

# Religious Experience and Lay Society in T'ang China

*A Reading of Tai Fu's Kuang-i chi*

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# 1

## A sequence of voices

The voice that will open this book belonged to a young provincial woman of the eighth century:

A girl of T'ung-lu named Wang Fa-chih has served the spirit of a young man since early in life. During the Ta-li period [766–779] the spirit was suddenly heard speaking out in an adult voice.

Fa-chih's father asked: 'Isn't this some sage or worthy speaking?' And the answer came: 'It is. My name is T'eng Ch'uan-yin. I came from the metropolitan county of Wan-nien; my house was in Ch'ung-hsien ward. And I have an affinity with Fa-chih from the past.'

In the exchange of remarks which followed he showed deep understanding of natural principles.

A succession of prefectural and county administrators have paid him high regard. The magistrate of T'ung-lu county, Cheng Feng, an enquiring man, often summons Fa-chih to his residence. He tells her to bring down Master T'eng XII, and after a long interval the spirit comes. His conversation is very much that of an educated man, and Cheng never tires of listening to him. In the company of writers or poets he will happily share in literary conversation and composition all day long.

A travelling Buddhist monk once approached Fa-chih for alms. The spirit spoke with him and dedicated this poem:

You stand aloof, do not seek fame as a Buddhist.  
Your single purpose, held constantly in mind, lies high up in  
the blue mists.  
The men of the hour may radiate forceful energy –  
But which of them could stay long enthroned on the precious  
lotus flower?

Another time he dedicated the following poem to someone:

All through life my abilities have been less than adequate,  
But in dealing with the world my sincerity is more than enough.

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I can proudly claim that I have given 'no grave cause':  
Let the good gentleman not shun my presence.<sup>1</sup>

In the sixth year, on the night of the twenty-fifth of the second month, Tai Fu forgathered in Cheng Feng's residence with Hsü Huang, from the Troop Service in the Guards of the Left, Ts'ui Hsiang, magistrate of Lung-ch'üan, Li Ts'ung-hsün, assistant magistrate of Tan-yang, and two local residents, Han Wei and Su Hsiu. As it happened Wang Fa-chih made an appearance, and we told her to summon T'eng Ch'uan-yin. After a long pause he came. He joined with Hsü Huang and the others in an exchange of courtesies that went on for hundreds of words. Then he addressed the whole company of gentlemen, inviting each of us to compose a piece of verse. We did this, then we all asked for a poem from him, and he dashed off two:

In comes the tide at the river-mouth: at first the waters run high.  
In a rocking boat a lotus-gatherer cannot pick the blooms.  
So I go back empty-handed, my springtime mood let down.  
I must wait for the slack water to try picking once more.

('Don't smile at me, gentlemen,' he said.) Then:

Suddenly a wisp of cloud scuds across the lake.  
In my boat I find that rain has wet my clothes.  
I forget all about the lotus blooms just picked,  
And turn back, simply shielding my head with a lotus leaf.

His own comment was: 'That was done in quite a flurry, too!' And he caused his 'younger brother' Fa-chih to exchange hundreds more words in courtesies with Cheng Feng. Then he departed. (84)<sup>2</sup>

This party at the magistrate's residence in T'ung-lu 桐廬 took place on 15 March 771. They were in the wooded hilly country on the edge of the western Chekiang uplands, at a point where the south-flowing T'ung-lu River entered the great tidal stream, then called Che-chiang 浙江, that would flow out to the Bay of Hang-chou some fifty miles to the north-east.<sup>3</sup> The company brought together guests from different walks

1 A Confucian allusion: 'None who have been long in his service does [the gentleman] dismiss without grave cause,' *Lun-yü* 18/10. Cf. Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius*, London 1938, pp. 222-3.

2 *TPKC* 305.2414. Numbers in bold type refer to the contents of *Kuang-i chi* as listed in the Appendix.

3 The county seat stood 140 paces north of the Che-chiang River, and one *li* west of the meeting waters: *Yüan-ho chün-hsien t'u-chih* 25.607-8. (On modern maps the main river at this point is called Fu-ch'un chiang 福春江.) This situation seems to explain the reference in one of the poems to spring tide waters entering a river-mouth: the famous tidal bore on the Ch'ien-t'ang River sometimes pushed many miles upstream. Bishop Moule, on a branch river somewhat further downstream on 29 May 1888, described how 'a smooth wave (perhaps 2 feet above the previous level) came swiftly up and took us up stream at a great pace, I should say full 5 miles an hour': see Osborne Moore, 'The bore of the Tsien-tang kiang (Hang-chau Bay)', *Journal of the China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 23, 1889, p. 244; cf. pp. 227-8. Compare the high-running waters

of polite society – a military officer, some county administrators, some untitled local residents – and Tai Fu 戴孚, the man whose bare name and lack of description mark him as the author of this account. From the voices of such men, in such situations, will come the chief material for the studies that form this book.

Already, of course, several voices are speaking. The young woman Wang Fa-chih 王法智 holds centre-stage. But she is only the mouth-piece of a ghostly intruder, a man otherwise unknown to history, who speaks up in this cultured male society claiming a past address in the T'ang capital Ch'ang-an.

So Wang Fa-chih is a woman possessed. Although her age in 771 is not given, we know that she was still a child when, no more than five years before (at the opening of the Ta-li 大歷 period), the male soul with a Ch'ang-an address made his first appearance in her life. There are features here well known to students of possession around the world: a change of voice – young girl's into grown man's;<sup>4</sup> new, unexpected skills and knowledge passed from spirit to host.<sup>5</sup> But other aspects of possession behaviour remain to be guessed at. The state of trance which allows a new personality to emerge and communicate is widely, even universally, brought on by stressful physical stimuli – drugs, rhythmic drumming, bell-ringing, handclapping, dancing, inhibition of normal breathing – and while such things have been familiar sights in the public conditions of village shamanism in traditional China, we cannot easily imagine them within the polite setting of a magistrate's residence. 'After a long pause he came,' says the text. What happened in that pause, which also intervened on those other occasions when Cheng Feng 鄭鋒 required her to summon the spirit? It is tempting to imagine the girl overbreathing and causing changes in her body chemistry that would bring on the trance.<sup>6</sup> But the literature on possession suggests that states of trance, once established and repeated, are more and

which rock the lotus-gatherer's boat in the poem. Widespread damage from a summer tidal surge at Hang-chou was reported for the year 767: *CTS* 37.1361–2.

4 Sampled in the standard literature: see T. K. Oesterreich, *Possession, demoniacal and other* (trans. D. Ibberson), London 1930, pp. 19–20, 33–4 and 66–7; I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic religion*, Harmondsworth 1971, p. 94; William Sargant, *The mind possessed*, London 1973, pp. 47–8.

5 Oesterreich, *Possession*, pp. 137, 144. Cf. Sargant, *The mind possessed*: 'In hypnoidal states people can remember languages which they have consciously long forgotten, or they can construct new languages. They can act or give impersonations or produce art or music with a degree of skill which is not normally available to them... the brain absorbs and records far more information than is normally remembered, but which can come to the surface in abnormal states of mind' (pp. 36, 37).

6 Sargant, *The mind possessed*: 'overbreathing produces a state of brain alkalosis when the carbon, an acid, is blown out of the blood stream, and this often brings about hysterical dissociation and states of increased suggestibility' (p. 135; cf. p. 117).

more easy to enter; and heightened suggestibility opens the subjects to powerful influence from their surroundings in fixing the content of their trance experience.<sup>7</sup>

We cannot fit Wang Fa-chih easily into any of those categories of traditional Chinese society for whom possession was a routine experience. She was no village exorcist or professional medium in the service of a temple cult.<sup>8</sup> She came instead from a background of some literary culture and operated strictly within its bounds. Her father, in conversation with the ghostly T'eng Ch'uan-yin 騰傳胤, was able to appreciate his 'deep understanding of natural principles'. Young girls, of course, would not enjoy conventional access to the polite male society which talked about such things. But trance made all the difference. The first possession by T'eng came unexpectedly, perhaps involuntarily, but now it rewards the girl with a place of honour and respect as a centre of attention in the local officials' social circle. In these new circumstances her fits of possession are sought at the magistrate's bidding; they come, however slowly, in response to voluntary efforts. And the possessing spirit acknowledges and dignifies his hostess as a 'younger brother' (弟). Possession is sometimes seen as a strategy of repressed or marginal groups in society: it gains them attention and fulfilments denied in conventional life.<sup>9</sup> Wang Fa-chih, the possessed girl whose male persona has officials and gentry hanging on her every word, might answer well to this view. But she functions (and this is our main point of interest) as an individual, not as a member of a profession.

Her inspired verse is lucid and graceful. The second poem of dedication boasts a modest Confucian allusion. And the last piece, in which the lotus gatherer retires in a shower of rain, reminds the modern critic Ch'ien Chung-shu of the same conceit pursued by other more celebrated poets.<sup>10</sup> Spirit-poets were not rare in Chinese life. In later periods we often read of verses revealed by spirits through automatic writing séances.<sup>11</sup> But spirit-verse produced in a state of possession is as ancient in China as the traditions of inspired poetry revealed to fathers

7 Oesterreich, *Possession*, pp. 95, 99; Sargant, *The mind possessed*, p. 54. I have myself watched a young man in T'ai-pei county rapidly enter trance and possession in a tranquil temple setting, with no strong physical stimuli at work.

8 Examples of these practitioners in Tai Fu's China are discussed below, in Chapter 4.

9 This view is argued in Lewis, *Ecstatic religion*, particularly Chapters 3 and 4, which discuss the more developed context of 'peripheral cults'.

10 Ch'ien Chung-shu, *Kuan-chui pien*, Peking 1979, pp. 772-3.

11 The visible procedures are carefully described in Justus Doolittle, *Social life of the Chinese*, vol. 2, New York 1865, pp. 112-14. Many examples will be found in the eighteenth-century poetic memoirs of Shih Chen-lin 史震林, *Hsi-ch'ing san-chi*: see 1.1-11, 17, 20, 23-4, 27; 2.27, 53, 57, 61, 83; 3.119, etc.

of the Taoist movement,<sup>12</sup> and continues today in the temple-cults of modern Chinese societies. Such, essentially, is the style of Wang Fa-chih, comfortably adapted to an urbane secular setting and happily accommodated by its hosts.

We hear her voice from the depths of the past only with the help of another, the voice of Tai Fu, who was one of the company she entertained that night in 771. He compiled the book from which this account first came – the *Kuang-i chi* 廣異記, or *Great book of marvels*, a collection of more than three hundred such items – and here he makes his first and almost his only bow as witness and informant. The *Kuang-i chi*, or the remains of that lost collection, will provide the themes and material for most of what follows in this book. Its scope and subject-matter, its place in literary tradition, the extent of its survival – all these will need scrutiny in the next chapter, together with the few facts we know about Tai Fu and his life. But he faces us here as a witness. Named without title or introduction, the author addresses us in his own voice.

Time and place, we shall see, square exactly with his life and the contents of his book. The scene, as in a score of other stories from the 760s and 770s, lies in the region of modern Chekiang.<sup>13</sup> And it comes with a precision that tells us important things about the author, the society he kept, his personal interests and, effectively, how he collected much of the material we find in his book. Tai Fu ended his own career in a minor provincial post. Military staff, county officials and local gentry were his natural associates and, we find in many other stories, his main informants. This episode came from his own experience, but he drew a multitude of others from hearsay gathered among men like these. What they told him he now transmits through the loosely assembled pages of his book. And that, in a fashion I have described elsewhere, owes its partial survival to the accidents of anthology, manuscript transmission and belated printing.<sup>14</sup>

12 See K. M. Schipper, *L'empereur Wou des Han dans la légende taoïste*, Paris 1965, pp. 12–14, 55–7.

13 Although the various provincial colleagues gathered in the official residence of T'ung-lu county, their own postings lay quite far afield – one in Tan-yang 丹陽, which is many miles to the north on the main Chiang-nan canal, just before its entry into the Yangtze River; one in Lung-ch'üan 龍泉 at a similar distance away in the south. If we draw a circle on the map to take in these places, T'ung-lu is close to its centre, and the radius reaches 140 miles around. Only just outside the circle is Jao-chou 饒州 in the west, the scene of Tai Fu's own last appointment (see below: Chap. 2, p. 44). We can only guess whether he was really based there in 771, but it remains clear that the séance described here did not have a strictly local audience. Other stories in the collection with a Chekiang setting are: 6, 29, 33, 36, 54 (set in T'ung-lu), 60, 85, 132, 141, 167, 176, 187, 202, 217, 233, 292, 307, 310, 315, 316, 318. Stories with Chekiang-based informants are: 24, 80, 115, 122, 128.

14 Tu Te-ch'iao, 'Kuang-i chi ch'u-t'an', *Hsin Ya hsüeh-pao* 15, 1986, 395–414.



Tai Fu serves as an informant, but not a neutral observer. Faced with Wang Fa-chih he plays a part with the rest of the company in endorsing the view that she is indeed possessed by a dead man's spirit. He joins in the exchange of poems and conversation with which that secular gathering greets and accommodates its supernatural visitor. His motive in recording the occasion grows out of their communal perception of the girl's trance behaviour. For them Wang Fa-chih speaks with a voice from beyond the grave: for us the voice of Tai Fu speaks from within his own society.

In this complex system of voices the last to speak is the modern historian who recovers the story from the old tenth-century source where it lies preserved. A certain kind of relationship to the past is implied here. The French historian Le Roy Ladurie put this well when he considered the career of Arnaud Gélis, canon's servant and assistant sexton in the mediaeval village Montaignou, who served his community as a messenger of souls:

His chief role was to make the dead speak. Rather comparable, at the end of the day, in spite of immense chronological and cultural differences, to the role of the *historian* in our contemporary societies.<sup>15</sup>

That role goes perfectly with the business of this book, and not simply because so much of Tai Fu's traffic runs between the living, the dead and those caught in between. It is rather that the *Kuang-i chi* and its like preserve, at many points, the oral history of a remote age. Buried within those hundreds of anecdotes are statements by ordinary people about their times, their surroundings and often about their own experience. We study them, not really to build up a knowledge of events and institutions with documentary data, but rather to explore the perceptions of that long dead generation as it confronted the visible and invisible worlds all around. To deal with material like this is to handle an awkward and slippery critical task. The historian must find ways to distinguish between subtly different forms of testimony that face him, often in disguise, and the challenge of this task will remain alive at every point in the studies that follow.

In the sequence of voices chosen to open this book Wang Fa-chih speaks first. A humble individual, a remote period, an obscure provincial situation – yet we observe and in some ways understand this woman through the eyes of a personal witness from her own time and place.

15 'Son rôle capital: faire parler les morts. Rôle assez comparable, en fin de compte, en dépit d'immenses différences chronologiques et culturelles, à celui de l'*historien* dans nos sociétés contemporaines': Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaignou, village occitan de 1294 à 1324*, rev. edn., Paris 1982, p. 601.

Here is the simplest scheme of testimony available to us in the *Kuang-i chi*, though even this, presented through Tai Fu's ways of perception, his cultural assumptions and cast of mind, takes on a quite different character when we analyse it ourselves. To make progress from here to the more complex testimony and interpretation that lie ahead, some ground rules will be needed. We shall approach them through reading about a second provincial individual.

36 Wang Ch'i comes from the T'ai-yüan family, and his home is in Ying-yang. He has abstained since childhood from all meat and strong-flavoured food. Early in the Ta-li period he became revenue manager in Ch'ü-chou. He is deeply devoted to regular reciting of the *Kuan-yin sūtra*, and throughout his life this practice has never failed to cure him of his frequent bouts of serious illness. Always, as he recites, strange creatures and phantasms come to vex and assail him, but Wang is right-minded, so they cannot interfere with him.

When he was nine years old he suffered an illness for five or six days which left him unable to speak. Suddenly he heard someone outside the gate calling his name, with the words: 'We're coming after you!' So he went off with them and walked some fifty *li*, when they came to an official building.

The senior officer inside said, in great alarm: 'Why did you make the mistake of bringing this little boy here? You must send him back at once!'

A man at his side said: 'Whoever has been summoned here ought not to be let go. You must commission him to do an errand – only then can he leave.'

The officer said there was a dog that was due to die and told Wang Ch'i to fetch it. But Wang pleaded that he was too young and could not cope with the journey alone. So the official told him to go in company with a messenger. On the way the messenger gave Wang Ch'i a pill shaped like a little ball and told him to knock at the gate of the house where the dog lived. The dog came out, and he threw the pill to it. It swallowed this down and instantly died. The official said: 'Your errand is done: you may go home!'

Later on he fell sick again. Suddenly he felt through all his limbs the presence of eighty-two people: eyes, eyebrows, nose and mouth – all had their keepers, and those inside his arms and legs were moving to and fro, attacking his flesh and blood. Whenever they came into the wrist-joints there would be collisions and blows. The illness was unendurably depressing.

When Wang Ch'i asked: 'Do you people want to kill me?', they replied: 'Of course we are not killing you. We are curing you of your disease!'

He said: 'If you do cure me I'll provide a rich feast to feed you with!' And the demons cried out within his flesh in great delight. The next day a meal was served for them, and when it was eaten they all departed. He also recovered from the other symptoms.

Wang has a consecrated knife kept in readiness, more than a foot long, which he holds in his hand whenever he is reciting the scripture. And when seasonal epidemics break out he keeps it constantly at the head of his bed for self-protection.

On a later occasion when he was seriously ill he forced himself to rise in the dark and invoke the name of the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin. Suddenly the darkness became as bright as day, and he saw the blade of the knife pointing upwards. A monk came in and sat down with Wang, asking him what knife this was.

Wang said it was a devil-killing knife, and the monk then abruptly vanished. Before long an iron flail descended from mid-air and struck at the knife. It delivered more than 200 blows in succession, until the flail was all smashed in pieces, while the knife was unharmed. Then he saw a huge water cask, banded with iron and large enough to hold more than 250 gallons. It was turned facing downwards, and beside it were two giants wielding staves.

They asked Wang: 'Do you know what this is?'

He said he did not, and they told him: 'It is an iron-banded prison!'

Wang said: 'Just the very thing I need to imprison devils in!'

With these words they both vanished. Then he saw a feast of delicacies being carried out through the gate on stands, about a hundred of them. Again, he saw several hundred people dressed in radiant clothing, drawn up in lines inside his residence; and he saw his late father, sword in hand, furiously saying: 'I have no rooms for you to stay in!' And the people all at once broke up and fled. Not long after this he recovered from the illness.

In the Ch'ien-yüan period [758-759], when he was in Chiang-ling, he once again suffered a serious illness, and returned with devout heart to invoking the name of Kuan-yin. In the distance he could see hundreds of demons coming towards him in boats. They were famished from their long journey and begged Wang for food. So he told his servants to prepare a meal, which was laid out in the courtyard. The crowd of demons sat down in rows, while from Wang's own mouth two demons leaped out and took their seats. When the meal was finished they said at first that this was still not enough.

Wang said: 'You want some clothes, don't you?'

And the demons replied: 'Exactly!'

So he told his servants to make several dozen suits of paper clothing and also tunics in the official colours, such as red and green. These were burned in the courtyard: the demons put them on, then scattered. And consequently he recovered from his illness.

In the Yung-t'ai [765] period he again fell seriously ill. So with pure heart he recited the *Heart sūtra* by lamplight. And suddenly a sound like the fluttering of birds gradually worked its way from his seat right up through his body and made his mouth gape open uncontrollably. He reflected that this must be a demon vexing him, and redoubled his mental clarity and composure. In a few moments he was back to normal. Then again he saw bloated corpses beside his bed, serpents as thick as jars, with a multitude of demons, most of them dead men he had once known, who wildly sought to destroy him. Wang closed his eyes and devoutly recited the *sūtra* through twenty-four times. All vanished clean away. And after thirty-nine readings he relaxed and got some sleep. The next day he was well again.

His wife Li once also fell sick of an epidemic disease. Wang recited the *Heart*

*sūtra* on her behalf, by lamplight. After four or five phrases he suddenly saw three human heads under the lamp, one of them belonging to a maid of Li's who had recently died. Then he heard a cry from the mouth of Li, who pulled herself up into a sitting position. She stared, unable to speak, just pointing to this side and that, or up and down, as though she saw things there. Wang ordered a slave with a long sword to slash through whatever place she pointed at.

At length she awoke and said: 'Is that Master Wang III?' (No doubt she was addressing Wang Ch'i as a younger brother.)

Wang asked her what she had been pointing at.

She said: 'I saw someone at the window, with a nose several feet long. Then I saw two creatures beside the bed that looked like camels. And I also saw red curtains spread out all over the room. All these things were broken up by the slave hacking at them with his sword, and all at once they vanished.'

For his part Wang recited the *sūtra* through forty-nine times, and Li accordingly recovered.

This Wang Ch'i 王琦 belongs to the same company of petty provincial officials in the Chekiang region with whom Tai Fu mixed in the 760s and 770s. The signs are that this piece, with its detailed private chronology, its domestic particularity and the family circle that populates its scenes of hallucination, represents Wang's own testimony as noted down by his friend Tai Fu.

Wang stems from an eminent clan,<sup>16</sup> and from a branch associated with the ancient town of Ying-yang 滎陽 on the south bank of the Yellow River. His current (or most recent) appointment places him, ca. 766, on the staff of a prefecture in the post-rebellion province Che-tung 浙東.<sup>17</sup> His medical history, which occupies the whole of this story, is so subjective in symptom definition and so vague in aetiology that clear diagnosis is hardly possible. The hallucinations could come from different organic causes, ranging from pathogenic foodstuffs or drugs to feverish episodes during bouts of malaria or other epidemic disease. But certainly Wang's perception of experienced sickness makes an interesting comparison with the literature of possession in traditional societies. This man is clearly prone to hallucinations. He relies on his

16 A lineage belonging to the group of Seven Great Surnames 七姓 recognized as an aristocratic elite by an edict of 659 (see *T'ang hui-yao* 83.1528-9) and by Shen Kua (1031-95) in his essay on the T'ang and pre-T'ang aristocracy (*Meng-ch'i pi-t'an chiao-cheng* 24.773). Cf. *HTS* 72B.2632-3; Denis Twitchett, 'The composition of the T'ang ruling class: new evidence from Tunhuang', in A. F. Wright and D. C. Twitchett, eds., *Perspectives on the T'ang*, New Haven and London 1973, pp. 47-85, with pp. 56 ff.

17 Ch'ü-chou 衢州 (now Ch'ü-hsien 衢縣 in modern Chekiang) was one of seven prefectures since 756 under the administrative control of the civil governor of Che-tung 浙東觀察使: *Yüan-ho chün-hsien t'u-chih* 26.617; *T'ang fang-chen nien-piao* 5.770.

own ritual therapy to deal with them, and for this purpose favours two well-known Buddhist scriptures, both long used in China for talismanic effects.<sup>18</sup> Certain episodes of his history also imply the belief, widespread in traditional societies, that organic diseases are caused by demonic possession. Oesterreich excluded that loose conception from the analysis set up in his classic book on possession.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless Wang's case history does invite a closer look, and each bout of illness reveals a character of its own.

The childhood illness at nine *sui* 歲 (eight years by the Western count) takes him into an episode of bureaucratic muddle in a courtroom of the other world. This we recognize at once as a standard narrative format, repeated many times in the *Kuang-i chi* and elsewhere. But its familiarity does not invalidate, and may even explain, the episode's status as a subjective experience in a child on the brink of death. Such is the décor with which the surrounding culture has furnished his mind.<sup>20</sup>

The second illness shares characteristics with possessions in other societies and times. Multiple spirits at large in Wang's body are closely associated with physical discomforts: he seems to suffer the symptom known to modern pathology as 'formication', a crawling or needling sensation all over the skin. It compares with a condition leading up to convulsive fits once reported among the Samoyed women of Arctic Russia:

Some subjects declare that they have the sensation of a rat running all over the body and inflicting on the limbs innumerable and very painful bites.<sup>21</sup>

More characteristic of possession strictly defined is the possessing spirits' ability to speak up for themselves in dialogue with the subject, and their

18 *Kuan-yin sūtra* 觀音經 was a popular name for the 'P'u-men p'in' 普門品 chapter of the famous *Lotus sūtra* (*Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*), describing the saving grace of the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin. Its most widely used Chinese version was by Kumārajīva (350?-409?): *T* vol. 9, no. 262. For descriptions of its early devotional and talismanic use, see Tsukamoto Zenryū, 'Koitsu Rikuchō Kanzeon ōkenki no shutsugen', *Silver Jubilee volume of the Zinbun kagaku kenkyūso, Kyōto University*, Kyoto 1954, pp. 234-50. The so-called *Heart sūtra*, a distillation of the great body of Buddhist wisdom literature, was also translated by Kumārajīva (*T* vol. 8, no. 250), but its earliest known version using the title *Hsin-ching* 心經 was apparently by Hsüan-tsang 玄奘 (602?-664) (*T* vol. 8, no. 251); others soon followed (nos. 252-5). Hsüan-tsang's own use of this protective text is described in his early biography *Ta-T'ang Ta-tz'u-en ssu San-tsang fa-shih chuan* (*T* vol. 50, no. 2053) 1.224b: see G. Dudbridge, *The Hsi-yu chi*, Cambridge 1970, pp. 14-15.

19 Oesterreich, *Possession*, pp. 119, 124.

20 Elsewhere this is explicit. Story 259 describes how a boy sees a vision of an ox-headed man, 'truly as seen in pictures of hell'. It turns out to be an ape. The boy is so severely shocked by his experience that he soon dies.

21 Oesterreich, *Possession*, p. 204.

willingness to leave upon fulfilment of a condition – here the serving of a rich meal.<sup>22</sup> And when they go, the other symptoms go too.

Wang's adventures with the ritual knife in his third serious illness suggest a sequence of delirious hallucinations. But in the Ch'ien-yüan 乾元 episode we see him once again meeting external conditions for the possessing spirits, some of whom make their exit through his mouth. He serves them by burning paper clothes for their use – and serves us by providing this uniquely early evidence of a ritual act, practical and enduring, still widely performed in Chinese society.<sup>23</sup> He adds tunics in the colours laid down for official wear by an ordinance of 630: red (緋) for fifth-grade officers, green (綠) for the sixth and seventh grades.<sup>24</sup>

The Yung-t'ai 永泰 episode shows Wang most effective in his disciplined mental resistance. Two perspectives are possible here. For Oesterreich this man might confirm his observation that people of intense religious commitment are traditionally prone to obsessions and phenomena of psychic compulsion, but that, while in people of weak character obsessions easily become full possessions, the lives of saints and mystics often show how strength of character and discipline can keep possession at bay.<sup>25</sup>

The clinical psychiatrist William Sargant rejected Oesterreich's distinction between states of hysteria and possession in favour of distinctions in social context and prevailing belief; and he stressed his finding that normal people are far more susceptible to hypnotic states than the mentally disturbed.<sup>26</sup> On this view, Wang Ch'i's successful battles with

22 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 106–7, 228 (Japan), 136–7 (Abyssinia), 232 (Mecca).

23 Cf. story 104. Tsien Tsuen-hsüin, *Paper and printing* (vol. 5, part I, of Joseph Needham, *Science and civilisation in China*, Cambridge 1985, pp. 104 ff.), cites twelfth-century sources for the burning of paper clothes and other objects for the dead in the Sung period. W. Eberhard, *The local cultures of south and east China* (trans. A. Eberhard, Leiden 1968, p. 467), cites *T'ung-yü chi* 通幽記 (in *TPKC* 332.2637) and *Ming-pao chi* B.27 as examples of the use of paper and textile imitations of persons in funeral ceremonies, 'definitely before the T'ang period'. Both, however, are T'ang sources. For the burning of paper clothes for the dead he cites *I-chien san chih*, *hsin* 辛, 5.1422: a reference no earlier than 1198. The present reference thus has some historical interest. The burning of paper money from this period or before is more richly documented: see the discussion by Hou Ching-lang, *Monnaies d'offrande et la notion de trésorerie dans la religion chinoise*, *Mémoires de l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises*, vol. 1, Paris 1975, pp. 3–17; and cf. below, Chap. 3, p. 54, with n. 11, and Chap. 4, n. 37.

24 *CTS* 45.1952. Cf. *TCTC* 210.6686.

25 Oesterreich, *Possession*, pp. 80–3. The terminology used here reflects the theological definition given by the mediaeval Catholic church to its doctrines of *obsession*, in which the assault of devils was external, and *possession*, in which it came from inside the patient's body. Compare the discussion in Keith Thomas, *Religion and the decline of magic: studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth century England*, London 1971, pp. 477 ff.

26 Sargant, *The mind possessed*, pp. 56–7, 31.

invading spirits may have been the symptom of a long-standing mental pathology.

A final episode shows his sick wife susceptible to suggestion, both from her husband's prior visions and from his trusted ritual therapy.

If we discuss Wang Ch'i's medical history in terms of religion, ritual and possession, it is because he does so himself. His experience of sickness may or may not have stood out as unusually colourful and eventful in his own time, but it has one quality which certainly attracted Tai Fu and must surely interest modern readers too: the patient's private, subjective experience finds precise and articulate expression. We know exactly what sensations Wang was aware of, what visions filled his mind, what actions he took and why he took them. We may also notice what forms of treatment were absent from his sickbed – for no professional specialists, medical or ritual, appeared to attend him there. He seems to have put all his trust in the power of mental discipline, the magic of certain Buddhist scriptures, the use of physical weapons and in fearless dialogue and crude transactions with his tormentors.<sup>27</sup>

This, then, like the story of Wang Fa-chih, also testifies to human perceptions within its parent culture. But it differs in one clear and fundamental way. While the woman Wang Fa-chih comes before us only as an observed performer, the man Wang Ch'i takes us inside his felt experience. Tai Fu reports them both, but from different vantage points. With one he picks up hearsay and joins other spectators in watching the outer surface of events (though even the spectators enjoy indirect communion with an unseen ghost). With the other he lets the consciousness of an articulate patient take charge (though even that active expressionist watches blankly from the outside as his wife wrestles with visions he cannot see himself).

The distinction drawn here will run through all our attempts to read and interpret Tai Fu's testimony. To make it quite clear these two unusually pure specimens have been picked out to stand at the head. They suggest a first rule: *to separate the viewpoint of secular observers from the inner eye of a participating subject*. A second rule will follow from the first: *to recognize both kinds of vision at work within the same account*. And for this we now turn to a third provincial.

85 Li Tso-shih, assistant magistrate of Shan-yin county, fell ill from exhaustion in Ta-li 2 [767]. After several weeks of illness he enjoyed an intermission and

27 With this we can contrast the case of Yen Feng-hsiang in story 152, whose struggle with a sequence of demon visitors involves the systematic use of professional ritual assistance – spirit mediums, Buddhist monks, Taoist priests of the Liu-ting 六丁 school – all without apparent effect.