Abstract

The Queen Mother of the West (Xi Wang Mu) as we know her now is a queenly Taoist Goddess, mother of the Jade Emperor and capable of granting immortality through her magic peaches. However, this is a far cry from the controversial assortment of her earliest images, which included a Shang deity known as Mother of the West (Xi Mu), a shamanic deity with animalistic aspects and a lady goddess who sang verses and liased with kings. Though well known, these images nonetheless suffer from a lack of careful attention as most scholars concentrate their efforts on examining her later Taoist images.

I believe the rich imagery of the Queen Mother’s earliest images holds the key to understanding her deeper significance. As such, the main chapters of this thesis shall focus on re-discovering her elusive images of the Shang and Zhou period. My study is pioneering in that it uses a kaleidoscopic perspective to examine her image, significance and symbolism in the different times and texts. I make use of archaeological reports, art studies, oracle bone studies, myth studies and literary analysis to uncover different aspects of her images. Besides that, I shall also examine the possible reasons for the changes of her outer appearance from an anthropological perspective. Thence, I hope to reconstruct a fuller picture of the Queen Mother’s earliest images and her evolution.

From the continuities of symbolism and significance I uncover, I hope to establish that these images are indeed evolutions of the same goddess and are not as irreconcilable as they seem at first sight. Although she absorbs other traditions along the way, her intrinsic features and qualities are those that have been with her since creation. In the last chapter, I shall also suggest the possibility of re-reading her later images by using these intrinsic qualities as stepping-stones to understand her hidden symbolism.