Voices from Early China

The *Odes* Demystified

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Geoffrey Sampson

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By Geoffrey Sampson

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The symbol on the title page is the Chinese title of this book—*Shi*, "Poetry"—in the hand of the Tang dynasty monk Huai Su, who called his greatly admired calligraphy "the handwriting of a drunken immortal".

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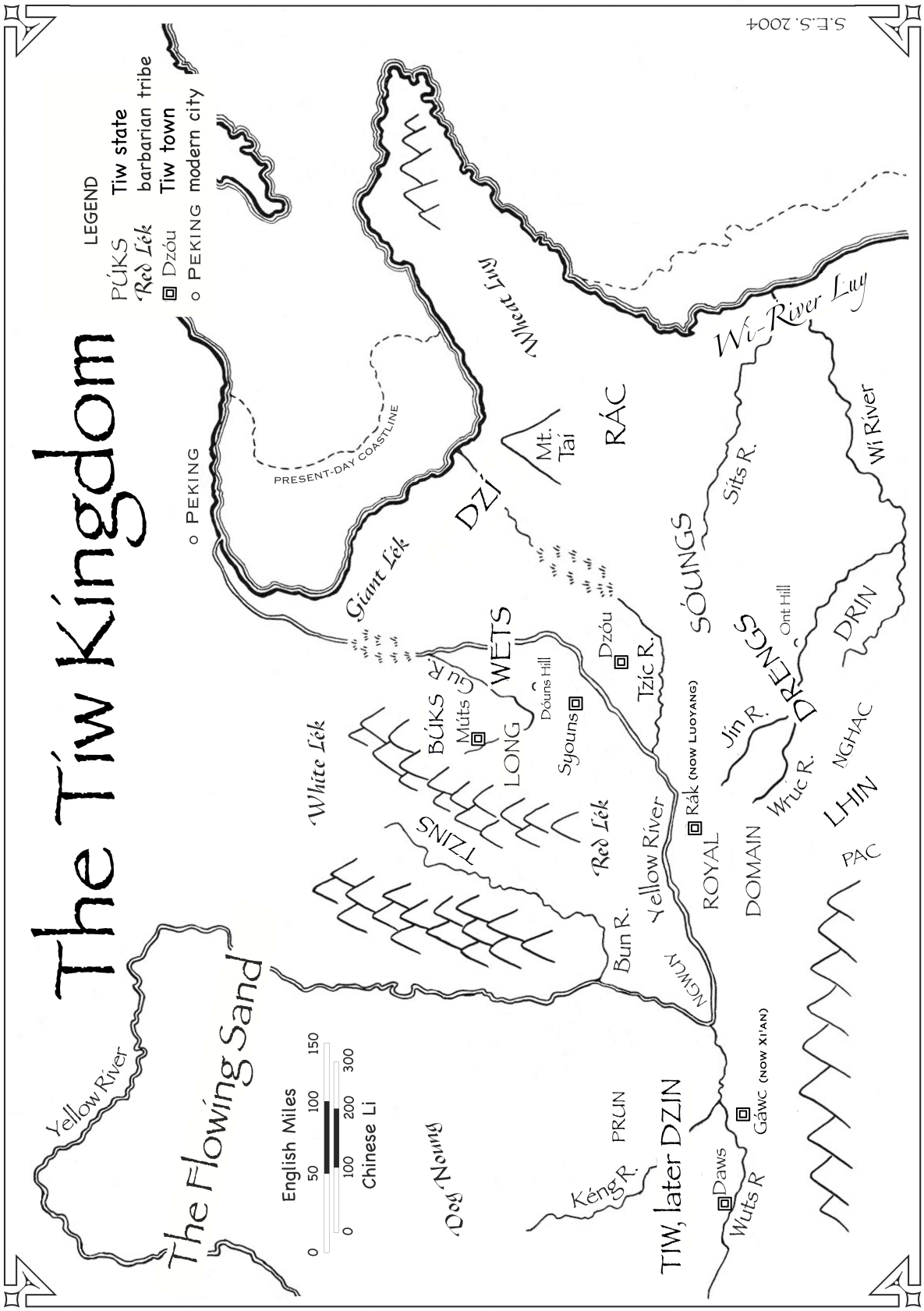
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Introduction

This book offers a translation of the Chinese *Book of Odes*, a collection of 305 poems written over roughly the period 1000–600 B.C. It is one of the two earliest monuments of Chinese literature, and one of the oldest literary works in any still-living language—the earlier Odes may perhaps be the oldest such literature of all. The poems provide fascinating vignettes of life in a society almost unimaginably remote from us in time, and many are charming expressions of universal human experience, for instance by women about love problems. (For such early literature it is remarkable how many of the Odes are written by women.) In some cases we have good grounds for identifying the author of an Ode with some individual known to history, but in most cases the authors are unknown.

We also do not know who collected the poems into an anthology. Traditionally this was said to be Confucius (who lived from 551 to 479 B.C.), but that may merely reflect a tendency to attribute anything old to some famous figure. The tradition seems to be based on a brief and inexplicit allusion to two sections of the Odes in the *Analects*, the record of Confucius's sayings by his pupils; but there is evidence that the anthology already existed, in something like its eventual format, when Confucius was a child.

In everyday English, "ode" is usually a jocular synonym for "poem" in general. But technically it means a particular kind of poem—lyrical and personal rather than, say, the kind of long narrative poem called "epic"; and odes are commonly intended to be sung to music. The poems in the *Book of Odes* are not all identical in genre, and we cannot hope to find perfect matches between Chinese literary genres and those of Western literature, but that said, "ode" is a reasonable word for these poems or songs. (I shall use "Odes" with a capital O to refer to the poems in this anthology, as well as to the anthology as a whole.)

Unfortunately, the appeal of the poems has been concealed from a modern readership in many different ways. The aim of this book is to cut through these problems and make the Odes as transparent as they have ever been made, for Western readers and, if it is not presumptuous, also for East Asian readers.

Making the opaque transparent

The language of the *Book of Odes* is recognizably continuous with modern Chinese—any educated Chinese can read many brief passages with understanding. But over almost three millennia the language has changed so much, with many words becoming obsolete, that reading an entire poem is a challenge requiring specialist help. The book has been translated into Western languages several times, but usually by scholars who are more interested in the philological conundrums it poses than in producing straightforward wording that can be read for pleasure. Furthermore the meaning of many Odes has been systematically distorted by contributors to the Chinese commentary tradition and by Western translators.

The world of the Odes was a rather down-to-earth society concerned, much of the time, with very ordinary human predicaments. But, as China later grew into what for much of human history was the richest and most powerful society in the world, it developed a degree of pomposity, and one consequence was that it seemed intolerable for such ancient and revered

literature to deal with topics that were less than august. Poems were reinterpreted to be about high politics. Ode 41, read for the plain meaning of its words, is about a poor girl trying to offer her body to a shy young man in exchange for shelter on a bitter winter night; but one commentator decided that it was really about the queen of a defeated nation seeking asylum with the ruler of a neighbouring country. Sometimes editors would modify the text to suit their ideas of morality: Ode 88 has a man waiting for his girlfriend *ghà dàng*, "in the hall", but one editor "corrected" this to *ghà dràng*, "by the gatepost", because it was not proper for him to be in the girl's house. As the centuries passed and theories like these acquired the authority of age, they were accepted as received truths which students of the Odes did not question. Early manuscripts unearthed by archaeologists over the past fifty years make it clear that, in their own time, the Odes were understood in a down-to-earth fashion; the "pompous" or "political" reinterpretations arose later—but, having done so, they became dominant.

I don't mean to suggest that Chinese interpreters of the Odes have regularly distorted their meanings while Western translators get them right. Sometimes it is the other way round. Odes 187 and 188 both appear to be by women who have married men living far from their homes and then found themselves rejected by their husbands, so that their only solution is to go back to their parents. James Legge, who in 1871 first translated the Odes into English (and who became Oxford University's first professor of Chinese), pointed out that the ancient Mao commentary on the Odes, seen as authoritative by many Chinese, explained the poems in just those terms; but according to Legge this interpretation is "too absurd to be dwelt on". For Legge both Odes are about officials who have had to leave the royal court to settle in outlying regions, and find the locals there difficult to deal with. But Legge offers no reason why the Mao interpretation is "absurd". I take it to be correct, and translate accordingly.

(This is not to say that "political" interpretations are always wrong. Ode 44, read for the surface meaning of its words alone, would make little sense, but when one hears the piece of history that lies behind it the poem becomes meaningful and poignant. Where traditional interpretations in terms of historical events are plausible, my translations reflect them—I only reject them when they seem redundant and forced.)

Much of the aesthetic impact which these poems must have had on their original readers or hearers stems from the "speech music" they incorporate. Most obviously, they rhyme—the *Book of Odes* is the earliest known rhyming poetry in any language. But the sounds of Chinese have changed over the millennia, as happens with all languages, and one consequence is that if an Ode is read in modern Chinese pronunciation the rhyming is largely destroyed. And even when rhyme-words in the Odes continue to rhyme today, their effect has been dissipated by the sound-changes just mentioned. The effect of rhyme depends on rhyming words not being too frequent, so that when lines do end with words that match in this way, they command attention and create a feeling of rightness. Unlike the Old Chinese of the Odes, modern Chinese has so few different sounds that any word rhymes with an enormous number of others, and the impact of rhyme is lost. (Only two consonants can end a modern Chinese syllable, *n* and *-ng*; all other syllables end in vowels, but there are effectively only four different vowels, though some of them can combine as diphthongs. The sound system of Old Chinese was much richer.) Rhyme apart, the Odes as they originally sounded contained a great deal of assonance and alliteration which were an important ingredient of their poetic value—and which, again, has been lost in the modern language. This book shows the Old Chinese sounds alongside the English translations, so readers can appreciate the poems for their speech-music as well as their meaning.

For present-day Western readers, these poems are far more accessible than the Chinese poetry which is commonly translated. Westerners who know anything of Chinese poetry are

most likely to have encountered the lyric poets of the Tang and Song dynasties (seventh to thirteenth centuries A.D.)—writers such as Li Bo (sometimes spelled Li Bai) and Bo Juyi. That literature is subtle and beautiful, for those who understand it, but understanding it is difficult. China under the Tang had been a mighty and complex civilization for a very long time. (The Tang capital was easily the richest and most technologically advanced city anywhere in the world; the West only caught up far later, through our Industrial Revolution.) Poets and their audiences took for granted a large shared stock of historical and literary knowledge, and writers drew on this freely to achieve their own literary effects; as a result, many of these effects are lost on us. The China of the Odes by contrast was a young civilization that had had little time to build up a resource of cultural references. The poems in this book speak to us directly about human beings and the natural world. Their wording perhaps sometimes borders on the naive—this is not poetry with the intellectual subtlety of a Shakespeare or a Donne. But the directness makes it clear; and how many opportunities do we have to see directly into the hearts of men and women who lived almost three millennia ago, naive or not?

Furthermore, poetry of the Tang and Song used metrical effects which depended on the "tones" or pitch-patterns of words which are a distinctive feature of modern Chinese, but which Westerners find it hard to hear. The Old Chinese of the Odes was not a tone language, and its sounds are easier for Western ears to grasp.

One large barrier to Westerners wanting to engage with these poems is the nature of Chinese script, which assigns an individual written graph or "character" to each word, rather than spelling words out alphabetically. A Western reader may glimpse a little of the visual beauty of Chinese writing, but in all other respects it is entirely opaque. Even when two lines of poetry do rhyme, a Western reader would have no way of knowing it. And the script of the Odes is problematic for Chinese readers. Many words, and hence the graphs used to write them, are now long-obsolete; and the poems were written centuries before Chinese script was standardized, so words which do survive in the modern language are often written with graphs which are still used, but not for the words intended in the poem.

In this book, each Ode is rendered into straightforward, modern, and I hope readable English, representing what the poet actually seems to have been saying while ignoring political "reinterpretations". And below each translated verse I spell out alphabetically how the poems originally sounded. Chinese and Western scholars have put a great deal of effort over recent centuries into working out how Old Chinese was pronounced, and in the 21st century there is sufficient scholarly consensus to make this a meaningful exercise. I discuss my spelling system for Old Chinese later in this Introduction, for readers interested in the details. But many readers who care about poetry, or about the origins of Chinese culture, while having little special interest in phonetic matters may be content to assume that whatever precise sounds my Old Chinese spellings stood for, they were something roughly like what the spellings suggest at first sight. That will actually work quite well.

Old Chinese was an extremely simple language, with none of the apparatus of inflected word-endings, regular and irregular verbs, and so forth, which bedevils the study of European languages. Chinese was essentially a grammar-free language: an Odes line is a sequence of lumps of meaning, and the hearer or reader fills in the relationships between the lumps using common sense and hints from context. Thus a Western reader who is struck by some line or verse and wants to grasp how it works can look up the meanings of the words in the Glossary beginning on p. 381, and then has just about all the information needed to see how the passage means what my translation says it means.

For Chinese readers the essence of the poems lies in their written form, so alongside the alphabetically-transcribed Old Chinese I show the lines in Chinese script. But where it is clear

that the usual editions of the Odes represent a word by a graph which is not the one which later became standard for that word, I give the standard graph rather than the graph found in commonly-available editions of the poems. (This is one justification for my presumptuous suggestion that the book makes the Odes more accessible than before even to Chinese-speakers.)

To achieve these various things I have of course had to soak myself in the relevant scholarly literature. But I have studied this material in order for my readers to have no need to do so.

Deeper roots than ours

It is worth taking a moment to reflect on how very old these poems are, in terms of history with which most of us are more familiar. The youngest Odes were written some 2,600 years ago. England was not yet England then: it would be a thousand years before the Angles and Saxons came to Britain. For that matter, Britain was probably not yet Britain; it is unclear when the Celts or "Ancient Britons" arrived, but the scholarly consensus seems to place it rather later than the Odes. We know little about the people who lived in Britain before the Celts; they appear to have been nomadic herdsmen. We have no idea what language or languages they spoke, or whether these were related to any languages known to history—they certainly had no idea of writing. The classical civilizations of Europe were only just getting off the ground. This was when the Greeks first learned to use the alphabet; the legendary date of the foundation of Rome by Romulus and Remus was 753 B.C.

In China, matters were different. The Chinese led settled lives; many lived in walled towns. Those who could afford it got about in carriages. Their culture was already sophisticated, politically, technically, and artistically. They spoke an earlier version of the language which their descendants in the same territory speak today: Chinese. And we know these things because they have told us. Before the time of the earliest Odes, Chinese was already a written language. The script used to write Chinese at that period looks superficially unlike modern Chinese writing—later changes in writing materials caused curves to give way to straight lines and angles, leading to a more abstractly stylized appearance; but a brief examination quickly reveals how one is a direct evolution from the other.

We must not exaggerate how far China had moved from barbarism towards civilization. Henri Maspero warns us that "we should not imagine the [ruling dynasty's] royal court, even at the height of its power in the late ninth and early eighth centuries, to be how it was depicted in literature composed many centuries later: a place of refined civilization, philosophy, and hierarchical ritualism. On the contrary, the early texts show it as still half-savage." This mixture of advanced culture with real barbarity (see Ode 131, for instance) is one aspect of the fascination of the Odes. At times the English of my translations may strike readers as too colloquial to suit ancient poetry, but at the Odes period blunt colloquial language was probably the only language available for most topics.

While the *Book of Odes* is among the world's oldest literary productions, it is far from being the oldest of all. The poetry of Sumer (in what is now Iraq), for instance the epic tales of Gilgamesh, date to the third millennium B.C. But the Sumerians and their language vanished from the historical record many centuries before the earliest Odes. China is the oldest civilization in the world which continues to flourish in essentially unbroken continuity today.

The Odes in roman script

Some scholars see spelling these poems out in their original pronunciation as a pointless waste of effort. I have known this view to be expressed by one of the same linguists who have devoted

a great deal of their own effort to working out what that pronunciation was, without themselves doing anything with this knowledge. To me it seems misguided.

Already a thousand years ago (by which time the sounds of Chinese had already changed greatly), we find a scholar publishing a book, *The Rhyme-Mender*, which tried to reconstruct the original pronunciation of the Odes—in an unsophisticated fashion by modern standards, but a creditable first attempt; and another scholar commented that "only since the completion of the *Rhyme-Mender* can the Odes be seen as poetry". For anyone interested in poetry as a genre of literature, there is no way to get a feeling for the nature of these very early examples without saying some of them over to oneself in the jingly rhythms and sounds, or at least an approximation to the sounds, that the poets who composed them heard. One hears how central rhyme and assonance are to many of them—but also how tentative these early poets often were in their use of these effects. Sometimes an Ode will begin with a regular rhyme-scheme, but then after a verse or two it will be abandoned in favour of a different scheme, or no scheme at all. Metre is sometimes very regular, but sometimes it is violated for no immediately-obvious reason. In some cases there are reasons which are not obvious, and I return to that later. But in other cases the reason may have been simply that there were not yet any established conventions—these poets were feeling their way towards creating conventions, and had no fixed ideas about what might be permissible and what not. Some Odes use many "rhymers and chimers"—two-syllable compounds which gain expressiveness through alliteration or assonance, like *trent-tront* "toss and turn", or *dzòuy-ngòuy* "craggy". In present-day Mandarin Chinese it is not just that these particular compounds no longer alliterate: the language scarcely has such expressions at all. (Some other East Asian languages, for instance Vietnamese, use many such compounds today, but in Mandarin they have vanished.)

In the case of the Odes, the original pronunciation is all the more important because the sounds of Chinese are arguably not naturally suited to poetry: few would describe it as a mellifluous language. Consonants in European languages often bridge between one syllable and the next; in a word like *analogy*, there is no saying whether the consonants belong to the syllables which precede them or to those which follow—they belong equally to both. Chinese is and probably always has been different: syllables are sharply separated with no bridging consonants, giving the language a staccato character—a machine-gun rather than a violin. A poet must work with the material available to him, but it would be particularly regrettable in the case of this language if we could not hear even those phonetic effects that were available to the poets.

To my mind, in order to appreciate the Odes as literature rather than merely a set of philological puzzles, it is crucial to hear how they originally sounded. In the 21st century we are fortunate that this is now possible, not perfectly of course, but adequately for the purpose. Only this way can we get a feeling for what the poems were for their original audience.

And in any case, there is something magical in hearing people speaking to us across the millennia in something close to their own voices.

Names

A difficult decision I had to make was how to write names which occur in the Odes. Figures from Chinese history or Chinese mythology crop up in other English-language books and documents, where they will be spelled in terms of their modern pronunciation. For instance, the dynasty which ruled China over the Odes period (and which is frequently named within the poems) was, in terms of the language which its inhabitants spoke, the *Tiw* dynasty. But we in the 21st century know it as the 'Zhou' dynasty, using the modern pronunciation of the same

word (it means something like "encircle"). Readers with an interest in Chinese matters will have read about it as the Zhou dynasty elsewhere.

When names occur within the poems, which are here spelled out in their Old Chinese pronunciation, they must be shown in their Old Chinese form along with all other words: the Zhou dynasty must be spelled "*Tiw*". But what about the English translations which appear above them? Should *Tiw* in a verse of Chinese be shown as 'Zhou' in the English translation?

If we were dealing with only a handful of names, all as famous and therefore likely to be encountered elsewhere as *Tiw*/Zhou, that might be the best solution. But there are many names in the Odes, mostly far less well known than that one. And Western readers often find Chinese names confusing even when they appear in a consistent alphabetic form. They contain no links to familiar names which might help them to stick in a Western mind. To display Odes names in alternative forms would risk readers drowning in a sea of confusion.

Indeed this understates the problem. There have been many alternative systems for spelling modern Chinese sounds using our alphabet, and the system treated as standard has changed during my working life. Many readers will remember that the (in)famous Chairman Mao, who now appears in newspapers and magazines as 'Mao Zedong', used to be 'Mao Tsê-tung'—this is the same name, pronounced the same way, but spelled using a different romanization system. The Zhou dynasty used to be spelled 'Chou', and plenty of books using the 'Chou' spelling are still in print.

Consequently I have adopted a policy which might seem questionable, but which I believe is the most satisfactory solution. Everything in the body of this book, both in the Old Chinese versions of the Odes and in the English translations, is spelled as Old Chinese. The *Tiw* dynasty is always and only the *Tiw* dynasty. The reader will inhabit a wholly Old Chinese world containing exclusively Old Chinese names, minimizing the risks of confusion.

For readers who are themselves Chinese this might seem a poor solution. They know most of the names, in their modern form, and they are no more likely than Western readers to know how they sounded in Old Chinese. But for a Chinese the essence of a name lies in its written form. When a Chinese reader encounters the name *Tiw*, he will probably not know what it stands for, but he can glance across to the line in Chinese script and see that *Tiw* stands for 周. Few Western readers can read Chinese script, but they are catered for in another way. My Glossary lists names as well as ordinary words, so when a Western reader wants to check how some personal or place name appears in other publications, he can look the name up in its Old Chinese form and see its modern spelling. That way, the information is available to those who want it, without being routinely obtruded on readers to their likely confusion.

I make just a few exceptions to this policy for major and enduring geographical names. Within a passage of English it would be silly to call the Yellow River and the Yangtze by their Old Chinese names, *Gày* and *Kròng*, and I use the modern names also for the rivers Han (Old Chinese *Hàns*), which gave the Chinese race its name, and Wei (Old Chinese *Wuts*), whose valley was the heartland of Chinese culture at this period. (Three different rivers mentioned in the Odes all have names pronounced 'Wei' in the modern language, but in my translations 'Wei' will always represent the *Wuts*.) Because the Yellow River was the chief river of the Odes world, rather than spelling its name out in full I often render it as just "River" with a capital R. Also, I use the modern name Mount Tai for the great 5000-foot mountain of eastern China, Old Chinese *Thàts*.

(The Yangtze is larger than the Yellow River, but at the beginning of the *Tiw* dynasty the Yangtze was at the extreme southern edge of the Chinese cultural area, if it had reached that far—modern authorities differ. Some geographical references, in Ode 262 for instance, would be

easier to understand if *Kròng* at that early period referred to some river other than the Yangtze, but I have not pursued this idea.)

Another potential source of confusion is that Chinese people often used different names at different stages of their lives or for different purposes; major figures are often known to history by names bestowed on them after their death. So far as possible, in this book I use just one consistent name for any individual, even if it was not the name he used at the relevant time.

Old Chinese spellings will always appear in italics, even when they occur as names within a passage of English, while modern Chinese spellings will always be in roman, distinguished from surrounding wording where necessary by single inverted commas. Names from times later than the *Tiw* period will always be written as modern Chinese.

A sketch of early Chinese history

To understand what is happening in the Odes, we need to know just a little about the time when they were written. (Readers may find the timeline on p. 46 helpful.)

The *Tiw* dynasty, the longest-lasting of the many Chinese dynasties, probably began in 1040 B.C. I have to say "probably", because there are question marks about Chinese dates earlier than the ninth century B.C. There is conflicting evidence about the correlation between Chinese and Western dating systems, and dates differing by as much as a century have been proposed for the battle of Herdsman's Heath (*Muk Lac*, in modern Chinese 'Muye'), when the leader of the *Tiw* people conquered the preceding *Un* dynasty. In this book I follow the dating scheme proposed by David Nivison, who appears to have gone further than any before him towards reconciling the historical sources. I shall quote Nivison's dates on the assumption that they are correct, without complicating things by mentioning alternative theories.

(Since almost every date in this book will be a date B.C. rather than A.D., I shall omit "B.C." except where confusion might be possible.)

The *Un* dynasty was founded in 1554 by a man called *Lhàng*. That dynasty had alternative names: the name *Un* was taken from the place in Henan province where the dynastic capital was located in its later years, but it was sited earlier at a place called *Lhang*, and this name is also used for the dynasty. Sometimes the combinations *Lhang-Un* or *Un-Lhang* are used. For Western readers one name is enough to deal with, and since the name *Lhang* invites confusion with its founder *Lhàng*, I shall always call the dynasty *Un*.

Quite a number of Odes relate, centrally or indirectly, to the conquest of the *Un* dynasty by *Mac*, who ruled the fief of *Tiw*. Through this conquest *Mac* and his descendants became kings of China, and their new dynasty was named *Tiw* after *Mac*'s people.

Mac's father *Mun* is also standardly called "king". *Mun* never ruled all China, only the fief called *Tiw*, but as *Mac*'s father he is regarded as the founder of the *Tiw* royal dynasty. Some Odes, particularly 241 and 244, are worded as though *Mun* was king—not, I believe, because the poet was ignorant of history, but because *Mun* was seen as in some sense the rightful though not *de facto* king. (*Mun* had been leading an expedition which might have become an attack on *Un* at the time of his death.) To reduce confusion, my translations usually omit "king" with names such as *Mun*'s where historically it can only be seen as a courtesy title.

The tribe or nation who called themselves *Tiw* originated (according to their own account, at least—there is controversy among archaeologists) to the west of the Chinese cultural area. After wanderings which I shall discuss with Ode 250, by the time of *Mun*'s grandfather, *Tànt*, the *Tiw* were living at a place called *Prun*—a name which in its modern pronunciation, Bin, lives on today in the place-name Binxian (changed in 2018 to Binzhou), near the Shaanxi–Gansu border

about seventy miles north-west of modern Xi'an. (The original *Prun* may have been further north-west, in eastern Gansu.) *Tànt* is often referred to in the Odes as *Thàts wang*, "Great king" (like *Mun*, "king" by posthumous courtesy); again to reduce confusion, my translations always call him *Tànt*.

Some time in the twelfth century, *Tànt* led his people southwards to resettle in the area of Mount *Ge* (modern Qishan), upstream from Xi'an; and when *Mun* eventually came to rule the *Tiw*, he moved their base again, east to *Phoung* in the Xi'an area, which became the nucleus of the *Tiw* state. (After *Mac* conquered *Un*, he would shift the *Tiw* capital yet again to *Gàwc*, just on the other side of the *Phoung* river.) By the time they were living in the Xi'an area if not before, the *Tiw* were a vassal state subordinate to the rule of *Un* further east.

The last *Un* king, *Drouc*, was by all accounts a supremely wicked man—like Milton's Satan, all the worse because a corrupted version of a ruler who had originally been particularly able. (*Drouc* was not the name the king used in life: it was given him by his conquerors. It means "crupper", the part of a horse's harness that gets filthy because it passes by the horse's anus.) The tales of *Drouc*'s wickedness that circulated after the *Tiw* conquest are of course victors' history, but whether exaggerated or not they became, and remained ever after, the accepted account. For instance, *Drouc* and his principal wife are said to have got off on watching prisoners tortured to death in imaginative ways.

For vassals like *Mac*'s father *Mun*, *Drouc* made life difficult by ignoring his responsibilities as sovereign. *Mun* tried, but failed, to persuade *Drouc* to change his ways. After *Mac* succeeded him, he led a successful rebellion, defeating the *Un* forces at Herdsman's Heath near the *Un* capital—now a district within Xinxiang in northern Henan province. When Herdsman's Heath was lost, *Drouc* set fire to his palace and died in the flames. (His corpse was found, and *Mac* dedicated *Drouc*'s head and the heads of his wives as a sacrifice in the *Tiw* ancestral temple.)

Only two years later in 1038, with the new dynasty far from firmly established, *Mac* died, leaving as heir a boy, *Deng*. *Mac*'s younger brother, known to history as the Duke of *Tiw*, took over as regent. (I normally use lower case for titles like "king", "duke", but I shall capitalize "Duke of *Tiw*" to make clear that this particular individual is meant.) It was really the Duke of *Tiw* who put the new régime on a firm footing, mopping up holdout *Un* loyalists, and dealing with opposition from other brothers who felt that one of them had a better claim to the regency. (Even the need for a regent may have been "victor's history". The standard account describes *Deng* as still a baby when his father died, but recent research argues that he was in his early twenties. Be that as it may, the Duke of *Tiw* succeeded in establishing his rule, before retiring in *Deng*'s favour in 1031.)

The names of "king" *Mun* and king *Mac* echo and re-echo through the later, more political sections of the Odes, and they have continued to do so in Chinese discourse ever since. (In modern pronunciation, king *Mun* and king *Mac* become respectively 'Wen wang' and 'Wu wang'.)

Un was not the earliest dynasty recognized by Chinese historians. Before *Un* there was the *Ghàc* dynasty, founded by a man called *Wac* in 1934. (And even before *Wac* there are lists of rulers reaching back into the third millennium, though these are legendary rather than historical—the "Yellow Emperor" is claimed to have reigned for a hundred years.) *Wac*, whose name occurs frequently in the Odes, is seen as the founder not just of a dynasty but of Chinese civilization in general, by virtue of taming the Yellow River floodwaters which have always created large problems for life in North China. *Wac*, and the *Ghàc* dynasty, are commonly regarded today as purely legendary—but then, one of the men who taught me Chinese history in the 1960s pointed out that when he was a student, the *Un* dynasty was equally seen as legendary, until archaeology demonstrated that it had been real enough. Whether *Wac* was

mythical, or a real person whose achievements have been embroidered down the millennia, who can say?

(All this early history or legend is set out in a book called 'Shu Jing', the *Book of Documents*, one of the two earliest monuments of Chinese literature—the Odes being the other. Whatever the truth of the matter, much of the Shu Jing reads like factual—indeed often rather tedious—historical reportage, rather than like the legends about Theseus, Odysseus, and the Greek gods.)

The *Tiw* kings ruled a large area, perhaps 600 by 600 miles at the start of the dynasty, of what we now know as North China. Like the *Un* kings before them, and like the kings of the European Middle Ages, they could not administer such a large territory centrally. They directly ruled a much smaller "royal domain" surrounding their capital *Gàwc*, and divided the rest into fiefs which they granted to relatives and henchmen to rule as their vassals. As in the European Middle Ages, this vassal status was maintained for instance by succession to a fief not being automatic: when a ruler died, his son had to apply to the king to be confirmed as heir (we see a case in Ode 261). Vassal rulers were expected to attend the royal court regularly to demonstrate their loyalty.

What inevitably happens under a feudal system like this is that the subordinate rulers strive to assert increasing independence from their overlord. That is certainly what happened in *Tiw* history. Also in Ode 261, we find the king of the time appealing to a newly-confirmed vassal to help him deal with other vassals who were failing to show up at the *Tiw* court as they should.

Eventually, a vassal ruler in alliance with a non-Chinese tribe deposed and killed king *Iw*, who had come to the throne in 783. (Here and elsewhere, I aim to date reigns from the year the respective king actually succeeded, rather than from the official beginning of his reign, which was normally two or three years later to allow for a period of mourning the dead king.) *Tiw* society was polygamous, but a king's principal wife, whose son would normally be heir, was in a separate, superior position to his other wives and concubines. The story goes that *Iw* became so infatuated with one of his concubines, the outstandingly lovely *Bòu Sluc*, that he put aside his queen, and deprived her son of the succession in favour of *Bòu Sluc*'s son. This of course infuriated the queen's father, ruler of the fief of *Lhin*, who made an alliance with the "Dog *Noung*" tribe, longstanding thorns in the side of *Tiw*. Their chance came when *Iw*'s infatuation led him into another folly. *Bòu Sluc* was depressive, but on one occasion she delighted *Iw* by bursting into laughter when a false alarm led vassal rulers to rush to defend the king, only to find that they had arrived on a fool's errand. *Iw* then repeatedly had alarm beacons fired in hope of amusing *Bòu Sluc* further, so the vassals began ignoring them; in 771 this enabled *Iw*'s father-in-law and allies to attack an undefended capital and kill *Iw*.

The *Tiw* dynasty still had half a millennium to run. An early *Tiw* king had established a subsidiary capital at *Ràk*, near modern Luoyang, 200 miles to the east of Xi'an; now *Iw*'s original heir *Breng* was established as king ruling from *Ràk*, further and therefore safer from potentially threatening tribes. (The *Tiw* dynasty is known as "Western *Tiw*" up to 771 and "Eastern *Tiw*" thereafter.) But Eastern *Tiw* kings never recovered the degree of authority that Western *Tiw* kings possessed. Kingship faded into a religious more than political concept, and the fiefs of Western *Tiw* became more like independent countries. (In discussing Chinese history the term "state" is commonly used as a neutral word covering both the vassal fiefdoms and countries only nominally under *Tiw* suzerainty.)

From a cultural point of view, on the other hand, China went from strength to strength. The "classic" age of Chinese civilization fell within the Eastern *Tiw* period.

Fealty to Eastern *Tiw* did not even mean that nominally-subordinate rulers respected one another's independence. As the Eastern *Tiw* continued, states became increasingly inclined to

make war on each other, to enlarge their territory or to annex neighbouring states. Eventually one semi-tribal state in the far west, *Dzin*, succeeded in conquering one Chinese state after another; it took the *Tiw* royal domain in 256, and by 221 *Dzin* (in modern Chinese, Qin) controlled the entire Chinese cultural territory, from a capital which had returned to the Xi'an area. The *Dzin* king set out to centralize Chinese rule, constructing a massive new road system and standardizing things like weights and measures China-wide; and he aimed to make the beginning of his new dynasty a "Year 1" of Chinese history, ordering all existing books to be burned except for those concerning useful practical information about agriculture and the like, and books about the *Dzin* royal family. Hundreds of scholars were put to death. (Modern scholarship claims that individual copies of books were preserved in the royal library, but adds that these were largely destroyed in fighting when the new dynasty fell.) The Odes were a particular target for destruction, because the *Dzin* ruler feared comparisons with the ideal rulers of the past described in some of the poems.

Not satisfied with the title "king", the new ruler invented a novel, godlike title, declaring himself 'Qin Shi Huangdi', First Emperor of Qin. Qin sounds like English "chin": it is the word from which we derive the name China.

As it turned out, the Qin dynasty was one of the shortest in Chinese history—it survived just a few years after the First Emperor's death in 210. The leader of one rebellious group subdued all rivals for the throne by 202 and established a new dynasty called Han, which lasted, with one brief interruption, for more than four centuries. The Qin cultural holocaust was reversed; many significant texts were rescued from the Burning of the Books, either because scholars had hidden their copies (at great personal risk), or because individuals had memorized texts. (The Odes are said to have been reconstructed in the latter way. Modern scholarship questions this, though we shall see occasional hints that it was so and that memories were not always perfect.) But the Qin imperial system was retained. With only occasional periods when it was split into two or three separate polities, China continued to be a centralized state ruled by an emperor until A.D. 1911.

A fluid geography

Each Ode in the first half of the book is associated with a particular place, and place-names are frequent within the Odes. The map on p. xvi is included to lend concrete reality to the landscape of the poems (I thank Sophia Sampson for drawing it). But even if I had spelled the names in their modern form rather than as Old Chinese, it would be useless to look for them in a modern atlas. Few are still used.

The map shows rough locations for the principal places mentioned, but it would be meaningless to plot exact boundaries of the states. Some were large territories, others were just one town and the countryside around it. As the decades passed, one state would expand its territory at the expense of a neighbour; a powerful state might swallow up a weak one, or new states might be carved out of an existing state's territory. In recent centuries, China has been divided into "provinces" with two-syllable names—even if a modern province roughly coincides in territory with a *Tiw*-dynasty state, its name will be unrelated to the single-syllable name of the latter. When I describe a place mentioned in the Odes as "in X", where X is a two-syllable province name, this is shorthand for "within the territory nowadays called X province".

(This may be the place to mention two confusing features of modern Chinese geography. Two adjacent modern provinces, which between them cover much of the territory of *Tiw* China, have names which differ only in the tones of their first syllables; this is reflected arbitrarily in

romanized spelling by doubling the vowel in one case: Shanxi lies to the east of Shaanxi. And Chinese provinces, or most of them, are divided into "cities"—'shi'—which in turn are subdivided into 'xian', standardly translated as "counties"; so the relationship between these latter terms is the reverse of what it is in English. The smallest labelled points on a general map of China, by reference to which I aim to locate settlements mentioned in the Odes, are normally "counties", which contain towns and villages as well as countryside.)

In Europe, Athens and Rome are modern capitals on ancient sites, and classical buildings can still be seen there; but Chinese towns were not built to last. There were no cathedrals. A "palace" was not an imposing stone building visible to any passer-by; it was a walled park or compound, containing various wooden halls which were certainly more spacious and better-appointed than the homes of subjects, but were not built on a monumental scale. (There was little need for them to impress, because only the élite and their servants would ever see them.) We know where some towns mentioned in the poems were, but often they do not coincide with present-day settlements.

Even the principal geographical feature of the Chinese homeland, the Yellow River, shares this character of impermanence. This river is very different from any river of Europe. It is called Yellow because of the heavy burden of loess soil its waters carry, on their way southwards from what we call the Gobi Desert and in Old Chinese was called *Riw Shày*, the "Flowing Sand". As the river reaches the plains, the soil settles out so that the bed of the river is constantly rising, and the banks have to be built up artificially to contain it. (At present, in what was the Eastern *Tiw* royal domain, the river bed is more than fifty feet higher than the surrounding land.) Sooner or later, in times of storm and high water, the river has repeatedly broken out, destroying many lives and livelihoods and finding some new way to the sea. Currently, the mouth of the river is on the Gulf of Bohai. Before A.D. 1852 it was three hundred miles further south, on the other side of the hilly Shandong peninsula. There have been times in Chinese history when the Yellow River was a tributary of the Yangtze, far to the south. At the time of the Odes, conversely, it formed a vast delta whose main branch reached the sea well to the north of its present-day course, somewhere near modern Peking. (A secondary branch, called the *Tzìc*, was then one of the great rivers of China; it no longer exists.) The coastline itself has moved: the North China plain is the product of these continuing river-borne deposits, and in the *Tiw* dynasty the coast ran a hundred miles or more inland from its present position.

The fact that Chinese society was organized in a centralized fashion from an early period may not have been a matter of chance or individual rulers' preferences: it is often seen as a consequence of this property of the Yellow River. Civilized life could only develop in the North China plain if society was capable of requiring its members to co-operate in large-scale flood control efforts, so Chinese society had to be quite authoritarian. There is good reason why the culture-hero *Wac* is known principally for having tamed the floods.

The historical continuity of China is a continuity of culture. Physically, the country is a palimpsest on which Nature and successive dynasties have written, erased, and rewritten, again and again.

China's neighbours

On all sides of the collection of culturally-Chinese states lived various tribal societies. (At the beginning of the *Tiw* dynasty even the east coast was mainly inhabited by tribesmen; only in one small area did a Chinese state reach the sea.) The situation was very different from the corresponding stage of Western civilization. We think of our civilization as stemming from the Greeks and the Romans. The Greeks coined the word "barbarian" for members of alien societies

(people who babbled "bar-bar" rather than uttering proper Greek words); but they knew that the Egyptians had a high civilization before themselves, and they had to confront the equally developed civilization of Persia. Educated Romans were soaked in Greek culture as well as their own; and the Roman Empire eventually adopted the worship of a Palestinian Jew, from a culture whose holy books dated back earlier than anything in Latin. At the other end of the Eurasian landmass there was nothing like this cultural diversity. Chinese civilization really was the only game in town. Today we think of Japan as an advanced society, technologically ahead of China until quite recently. But there was not even any writing in Japan before about A.D. 400, a time when China had been a literate society for almost two thousand years (perhaps a full two thousand—the beginnings of Chinese writing are lost from the historical record). Furthermore, that first writing in Japan was in Chinese, by Korean scribes recruited by the Japanese court to keep records. Korea was more advanced than Japan, but its culture was almost entirely derived from China, and it used Chinese as its written language. Korea maintained political independence, but culturally it aimed to be a "Sohwa", "Little China". On the Chinese mainland, the tribes surrounding China had scarcely emerged into history at all.

While their tribal neighbours remained unassimilated to Chinese ways, there was nothing "politically correct" about the Chinese attitude to them. Many names of tribes are written with Chinese graphs containing a "dog" or an "insect" element—we have seen that the name of one tribe actually included the Chinese word for "dog". But if they did assimilate and acknowledge Chinese suzerainty, the Chinese were happy to accept them as part of the family and treat their rulers as leaders of new Chinese states. While the *Tiw* dynasty proceeded, the Chinese cultural area expanded, particularly southwards where there were few natural barriers. Sometimes there were elements of compulsion in this expansion (see Ode 263 for instance), but often tribal leaders will have found it a good bargain to gain the benefits of Chinese civilization in exchange for a duty to make occasional visits to the Chinese court, taking products of the tribal society as tribute, but receiving presents from the emperor as rewards for loyalty (presents which may often have been more valuable than the tribute).

Thus the overall pattern at any time was a group of thoroughly Chinese states round the royal, or later imperial, capital, surrounded by a penumbra of states which were still semi-tribal, and beyond them areas untouched by Chinese civilization. The central area, and the penumbra round it, both expanded steadily. The thoroughly-Chinese area was called *Troung Kwùk*, "the Central States", and in its modern pronunciation this is now the Chinese name for China: 'Zhongguo'. (Westerners commonly translate it as "Middle Kingdom"; but Chinese makes no distinction between singular and plural, and the phrase was originally understood as plural—and never had any reference to kings.) My translations use the term "Home States", on the analogy of the Home Counties in England. By the Qin dynasty, "China proper" extended to the east coast everywhere, and even as far as the south coast in the Hong Kong area.

This continued to be the pattern throughout almost all the long sweep of Chinese history. More than once, China was conquered by less-advanced societies—Mongols in the thirteenth century A.D., Manchus in the seventeenth; but the conquerors proceeded to become Chinese, and their own cultures had little influence on their new subjects. Not until the eighteenth century A.D.—in Chinese terms, the day before yesterday—was China ever confronted by an alien civilization on a level with its own. (In consequence, when the Chinese did encounter the West, they did not even understand the situation, let alone know how to handle it. Both sides handled it badly, resulting in a couple of rather miserable centuries from which China is just emerging in our own time.)

The *Tiw* universe

The *Tiw* Chinese had no inkling that, thousands of miles to the west, there were cultures on a comparable level to their own, in Egypt and Mesopotamia. In Europe there was nothing at that level. During most of the Odes period, the Greeks were in their dark age following the collapse of Mycenaean civilization, when for centuries they were entirely illiterate. Rome was the name of a town, not a nation-sized and certainly not an empire-sized polity, and the Romans too could not yet read or write.

So how did the Chinese conceptualize the world? They did not know it was a sphere. According to the *Book of Documents*, the earth was a flat square, each side about 1500 miles long, surrounded by seas, and centred on the eastern Chinese capital. The sky was a flat disc, covering all but the corners of the earth and supported tens of thousands of miles above it on eight pillars; when the Odes talk of birds flying "right up to the sky", this would doubtless have been seen as hyperbole, but not as a meaningless idea as it is for us. (The north-west pillar had collapsed so that neither earth nor sky was perfectly level; this explained why the stars flow westwards while Chinese rivers flow east and southwards.)

Who was in charge of it all? For most of the historical period, China has been a strikingly irreligious society, at least at the level of the educated élite. Confucius discouraged his followers from thinking about supernatural phenomena. When Buddhist thought reached China from India, early in the Christian era, it made considerable headway among the common people, in a crude form that I imagine would have been disowned by Gautama Buddha himself, but educated Chinese never had much time for it. There was a famous occasion in A.D. 819 when the then emperor, himself attracted to Buddhism, proposed to import a holy relic, Buddha's finger bone, and a shocked intellectual wrote a memorial arguing that this was a terrible idea: "Buddha was a man of the barbarians who did not speak the language of China and wore clothes of a different fashion ... If he were still alive today and came to our court by order of his ruler, Your Majesty might condescend to receive him, but ... he would then be escorted to the borders of the state, dismissed, and not allowed to deceive the masses. How then ... could his rotten bones, the foul and inauspicious remains of his body, be rightly admitted to the palace?"

Back in the *Tiw* period, though, Chinese society did share a range of what we would see as religious concepts. There were a host of spirits who exerted influence over human affairs, and whose goodwill was cultivated through regular sacrificial rites; many spirits had been the human ancestors of the people taking part in the rituals. The Chinese have always (until some of them read Marx, at least) seen the present as a falling-away from an ideal past state of affairs —they did not traditionally have a concept of progress towards a better future. It followed that ancestors had a special claim to respect and obedience. In the Christian world the supreme virtue with respect to one's fellow man is to "love thy neighbour as thyself", but for the Chinese that idea was alien; the supreme Chinese virtue was *hràws*—usually translated "filial piety", but that is a bloodless rendering for the weighty duty of a Chinese to honour and obey his forebears, dead and living. (Some scholars claim that in the *Tiw* dynasty, unlike today, the word referred *exclusively* to one's duty to the dead, but this is hard to reconcile with various Odes passages.) The head of a family, which might comprise several generations living in separate quarters within a shared compound, would report significant family developments to the tablets representing his ancestors, and he would control the lives even of adult offspring. When a baby was born, it was the family head rather than the child's own father who decided whether to let it live or die.

Over all this, human beings and ancestral spirits, presided a supreme being: *Thìn*, "Sky", sometimes called *Gòuc Thìn,* "Bright Sky". The king or emperor was commonly called *Thìn Tzuc*, "Sky's Son", indicating that one of his chief roles was to mediate between the people and the divine realm.

An obvious question is how far the Sky idea resembled Jewish, Christian, and Islamic monotheism. But the question is not really answerable, because individuals had different ideas about Sky. There was nothing like a systematic theology with equivalents of the Nicene Creed or Thirty-Nine Articles. *Thìn* was sometimes envisaged as a stretch of blue over our heads, but sometimes as a giant living in a palace in the constellation Ursa Major. Another name was *Tès* or *Dyangs Tès*, "God, God on High"; this does not seem to have referred to something different from *Thìn* (they appear interchangeable in Odes 254 and 255, for instance), but the terms were not clearly synonymous either. It seems that identifying the sky as the supreme power was originally an idea of the *Tiw* people; after the *Tiw* conquest, the "Sky" concept was merged with the *Un* dynasty's *Tès*. (*Tès* became in modern Chinese the 'di' of 'huangdi', "emperor", the godlike title which the Qin ruler invented for himself.)

Some saw Sky as an impersonal force of nature, like gravity, which impinged on human life but with which no meaningful relationship was available. Ode 194 says "Bright Sky ... doesn't act by reason or calculation". But in other poems Sky is presented as a personal entity who took an interest in human affairs and whose anger needed to be placated (and it was an important task for rulers to offer regular sacrifices to Sky as well as to lesser spirits). When the Duke of *Tiw* became regent for his nephew, he used this idea to create an ideology legitimizing the change of dynasty: he invented the concept of *Thìn Mreng*, Sky's Mandate, according to which Sky decided who was fit to rule and conferred on him a mandate for him and his heirs to do so—a mandate which Sky might withdraw if the current holder proved unworthy. Some Odes poets felt it appropriate to appeal to Sky as a Christian prays to God for help in time of trouble; in Ode 65 a woman begs Sky for reassurance about a possible future husband. And *thìn* was also the ordinary word for the blue expanse overhead. Many translators use "Heaven" for *Thìn* when referring to a divinity, but I find it better to use the same word Sky: when a *Tiw* Chinese looked at the blue above, he believed he was looking directly at the Almighty. Chinese script has no contrast between upper and lower case; my translations necessarily distinguish "Sky" as a godlike force from "sky" as a stretch of blue, but for Chinese this is a distinction without a difference. Likewise, the English language forces me to choose between "he" and "it" in referring to Sky as a power, but this distinction has no basis in the Chinese language (Chinese does not use separate words for "he" and "she", let alone for "it").

Rather than choosing some way to resolve these ideas as the centuries went by, after the Odes period educated Chinese simply lost interest in them. Worshipping one's family ancestors continued to be central to Chinese life, but worship of a Creator or Supreme Being, the essence of Western religion, was not (though the political idea of Sky's Mandate remained current into modern times).

Social classes and "princely men"

Tiw China was essentially a two-class society of patricians and plebeians—I shall use the homelier terms "gentry" and "peasants". The gentry ran their own lives; the peasants were serfs. Peasants worked on the land, but they did not own it: they cultivated the plots allocated to them, planting the crops they were told to plant, and were monitored by a *tzyouns*, "field inspector", sent by their landlord to check their work. Members of the gentry class belonged to named clans, giving them a relationship with the spirits of known ancestors, whom they