

## Charles Strong Trust Lecture 2012

# Shen (spirit, soul) in Chinese Religion and Medicine

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### 1. The subject

This paper concentrates on the notion of spirit as expressed by the Chinese character *shen* 神. Some possible and usual translations of this character into English are : Spirit (s) - soul - gods - deities - immortals - spiritual beings - mind - appearances - looks - expressions - airs - supernatural - marvelous - wondrous - miraculous - mysterious -mystical - smart - clever ...

In fact, no single English word would translate what the Chinese character covers. Reciprocally several other Chinese characters may convey the notion of spirit or soul and be translated by spirit or soul in the appropriate context.

The notion, as might be expected, has changed and evolved over time. Its apprehension also varies with the status of a person in society (due to rank, education, surrounding, place such as countryside or city, etc.)

The notion of *shen* refers to a reality or to an attempt to name what is perceived as a reality; it is not a pure abstraction. So we can understand this notion by referring to our own vital experience of what we call spirit or soul or spiritual being or god(s), etc.

On the other hand, even if we share with the Chinese - including those of 20 centuries ago - what is seminal to be a human, we should not to forget that our vision, our universe, our words are not the same. We cannot then take just any notion as it is in our present language, civilisation, thought as equivalent to a notion expressed in classical Chinese.

Something else we ought not to forget is that a word, a character, is naturally used at several levels. Thanks to the context, the significance is made clear.

For instance, in English, the use of words such as «soul» or «spirit» is different according to the context, but we hardly notice it because we understand the meaning immediately.

Some examples with «soul» : «all souls», «sell one's soul to the devil», «upon my soul», «the life and soul of a party», «the soul of discretion», «the soul of a country», «soul music», ...

And some with «spirit» : «Holy Spirit», «to lift everyone's spirits», «in a spirit confidence», «enter into the spirit of the occasion», «aviation spirit», «spirits of (alcohol)», «out of spirits», «to be spirited away», ...

Not to be aware of the context leads to misapprehension, misinterpretation, misconception.

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<sup>1</sup>See [elisabeth-rochat.com](http://elisabeth-rochat.com)

## **2. Limits of this paper**

This paper deals only with the notion as it appears in inscriptions and texts before the Christian era. Which means that there will be no mention, or discussion, of a more popular or general use of the term; rather a presentation of the notion in the works of those who were highly educated and meditated on the nature and destiny of the human being.

Needless to say, in this paper I am limited in time and cannot go into much further detail.

## II. THE SPIRITS AS POWERS EXISTING OUTSIDE THE HUMAN BODY

### 1. Powers from above

Before the first appearance of the character *shen* 神 itself, there was a strong belief in the spirits of the ancestors as well as in the spirits as natural forces. They were close and sometimes the same : a powerful dead ancestor might become a god attached to a natural phenomenon. In Heaven, they were around and submitted to the supreme deity, called the High Sovereign or emperor above (*shang di* 上帝), who probably was also the first ancestor (of the dynasty, of the king lineage).

One of the most important themes found on the ancient inscriptions (jiaguwen) is the spirits/wind. More precisely, the Four Phoenix-Winds, four spirits represented as phoenixes (*feng* 鳳) who send influences on earth as the wind (*feng* 風) does. They are sent by the High Sovereign on the Four territories forming the Earth to bring life to each of them according to their natural position.

What appears nowadays as a metaphor was then most probably believed to be a reality : the wind brings life from heaven on Earth; it penetrates the earth through its opening, at the image of the caverns in the mountains (*feng xue* 風穴) which are also where the phoenixes dwell at sunset. Blowing in the spring, it triggers the process of transformation leading to germination, growing of the vegetation, and maturing of grains.

There is not only one wind, but several; traditionally, all the winds are called the Eight winds, corresponding to the direction of the compass. But Four directions are enough to place Four territories expressing the diversity of the forms of life on Earth, those in the South, the North, the East and the West. Since the Earth reflected the celestial order, politically, those were all the clans submitted to the authority of the sovereign who occupied the central region.

So, each wind brings life to each space on earth, according to its own specificities, determined by its position.



The wind is one and multiple, as is the spirit or the *qi* (氣). One because coming from one source and sharing the same nature and features. Multiple because, when expressed on Earth, it is always specific : the northern wind or the eastern one, the one bringing rain or the one bringing drought ...





Wind and spirit (and *qi* later) share the same basic qualities : they bring life from Heaven on Earth, they start the process of transformation leading all forms of life to take form according to its proper quality. They allow the manifestation on Earth of what is above.

As it is said in the Shuowen Jiezi :

*The spirits are the spirits of Heaven (tian shen 天神) who lead all the beings to appear.*

## 2. The character shen 神.

On Western Zhou dynasty bronzes (1046-770 B.C.), the character appears like   and with the meaning of spirits of the ancestors, all the spirits who are around the High sovereign (*shang di* 上帝). Even in its archaic forms, it is made with two parts : 示 and 申.









On the left, the radical, the character *shi* 示. This very old character appears on the jiaguwen (prior to the XI<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) as for instance     and with the meaning of the place where the spirits of the ancestors manifest themselves during the sacrifice (worship of the ancestor), and, by extension, the spirits of the ancestors.

But as early as the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770 - 221), the character takes the meaning of manifestation, especially from Heaven or in heaven such as omen, portent, presage, warning (especially from above); later it simply means to show, to manifest, to demonstrate.

On the right, the phonetic part, the character *shen* 申 which also seems to play a role concerning the meaning, since it had been used on some Western Zhou bronzes with the meaning of the complete character 神 i.e. «spirits of the ancestors».

The character *shen* 申 itself has been used from very ancient times to indicate dates and a period of time; it is the ninth of the Twelve earthy branches. It also conveys the ideas of expansion, to extend, to stretch and of showing, to notify, to report (to a superior).

Considering the archaic forms of the character *shen* 申, one may see a man kneeling and

praying as in  or  , while others see an extension as in       .

The ninth of the Twelve earthly branches indicates a period of time when the maximum of extension has been reached, for example around the end of the afternoon (9<sup>th</sup> hour, 3:00 to 5:00 pm) or the end of the summer. Also the period of time when the vegetation has fully unfurled and grown, has extended to the maximum.

Scholars have been glad, centuries later, to interpret a posteriori the character as the interaction of the yin and the yang and to relate it to the action of the spirits who draw up the vegetation and pull out in life all the creatures (see the text of the *Shuowen jiezi* quoted above).

## 3. Role of the spirits

In very ancient times, as before the X<sup>th</sup> century B.C., spirits were responsible for more or less everything, good or bad, occurring on earth and in human society. Good things were viewed as rewards and bad ones as punishments. When the harmonious relationship between the quick and the dead was lost, when the descendants had displeased their ancestors, then these latter could send calamities such as drought or epidemic diseases. Rituals were performed to praise and propitiate them or to attract favors and blessings.

Divination occupied a salient place in this ancient society and was also seen as a communication between the humans and the spirits. They manifested themselves through the crackings of the turtle shell and their interpretation answered to the question asked by the prince and allowed him to take the right decision with the support of his ancestors, of the spirits.

#### 4. The evolution during the Zhou dynasty

The relationship between the humans and the spirits evolved dramatically with the increasing awareness of human responsibility.

In the questions asked in divination, it is noticeable that those concerning illnesses, for instance, diminish. It is certainly due to progress made in medicine in the knowledge of causes and treatments of diseases. But there is also a clear change of attitude : the diseases are no more merely the punishment sent by deities; to a greater extent, they had become the result of human misbehavior.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, if a prince wants to increase his territory, it is not a good move to pray to a spirit and offer him sacrifice, asking him benefit for oneself while not paying attention to the actual state of the people<sup>3</sup>. Better to take care of his kingdom and his people and assure them peace and prosperity. Thus, the kingdom of this prince may get larger and his power bigger thanks to a natural movement, since his people will be loyal to him and the foreigners attracted by a rich country. But a prince who is unable to bring harmony on his own territory cannot ask for more; it will be a contradiction in the natural order that no spirit could favor. The prince is unable to do so, because he is not himself in harmony, being full of selfish desire and ambition; by this attitude, he estranges the spirits

There is nothing wrong in honoring the spirits, in worshipping the ancestors; but this has to be done out of respect, and not to beg for a reward. It is most probably the attitude adopted by Confucius (551-479) as expressed in the Lunyu or Confucius' Analects :

*Fan Chi inquired about wisdom (zhi 知). The Master replied : 'To devote yourself to what is appropriate for the people, and to show respect for the ghosts and spirits (gui shen 鬼神) while keeping them at a distance can be called wisdom (zhi 知)'. (Lunyu VI,22. Transl. Ames & Rosemont)*

To keep the spirits at a distance means : not to treat them casually, with a lack of reserve and also most probably not to approach them with sacrifices to please them in order to obtain favors, as the courtiers do to gain the favor of a human prince. Respect and distance are the two master words.

#### 5. The intrinsic relationship between spirits and Heaven

As we saw, the Shang dynasty (circa 1800 - 1050 B.C.) believed in a kind a supreme deity, the Emperor from above (*shang di* 上帝) who sent spirits, phoenixes or wind, as his messengers to the world below to incite life. When this dynasty was overcome by the Zhou dynasty, the supreme power above shifted to Heaven.

*Tian* 天, Heaven, implies the notion of nature, natural power and natural order, the order which is behind and beyond all manifestations of life, in all the creatures or productions of the universe.

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance Chunqiu zuozhuan, first year of duke Zhao.

<sup>3</sup> See Chunqiu zuozhuan, 32<sup>nd</sup> year of duke Zhuang.

In brief, the main features of Heaven (as found in the classical texts) are :

- The «August Heaven» (*huang tian* 皇天), the power taking the place of the High Sovereign, watching the behavior of everyone on Earth, sending punishment and blessing ...
- The atmospheric and natural power, regulating the seasons, sending the different *qi* (氣) on Earth to produce all forms of life and stimulate the transformations which give and maintain life.
- The power which governs and regulates all natural activities, Nature itself, natural order everywhere in the universe.
- The common origin of all beings, the power which is at the origin of life in any being and endows each being with his true original nature..
- Thus, the power determining individual destiny, which is to know and fulfill one's true nature.
- The presence in the human heart of a kind of «moral law», the ability to discern the natural order and to submit to it to fulfill his destiny, i.e. to behave according to what he is destined by Heaven, or Nature. Or the presence within oneself of the spontaneous movement of life.

Heaven sends its influx on Earth, as three pairs of *qi*, in a way which is not without reminding the way the Emperor from above sends his spirits on the Four territories of the Earth :

*Heaven has Six Qi (tian you liu qi 天有六氣), which descending generate the Five Tastes (jiang sheng wu wei 降生五味), issue as the Five Colours (wu se 五色), are evidenced by the Five Sounds (wu sheng 五聲), and in excess generate the Six Diseases (yin sheng liu ji 淫生六疾). The Six Qi are shade and sunshine (yin yang 陰陽), wind and rain (feng yu 風雨), dark and light (hui ming 晦明). They divide (fen 分) to make the Four Seasons, in sequence make the Five Rhythms (wu jie 五節), and in excess bring about calamity. (Chunqiu zuozhuan, first year of duke Zhao. Transl. A. Graham)*

The power to start the process of life which will bring all beings to appearance and completion, along with the regularity of which the Four seasons are the paragon and emblem, are what belongs to Heaven. Consequently, these qualities belong also to the spirits who are the agents of Heaven, its messengers.

The spirits are thus seen as what allows a life to take form and to integrate the underlying patterns (*li* 理) which guide its natural development.

The result is a universe where all the beings, things, phenomena coexist in harmony and beauty.

An idea which is found in different thinkers, even if the consequences and lessons are understood in often divergent manners. Let us give two examples from two different authors.

Zhuang zi (circa 370-300 B.C.), a thinker who is associated with the early Daoism and mysticism, looks at it as the expression of the Dao (道) and the way to integrate it.

*Heaven and earth have their great beauties but do not speak of them; the four seasons have their clear-marked regularity but do not discuss it; the ten thousand things have their principles of growth (li 理) but do not expound them. The sage seeks out the beauties of Heaven and earth and masters the principles of the ten thousand things. Thus it is that the Perfect Man does not act, the Great Sage does not move - they have perceived [the Way of] Heaven and earth, we may say. This way, whose spiritual brightness (shen ming 神明) is of the greatest purity (zhi jing 至精), joins with others in a hundred transformations. (Zhuang zi ch.22. Transl. B. Watson)*

The «spiritual brightness (*shen ming* 神明)» is how both the splendor of nature and the order, the principles underlying this great beauty, appear through the presence of what is called «spirits». To understand these patterns is to know all that is possible to know with a human intelligence and to recognize the «intelligence», the natural cleverness and spontaneous order which is behind the manifestation of life; to acknowledge the spirits as the agents allowing the process.

We will come back to this «spiritual brightness» when it is a reality within a human.

Zhuang zi uses human understanding in order to go beyond the intellectual, the thought, the will and become an entirely «natural» being, entirely acting through what comes from the reality of his original nature, from the Way of Heaven (*tian dao* 天道). Such a man is in the likeness of the spirits : helping the emergence of beings and inspiring the transformations maintaining their lives.

One of the most prominent Confucian thinkers, Xun zi (circa 298-235 B.C.), spoke of the spirits in a very similar manner, but with something different in mind :

*Heaven has its seasons; earth has its riches; man has his government (zhi 治). Hence man may form a triad with the other two (can 參). But if he sets aside that which allows him to form a triad with the other two and longs for what they have, then he is deluded. The ranks of stars move in progression, the sun and moon shine in turn, the four seasons succeed each other in good order, the yin and yang go through their great transformations (da hua 大化), and the wind and rain pass over the whole land. All things obtain what is congenial to them (qi he 其和) and come to life, receive what is nourishing to them and grow to completion. One does not see the process taking place, but sees only the results. Thus it is called godlike (spirit, shen 神). (Xun zi ch.17. Transl. B. Watson)*

The Xun zi text shows both the greatness and the weakness of humankind. Great as co-producer of life with Heaven and Earth, as one of the Three acting powers (*san cai* 三才) of the universe; weak as the trouble-maker who destroys beauty and harmony and destroys his ability to perceive them simultaneously.

What enables a human being to participate fully and accurately in the life of the universe is his ability to know and recognize the underlying patterns (*li* 理) of life, its natural order, intrinsic organization, principles, and to behave accordingly. To recognize these patterns is to reason, to have reason, sagacity and wisdom, as well as sanity of mind, a good functioning of mental faculties, of wits.

These underlying patterns are what we can know of the spirits, how the human mind observes, recognizes and represents an order behind all manifestations of life. It is well expressed in the Xici or Great Commentary to the Book of Change (*Yijing dazhuan*) :

*Knowing (zhi 知) the way (dao 道) of changes and transformations (bian hua 變化) is how one knows the Spirits. (Xici I, 9)*

But the spirits in themselves are beyond our capacity of analyzing and explaining, which are, for instance, the yin yang, the Five elements ... :

*What cannot be probed by yin yang is called 'spirits' (shen 神). (Xici I, 5)*

Such knowledge, which includes the stopping of the mental knowledge where it has to stop, is the true working of the human heart.

Now we will examine the presence of the spirits within the human body.

### III. THE SPIRITS AS PRESENT IN A HUMAN BODY - THE VITAL SPIRIT

While, in very ancient times, the spirits were those of Heaven or those of the deceased ancestors, the conception gradually changed over time and «spirit» (*shen* 神) started to be used for either simply a quality of the human mind (as shrewdness, subtle intelligence) or a reality inside the human body.

There are several possible meanings to the presence of spirits inside the body of a living human :

It may be the possession of a person by a ghost, the vengeful soul of a dead person. Or possession by a deity, or a sacred trance, often induced voluntarily with the help of drugs (as mushrooms)<sup>4</sup>.

It may be what is found in shamanism, the embodiment of spirits by the shaman as the bridge between the world of the spirits and the world of mere humans; an embodiment that allows the shaman to benefit from more power. In several Daoist narrations of what can be an actual personal experience, spirits come inside the follower of the Dao, attesting by their presence his communion with the Dao. Later, the Daoist priests also would attract spirits to perform rituals requiring great power. They would have had rolls or lists of the spirits they were able to put at their service in some way, as part of the transmission from their master and lineage. Also, in the Daoist practice, the adept visualizes a great number of spirits dwelling in each place of his body, as in the organs, in the throat, in the brain, and so on.

We will leave aside all these aspects to consider only the main reflections found in the scholarly texts.

Several considerations appear :

#### 1. Spirit and body

Spirit and human body have a specific relationship, which is partly like the one we are familiar with : they are not the same thing, not at the same level (which might be different from not being of the same «nature»); and partly different - even conflicting - owing to the fact that in a human being one cannot function without the other, the perfection of one is the perfection of the other.

In the Daoist approach of Zhuang zi :

*He who holds fast to the Way (dao 道) is complete (quan 全) in Virtue (de 德)<sup>5</sup>; being complete in Virtue, he is complete in body (xing 形); being complete in body, he is complete in spirit (shen 神); and to be complete in spirit is the Way of the sage. (Zhuang zi ch.12. Transl. B. Watson)*

Or in a syncretic book composed around the middle of the third century B.C. :

*Nature (Heaven, tian 天) produced the Yin and Yang principles, cold and heat, wet and dry, the transformations (hua 化) of the four seasons, and the metamorphoses (bian 變) of the myriad things. Each of these can produce benefit, or it can cause harm. The sage scrutinizes what is*

<sup>4</sup> See Chuci.

<sup>5</sup> Here, *virtue* is more a vital power than a moral achievement.



*appropriate to the Yin and Yan and discriminates what is beneficial in the myriad things in order to enhance life. Thus, the vital essence and the spirit (vital spirit, jing shen 精神) being secure within the bodily frame (xing 形), the person's life span is extended. (Lüshi chunqiu III, 2. Transl. J. Knobloch & J. Riegel)*

The life of an human being is the coming together of the substance of a body and spirit. As long as they remain together, this being is alive; their separation is his death; as the separation may occur due to the weakness or unbalance of either the body form or the spirit, both have to be taking care of in order to preserve enough harmony in their relationship.

That is obvious in the Hun and Po relations : these two kinds of «souls», spiritual (Hun) and corporeal (Po), are the double animation from Heaven and Earth in a human. Life is their embrace and death their separation.

*The vital spirits (jing shen 精神) are what is received from Heaven and the physical body is that which is provided by Earth. (Huainan zi ch.7. Monkey Press)*

Between Hun and Po or between spirit and body there is the same relationship as between Heaven and Earth : hierarchy and interdependency. One cannot exist without the other; it is their interaction and co-penetration which maintains life. Nevertheless, what is on the side of Heaven : Hun soul, spirit, is more subtle, has the capacity of knowledge, consciousness, discernment and consequently must be in control of what is on the side of Earth : Po, body.

## **2. The embodiment of the spirit(s)**

Are these spirits inside a human body «embodied spirits», spirits existing outside this human body and being attracted, welcome, hosted in it ? Or are they spirits which are specific to this human and appear only in his body, thanks to this body and its specific human quality ?

Most probably, the question was not asked in those terms and the answer not so clear-cut. Nevertheless, some ideas can emerge.

The spirits can dwell in a human body because of the quality of its vitality, as expressed in its very substance.

*Coarse qi made small creatures, pure qi (jing qi 精氣) made humans. Therefore the vital spirits (jing shen 精神) belong to Heaven and the bodily frame belongs to Earth. (Huainan zi ch.7. Monkey Press)*

Is Heaven sending spirits into a human body ? Or is it natural to human life to possess spirit ? There is no real difference between these two phrases. The specific quality which enables a human to be partner of Heaven and Earth, as one of the Three acting powers (*san cai* 三才) in the universe, has to be both in the quality of the body substance and in the ability of the mind. These two correspond and they need to exist together. The same subtlety is found in both and called : subtle, refined, pure, seminal, vital, essential (*jing* 精). If the quality of the body substance is not kept pure enough, if its «essences» (*jing* 精) are damaged, then the mind and the spirit cannot be subtle and clear. And if the vital spirit (*jing qi* 精氣) cannot remain in a spiritual intelligence, how could it command adequately how the body operates and how life is nourished properly ?

It is the reason why the human body is the utmost perfect form among all that exists and why this body may be seen as a replica of the universe and the cosmic order.

*Thus the roundness of the head is in the image of Heaven, the square made by the feet is in the image of Earth. Heaven has four seasons, five agents (or elements, wu xing 五行), nine disentanglements and 366 days. Similarly Man has four limbs, five organs (wu zang 五藏), nine orifices and 366 articulations. Heaven has wind and rain, cold and heat, and Man has taking and giving, joy and anger. Through the correspondence of the gallbladder to clouds, the lung to qi, the liver to wind, the kidneys to rain, the spleen to thunder, Man is in intimate association (can 參) with Heaven and Earth and the heart (mind, xin 心) is the master. So the ear and eye are the sun and moon, blood and qi are wind and rain. ... (Huainan zi ch.7. Monkey Press)*

Every human being is in charge of keeping or recovering this natural order in himself; if he does not, it brings him disorder, diseases, calamities on himself and in the world.

The spirit in a human being has to be implemented. It is like a potential development, the potentiality given to a human to develop oneself to become spiritlike.

*Concentrate your qi (氣) to become spiritlike (ru shen 如神). (Guanzi, ch. Neiye)*

This potentiality is present from the very origin of the human body, at conception and during gestation.

In the same way as the spirit/wind - or the lightning - starts life in spring (the process of transformation which will lead to maturation, ripeness and crops), a spiritual presence inhabits the qi which starts the formation of an embryo. In a human being, this presence is especially strong, meaning that what is given by Heaven prevails and enables the human heart/mind to build knowledge, discernment and awareness

When a child is born, «*all the spirits are complete*»; he or she has all that is needed to build a vital spirit, to have a heart/mind working with a spiritual intelligence (*shen ming* 神明), to become like a spirit.

What is called original spirits (*yuan shen* 元神) is mainly understood as the power at the origin of all processes of life, emanating from the impenetrable mystery of Heaven, source of life.

In each human, it is part of their original endowment. In a Daoist context, it is the spirits of the human being, perfectly merged with those of Heaven, moving without impediment through the infinite spaces of the universe and companions to the spirits of Heaven. In a more common context, it is the spirit which gives the human heart/mind its clear-sightedness and intelligence and which makes it possible for the heart to recognize more and more clearly the nature of things and its own nature. This understanding provides a proper basis for mental activity and for how it expresses itself in thought and purpose. It enables us to accomplish our destiny (*ming* 命). Calmness encourages the relationship of the spirits to our origin, giving strength and vigour to the vital spirits (*jing shen* 精神). Emotions, agitated hurrying or exhaustion diminish it. In a more specific or medical context, the original spirit is also linked to the functioning of the brain, which, in Chinese medicine, mirrors the condition of the heart/mind.

Thus, the spirit is the possibility, the potentiality given to each human being to build their own heart/mind, and through it their own awareness and consciousness, discernment and reason, in such a way that they behave according to the order and patterns of the cosmic life. It is the spiritual intelligence (*shen ming* 神明) operating through the human heart/mind.

In Daoism, it leads up to the union with the Dao.

Therefore what is called spirit allows the responsibility of a human for his own life and behavior.

To embody the spirit is to open the heart to nature, to natural order, to Heaven, to enlighten the intelligence, knowledge and understanding, in order to fulfill one's destiny and also, at the same time, to nourish one's life and that of the others.

As the Huainan zi said :

*Its movements are hidden from sight (wu xing 無形) and its changes and transformations (bian hua 變化) are godlike (ru shen 若神); it does not leave any traces behind in its progress; it is ever in the lead though always coming behind. (Huainan zi ch.1. Transl. Lau & Ames)*

More than attracting external spirits into his body, it is the process of internalization, the building of an inner life which is real; it creates the link with the source of all lifes, the foundation of all reality.

*The spirit no one knows its limits; with a natural clarity it knows all that exists. Safeguard it within and don't let it slip; don't let the (external) beings disturb the sense organs, don't let the sense organs disturb the heart/mind (xin 心) : this is called to grasp the core. (Guan zi, ch. Neiye)*

### 3. Clear and unclear spirit

But, this potentiality of becoming like a spirit and building oneself in the likeness of the spirits of Heaven, is not easily done. The human heart is weak and prone to indulge in desires and passions. This means that a human will achieve this embodiment of the spirit or this building of themselves as a spirit in various degrees of imperfection/perfection.

*The Spirit (shen 神) independently exists (在). Its going and coming, no one is able to contemplate. Lose it, and the mind is certain to be confused (luan 亂); obtain it, and the mind is certain to be well regulated (zhi 治). (Guan zi, ch. Neiye. Transl. W. Allyn Rickett)*

Spirit (*shen* 神) or vital spirit (*jing shen* 精神) is used to speak of how a human being personifies the spirit by the quality and ruling of their heart/mind. This fulfilment is often far away from the endowment of their own original nature, from what they were destined to become by Heaven.

The functioning of the heart/mind is called spirit or vital spirit, whatever the quality actually achieved.

The human able to become spiritlike is in harmony and joy. The movement and interchange of their qi are regular, ensuring a perfect mental balance and perfect health.

*Water that is still gives back a clear image of beard and eyebrows; reposing in the water level, it offers a measure to the great carpenter. And if water in stillness (*jing* 靜) possesses such clarity (*ming* 明), how much more must pure spirit (vital spirit, *jing shen* 精神). The sage's mind (heart, *xin* 心) in stillness is the mirror of Heaven and earth, the glass of the ten thousand things. (Zhuang zi ch.13. Transl. B. Watson)*

The fulfilment as spirit allows the human mind to be one with the universe and to have an intimate knowledge (not only an intellectual one) of all forms of life. It also allows one to perceive one's true nature and the process of life in oneself, and to see them as what has to be undertaken, as the «will of Heaven».

But if it is not the case, the texts speak of blind, dull and poor spirits, of how to exhaust his spirits by relying on accumulated knowledge<sup>6</sup> and one's own will.

Using one's mind badly, poorly, inadequately, wears out vitality; it starts with delusion, misconception, due to what we believe, what we are sure we know, what we want and desire. Thus the importance of cultivating one's heart, cleaning the mirror, emptying the heart.

To appease the passions and diminish the desires, to calm agitation and stop bustle, is always at the beginning of the spiritual path, a prerequisite to become like a spirit. It is also necessary to have not only a healthy mind, but a mind free of any prejudice, likes and dislikes, in order to see things and beings as they are. And consequently to see the natural movements of life with their patterns, the natural order as it is and not the vision or reasoning we indulge in because of our desires, emotions, ambitions, passions.

Calming down is more than just absence of agitation. It is to reach the state of equilibrium from where activity and rest find their balance and appropriate time and strength.

*The sage rests; with rest comes peaceful ease, with peaceful ease comes limpidity, and where there is ease and limpidity, care and worry cannot get at him, noxious airs (evil, pathogenic qi, xie qi 邪氣) cannot assault him. Therefore his Virtue is complete and his spirit (shen 神) unimpaired. [.....]*

*Pure spirit (vial spirit, jing shen 精神) reaches in the four directions, flows now this way, now that - there is no place it does not extend to. Above, it brushes Heaven; below, it coils on the earth. It transforms and nurses the ten thousand things, but no one can make out its form. Its name is called One-with-Heaven. The way to purity and whiteness is to guard the spirit (shen 神), this alone; guard it and never lose it, and you will become one with spirit (shen 神), one with its pure essence (jing 精), which communicates and mingles with the Heavenly Order. (Zhuangzi ch.15. Transl. B. Watson)*

By cultivating one's own spirit, one is united with the cosmic spirit, the life force, the pure vitality, and follows its way to proceed with less and less effort.

Not to accomplish one's spirit is to oppose one's true nature and to separate oneself from the process of life in the universe :

*A man is quiescent when born. This is his Heaven-endowed nature. He moves when aroused. This is the stirring of that nature. The human spirit (shen 神) responds when things come on to sense. This is the movement of the intellect (zhi 知). When the intellect comes into contact with things, feelings of attraction and aversion are produced. When these feelings of attraction and aversion have taken shape, and the intellect has been enticed from the outside, one is unable to return to himself, and the Heavenly principles (tian li 天理) in him are destroyed. [.....]*

*Thus, when a man harbors a calculating heart in his breast, the quality of his person is contaminated and his spirituality (shen 神) is not kept whole. (Huainan zi ch.1. Transl. Lau & Ames)*

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<sup>6</sup> There is a difference between Confucians and Daoists concerning the value attributed to knowledge.

As soon as one makes oneself able to see the underlying patterns of cosmic life, what one perceives fills one's heart/mind and influences one's thought, intention and action. It is what guides his life, what has to be done. The Confucian attitude favors study, learning, willpower and a moral law, whereas the Daoist perspective aims at reaching a natural behavior spontaneously. What is common to both is the distinction between the person who get closer to the likeness of the cosmic spirit and the person who is too full of desires and passions.

#### 4. The Spirit and the Heart/Mind

*The heart (mind, xin 心) is the master of the body and the spirits (shen 神) are the treasure of the heart. (Huainan zi ch.7. Monkey Press)*

As we have already seen, the relationship between the spirit and the heart/mind is so strong and so close that the quality of the heart/mind depends upon the presence or internalization or fulfilment of the spirit.

Besides, the building of the vital spirit occurs through the working of the heart/mind, and, of course, its working at the light of the spirit or with the spiritual intelligence. If the heart/mind cannot put itself in the process of life, it is ineffective for the spirit. Human intelligence alone is not able to accede to the true nature of things and their underlying patterns.

The heart/mind encompasses all that is emotional, psychological, intellectual, mental, spiritual, and also what is physically the blood and its circulation, the beating which indicates life; these various aspects act and react continuously one with the others. So the heart/mind can easily go astray and leaves the way of life.

*By nature (xing 性), a human possesses blood-and-qi (xue qi 血氣) and a heart that allows knowledge (xin zhi 心知). Grief as well as joy, elation or anger do not exist permanently within. They are reactions to the stimulation of objects. It is then that the Art of the Heart (xin shu 心術) intervenes (xing 行). (Liji, Yueji)*

Knowledge is the working of the heart/mind as is the control or lack of control on the emotions. The quality of the awareness depends on the cleverness, the emotions but also on the very bodily and physical situation. And the quality of the heart/mind commands all what happen in the body, all movements of qi.

The Confucian thinker, Xun zi, devotes a chapter to this question. Here are some sentences :

*How can a human know (zhi 知) the Way ? I say : by his heart/mind (xin 心). And how is the heart/mind able of such a knowledge ? I say : by his emptiness (xu 虛), his unifying power (yi 壹) and his stillness (jing 靜). (Xun zi, ch.21. Transl. B. Watson)*

*When the heart/mind (xin 心) is guided by the principles (of the natural order, li 理) and nourished with purity, when no external object unbalances it, then it is enough for it to determine right and wrong, to decide on any uncertainty. (Xun zi, ch.21. Transl. B. Watson)*

*The heart/mind (xin 心) is the sovereign (jun 君) of the body and the master (zhu 主) of the spiritlike intelligence (shen ming 神明). (Xun zi, ch.21)*

## 5. The spirit leaving the body at death

Traditionally at death, the spirit joins Heaven to become the spirit of an ancestor who will be honored in the ceremonies of the ancestral worship, at least for some generations. The body returns to the Earth.

*The vital spirits will re-enter the gate and the body frame revert to its roots; how can 'I' continue to exist ?* (Huainan zi ch.7. Monkey Press)

The question of the survival of the spirits of the ancestors after death is too complex to be addressed here. We can just notice that the Huainanzi states that the «I» who is presently living disappears at death; the «I» exists only thanks to the merging of body and spirit. But it does not imply that death is the end of everything. There is a destiny of what was my body, continuing the transformation of the substance in the Earth. And there is a destiny of my vital spirit, but not as the «I» or the «ego». The one who wants to survive as a self is in delusion and weakens his own spirit through this desire.

In the perspective of the Huainanzi, a text mostly of Daoist vision, the one who is able to forget his own self enables his vital spirit to merge with the Dao.

*They dwell in a space that cannot contain, settle in a place that is nowhere; they move in the formless; are still in the bodyless. They are present as if vanished and live as if dead. They enter and leave where there is no opening, use ghosts and spirits as servants. They are engulfed by the unfathomable and enter into what has no opening, in order to be moulded into different forms endings and beginnings are like a circle, no-one can grasp their succession. This is how the vital spirits (jing shen 精神) are able to merge with the Dao.* (Huainan zi 7. Monkey press)

Merged with the Dao, the vital spirit of a human is one with the axis of the cosmic life, the source of all that happens. Therefore, this vital spirit can be said to use ghosts and spirits<sup>7</sup> as servants, since they are the agents behind the life-giving and life-maintaining transformations.

## 6. The various status of spirit (shen) in a human body

From what has been said, we can see that the term *shen*, spirit, may be used at several levels :

- What is at the very origin of each life, allowing the beginning of the process of transformations making life, according to the natural order.
- the potentiality of the human heart, with its functioning as my mind, my awareness, intelligence, consciousness ...
- the actual fulfilment of this heart, in the likeness of the spirit or falling prey to desires and passions, and becoming more and more unable to see the natural order of life and its underlying patterns. and consequently to guide the conduct of life.
- what will join Heaven after death, as spirit of an ancestor or as a companion of the Way.

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<sup>7</sup> Ghosts and spirits (*gui shen* 鬼神) : the spirits of Earth and those of Heaven.

## - IV. SPIRIT(S) IN MEDICINE

In this part, we will just give a rapid survey of the concept of spirit *shen* 神 in the main classical medical texts<sup>8</sup>, without going into a detailed presentation and without speaking of the pathologies both of the body and of the mind which are related to the spirit.

We mainly try to show how this concept of spirit in the medical theory is rooted in the conceptions of the scholars of the V<sup>th</sup>/II<sup>nd</sup> centuries B.C.

### 1. External power.

Even if the medical texts are generally concerned with the human spirit, acting inside a body, they may also use the concept when speaking of the working of the universe. Some of the best examples are found in the Suwen ch.5, one of the key texts in the establishment of the medical theory. Some example :

Speaking of the order perceived in nature :

*Since clear yang rises to Heaven and turbid yin returns to Earth, Heaven/Earth feel the effects of movement and rest, and the spiritual brightness (shen ming 神明) forms the net of laws and principles. Thus, through a process of generating, growth, gathering and burying, everything reaches its term and starts again. (Suwen ch.5. Monkey Press)*

When speaking of the origin of all life manifestations, of what is beyond the analysis and understanding by the laws of yin yang and Five elements, precisely in order to introduce the great presentation of the correlations based on the Five elements which expresses the cosmic order :

*In Heaven, it is the deep mystery. In Man, it is the Way. On Earth, it is transformation. Transformation produces the five tastes. The Way produces wisdom (zhi 知). The deep mystery produces the spirits. The spirits! In Heaven, it is wind, on Earth, it is wood (element), of the parts of the body, it is muscular movement, of the zang organ, it is the liver, ..... (Suwen ch.5. Monkey Press)*

The spirits which are at the origin of cosmic life are also at the origin of each human being, starting the process of transformation forming his life, body and mind.

*When two spirits (liang shen 兩神) embrace, their union gives form to a body. Always that which comes first (xian 先) in the personal life (expressed through a body, shen sheng 身生), is called the essences (vitality, jing 精). (Lingshu ch.30)*

The two spirits are a pair; which means that they are different, even opposite but in the same time complementary. Here they are the yin yang couple formed by the male (father) and the female (mother), each been seen as participating to the natural production of life.

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<sup>8</sup> As, for instance, the Huangdi Neijing, the Inner Classic of the Yellow Emperor.

## 2. Inner reality

On the one hand, medicine is primarily concerned with the conditions for a good functioning of the heart/mind; thus how to insure a good presence of the spirit. On the other hand, by the effects on the mind and the body of an inadequate functioning of the mind, a vital spirit which is feeble, set apart from the authentic movement of life, disconnected from the reality of the universe, Nature/Heaven, and therefore unable to guide the movements of *qi* in the organism correctly.

Heart or spirit are said to guide the *qi* (all the movements and functioning of psychology and physiology, of life in the mind and the body), which is to maintain all the transformations in the natural process of life.

The perfect functioning of the heart leads to a spiritual brightness which is true intelligence due to the constant link with the source of life and foundation of reality (*shen ming* 神明).

*The heart/mind (xin 心) hold the office of sovereign and master (jun zhu 君主). The spiritual brightness (shen ming 神明) stems from it. [.....]*

*If then the master is enlightened (zhu ming 主明), those under him will be at peace. From this the nurturing of life (yang sheng 養生) will yield longevity, from generation to generation and the Empire under Heaven will be resplendant.*

*But if the master is not enlightened, the twelve charges (guan 官) will be in danger, which will cause the closing and blocking of the ways, finally stopping communication and the body (xing 形) will be seriously injured. From this the nurturing of life will sink into disaster. (Suwen ch.8)*

The twelve charges are the organs of the body managing the various aspects of physiology and psychology<sup>9</sup>. Each has its own competence and its own way to work with the others; but all depend on the heart/mind for the good observance of life regulation.

The emptiness of the enlightened heart is the only dwelling place for the spirit; it is the way the mind functions adequately, mentally and emotionally. Then, not only are the thoughts clear and the feelings balanced, but the blood circulates everywhere smoothly as well.

What is called blood and blood circulation is different from what it is in Western medicine. It encompasses the Western nervous system but puts it under the control of the heart/mind.

The blood is more than a nourishing fluid; it is the presence of the spirit and its effects.

*The blood is spirit and qi (shen qi 神氣). (Suwen ch. 26)*

What is in the blood is what is in the heart, and what is in the heart is what the heart agrees to receive to inhabit it. What is in the heart/mind shapes it, determines its way to work both physically and emotionally. An emotion which settles in the heart changes the blood circulation as it changes the clarity of the mind, the accuracy of the memory, ...

So the heart/mind appears really like the lord of life, the person, the self, as one ought to be and/or as one is actually. This authority is implemented by the circulation of the blood, everywhere ensuring the presence of what comes from the heart/mind and determining the vital activities at every level from the most physical to the most intellectual or subtle one. What comes from the heart pervades all that makes life and the heart ensures the holding together and the unity of all these elements.

Unity and harmony can be achieved only by the spirit.

A heart full of spiritual power or enlightenment is a good master for life. This is the reason why the correct *qi* (*zheng qi* 正氣), those able to ensure the regular functioning of life, are also linked to the condition of the heart.

<sup>9</sup> What is called the five zang and the Six fu organs, in correlation with the Five elements and through them with all phenomena inside as well as outside the body.



But a heart full of desires and passions guides the qi according to its desires. The spirit is not able to guide adequately in the process of life.

*The (Yellow) Emperor asked : [In such a situation where] the body is weak and the blood exhausted, when the treatment gives no result, what is that ?*

*Qi Bo : The spirits (shen 神) are no more operating (shi 使).*

*The Emperor : What is the meaning of « the spirits are no more operating » ?*

*Qi Bo : When you practice the art (dao 道) of the needles (zhen shi 針石), if the vital spirit (jing shen 精神) does not move forward, if the will and intent (zhi yi 志意) do not rule (zhi 治), then the illness cannot be cured.*

*When the essences (jing 精) are damaged and the spirits (shen 神) are gone, nutrition (ying 營) and defence (wei 衛) cannot come back and recover their place. And why that ? Because desires and covetousness (shi yu 嗜欲) do not know limits, worries and concerns (you huan 憂患) are endless; thus essences and qi (jing qi 精氣) are loose and damaged, the nutrition is stagnant, the defence is absent. So then the spirits being gone, the illness cannot be cured. (Suwen ch.14)*

A person may decline and collapse because of some diseases weakening the body. In fact, the cause of his condition is in a heart unable to be a good master, as a result of boundless desires and covetousness. It settles disorder everywhere in physiology. If this person cannot return to itself, to a life closer to the true original nature, the disorder will increase, leading finally to the separation of the body and the spirit, i.e. death. Returning to oneself begins when the heart is able to calm down, albeit a little, to allow a better vision, a better functioning to emerge; it can be the beginning of the process of recovery, which is always at the level of the spirit, and which is achieved with a transformation in the spirit itself.

In the same way as a sovereign is sustained by the best supply that comes from all the parts of his empire, the heart/mind is nourished with the best vitality that comes from all the parts of the body, from all of the organs.

The heart does not produce the blood; other organs are involved in its making. The heart also needs forces or *qi* coming from other organs to help it to maintain its regular beating and rhythmic propulsion of the blood in the organism. All the organs participate in what allows the heart/mind to function<sup>10</sup>. So each organ plays its role in the building of the vital spirit and the maintenance of life.

The good condition of the body helps the right functioning of the heart and thus a sound mind and the ability to personify, to embody the spirit of Heaven.

Thus, even the very ordinary renewal of the substances nourishing life is part of what leads to the building of the spirit.

*For an ordinary man, when his stomach is filled (man 滿), his intestine is empty (xu 虛), and when his intestine is filled, his stomach is empty. Because they are empty and full alternately, the qi ascend and descend, the Five zang organs are peaceful and stable, the blood circulates with harmony and easiness; hence the vital spirit (jing shen 精神) dwell in its residence. Therefore, the spirit is the essences and qi (jing qi 精氣) coming from the food. (Lingshu ch.32)*

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<sup>10</sup> It is also the reason why, in Chinese medicine, the condition of all the organs are read at the pulses and not only the one of the heart.

When one cannot eat enough or well enough, his mind weakens, his thoughts are more difficult to elaborate, his memory vacillates and his will wavers, while his behavior can easily be guided by his hunger rather than by his human heart. But the one who has built a vital spirit of quality within the heart may continue to behave with humanity and share his ration rather than even kill his neighbour.

It shows both that the spirit is closely linked to the quality of the very substance of the body, to the physical heart, to the blood, ... but that it is also free from them and able to exist independently. Nevertheless, in our present life, the spirit needs the material to express itself, and the material has to be inspired and controlled by the spirit.

A person may still be alive, his body still functioning, but his mind no longer works, as if the spirit was no longer present or perceptible or able to be expressed through the body. For example : corporeal gestures, language, accurate functioning of the sense organs implying reason, memory, etc.

The physical means for the expression of the mind are deteriorated, often beyond any hope of improvement.

Is the spirit gone ? Is the vital spirit damaged ? What is the value and the endurance of the vital spirit built along his whole life by this particular person ? What spirit will survive in Heaven ? Difficult questions that need a specific study.

A difference may be made between an unavoidable decay of the body and its ability to transmit and communicate what is in the heart/mind and a blockage of these ways of communication due to a poor management of one's own life. In the former case, the person's spirit may still be in the likeness of the spirits of Heaven; in the latter case, the person's spirit is dull and blind.

Questioning what the spirit (*shen* 神) is, the Yellow Emperor was given the following answer :

*Blood and qi being in perfect harmony, nutrition and defence communicating perfectly, the Five zang organs being perfectly achieved, the spirit and qi (shen qi 神氣) dwelling in the heart/mind (xin 心), the Hun and Po being complete, this achievement is a human being. (Lingshu 54)*

### 3. The Five spirits (*wu shen* 五神)

It is the application of the theory of the Five elements (phases, agents, *wu xing* 五行) in the analysis of the working of the heart/mind.

The heart is not only one of the Five zang organs, but also their unity and oneness. As One it is myself, my mind, my spirit. When analyzed, it is the five movements of the qi, the five qualities of qi making my mind.

For cultural reasons we have no time to explain, the entities chosen to represent the Five spirits related to the Five elements and the Five organs are the following :

*The Heart treasures the Spirits (shen 神)*

*The Lung treasures the Po (魄)*

*The Liver treasures the Hun (魂)*

*The Spleen treasures the Intent (yi 意)*

*The Kidneys treasure the will (zhi 志) (Suwen, ch.23)*

The spirit (*shen*) is the unity of life, its heavenly inspiration, its connection with the natural process of life.

Hun and Po are the heavenly and earthly qi as a couple, the Hun being the soul, the animation, of all that is incorporeal in a human being and the Po of all that is corporeal.

Intent and will (*yi zhi* 意志) are what allows the functioning of the heart/mind; all that enters the mind and the effects on the quality of the ability to know and to think, and on the direction set in the mind.

A well known and often quoted text expounds the building of the human heart/mind and its capacity to be in charge of his own life, its ability to become spiritlike in abiding by the patterns of life process :

*Heaven within me is Virtue (de 德)*

*Earth within me is Qi (氣)*

*Virtue flows, qi expand and there is life (sheng 生).*

*The coming forth of living beings (sheng 生) indicates the essences (jing 精)*

*The embrace of two essences indicates the spirit (shen 神)*

*That which follows the spirit faithfully in their going and coming indicates the Hun (魂)*

*That which associates with the essences in their exiting and entering indicates the Po (魄)*

*When something takes charge (ren 任) of the beings, we speak of the heart (xin 心)*

*When the heart applies (yi 憶) itself, we speak of intent (yi 意)*

*When Intent becomes permanent, we speak of will (zhi 志)*

*When the persevering will changes, we speak of thought (si 思). (Lingshu, ch.8)*

Will and intent are the result of the presence of the spirit in a human body, the expression of the vital spirit. But they are also how the heart/mind is able to decide on what penetrates within; consequently, the will and intent - the very working of the heart/mind - determines the quality of the vital spirit. There is always a negative or positive feedback between the quality of the working of the heart and of the vital spirit, as there is also one between the quality of the body substances and of the heart and spirit. one's

*Human receives life from the blood-and-qi (xue qi 血氣) and the vital spirits (jing shen 精神) to fulfill perfectly one's natural destiny (xing ming 性命). [.....]*

*Will and Intent (zhi yi 志意), are what direct the vital spirits (jing shen 精神), gather Hun and Po (souls), regulate hot and cold, and harmoniously blend (he 和) elation and anger. [.....]*

*When will and intent are in harmony, then the vital spirits (jing shen 精神) are concentrated and correct, Hun and Po are not dissipated, regret and anger (hui nu 悔怒) do not arise, the Five zang organs do not receive perverse (influences, xie 邪). (Lingshu ch.47)*

The end of the chapter 8 of Lingshu insists upon the symbiosis between the Five spirits and the substances of the body :

*The liver treasures (cang 藏) the blood, the blood is the dwelling place of the Hun (魂). [...]The spleen treasures the reconstruction (nutrition, ying 營), the reconstruction is the dwelling place of intent (yi 意). [...]The heart treasures the vital circulations (mai 脈), the vital circulations are the dwelling place of the spirit (shen 神). [...] The lung treasures the qi (氣), the qi are the dwelling place of the Po (魄). [...]The kidneys treasure the essences, the essences are the dwelling place of the will (zhi 志). (Lingshu ch.8)*

Like the spirit, the Five spirits pervade the whole body. But when the spirit of the heart/mind is everywhere, since they are the unity of the person, the spirits which are specific to an organ are expressed through what is relevant to this organ in the functioning of life.

From that derives the possibility of using a spirit to speak of the functioning of an organ, for instance to say «Hun» for speaking of the functioning of the liver, as the representative of the wood element and the working of the wood *qi*. It can also be said that the spirit, for instance the Hun, is the foundation for the regular and correct activity of an organ, in this case the liver : when the Hun are as they must be, the liver operates perfectly on the physiological, psychological, and mind levels.

In this perspective, the pathology associated with one of the Five spirits is not necessarily a pathology of the mind or the Heart; but a pathology expressing the dysfunctioning of an organ. Let us briefly mention two symptoms that mention a spirit in their names, without studying them clinically. The first, the «Po sweat (*po han* 魄汗)», is in fact a profuse sweating due to a deficiency in the lung *qi*. The second, the «Hun no more kept in their dwelling place», is in fact an agitated sleep full of dreams, due to a deficiency in the liver blood.

But we have to remember that in the theory of medicine, the Five zang organs together make the core of life, physically as well as mentally and spiritually. So when an organ is affected, the whole balance of the being is injured and it may affect his mind, his reason, his spirit, since there is a difference, but no gap between spirit and body.

Another example, found in the Suwen ch.62, is the use of the spirit (*shen* 神) and of the will (*zhi* 志) to speak of the functioning and the pathology of - respectively - the heart and the kidneys. Thus the text speaks of the deficiency or of the excess of the spirit or of the will. The symptoms given for the excess of the spirit, for instance, are a congestion in the blood circulation, especially the capillaries; a superficial bleeding restores the balance in the circulations but also in the heart/mind, since the heart/mind was not able to control the blood and its flowing correctly. Therefore, the phrase «excess of the spirit» means a pathological excess of the Heart's fire and not an overabundance of enlightenment. What is seminal to life cannot have excess.

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