2.2 The Spirit World

During the Zhou period, families, both noble and common, sacrificed to their ancestors. These sacrifices were of the utmost importance and any neglect would bring about misfortune and calamity, for ancestors had the power to aid or punish their descendants.

Human sacrifice was practiced extensively during the Shang dynasty and to a lesser extent down to the third century B.C.E. The third selection decries the practice that “takes all our good men” in following the king in death. Duke Mu of Qin died in 621 B.C.E. The last selection is a conversation between a Zhou king and his minister and demonstrates the Chinese belief in the close interaction between the spirit world and the political environment. The king could not afford to lose the favor and protection of Heaven.

**ABUNDANT IS THE YEAR**

Abundant is the year, with much millet, much rice;  
But we have tall granaries,  
To hold myriads, many myriads and millions of grain.  
We make wine, make sweet liquor,  
We offer it to ancestor, to ancestress,  
We use it to fulfill all the rites,  
To bring down blessings upon each and all.


**Glorious Ancestors**

Ah, the glorious ancestors—  
Endless, their blessings,  
Boundless their gifts are extended;  
To you, too, they needs must reach.  
We have brought them clear wine;  
They will give victory.  
Here, too, is soup well seasoned,  
Well prepared, well mixed.  
Because we come in silence,  
Setting all quarrels aside,  
They make safe for us a ripe old age,  
We shall reach the withered cheek, we shall go on and on.  
With our leather-bound naves, our bronzeclad yokes,  
With eight bells a-jangle  
We come to make offering.  
The charge put upon us is vast and mighty,  
From Heaven dropped our prosperity,  
Good harvests, great abundance.  
They come [the ancestors], they accept,  
They send down blessings numberless.  
They regard the paddy-offerings, the offerings of first-fruits  
That Tang’s descendant brings.

**HUMAN SACRIFICE**

“Kio” sings the oriole  
As it lights on the thorn-bush.  
Who went with Duke Mu to the grave?  
Yan-xi of the clan Zi-ju.  
Now this Yan-xi  
Was the pick of all our men;  
But as he drew near the tomb-hole  
His limbs shook with dread.  
That blue one, Heaven,  
Takes all our good men.  
Could we but ransom him  
There are a hundred would give their lives.

“Kio” sings the oriole  
As it lights on the thorn-bush.  
Who went with Duke Mu to the grave?  
Zhong-hang of the clan Zi-ju.  
Now this Zhong-hang  
Was the sturdiest of all our men;  
But as he drew near the tomb-hole  
His limbs shook with dread.  
That blue one, Heaven,  
Takes all our good men.  
Could we but ransom him  
There are a hundred would give their lives.

“Kio” sings the oriole  
As it lights on the thorn-bush.  
Who went with Duke Mu to the grave?  
Quan-hu of the clan Zi-ru.  
Now this Quan-hu  
Was the strongest of all our men;  
But as he drew near the tomb-hole  
His limbs shook with dread.  
That blue one, Heaven,  
Takes all our good men.  
Could we but ransom him  
There are a hundred would give their lives.

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**Questions:**

1. What role did spirits play in the lives of the Chinese? Why was it important to placate them?
2. How was human sacrifice regarded by the Chinese?
2.3 Ch’u Yuan and Sung Yu: Individual Voices in a Chaotic Era

The later Zhou period (“Era of Warring States”) was a time of intrigue, uncertainty, and confusion—a time when the individual could very easily be lost from view. Politics, ethics, warfare, and religion, underlined by that supreme piece of logical irrationality, the “Mandate of Heaven,” cast a generally depressing shadow over the years before the Qin period. The mandarins Ch’u Yuan (332–295 B.C.E.) and his nephew Sung Yu, in their enthusiastic, distinct styles and down-to-earth descriptions, provide a refreshing contrast.


BATTLE

“We grasp our battle-spears: we don our breast-plates of hide.  
The axles of our chariots touch: our short swords meet.  
Standards obscure the sun: the foe roll up like clouds.  
Arrows fall thick: the warriors press forward.  
They menace our ranks: they break our line.  
The left-hand trace-horse is dead: the one on the right is smitten.  
The fallen horses block our wheels: they impede the yoke-horses!”

They grasp their jade drum-sticks: they beat the sounding drums.  
Heaven decrees their fall: the dread Powers are angry.

The warriors are all dead: they lie on the moor-field.  
They issued but shall not enter: they went but shall not return.  
The plains are flat and wide: the way home is long.  
Their swords lie beside them: their black bows, in their hand.  
Though their limbs were torn, their hearts could not be repressed.

They were more than brave: they were inspired with the spirit of “Wu.”

Steadfast to the end, they could not be daunted.

Their bodies were stricken, but their souls have taken Immortality—

Captains among the ghosts, heroes among the dead.

THE MAN-WIND AND THE WOMAN-WIND

HSIANG, king of Ch’u, was feasting in the Orchid-tower, Palace, with Sung Yü, and Ching Ch’ai to wait upon him. A gust of wind blew in and the king bared his breast to meet it, saying: “How pleasant a thing is this wind which I share with the common people.” Sung Yü answered: “This is the Great King’s wind. The common people cannot share it.” The king said: “Wind is a spirit of Heaven and Earth. It comes wide spread and does not choose between noble and base or between high and low. How can you say ‘This is the king’s wind’?” Sung answered: “I have heard it taught that in the crooked lemon-tree birds make their nests and to empty spaces winds fly. But the wind-spirit that comes to different things is not the same.” The king said: “Where is the wind born?” and Sung answered, “The wind is born in the ground. It rises in the extremities of the green p’ing-flower. It pours into the river-valleys and rages at the mouth of the pass. It follows the rolling flanks of Mount T’ai and dances beneath pine-trees and cypresses. In gusty bouts it whirls. It rushes in fiery anger. It rumbles low with a noise like thunder, tearing down rocks and trees, smiting forests and grasses.

“But at last abating, it spreads abroad, seeks empty places and crosses the threshold of rooms. And so growing gentler and clearer, it changes and is dispersed and dies.

“It is this cool clear Man-Wind that, freeing itself, falls and rises till it climbs the high walls of the Castle and enters the gardens of the Inner Palace. It bends the flowers and leaves with its breath. It wanders among the osmanthus and
pepper-trees. It lingers over the fretted face of the pond, to steal the soul of the hibiscus. It touches the willow leaves and scatters the fragrant herbs. Then it pauses in the courtyard and turning to the North goes up to the Jade Hall, shakes the hanging curtains and lightly passes into the inner room.

“And so it becomes the Great King’s wind.”

“Now such a wind is fresh and sweet to breathe and its gentle murmuring cures the diseases of men, blows away the stupor of wine, sharpens sight and hearing and refreshes the body. This is what is called the Great King’s wind.”

The king said: “You have well described it. Now tell me of the common people’s wind.” Sung said: “The common people’s wind rises from narrow lanes and streets, carrying clouds of dust. Rushing to empty spaces it attacks the gateway, scatters the dust-heap, sends the cinders flying, pokes among foul and rotting things, till at last it enters the tiled windows and reaches the rooms of the cottage. Now this wind is heavy and turgid, oppressing man’s heart. It brings fever to his body, ulcers to his lips and dimness to his eyes. It shakes him with coughing; it kills him before his time.

“Such is the Woman-wind of the common people.”

Questions:
1. What view does Ch’u Yuan apparently have of war? Of the afterlife?
2. To what extent do you think that Ch’u Yuan might actually have participated in military campaigns? On what might you base your assumptions?
3. What does Sung Yu’s prose poem about the winds tell us about social and gender-based attitudes in Zhou China?