

Introduction

A Chu Text

Birth is naturally a gendered phenomenon. Only a “mother” can give birth and only people labeled “females” can be mothers. In this sense, the idea of womanhood has always been intimately associated with the physical reproduction of society. Reproduction of society, history, and the ability to have a future all relied on women.¹ However, the categorization of birth as a female experience was not absolute in ancient China. For example, in Chinese philosophical and historical discourse, the vocabulary for “birth” could be used in a genderless and abstract sense of one cosmic process generating another or even a male dynastic founder producing heirs. In this book, we focus on the female experience of physical birth but, since we are necessarily limited to written texts, we also interrogate the seeming genderless aspects of mythical, philosophical, and religious contexts. Unlike other studies of female reproduction and the control over reproduction during the imperial, particularly the late-imperial, times, a study of childbirth in pre-imperial China must tease information out of ancient vocabulary and cryptic texts.² The heavy hand of later editors, particularly those of Han and later Ru or Confucian scholars, upon pre-imperial texts requires us to balance information provided by recently discovered bamboo and silk texts and other excavated texts, such as bone and bronze inscribed texts, against what is preserved in the transmitted classics. Material culture—that is, artifacts and burial data—can also provide hints.

The text, the *Chu ju*, that inspired this analysis of the female birth process is a recently discovered fourth-century BCE bamboo manuscript that likely originated from the middle Yangzi region, a product of a Chu 楚 scribe (the text is translated at the end of the introduction and analyzed in more detail in chapter 5). Its exact origin is unknown since it

is among the historic, poetic, and divinatory texts preserved by Tsinghua University that were originally stolen by thieves from an ancient tomb. This text clearly connects birthing to lineage creation and political identity. It is remarkable because it not only provides a history of the mostly male Chu royal lineage in rhythmical prose and all its capitals up to 381 BCE, but it also includes the earliest detailed description of a female traumatic birthing experience, one that in modern times would be understood as a cesarean section. We explore the connection between birthing myths and royal genealogy as well as the cultural symbolism of the cutting or splitting open of the mother's body. But first, to put this Chu text into a larger religious and mythical context, we examine the earliest records, those produced by the Shang people during the second millennium BCE up through the time of the third-century BCE Chu text. The elite wished to control fertility, the success of the pregnancy, as well as the gender and future prognosis of the baby. Because of the religious belief structure at the time, this process included appeals to the supernatural. China's earliest birthing records are mostly preserved in divination records, oracle bones, and bamboo stalk divination manuals and almanacs, or *Day Books* (*Rishu* 日書), as well as in silk medical manuscripts and some transmitted texts.

In chapter 1, we begin our discussion with the earliest vocabulary and images associated with birth. We show the connection between the idea of human embodiment and early notions of "enclosure." In chapter 2, we discuss the efforts to control social reproduction through divination, prayers, and sacrifices to the ancestors. We also touch on the issue of birthplace and hints regarding the need to sequester the birth event, which in later times we know was to control spiritual pollution from fluids and blood. In chapter 3, we examine the idea of the "mother" as a channel of cosmic reproduction and transformation and look at ancient notions of embryonic development. In chapter 4, we examine ancient divination and other methods used to determine the outcome of birth. In chapter 5, we compare transmitted versions of Chu genealogy with that recorded in the fourth-century BCE *Chu ju* 楚居 account and pay particular attention to the role of mothers and goddesses. In chapter 6, we compare the legends of good and bad births and their cultural affiliations and note how cultural conflicts ironically preserve evidence for early surgical procedures for difficult births. Through a subtle examination of early Chinese materials, our overall study teases out the unknown history of ancient womanhood and women's role in the social reproduction of early Chinese patriarchy.

Although the ideas in this book are necessarily speculative, we feel that the *Chu* text provides us a unique opportunity to explore an untouched and for many a still untouchable topic: the female experience of childbirth. In the *Chu ju* text, which we will explain in detail in chapter 5, we find a number of avenues for exploration: divine genealogies, the mention of birth mothers, the contrast between a smooth versus difficult birthing, the significance of twins, the manipulations of the traumatic birth by a shaman-physician, the idea of the mother's body "splitting," and the naming of a people (the Chu people) from a tool used in the birthing of the ancestral progenitor of the Chu people and to represent their identity.³ We analyze the meaning behind the names of these ancestors in terms of the larger birthing narrative in early China.

Only the first section of the *Chu ju* mentions the role of birth mothers in the creation of a people. The rest of the manuscript is presumably devoted to male rulers and the names of their capitals. We are concerned with the initial section. Although scholars still debate how to read some of the archaic graphs, since the content of this text frames all the discussions in this book, we first provide an English translation and follow this with a detailed analysis with the Chinese in chapter 5:

Ji Lian at first descended onto Gui Mountain going to Xueqiong (a cave). Once he came out (from Xueqiong) to Qiao Mountain, he resided at Huanpo (a slope). Then he went up the Chuan River and had an audience with Pan Geng's daughter, who resided at Fang Mountain. Her name was Ancestress Wei ("Bird"?) and she had grasped the virtue of compassion. She wandered throughout the Four Regions. Ji Lian heard that she sought marriage, so he pursued her as far as Pan. Thereupon, she gave birth to Ying Bo (Elder Son Ying) and Yuan Zhong (Middle Son Yuan). The delivery was normal and auspicious. From early on they resided in Jingzong (Capital-Main Shrine).

Later on, Xue Yin (Ji Lian's descendant, a third son, "Cave Drinker") journeyed to Jingzong, whereupon he heard about Ancestress Lie ("Break Apart," or Li) in the Zai River region. She was mature with long delicate ears, so he took her as a wife and she gave birth to Dou Shu (Middle Sibling Dou) and Li Ji (Youngest Son Li). Li did not follow (Shu down the birth canal) but came out through a split in her side. Ancestress Lie's (spirit) went to visit Heaven. Shaman

Xian cut into (sewed? wrapped? confronted the demon in?)
her side with a thorn(s?), hence the modern term *chu ren* 楚
人, “the People of the Thorns.”

The complex imagery of meeting the young women in wild areas of mountains and rivers, of their smooth versus traumatic birthing of twins, of the use of thorns by shamans, and even the names of the people and places mentioned will be explored in greater detail in the following chapters. First, however, we will set up the social and religious context in which this tale of the birth of a people was imagined.