency of the placenta to create new plants.

Another myth, however, reveals the other, dark side of this mysterious superhuman energy associated with the placenta:\textsuperscript{34} A woman whose husband was gone, when she gave birth, threw the placenta away carelessly. It was carried away by a kite who dropped it in the neighbors' yard where the village priest lived. The priest's daughter picked it up thinking it was a piece of meat and ate it. When the mother's husband returned, he heard from his wife that a kite had carried off the placenta. Inquiring about the kite in the village they found out that the priest's daughter had eaten it, and thereupon the people in the tribe realized that she had turned into a witch. This is the reason that this tribe has ever since buried their placentas secretly with great care so that no witch could lay hands on them.

Summarizing these different beliefs related to the placenta, we can clearly distinguish a common thread running through the rituals and sentiments of the traditional peoples all over the world. The placenta is

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., pp.178-179.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., pp. 119-120.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., pp. 557-558.
obviously believed to be of a special significance for the newborn child's future based on the laws of sympathetic magic. Therefore any act performed on the placenta will have a similar effect on the child. But at the same time the placenta is believed to be imbued with a mysterious power of its own going far beyond simple magic, both extremely dangerous and potentially auspicious, and to contain some sort of life energy of its own or at least the potency for it. This stems from its association with the sacred act of birth, leading to a closeness to the spirit world, and its contact with female blood, which is in itself considered to be a sacred substance. When we recall this set of ideas, it is very understandable that traditional people treat the placenta only with the greatest care and reverence and pay special attention to its disposal. Based on very ancient beliefs in the nurturing power of Mother Earth and in the cycles of nature that begin and end in the soil, it is common to return the placenta to its mother, the Earth, by burying it in the ground, usually wrapped and secured in such a way as to prevent animals and uninitiated or evil-minded people from unearthing and desecrating it.

**Childbirth Practices Related to the Burial of the Placenta in Early China**

Although these patterns can be recognized all over the world, they are like any ritual subjected to local cultural, social, religious, economic and other influences and therefore each express these underlying cross-cultural sentiments very differently. Studying, recording and then relating local customs to cross-cultural patterns can offer a wealth of information not only
about a particular custom, but also about the society that it occurs in, since a society's rituals are tightly bound into its culture and reflect its beliefs and sentiments. In the case of early Chinese popular beliefs and culture, we can easily realize the truth of this statement by translating and interpreting the earliest materials available on the subject of childbirth rituals and thus gain insights into this otherwise not very well-documented or well-researched aspect of Chinese civilization. It is important to note the specific emphasis these medical manuscripts place on the rituals related to the burial of the placenta, which will therefore also constitute the main focus of the following investigation.

The most striking practice in these documents is related to an illustration entitled *Nan fang Yu tsang* (Southern Direction Yu's Burial) that was used as a device to figure out the most auspicious position for burying the placenta. It is designed as a square-shaped ring made out of twelve smaller squares that represent the twelve months. Each month-square is again subdivided into a ring of twelve squares with three positions in each of the four directions. These subdivisions within every month are distinguished by the numbers from 20 to 120 and the character *ssu* meaning "death", that appears twice in every monthly square. With the top of the chart signifying South, the bottom North, the left East and the right West in accordance with old maps found in the same tomb, the months start in the lower left-hand or north-east corner and proceed in a leftward direction, rising on the left and falling on the right.

---

35 Information for the next several paragraphs is based mostly on a translation of P'an Yuanken, "Ma-wang-tui po-shu mai-pao-t'u k'ao-cheng," (Textual Research on the Chart for Burying the Placenta, the Silk Writing Unearthed in Ma-wang-tui), pp. 247-250.
Although several numbers and ssu marks are missing in the monthly subdivisions because of the damaged condition of the scroll when it was discovered, we are able to reconstruct the original form of the chart and fill in the missing positions after understanding its usage, background and significance through further research in related materials: The text on the same silk scroll as the illustration contains no direct comment to it, but on another scroll from the same body of medical documents discovered in the tomb called TSA LIAO FANG (Recipes for Miscellaneous Diseases") we find a direct reference to the illustration:

A method of the Illustration on Burying the Placenta According to Yu's Burial: In burying the placenta, avoid the positions of Small Time and Big Time, and, using the month of giving birth, look for the place with the highest number to bury the placenta.

This text without doubt refers to the illustration in question and offers concrete advice concerning its usage as well as its significance. It tells us to use the chart as a guide to bury the placenta in an auspicious position by avoiding the positions of Small Time and Big Time in the month of birth and instead choosing the position with the highest number as the most auspicious location for burying the placenta. Since the two positions called "Small Time"

36 translation of Ma-wang-tui yi shu k’ao-chu (the most recent annotated Chinese edition of the medical texts found in Ma-wang-tui based on the Wen-wu edition of all Ma-wang-tui manuscripts), TSA LIAO FANG, p. 326, column 40.
and "Big Time" are to be avoided and are therefore obviously considered inauspicious and since there are two positions within the frame of each month on the illustration that are marked "ssu" (death), we can conclude that squares with that character are identical with the locations of "Small Time" and "Big Time".

But why do the ancient Chinese put such great emphasis on the burial of the placenta? Why do they use this particular method to define the most auspicious position for the placenta to be buried? In a tenth century Japanese medical compendium, quoting a now lost medieval Chinese text called the Ch'an ching ("Classic of Giving Birth"), we are able to obtain important information concerning the ritual's background as well as significance. There the following story is recorded:

A method for burying the placenta when one loses one's children time after time: Once upon a time when Yu was at Thunder Lake, a woman came towards him crying. When he asked her for the reason, she answered: "I have given birth to several children, and they have all died early. Not one of them is alive, therefore I cry." After Yu taught her this method, her children all attained long life, and she did not lose any of them to an early death.\(^{37}\)

\(^{37}\) Chapter 23 of Tamba Yasuyori, Ishimpo, p. 514.
According to this text, the woman was taught an effective method for coping with the common problem of infant mortality by the highly revered ancient sage-king Yu. This detail becomes important when we recall that the illustration for burying the placenta in the Ma-wang-tui manuscript is called *Nan fang Yu tsang* (Southern Direction Yu's Burial) and thus proves that the practice of burying the placenta according to the chart was clearly associated with Yu. This serves to show us the high significance attributed to this ritual in Chinese popular belief. After several general advices on the proper locations and preparations for the burial of the placenta, the text directly refers to the illustration, again quoting the medieval Chinese text "Classic on Giving Birth":

In all cases, one who wants to bury the placenta must first carefully observe the twelve months illustration. A location with a high number signifies longevity, a location with a low number a shortened life. Sometimes when a position with a high number is also the location of a spirit to be avoided, then this position should also be avoided.

From the context of the document and the description of the illustration and its usage in this paragraph we can conclude that the twelve

---

38 For a translation and interpretation of this material see below pp. 42-50.
month chart mentioned in the text must refer to a chart similar to the illustration painted on the silk scroll that was discovered in Ma-wang-tui. We can also conclude that the so-called "spirits to be avoided" signify the inauspicious positions that are marked ssu in the illustration and are called "Small Time" and "Big Time" in the instructions from the Tsa liao fang. One last reference in the Japanese writing, also a direct quote from the earlier Chinese text, gives us another more general, but equally important and revealing indication about the significance, motivation and background of the rituals related to burying the placenta:

Now concerning life as opposed to death and shortened life as opposed to longevity, it all depends on burying the placenta carelessly during the time of giving birth. It all depending on the time of birth, how can one not be careful! He who venerates the spirits and fears Heaven, what he elevates are rituals and funerals; he who avoids trouble and shuns disaster, what he is devoted to are the Old Masters and Sages. Therefore he who follows the Way of Heaven flourishes and he who opposes the Pattern of Earth perishes.

This text states the ancient belief that the course of a person's complete life is dependent on the respectful performance of the rituals surrounding the

---

40 ibid., p. 515.
burial of the placenta right after birth according to certain prescriptions that reflect and express the order of the cosmos. A correct application of the illustration by choosing a position marked with a high number and avoiding the locations of "Small Time" and "Big Time" in order to realize the most auspicious location for burying the placenta is therefore regarded as a matter of greatest importance with grave consequences for the complete life of the child. The last two sentences of the text imply that the Way of Heaven and the Pattern of Earth are somehow connected to the burial of the placenta and therefore also to the illustration. Based on this note we can conclude that the illustration must have been constructed in correspondence to cosmic patterns as perceived by the Chinese, which were most clearly expressed in the astronomical calendars. Without too much knowledge of Chinese astronomy we are able to understand the origin of the illustration and reconstruct the damaged parts:

The first question that needs to be solved concerns the positions that occur twice every month marked with the character for death. From the other scroll we know that these extremely unlucky positions, locations of the spirits that are to be avoided, are identical with what the text calls "Small Time" and "Big Time". From other early Chinese astronomical writings we can identify "Big Time" with the "All-inclusive Lake", the "Weighing God" and ultimately the "Great Year". "Small Time" can similarly be recognized as yet another expression for the "Month Establishe" or the "Envoy of the Big Dipper". According to Chinese astronomical beliefs of that time, the planet

---

41References to the following texts are found in the commentary by the Chinese editors to the Tsa liao fang manuscript: the Huai-nan-tzu, T'ien wen (Heavenly Patterns), Wai-t'ai pi-yao, and the Chou-li with commentaries by Cheng Hsüan and K'ung Ying-ta.
Jupiter was called "Year Star" since it completed a circle around the earth in about twelve years and therefore served to designate the twelve zodiacal positions throughout the year\(^{42}\). But because Jupiter circles the sky in the opposite direction to the twelve constellations used for measuring time, from west to east, the Chinese invented an imaginary "Counter-Jupiter", a star circling the sky every twelve years in correspondence with Jupiter but in the opposite direction from east to west, and called it "Great Year", using it for recording the years. At the same time it was also used for recording the months, moving in a leftward circle through the four central positions of the twelve constellations marking the four cardinal points, one month at a time. After completing a cycle, it was believed to start all over again thus circling the sky three times in the course of one year. As for "Small Time" or the "Month Estabisher", it is identical with the last star in the handle of the Big Dipper that designated the twelve months by pointing to one of the twelve constellations. It followed their order from east to west, moving one constellation every month and thus completing a cycle in one year. Since the imaginary Counter Jupiter moved through three constellations every month and the "Month Estabisher" through one constellation every month, the first one was called "Big Time" and the second one "Small Time".

But how does this theory apply to our illustration for burying the placenta? When we recall the structure of the diagram, we can easily identify the twelve squares in every month's ring as signifying the positions for the twelve constellations, with three constellations each pointing in one

\(^{42}\) For the portentous consequences of Jupiter see: Jao Tsung-i and Tseng Hsien-t'ung, *Yun-meng Ch'in chien jih shu yen-chiu*, pp. 67-99.
direction. Moreover, since "Small Time" and "Big Time" are identified with spirits to be avoided and therefore designate extremely inauspicious positions, they are marked ssu or "death" in the chart. Based on our knowledge that "Big Time" or Counter Jupiter moves through the central positions in the four cardinal points, we can conclude that the character ssu which always remains in one of the four central positions among the three positions in every direction is identical with the location of Counter Jupiter in each month, moving in a leftward direction from east to west through the three constellations of one direction a month at a time. Similarly we know that the star at the handle of the Big Dipper, the "Month Establishe", moves through one constellation every month in a leftward direction and we can thus identify the character ssu that moves in this fashion as expressing the location of that star in that particular month. We are now able to add the character ssu to positions that should according to our knowledge about the movement of these two heavenly bodies designate their location but have formerly been unidentifiable because of the damaged condition of the illustration on the silk scroll.

The last problem to be solved is the relationship of the positions marked ssu to the progression of the numbers. These follow the direction of the ssu characters and increase in a leftward movement, starting with the "death" location and increasing from 20 onwards. Arriving at the second "death" location, the numbers again start to increase from small to big. Since it was regarded as attracting bad luck and weakness to welcome Jupiter and good luck and strength to turn one's back on it\(^43\) and since the death location

\(^43\) \textit{Huai-nan-tzu, T’ien wen}.
symbolizing Jupiter is moving in a leftward direction, therefore the left means welcoming and bad luck and the right means turning one's back on it and good luck. Correspondingly the closer a position is to the back or right of Jupiter, the higher is its number and the closer it is to welcoming Jupiter or to its left, the smaller it is. Thus we can reaffirm the aforementioned advice from the commentary on another scroll as to the illustration's usage that one should bury the placenta at a location with a high number.

But why do the Chinese place such a specific emphasis on the fact that the location where the placenta is buried has to correspond to cosmic patterns? What is the foundation for the specific Chinese way of thinking that created this peculiar ritual? In order to answer these questions we have to take a closer look at general early Chinese concepts of cosmology and the significance of cosmic patterns that they recognized in nature for their personal, religious and political lives.

From a text quoted earlier it becomes clear that a proper burial of the placenta was seen as an expression of reverence for the spirits and fear of Heaven and believed to attract good luck and longevity for the infant by imitating and corresponding to the Way of Heaven and the Pattern of Earth. What exactly is meant by these terms and how do they relate to the custom of burying the placenta? The Chinese view of the cosmos and of their role in it was based on correlative thinking which meant that humankind was integrated in a cosmos and at the same time managed to influence it by discovering certain patterns of correlations in nature in order to act in

44 see above, p. 28.
accordance with these. The Chinese believed that imitating the actions of Heaven as they perceived them in the changes in nature would enable them to attract good luck and to partake in Heaven's power instead of exerting themselves uselessly by opposing it. For early Chinese, especially in such fields as astronomy, medicine, divination and music, the world was tightly structured and explained in an all-inclusive system of correlations based on Yin-Yang dualism, the Five Phases and numerological correspondences derived from the sexagenary cycle used in calendrical computations. Yang and Yin, originally signifying the sunny and the shady side of a mountain, came to symbolize the dualistic nature of the whole cosmos explained in such opposing and yet complementary pairs as warm/cold, light/dark, summer/winter, Heaven/Earth, sun/moon, water/fire, male/female, action/inaction, giving/receiving and ruler/minister\(^45\), whereby the Yang element was seen as superior to, but also dependent on the Yin element. A second paradigm that was used extensively to explain the cosmos and create correspondences in nature was a set of four or five elements based on the so-called \textit{wu hsing} (Five Processes). Originating in the primary elements of soil, wood, metal, fire and water and a group of Five Processes believed to express the particular nature of each of these elements, it was then applied to the older system of correlation of the Four Directions with the Four Seasons and the first four numbers by adding a central direction and a fifth season at the end of summer, and was also used to create such fairly artificial series as the

\(^{45}\) This list is based on an additional document on Ma-wang-dui manuscript B of Lao-Tzu in \textit{Ching fa, Ma-wang-tui Han-mu po-shu}, vol. 1, pp. 94 ff..
Five Flavors, the Five Colors and the Five Notes. The resulting view of the cosmos incorporated a structure of correlations similar to this diagram:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wood</th>
<th>Fire</th>
<th>Soil</th>
<th>Metal</th>
<th>Water</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>Summer</td>
<td></td>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>Winter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>(Center)</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>North</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue-green</td>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These correspondences were believed to reflect the so-called "Way of Heaven" and "Pattern of Earth", and by applying this knowledge humans were able to participate in the power of Heaven. This system, first developed and used by diviners, astronomers, physicians and musicians, was later adopted into other spheres of life, most importantly into political theory and practice: The emperor came to be seen as an important link between the spheres of humankind and Heaven, aiding Heaven by following his Way which was reflected and could be recognized in the patterns in nature. A short passage from the instructions to the emperor for the first month from an almanac called *Yueh ling* (Monthly Observances), will exemplify this role:

The Son of Heaven occupies the room to the left of the *Ch’ing Yang*, or Green Bright Hall; he rides

---

46 A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, p. 351.

47 This book is based on the first twelve sections of a text called *Lü-shih ch’un-ch’iu* published in 238 B.C.
there in the phoenix carriage, which is yoked with azure dragons wearing green flags. He is robed in green robes, wears green jade ornaments, eats wheat with mutton; and his vessels are lightly carved, in order to aid the springing grain.\textsuperscript{48}

In addition to these ritualistic instructions as to the ideal color, food, direction, location, the ruler was also to imitate the seasonal character in his concrete political actions: Spring was the season defined by the spirit of liberality, which meant for example the bestowing of gifts to the feudal lords and the protection of the female, the young and the unborn in order to induce a similar response from nature. The ultimate goal for all these actions was to aid Heaven and Earth in their work and thus to ensure a plentiful harvest through a harmonious cooperation with the forces of nature, seen as an expression of Heaven's Way.\textsuperscript{49}

When we now apply this way of reasoning to the ritual of burying the placenta, we realize that the illustration for burying the placenta is indeed born out of this frame of mind. It is a diagram that outlines the movement of two heavenly bodies, Jupiter and the last star in the handle of the Big Dipper, as they were perceived by the Chinese. In their movements they are believed to conform to a pattern, recorded in the chart for burying the placenta, that

\textsuperscript{49} For more detailed information on the subject of Chinese cosmology, see Marcel Granet, \textit{La Pensée Chinoise}, A. C. Graham, \textit{Disputers of the Tao}, pp. 313-370, and John B. Henderson, \textit{The Development and Decline of Chinese Cosmology}. 
reflects calendrical computations and astronomical observations and thus shows the great influence of correlative thinking on these theories. The knowledge of the Way of Heaven as reflected in natural patterns is of the greatest importance in all aspects of life since it enables humans to utilize Heaven's superhuman power and attain such goals as health and longevity that ordinarily lie beyond human control. An awareness of these patterns and actions that are carefully performed on the basis of these observations are at the same time also an expression of one's fear of and reverence for Heaven. When we now recall the earlier paragraph about magic in general, we realize that we can easily fit the Chinese correlative cosmology, in general as well as in the particular instance of burying the placenta according to an illustration based on astrology and the calendar, into a cross-cultural frame. The conviction that things act on each other through a magical connection unperceivable for our modern eye and most often denied by Western science is reflected both in the belief that the fate of the placenta is related to the fate of the infant and also in the belief that the motion of heavenly bodies, regarded as an expression of the Way of Heaven and the Pattern of Earth, has an influence on the placenta and therefore indirectly on the child. The diagram serves as a means to avoid a contact of the placenta with Jupiter and the last star in the handle of the Big Dipper, since that incident was believed to be of the gravest and most unlucky consequences for the life of the child. Thus we find in the custom of choosing a lucky location for the burial of the placenta yet another expression of the universal human attempt to influence matters, which are ordinarily seen as lying more or less beyond human

---

50 see above pp. 9-10.
control, by conforming with and relating to super-human powers such as
Heaven, Mother Earth or the spirits in general in the form of ritual.

The particular custom of choosing a lucky location for the burial of the
placenta by avoiding certain heavenly bodies which are considered
inauspicious is but one instance in the list of ancient Chinese rituals
connected with the burial of the placenta. In the same documents that I used
earlier in order to understand and interpret the illustration for an auspicious
burial of the placenta we can find several more details which are equally
interesting and will further enhance our understanding of early Chinese
culture as expressed in these rituals. When we compare the Ishimpo to the
silk manuscripts discovered in Ma-wang-tui we find that it describes exactly
the same practices with minor variations and records some additional beliefs
quoted here merely for the sake of adding some interesting unique details,
thus proving the importance and continuity of the customs described in the
earlier documents.

The scroll called T'ai ch'an shu ("Writing on Giving Birth"), found
among the writings discovered in Ma-wang-tui, contains in addition to two
illustrations also a text concerned with advice in regard to childbirth. After 13
columns on such matters as nourishing the foetus, sexual intercourse, the
development of the foetus and taboos regarding the pregnant woman's diet
and living place, the next six columns, 14 to 19, concern actions right after
birth related to a proper burial of the placenta and are therefore directly
relevant to our topic. The rest of the text contains a method to influence the
sex of the foetus through dietary means, general advice regarding the mother
and child's health after birth and two last columns on another belief related to the burial of the placenta. This investigation will have to be limited to a translation and interpretation of those columns which directly relate to the focus of this paper and manage to add new insights into Chinese childbirth practices that are performed in order to ensure the infant's future health and good fortune. The basic ritual is described in the following few columns.

In all cases of performing childbirth, use clear [water] to rinse the placenta.

One says: It is necessary to thoroughly sprinkle and rinse [it], and again rinse it using wine\textsuperscript{51} ... ... ... ... ... small ... ... ... ... ... ... using a clay bowl, do not permit bugs and ants to enter, then ... ... ... ... ... a location where one [sees] the sun\textsuperscript{52}, the infant will not get sores, but a glowing skin (texture) and long life ...

\textsuperscript{51} The character shai has to be interpreted as a textual corruption of the character chiu. For references, compare Ishimpo, chapter 23, p. 514.

\textsuperscript{52} For adding the missing characters, see Tsa liao fang, column 42, translated below on page 40.
One says: Bury the placenta under a mat\(^{53}\) and [the infant] will not get sores. In the bedroom\(^{54}\) ... drink it on the Day of Establishment\(^{55}\).

When one gives birth to many male and no female babies and desires a female baby, after ... bury the placenta under the Yin\(^{56}\) side of a wall. When one [gives birth to] many female and no male babies, now take [the placenta] and bury it under the Yang side. One says: Wrap [it] in a piece of cloth of the kind used in a rice steamer and bury it\(^{57}\).

These paragraphs contain specific instructions concerning the proper way to bury the placenta after childbirth in order to ensure the child's health and good luck. In summary they cover the following method: after birth one prepares the placenta for burial by washing it first with clear water and then again with wine; then one seals it closely in a clay bowl, sometimes wrapped

---

53 This probably refers to burying it under the sleeping mat in the bedroom or the mat which the woman gave birth on.
54 In other early documents such as the literature for sexual cultivation, the character nei, "inner", frequently signifies the bedroom in such compounds as nei fang or nei shih.
55 The system of chien ch'u ("establishment and removal") was a method for determining the portentous aspects of days during the twelve months. For detailed information, see Jao Tsung-i and Tseng Hsien-t'ung, Yun-meng Ch'in chien jih shu yen-chiu, pp. 4-11.
56 The character Yin is here used in its original meaning as "the shady side" or "the side facing away from the sun". Similarly, the character Yang signifies "the sunny side" or "the side facing the sun" here.
57 translation of Ma-wang-tui yi shu k'ao-chu, T'ai ch'an shu, columns 14 - 19, pp. 325 - 354.
in a piece of cloth, in order to prevent bugs from eating it. Following these guidelines will influence the child’s health and the length of his life. It is also noteworthy that a burial on the sunny or shady side of a wall is believed to enable the parents to choose the gender of the next child. The identical practice is recorded with slight variations in the scroll *Tsa liao fang* following directly after the already quoted instructions regarding the usage of the illustration for choosing the most auspicious location:

After giving birth, immediately use flowing or well water which is clear to thoroughly sprinkle and rinse the placenta. Squeeze it well until there is no liquid left and thereupon fill [it] into a clay jar that has no refuse in it. Seal it carefully and tightly with a clay bowl to prevent bugs from entering it. Bury [it] in a tranquill\(^58\) spot in a Yang location where one can see the sun for a long time. This will give the infant a good heart and wisdom, a fine complexion and few diseases\(^59\).

This text mostly serves to clarify and substantiate the method described in the *T’ai ch’an shu* except for one slight variation, the advice to bury the placenta in a Yang location. However, when we take into consideration the low status of women in traditional Chinese patriarchal society, we realize that

---

\(^58\) The character *ch’ing* ("clear") should be interpreted as *ching* ("tranquil, even") thus signifying a quiet, undisturbed location.

\(^59\) translation of *Ma-wang-tui yi shu k’ao-chu, Tsa liao fang*, columns 41 - 42, p. 326.
the gender that was usually preferred for a child was definitely male, since the male off-spring guaranteed the continuation of the family line whereas a daughter was married off to her husband's family. According to the custom described in the scroll *T'ai ch'\an shu*, burying the placenta in a Yang location facing the sun was performed in order to guarantee that the gender of the next child would be male, the usual desire in traditional Chinese society. The advice to bury the placenta in an undisturbed location was probably founded in the desire to prevent the placenta from being unearthed and injured, thus signifying just another variation on the over-all theme to bury the placenta securely.

The Japanese medical compendium called *Ishimpo* repeats the basic method for burying the placenta in a more detailed version and also offers several interesting new customs:

A new method for burying the placenta: The Classic on Birth\textsuperscript{60} says: In all cases when one wants to bury the placenta, one must first use clear water and rinse the placenta of the child well until it is pure and clean. Take a new clay jar with a lid that is also new. When this is done, then wrap the placenta in scarlet red silk. Take five *tsu kung* coins and place them in the center of the bottom of the jar. Arrange them with the pattern facing upwards. Then take

\textsuperscript{60} The Chinese writing called *Ch'an ching* ("Classic on Giving Birth") is no longer extant, but is listed in a bibliography from the Sui Dynasty (A.D. 589-618). Its author is recorded as Te Chen-ch'ang.
the placenta which is wrapped up and fill it inside the jar. Seal it with the lid. Seal it all around the perimeter with a mud seal to prevent various bugs from getting in. Domestic animals, birds and beasts must not eat it. When done bury it according to the illustration of the succession of months in a Yang location\textsuperscript{61}. Dig down to a depth of three feet\textsuperscript{62} and two inches and firmly ram earth in order to prevent it from getting exposed again. When one follows this method, one will cause the child to grow up fresh and pure, beautiful and healthy, square\textsuperscript{63} and tall, benevolent, wise and clever, rich and noble.

Moreover, when one wants the child to be talented in literature, place a new brush on top of the placenta. Burying it like this signifies great luck\textsuperscript{64}.

Further below another peculiar belief is recorded, before the text offers yet another variation on the prescriptions for a proper burial:

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{61}] The original text shows here the character \textit{jen} ("person"), but considering the context here and certain passages in the already translated documents \textit{T'ai ch'\textquotesingle un shu} and \textit{Tsa liao fang}, we know that this must be an error based on textual corruption and therefore replace it with the character \textit{ti} ("location").
\item[\textsuperscript{62}] One \textit{ch'i}h ("foot") equals ten \textit{ts'un} ("inches"); 1.45 English feet or 0.43581 meters.
\item[\textsuperscript{63}] A square face was considered handsome.
\item[\textsuperscript{64}] Tamba Yasuyori, \textit{Ishimpo}, chapter 23, paragraph 15, p. 513.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Moreover, one should obtain a person with a well-known name, a good scholar, for burying the placenta. This will cause the child to become eloquent and very wise, and also to become famous and talented and to be without sickness for the whole life, but become rich and noble and attain longevity.

Another method: First wash the placenta with water until it is clean and pure. When that is done, then again wash the placenta with clear wine. Use a new clay jar and fill it with the placenta. ... Use clay to seal its mouth. Bury it according to the twelve month chart in the high numbers. Bury it in a place facing the sun for good luck, no deeper than three feet. Firmly ram it and do not permit it to be unearthed again.\(^{65}\).

After telling the story how the ancient sage Yu gave the advice regarding a proper burial of the placenta to a woman who had lost all her children prematurely, the *Ishimpo* then continues with more details:


\(^{66}\) see above, p. 27.
Take the placenta after birth, clean it well, take away grass and dust and wash it. Make a clay figure. When the newborn child is a boy, make it resemble a male. When the newborn child is a girl, make it resemble a female. Use scarlet red cloth to wrap the clay figure. Now, first take three coins and place them in a new jar. Then set the clay figure on top of them. Again set the child's placenta on top of the coins. As lid use a new pot. All around the perimeter close it tightly with a mud seal. According to a high number on the ground have the father himself dig and bury it. When this is completed, say the following prayer: One coin will gain you control over the Lord of the Earth, one coin will gain you longevity and mastery of the calculations\(^67\) and one coin will gain you control over food. When that is completed, trample on it with your left foot until it is firm and rammed like in the method mentioned above\(^68\).

The last paragraph relevant for our topic is cited under the chapter heading for a "Method for Burying the Placenta in Inauspicious Locations" and adds some more information concerning Chinese conceptions about the

\(^{67}\) sic. of years or of life, signifying another expression for controlling the span of one's life.

\(^{68}\) Tamba Yasuyori, *Ishimpo*, chapter 23, paragraph 15, p. 514.
influence of specific locations for the burial of the placenta on the child's future physical as well as mental health:

The Classic of Giving Birth says: When one buries the placenta in a Yin\(^9\) location where one does not see the sun or the moon, or under a wall or discards it in the water in a stream or next to a hole or a clean privy, in all these cases, the improper burial of the placenta will cause the child to have a sick ch'i\(^{10}\), sores and itches, ulcers and swellings. ...

When one buries the placenta near an old well or to the side of the earth god altar of the grain altar, at the edge of tumuli or tombs or in a location close to places where one worships the spirits, in all these cases one will cause the child to go insane and not attain longevity\(^{11}\).

Summarizing these accounts for the proper burial of the placenta we are now able to record a detailed description of the general ritual before we attempt to interpret specific beliefs concerned with additions to the "grave" or inauspicious locations: All writings reiterate the fact that a proper rinsing and washing of the placenta is essential in order to prepare it for burial. Even the

---

\(^9\) Here again the word Yin signifies a dark, shady location.

\(^{10}\) The character ch'i ("vital vapor", "vital breath") signified the general condition of one's body according to Chinese medical theories.

\(^{11}\) Tamba Yasuyori, *Ishimpo*, chapter 23, paragraph 17, pp. 514-515.
liquid that the placenta is being cleaned with is of some significance as reflected in the advice to use clear water, well water or even wine. Then the placenta is wrapped in scarlet-red cloth and put in a new jar or bowl together with three or five coins. This is closed with a lid and tightly sealed with the greatest care in order to make absolutely sure that the placenta will not be injured by animals. Lastly it is buried in a deep pit and earth is rammed firmly over it, again to secure it against being unearthed again. This custom reminds us of the sincere reverence that the placenta is treated with in traditional societies and stands in sharp contrast to the modern-day practice where the placenta is carelessly discarded in the trash can or the incinerator. It is a reflection of the widespread belief among these cultures that the placenta is not just a lump of inanimate flesh but incorporates some sort of life energy or serves as a seat for part of the newborn child's soul. The description of the burial of the placenta resembles a funeral rite and thus might even substantiate the suggestion that the ancient Chinese thought it necessary to find a permanent resting place for the placenta because they tried to appease the spirit or life force inherent in it, related to the belief that a dead body had to be properly buried in order for the deceased person's soul to permanently leave the world of the living and enter the spirit world instead of wandering around restlessly as a haunting spirit. In particular the detailed account of adding coins to the jar and even saying a prayer in order to wish the spirit good luck on its journey to the spirit world is most probably related to the common practice all over the world to add food, drink, clothes, money or

72 see above pp. 12-13 about related beliefs in Malaysia and Australia.
other material possessions to a person's tomb, meant to guarantee a safe passage and a high social status in the world of the spirits for the deceased person. The prayer quoted in the account as recommended for the father during the ceremony of burying the placenta\textsuperscript{73} clearly reflects this belief: The father adds money to the jar in order to enable the spirit inherent in the placenta to take care of its material welfare by paying with the coins. Although we can only guess what kind of spirit was exactly believed to inhabit the placenta we do know that the spirit was thought to have certain human characteristics like the need for food. Thus we can see here another example of the belief common throughout the whole world to regard the placenta as something like a twin sibling of the newborn child.

At the same time the treatment of the placenta was not only relevant in the context of securely putting to rest the spirit believed to inhabit it, but also because of the intimate connection of the placenta's fate with the newborn child's future. The conviction that it is of utmost importance to bury the placenta carefully in order to prevent it from being unearthed again or eaten by animals can be interpreted in the context of funeral rites in order not to disturb the spirit of the placenta or recall it from the world of the dead, but can also be seen in the light of sympathetic magic: Any harm done to the placenta was believed to induce a similar injury or bad luck in its owner's life. Similarly, the custom of adding a new brush to the placenta pit in order to cause the newborn child to become a good scholar is another example of the widespread practice of sympathetic magic reminding us of such beliefs as the German story about adding dice to a prince's caul in order to make him a

\textsuperscript{73} see above, p. 44.
better gambler\(^2\). In this frame of reasoning we can also interpret the general comments following every advice that this practice will cause the child to be healthy, lucky, benevolent and rich and gain longevity, since a careful treatment of the placenta influenced the child's future positively in a general way.

However, based on our knowledge of early Chinese cosmological thinking, it is possible to say that these beliefs might be based on the cross-cultural concepts of sympathetic magic, but were also greatly influenced by the specific Chinese conviction that a reverential treatment of the spirits in general was an expression of one's fear of Heaven and respect for Heaven's superhuman power and would therefore influence human fate in a positive way by conforming with Heaven's will, as we find it expressed in the writings concerning the illustration for choosing an auspicious location. The ritual of burying the placenta was after all attributed to the ancient sage Yu who was renowned for having recognized Heaven's will in the patterns of nature and having applied them in the human world for the great benefit of all humankind. Burying the placenta according to Yu's teachings was therefore yet another ritual performed in the attempt to express the Way of Heaven and the Pattern of Earth in human actions and thus to achieve the ideal of a perfect coordination of the spheres of Heaven, Earth and Humankind.

In regard to the prohibitions concerned with burying the placenta in inauspicious locations, it is important to note that these taboos fall into two categories: They either describe places that can be classified as having a Yin

\(^2\) see above, p. 17.
character or they are locations that are considered sacred\textsuperscript{75}. Concerning the Yin locations such as water or wet or dark and shady places, we have already noted earlier\textsuperscript{76} that in the patriarchal society of early China the Yang characteristic (which included such aspects as male, light, warm, active) was considered superior to the Yin element. It is highly probable that the Chinese believed that a placenta buried in a Yin environment would be able to exert some kind of a Yin influence on the child, thus resulting in a weakening of the child's \textit{ch'i} and therefore in a general bad health on the basis of sympathetic magic.

Considering a burial in such locations as in the vicinity of tombs or altars, we find ourselves reminded of the polluting aspect of the placenta\textsuperscript{77} as found for example in more recent accounts from Japanese and Taiwanese society: All the inauspicious locations quoted in this context share the fact that they were used for contacting and communicating with the spirit world, thus being places where one hoped to attract the spirits. As already explained earlier, the placenta was frequently associated with the female blood expelled during birth and was considered equally powerful and dangerous. What in ancient matriarchal societies was considered sacred and was revered because of its mysterious power was in later male dominated societies feared as being extremely dangerous and polluting. Based on the fear that the sight of female blood might insult the spirits and prevent them from communicating with the human world, female blood and everything related to it was tried to be removed as far away as possible from sacred sites and be hidden from the

\textsuperscript{75} translated above, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{76} On Yin/Yang dualism see above, pp. 33-34 and 39-41.
\textsuperscript{77} On the polluting aspect of the placenta see above, pp. 18-21.
spirits. Thus we can even in the earliest Chinese documents regarding customs related to the burial of the placenta recognize the different patterns of belief and behavior that we established earlier based on a cross-cultural investigation into rituals and myths from all over the world.

The Ancient Chinese Ritual of Exposing the Newborn Child

In the context of rituals following childbirth that were performed in order to influence positively the newborn child's future, the Chinese documents from the tomb discovered in Ma-wang-tui record another custom following the already translated practices concerned with the proper burial of the placenta in the same manuscript. This custom will be translated and interpreted here because of its significance as an expression of particular Chinese concepts and beliefs. Understanding its roots and functions will help us to understand yet one more aspect of early Chinese culture by studying its childbirth rituals. The manuscript entitled T'ai ch'an shu records the following practice in order to ensure that the child will grow up healthy and strong:

During childbirth, when the child is about to drop out, first take fertile soil, which is moist and clean...
When we attempt to add the missing characters through context, we can realize the following practice: Directly after being born the child was placed on moistened rich soil which was piled in a square of about 1 to 1.5 m in diameter and 10 to 15 cm high. The child was left on top of the pile on its own until it had covered itself completely with the soil, and was then washed. In the following paragraphs I will try to discover the roots of this peculiar custom which was believed to ensure the child's good health and strength. It contains a description of an interesting variation on the theme of exposing the infant after birth, a custom that is common in many different cultures all over the world. Its interpretation in the frame of this paper will be based on an extremely interesting article by Marcel Granet on "Le Dépôt de l'Enfant sur le Sol, Rites Anciens et Ordalies Mythiques" ("The Deposit of the Infant on the Soil, Ancient Rites and Mythic Ordeals"). The recent discoveries at Ma-wang-tui only reinforce and verify some of the claims he put forward based on an investigation into ritual practices and beliefs as found in classical Chinese literature.

---

78 translation of hia-wang-tui yi shu k'ao-chu, T'ai ch'an shu, columns 29-30, p.360.
79 for example compare to: Aegli Brouskou, "Enfants vendus, enfants promis," an investigation of the ancient Greek custom of exposing the new-born baby in order to avoid a premature death for the next sibling.
80 Marcel Granet, Etudes sociologique sur la Chine, pp. 159-202.
Granet claims that the popular Chinese tradition of leaving newborn daughters completely unattended on a pile of rags for three whole days is based on an ancient practice that had been justified over the centuries through moralistic symbolism. This aspect can easily be recognized in the following account of the custom which was recorded by the female historian and scholar Pan Chao (ca. 49 - ca. 120 AD) at the beginning of an essay on the education of girls:

In ancient times, when a daughter was born, she was laid down for three days under the bed. She was given a clay instrument for weaving as toy and she was announced [sic. to the ancestors] after a purification fast. Placing her under the bed manifested her humbleness and weakness in her role of being subordinate to man. Giving her the clay toy manifested her toiling labor in her role of working with her hands. The purifying fast and the act of announcing her to the ancestors manifested her role of perpetuating the ancestor sacrifices. These three contain the fundamental principles of conduct for women\textsuperscript{81}.

\textsuperscript{81} Granet, pp. 159-160 for the French translation and p. 295 for the original in Chinese.
Pan Chao herself based her account on an earlier text found in the last verse of a commemorative hymn in the *Shih Ching* (Classic of Songs) that celebrated the construction of a palace for King Hsuan (828-782 BC) of Chou:

If there is born a boy,
Now! Lay him down on the bed!
Now! Dress him in day garments!
Now! Give him a jade scepter to play with!
How he cries with sobs like jingling bells!
How supreme are his vermilion kneecaps\(^2\)!
A ruler in the household!

If there is born a daughter,
Now! Lay her down on the earth!
Now! Dress her in night garments!
Now! Give her a tile to play with!
Absolutely no ritual!
Only drink and food her tasks!
No grief for her parents\(^3\)!

Although this earlier text describes the joy resulting from the successful birth of a child, female as well as male, it already reflects a clear distinction in the social status dependent on gender. Whereas a son always

\(^2\) A special privilege, only worn by the ruler and his lords.

\(^3\) Granet, p. 160 for the French translation, which is based on Couvreur, *Che King*, p.221, and Granet, p. 295 for the Chinese original.
stayed in the family and continued the royal line, a daughter faced an uncertain future since she was married off to her husband's family. There she might have played an important role in the cult of her new family but always remained under his complete authority and could be sent back to her old family if she failed to fulfill her duties in serving her husband's family and his ancestors. Pan Chao's interpretation of the practice reflects her different viewpoint since she saw the role of women as being even less significant. Thus she modified the ancient text in order to condition the women in court for their future roles of merely being modest, hard-working and prolific servants for their husbands. The practice of placing daughters on the earth and sons on the bed therefore served in Pan Chao's view the function of defining the differing male and female roles in society and orienting a child towards its particular destiny depending on its gender, similar to other birth rites: Directly after birth, a bow was hung to the left of the gate for a son and a handkerchief to the right of the gate for a daughter. The bow, symbol of nobility, was later used by the son to prove his loyalty to his lord whereas the handkerchief was used by the daughter in the wedding night. Likewise, the garments of the day and night mentioned in the Shih Ching account signified that the male duties lay beyond the house in society whereas the daughter's activities lay inside the home in serving her husband. The toys handed to a child in the same hymn again reflect this greatly differing social status, one holding a scepter of precious jade symbolizing great dignity and the other a humble implement for vulgar chores meant to instill modesty. This custom, however, originated in the wish to simply predispose the children for their future spheres of influence with the social duties of the man in the feudal
hierarchy being no more noble or important in ancient times than the duties of his wife in manufacturing the sacred garments. Similarly to the way the toys, originally meant as symbols of different spheres of influence, are reinterpreted as manifestations of the noble and comfortable life of the man as opposed to the drudging and slave-like existence of the woman, Pan Chao also summarized the custom of laying the newborn son on the bed and the daughter on the earth into the biased statement that the daughter was placed under the bed to symbolize female inferiority.

From ancient ritual texts like the *Li Chi* or the *Tso Chuan* we know that the third day meant a stage of great importance in the life of a newborn child: On this day its father announced the birth to the ancestors, and at the same time the child was picked up for the first time by a vassal who had purified himself and was dressed in ceremonial garments. Then the child was handed to a wet nurse (or the mother in the lower ranks of nobility and the common populace) who kept it in strict isolation until the end of the first three months, because its *ch'i* ("vital vapor") was believed to be without strength. At that time the child was formally presented to the father and grandfather, received a personal name and then continued to live with the wet nurse in the women's quarters until its third year. All these ceremonies represented stages in a gradual penetration and acceptance into the family and at the same time ended periods of isolation, that was complete for the first three days, when the child did not even have a name, and was then successively lessened. But before the vassal could pick up a male child for the first time, six arrows, made of sacred wood with special significance\(^{84}\), were

\(^{84}\) Artemisia was used as a medicinal herb for the purpose of purification.
shot using the sacred bow that had been hung on the gate to announce the birth of a son and was also made of sacred material. The arrows were shot in the four directions, towards the sky and towards the earth, a ritual that conformed with the common practice of shooting arrows in order to ward off demons and unlucky spirits. We have no knowledge available concerning a parallel rite for the daughter related to the napkin that was suspended from the gate to announce her birth, but it was undoubtedly also meant as a symbolic implement to eliminate pollution. When we remember that the mother as well as her child were regarded as stained by the bloody act of birth, it is only logical that the child needed to be ritually purified before one commenced to nourish it. At the same time, however, the act of pulling the bow not only eliminated the birth stains and warded off evil spirits, but we also know that it was believed to establish a powerful connection between the newborn child and the land. In order for a son to be permitted to eat the grain from the land and thus receive his part of the offerings given to the lord of the land, he had to be put in contact with the nourishing earth and receive his rank in the feudal hierarchy which was done by pulling the bow. Thus both the rituals for eliminating pollution and attaining positive power that gave the newborn child the right to be nourished were acts of placing him in contact with the nourishing earth.

But why were sons placed on the bed and daughters on the earth? Whereas girls were simply left on the ground for three days for the purpose of eliminating the pollution resulting from the act of birth and also in order to vitalize their feeble ch'i through contact with the energy of the earth, boys

---

85 The Mulberry tree.
were put down on a bed in the southeast corner of the house which signified its most sacred part where the grain seeds were stored and the offerings to the ancestors were performed. Here was the seat of the head of the family and at the same time the residence of the tutelary spirit of the house where the child could collect the powerful positive forces from the family land. Since these forces, however, were merely a particular form of the energy released by the earth in general, we can conclude that girls were not left on the earth out of contempt for their inferior position compared to boys, but in order to expose them to the powerful energy of the earth at large, since they were to leave their family home upon getting married, whereas boys are placed in the sacred corner of the house in order to expose them to the particular energy of the family land and thus prepare them for their role as future head of the family and managers of the family land. Both rituals constitute therefore merely two aspects of the rite of presenting the newborn child to the earth. Moreover, some texts record that boys were not only exposed to the specific energy of the family land, but that all children, boys as well as girls and even deceased children, had to be placed on the ground in the first moments thus proving the strong belief in the vivifying power of the earth energy. This practice of exposing the child on the ground is only surprising until we become aware of the exceptionally strong connection that the ancient Chinese established to their native soil. The most ancient cult and strongest belief in early China was related to the ancestral centers and the local spirits of the race and the land. In feudal times, the power of the earth was believed to manifest itself in spirits of the land in a hierarchical organization parallel to that of the lords and vassals. After the unification of the Chinese empire, a cult
developed dedicated to a Sovereign Earth, a maternal power, nourishing, immediate and with multiple aspects, in opposition to the cult of Heaven as a father and strict ruler, distant and unique, in this way balancing paternal power with maternal benevolence in religious belief. Thus whereas the son was placed on a bed in the sacred center of the house in order to attain the paternal power necessary for performing the ancestral rites and managing the land, the daughter was imbued more generally and profoundly with the nurturing virtues of Mother Earth by placing her on the ground in order to acquire a confirmation of her feminine attributes. In later times when women became excluded from certain aspects of the religious life and were destined to a recluse existence because of societal changes, the rite of isolating the child by deposing it on the ground for three days was preserved in its original form for girls only, with a new negative value added of being necessary in order to eliminate their pollution, regarded as much greater than that of boys for whose purification it sufficed to shoot six sacred arrows.

A second aspect of the ritual of exposing the newborn child for three days on the ground is discovered by Granet in the myths surrounding the miraculous birth and childhood of Hou Chi ("Prince of Harvest"), Minister of Agriculture under the ancient sage-king Shun and later revered as a benevolent agrarian spirit and a personification of the power of the cultivated soil. He was believed to have been the ancestor of the royal line of the Chou Dynasty and at the same time a descendant of the mythical culture heroes. Because of his role as ancestor of the Chou Emperors the myths surrounding his person serve the purpose of legitimizing their claim to be Sons of Heaven, mandated by Heaven himself, and therefore mediators between the spheres
of Heaven and Man and dispensers of Heaven's will, mainly by controlling the agrarian calendar. According to an ancient legend, Hou Chi was conceived in a union of his mother Chiang Yuan, chosen for her supreme purity and virtue, with Heaven himself, either through an actual physical contact or through a swallow that Heaven sent down to her. Born from an unstained virgin in a marvellous birth without labor, his celestial origin was set in sharp contrast to the first moments of his life by a powerful poetic illustration of the ancient rite of abandoning the child on the soil for three days: In a magnified variation on the theme, the legend has Hou Chi abandoned three times, in a consecutively more hostile environment. When he is left on the street, cows and sheep do not crush him but protect him and take care of him. Left in the deserted forest, he is then saved by lumberjacks, but again abandoned on the ice in the middle of a lake. Out of the air a bird comes to retrieve him, and when the bird flies off and Hou Chi cries out with the voice of a great spirit, his mother can finally pick him up, since his divine origin and the will of Heaven are manifested. In every trial he forms a more complete alliance with nature, being exposed first on village soil, then on forest ground and finally on the ice and being saved by domestic animals, humans and lastly a wild beast. These trials, proving his divine origin and Heaven's mandate, also serve to constitute his personality and the divine powers needed for the Prince of Harvests in his work of assisting nature. An alliance of Hou Chi, the Son of Heaven, with the earth through a prolonged contact with nature enables him to perform his role as a mediator between Heaven and the people, which consists of issuing the calendar and laws that ensure a coordination with nature, existential for an agricultural people.
Thus in this legend we can recognize one of the most central ideas found in a traditional agricultural society, the idea of an organic alliance between humans and the earth. At the same time we are able to recognize how the ritual of abandoning the child on the ground for three days served the symbolic purpose of a trial that manifested the will of the supreme regulating power in nature as the ultimate judge over life and death and also created an intimate relationship of the child to the nourishing soil of a race.

Granet also detects an interesting and extremely significant parallelism that offers new insights into the ritual of abandoning the child, when he takes a closer look at the successive stages in a child's life as determined by ritualized periods of time and then compares these to the rituals surrounding marriage and death. All of these rites facilitate a gradual assimilation into a new family or environment through fixed periods of time, symbolized as being complete by the number three and ended by yet another initiation ritual. According to the idealized practice in the ritual text, a newborn son was left fasting in complete isolation on the earth for the first three days and then had to undergo a certain ceremony during which his father announced the new family member to the ancestors and the boy was picked up by a vassal and handed to a wet nurse who was to nourish him from then on, confined in a special room. It was not until the third month, that the child was presented to the father for the first time and given a personal name. This ceremony also ended the separation of mother and child, and from here on until his third year he lived with his mother, still in a somewhat lessened isolation. Upon having reached his third year, the boy was after a third ceremony finally permitted to partake in the communal life of the women's
quarters. Similarly to these ceremonies on the third day, the third month and the third year of a newborn child, a newly-wed bride was also introduced into her new family in symbolic ritualized stages: Only after the first three days had been spent in gloom in both families with no music permitted was the bride allowed to use the west stairway, designated for family members, to enter her new home. She then lived in retreat and could not partake in domestic chores, until the third month when she was considered her husband's wife and began the ancestor cult after being formally presented to them as a new family member. After the marriage had lasted for three years, finally, her husband could not dismiss her any more without any grave reason. The day of her wedding, however, did not signify an absolute commencement, but the culmination of a process that served the purpose of gradually lessening her ties to her native family. Thus the three gloomy days after the wedding were proceeded by a three-day fast, and the three-month nuptial retreat and the following presentation and sacrifice to the ancestors of her new family corresponded to a three-month retreat in the ancestral temple of her old family before the wedding. Similarly she underwent a three-month retreat before and after childbirth and also a (theoretical) three-day fast directly before and after childbirth.

In both cases we can recognize the following pattern that the first stage of the arrival and integration of a newcomer into the group is the shortest, but also the most intense period designating the central intention of the whole process and merely being prolonged and diluted in the following stages. This becomes even more obvious when we continue to follow the course of a boy's life in the ancient ritual texts: Until his seventh year, the boy
lived in the female community of the women's quarters and was permitted to intermingle freely with the daughters of the household. From age ten to twenty he received his education in his father's house, but not under his father's, but under his mother's family's direction. At age 15, which designated his having reached puberty, he was permitted to take a daughter's place in the ceremonies of the feudal cult. On his twentieth birthday he was accepted as a man and a major member of his family and was believed to have received complete paternal power. At the same time his mother visited him, offered him a present and bowed to him for the first time. At thirty, finally, he married, founded his own family and received employment at court. Thus we can see how a man learned to fulfill his difficult social duties by being incorporated gradually into more and more complex environments, from his parental family to society at large. In these stages we can also still recognize the ancient matrilineal structure of society which had not been completely obliterated by social revolutions: Before a son was considered to be ready to face his role in society he had to first submit to the conservative influence of the ancient uterine family by being exposed to the earth and spending his first years under his mother's influence among the women of the family. In order to prepare a child to enter into all these different systems of relations he had to first be presented to the primal power and source of all human links: his native earth!

When we compare the child's rituals with a woman's wedding rituals, we realize that the exposure of the child on the earth could not have constituted an absolute beginning in the early Chinese mode of thinking, but must have also been regarded as the culmination of a process of separation
that preceded the day of birth and the introduction of the newborn into his parental family, similar to the separation of the bride from her own family prior to her integration into her husband's family. Similar to the way in which a child was introduced into the community of the living and his personality was formed, the dead was believed to leave the living world in specific stages. A deceased master of a household was, like a newborn son, deposed on the soil and then put on the bed with a jade talisman for three days. On the third day, funeral services were performed and he was put in a coffin and placed near the stairway for guests, with his head facing South like the living. On the third month, he was transferred to the family's burial ground at the North side of the village and buried permanently with his head facing North. The master's quarters were supposed to stay empty for a mourning period of three years until the deceased finally received a place in the ancestral temple and his son moved into his quarters and assumed the position of the new master of the family. At this time the old master was believed to have acquired honors and a personality in the world of the ancestors. Three years after the death of his ancestor in the fifth generation his ancestral tablet was removed from the temple and his name could be used in the ceremony of the third month to give rank and personality to a newborn descendant. Thus the gradual des-incarnation of a deceased person into the ancestral mass was perceived as parallel to the re-incarnation of an ancestor into a newborn son in the same family and the community of the living. When a newborn son entered the world of the living, he simultaneously left the community of the dead and a deceased person entered into the community of his ancestors when leaving this world, similarly to the
way in which a bride left her old family and entered a new one. This belief explains the somber character of the period of three days preceding and following the birth or death of a family member and also the fact that the dead was exposed on the earth for three days similar to the ritual of exposing the infant after birth.

The last aspect to be investigated here is related to the significance of the earth in these rituals. Why was the earth perceived to be the creatrix of relations and affiliations and why was she attributed with being a nursing, feminine power who conferred feminine qualities? At the culmination of the processes of passing from the community of the living into that of the dead and vice versa stood the ritual of laying the newborn child as well as the body of a deceased person on the earth for three days. The earth was seen as the threshold for both birth and death where life and survival or death were inaugurated. She was the sovereign judge who decided the result of the ritual of exposure. She was also the source of the characteristic virtues of a race and the communal qualities of the ancestral mass and defined the status of every family member. From the facts that a child had to be carried by her before it could be picked up by anyone else and that it had to acquire the qualities essential for all social relations through contact with her before it was considered as qualified for human contact we can realize that the earth was regarded as the Great Parent by the Chinese. This was based on the belief in an alliance between the land and the people living on it that was central to religious and societal institutions. The Chinese family was deeply attached to the particular soil that they cultivated and that was believed to confer the particular qualities of the family. At the same time the earth was also
attributed with specifically feminine qualities such as being procreative and nurturing, thus being regarded as the Great Mother. We can see this aspect in the fact that the most sacred corner of the house was the granary where the seeds were conserved and where the newborn son and the deceased master of the household were laid on the father's bed. Here was the place where the dead were believed to be incarnated into the domestic soil and would haunt if they came back and where the newborn child received his distinctive personality as a reincarnation of an ancestor. During the Chou Dynasty, however, the seeds for the royal fields were conserved not in the chamber of the Son of Heaven, but in that of the queen who was also put in charge of germinating the grain. When the father placed his bed in the most sacred corner of the house, the granary, he usurped the mother's traditional role. This act therefore signified the transition from a matriarchal society based on uterine affiliations to a male dominated society and gives testimony of a time when the husband's position was that of a son-in-law who occupied the exterior quarters of the house.

Granet proposed these ideas on the basis of the sparse material available at his time, mostly ancient mythological and ritual texts, without any knowledge of actual practices. With the discovery of the Ma-wang-tui manuscripts we are now in the fortunate position of being able to verify the vivid and realistic picture that Granet drew with texts describing actual practices. Thus we find a more practical version of the ritual of exposing the newborn child for three days on the earth, as it is idealized in the ritual texts,
in the already quoted passage from the scroll *T'ai ch' an shu*\(^{86}\) where one is advised to place the child on a pile of dirt and leave it there without interference until it completely covers itself with dirt. Without any additional information about this particular rite and based on one's general knowledge of Chinese culture, one might be tempted to interpret this practice as the moralized rationalization of a primitive method of population control. We have records from numerous other cultures\(^{87}\) where the ritual of exposing a newborn child was practiced as a kind of trial, with Nature as the ultimate judge who decided whether the child was acceptable into the community of the living or not. Although this aspect is definitely recognized by Granet, he at the same time concentrates mostly on the specific Chinese characteristics of this universal practice. He emphasizes the particularly intimate relationship of the Chinese to their native land and the earth in general which was rooted in their strong agricultural orientation. Thus we find the ritual extended to an exposure lasting for a period of three days, considered the number of completeness by the Chinese. This practice enabled the infant to be completely impregnated with the life-giving energy of Mother Earth and also to gain the distinctive personality and virtues of his native family that he acquired through a contact with the native soil. The Ma-wang-tui manuscript also reflects this emphasis on the nurturing qualities of the earth by requiring that one uses fertile soil and also that the infant be completely covered with soil before it could be picked up by humans. The human community could only regard the creation of a new member as complete and accept the child after

\(^{86}\) see above, pp. 51-52.

the Great Mother and Ultimate Judge, the Earth, had expressed her acceptance of the child into the world of the living in the form of this ritual.

An interpretation of the two rituals discussed in this paper concerning burying the placenta and exposing the newborn child offers us a surprisingly detailed image of Chinese childbirth rituals at the beginning of Chinese civilization. In these traditional practices we find a reflection of ancient modes of thinking and at the same time of the societal organization and religious orientation in early Chinese culture. The event of childbirth, one of the most sacred and the same time most dangerous events in the life of traditional communities, was surrounded by rituals that were considered to be of extreme importance for warding off the numerous dangers for the life of both mother and child in this precarious moment. The problem of infant mortality, certainly very common in primal societies, was thus laid in the hands of nature who decided about the fate of the newborn child and who blessed it when the human community had expressed the necessary reverence in the form of rituals. These practices convey not only a sense of the great importance that this event carried in early societies, but at the same time they also constitute one of the most interesting and valuable sources of information on other aspects of ancient Chinese culture such as religion, beliefs concerning the afterlife, society and even economics. As we have seen in the example of early China we can conclude from the birth rituals, that there was a time, when society was based on uterine affiliations and when the Earth was revered as the Great Mother and ultimate power in the universe. Although the father later occupied the mother's role as protector of the grains
and head of the family and the basic family structure became patriarchal, the Chinese continued to believe in the nurturing power of the earth and therefore took such great care to bury the placenta in the earth as well as expose the newborn child on it.
REFERENCES


Montague F. Ashley-Montagu, Coming into Being among the Australian Aborigines, a Study of the Procreative Beliefs of the Native Tribes of Australia (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1937).


Richard Beitl, Der Kinderbaum, Brauchtum und Glauben um Mutter und Kind (Berlin: G. Grote'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1942).


A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* (La Salle: Open Court, 1989).


Jao Tsung-i and Tseng Hsien-t'ung, *Yün-meng Ch'in chien jih shu yen-chiu* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1982).
Isabel Kelly, *Folk Practices in North Mexico, Birth Customs, Folk Medicine, and Spiritualism in the Laguna Zone* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965)


Franz Termer, "Die Kenntnis vom Uterus bei den Maya und anderen Völkern in Mesoamerika," *Ethnos* 1959, 3-4, 177-201.
