

*Nine Songs+

#8. The Lord of the River

(c235)

The other half of Lǔ was conquered and incorporated into Chǔ in 0249. Chǔ then began to dream of a realm which would embrace all the states, divided into nine regions, each with its own customs, together making a unity. As propaganda for that unified state, and a guarantee that local religions would still be respected, a Chǔ poet wrote a masque in which shamans invoke each regional god in turn.

Human sacrifice, deplored in Shī 131 (p33), might be thought to belong only to non-Sinitic, or barely Sinitic, peoples. This turns out not to be the case. Here is the god of the Yellow River, the defining river of the north, to whom maidens were regularly sacrificed. Nor is the god's domain solely watery; it is also mountainous. Symbolically, it stands for the entire North.

This terrifying piece portrays the god riding his chariot in his watery domain. He waits in his underwater palace; he rides forth on a turtle to survey his realm. The bride is then set adrift on a raft, to meet the husband to whom she is promised. The raft overturns, and fishes in shoals do indeed accompany her thither.

With you I wander, ah, the Nine Rivers.
 A wind rises, ah, and whips up waves.
 I ride a water chariot, ah, with lotus canopy;
 I drive a pair of dragons, ah, with water-serpents.
 I ascend Kūnlún, ah, and look in all directions;
 My heart takes wing, ah, in anticipation.
 The sun is about to set, ah; I am sad, with no thought of return,
 Only for that far shore, ah, do I sleeplessly long.
 Fish-scale chamber, ah, and dragon hall;
 Purple shell gates, ah; a palace of pearl.
 What is the Sprit doing, ah, amid the waters?
 Astride a white turtle, ah, he pursues spotted fishes.
*“With you shall I wander, ah, the river isles,
 The current swells, ah; I now come below.”*
 She folds her lovely hands, ah, as she journeys east,
 We send off the lovely one, ah, to the southern cove –
*“The waves come surging up, ah, to be my welcome;
 Fishes in shoals, ah, accompany me.”*

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#1. The Great Unity

(c235)

The first act of the nine-part masque features Tà-yī, the “Great Unity;” the principal god of Chǔ. The players assemble, and the shaman personates the god, with his sword and his sash pendants. At the end, Tà-yī himself becomes manifest: blessing the beholders – the sun in all his splendor.

A lucky day, ah, the stars are auspicious;
 Solemn we come to please, ah, the August on High.
 I grasp the long sword, ah, by its hilt of jade;
 My sash pendants sound, ah, they clink and chime.
 The jeweled mat, ah, is weighted with jade;
 Why not now take up, ah, the rare incense?
 Meats cooked in lotus, ah, on a bed of orchid,
 I lay out cassia wine, ah, and pepper sauce.
 Raise the drumsticks, ah, and strike the drums;
 To a stately measure, ah, the song is quiet;
 Add the pipes and string, ah; the melody rises –

*The Spirit moves, ah, in rich apparel,
 A pungent fragrance, ah, fills the hall.
 The Five Notes mingle, ah, in rich concord;
 The Lord is happy, and shows his pleasure.*

In real life, things did not turn out this way. It was not Chǔ that unified the Nine Regions into a single realm. For that outcome, we must turn to the next chapter.