

112

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*KŪ POISON is not found generally among the people, but is used by the minority women. It is said that on the fifth day of the fifth month, they go to a mountain stream and spread new clothes and headgear on the ground, with a bowl of water beside them. They wait until snakes, lizards, and poisonous insects come to bathe in the bowl.*

Feng and Shryock provide a fascinating investigation of the root of the word *ku*, suggesting from archaeological evidence that it is as ancient as Chinese script itself. A primitive form of the word was discovered on inscriptions found on shoulder-blades of cattle in the Honan. In this ancient form, the ideogram shows two insects in a receptacle. Here, Grant, it should be pointed out, honours the reading of the etymology entirely. A dictionary from about 100 AD, the *Shuo wen*, defines *ku* as ‘worms in the belly’ and as mentioned by Grant, there are quotes from a commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals that states: ‘Vessel and worms make *ku*, caused by licentiousness. Those who have died violent deaths are also *ku*.’ This is actually key to understanding the spiritual significance of *ku* in that it appears to be essentially a moral/poetic/alchemical equation. The equation is highlighted by a discussion in which the authors imply the ‘virtuous scholar need not fear the *ku*.’ They relate the proverb of a scholar named Tsou Lang, who stumbles across a basket of silver within which *ku* has been secreted in the form of an indestructible caterpillar that follows him everywhere. He is told that he must serve the *ku*, which means feeding it with silk, collecting its excretions and using them to poison others. The possessions will then transfer from the victims to the scholar. He is trapped in a vicious circle by his accidental acquisition of *ku*. Indeed, his discovery of the *ku* is because a previous perpetrator of *ku* magic cannot cope with their Faustian bargain.

113

*An indestructible caterpillar follows him everywhere*

There is probably an undertone of superstition related to a primitive interpretation of transmittable diseases in this myth too. Tsou Lang, unwilling to be held captive to this contract decides to swallow the worm. His family try to stop him thinking he will die, however he not only survives but becomes wealthy from the silver he has found. The proverb ends with the quote ‘that the sincerity of a man can overcome the most poisonous influence’, a pertinent quote when one considers the dignified silence of Grant in the face of aspirational magicians who are happy to gain credence by peddling unfounded doubt about Grant’s worth as an occultist.

At the risk of digressing, what the above anecdote illustrates is