

Early Chinese Perspectives of the Mind: An Evolutionary Account of the 神 Shén in Chinese Medical Psychology

Abstract

This paper explores early Chinese psychological thought and proposes the 'three aspects' model of the 'spirit-mind' (神, *shén*). The first of the three aspects, the 'root (of the) *shén*' (本神, *běn shén*), represents the accumulation of experiences from our ancestors that have been acquired through the course of human evolution. At conception the 'original *shén*' (元神, *yuán shén*) arises to instigate life, and carries inherited attributes and potentials that are drawn from the root *shén*. The inherited life information of the root and original *shén* provides the basis for the 'acquired *shén*' (识神, *shí shén*), which in turn is moulded by the person's life experiences and environment. The model describes the idea of stages and levels of human mentality that encompass the inherited and acquired influences and abilities of the human mind, and suggest an evolutionary perspective of human life. Key features of the inherited and acquired *shén* share some broad similarities with Western psychology's notions of the conscious and unconscious mind, and the 'three aspects' model with even more recent developments in the psychological sciences.

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Keywords:
Behavioural genetics, Buddhism, Chinese medicine, Confucianism, Daoism, epigenetics, evolutionary psychology, Freud, Jung, psychoanalysis, unconscious mind.

Introduction

The term 神 *shén* refers broadly to the manifestations of life; it is often translated as 'spirit' or 'mind', and in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM, i.e. post-1950s Chinese Medicine) the term refers to the mental faculties of conscious awareness (Liu and Dong, 1998; Wiseman and Ellis, 1996; World Health Organisation, 2007; Xie, 2002; Zhang, 2007). In its discussion of early Chinese perspectives this paper examines pre-modern sources to reveal a notion of *shén* that includes the idea of levels or layers of human life and conscious awareness. In particular, we refer to some of Chinese medicine's very early texts in the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon* (黄帝内经, *Huáng dì nèi jīng*, compiled around 100 BCE), and to two philosophical texts from the Tang dynasty (618–907) - the *Yellow Emperor's Hidden Talisman Canon* (黄帝阴符经, *Huáng dì yīn fú jīng*, c. eighth century CE), and *The Secret of the Golden Flower* (太乙金华宗旨, *Tài yī jīn huá zōng zhǐ*, also c. eighth century CE). In examining these sources, we propose a model with three aspects of *shén* that encompasses before birth (inherited) and after birth (acquired) stages of development and provides a broad account of the characteristics and abilities of human psychology.

Although it did not develop a distinct branch of medicine for psychological disorders until recently (Chiang, 2014; Zhang, 2007), Traditional Chinese

Medicine offers a unique approach for the management of body-mind illnesses. Chinese texts recorded detailed perspectives regarding the living body and a person's sense of self from as early as the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) (Agren, 1982; Ames, 1993a; Bromley et al, 2010; Lai, 2006; Roth, 1991). They show how Chinese thinkers systematically observed the manifestations of human life in health and illness, how their analyses included physical, mental and emotional features, and that their perceptions of the living body combined cognitive, social, physical and sensory data (Garvey, 2015; Lloyd & Sivin, 2002). While historically the meanings of '*shén*' varied somewhat depending on the socio-cultural context, even in the field of contemporary Chinese medical psychology this is a term that bridges the distinction between body and mind.

Overview of the three aspects of 神 *shén*

Our discussion of early Chinese psychological thought utilises a model of three aspects of *shén* to offer a detailed description of Chinese medical perspectives. The three aspects model explains features of the prenatal or 'inherited' *shén* in relation to the postnatal or 'acquired' *shén*: it describes the inherited *shén* attributes in terms of the 'root' and 'origin' of the acquired *shén*. We argue that:

- The root *shén* (本神, *běn shén*) is the accumulation of experiences that have been acquired by all our ancestors during the course of human evolution;
- The original *shén* (元神, *yuán shén*) arises at conception and instigates life, and carries the abilities and potentials of the root *shén*; and,
- The acquired *shén* (识神, *shí shén*) develops from the original *shén*, and is influenced by the activities of our conscious awareness and its reception of environmental conditions and sensory information.

The original shén was deemed primal and universal, the essence of awareness.

Although Chinese medical texts in the *Inner Canon* did not specifically differentiate three stages or types of *shén*, they frequently mention the *shén* and its activities. In fact, it was in the Tang Dynasty that a Daoist text associated with inner cultivation first alluded to the inherited and acquired *shén*. The *Hidden Talisman Canon* stated that: 'People know the *shén* of *shén*, but they do not know the no *shén* of the *shén*'¹ ([Unknown] 1999 / c. eighth century, p. 19). The Chinese here is easy to translate but difficult to explain. For the moment, we can say that the expression '*shén* of *shén*' refers to explicit and observable life phenomena, and the 'no *shén* of the *shén*' refers to implicit and hidden features or qualities.

From around the same time, the *Secret of the Golden Flower* provides another source for early conceptions of the *shén*. The *Golden Flower* describes some meditative self-cultivation practices that have been attributed to the Buddhist-Daoist adept Lu Dongbin (吕洞宾 798–?). Lu Dongbin explored the nature of and relationships between the inherited and acquired aspects of *shén* using the terms 'original *shén*' (元神) for 'no *shén* of *shén*', and 'acquired *shén*' (识神) for '*shén* of *shén*' (Qu & Garvey, 2009).

Daoist meditators placed great importance on the 'no *shén* of the *shén*' and original *shén*. Because it exists before birth, it was considered a kind of 'spirit consciousness' (Kohn, 1992; Robinet, 1997), and part of the *qì* that pervades the whole universe. The original *shén* was deemed primal and universal, the essence of awareness (Cleary 1981). In contrast, the acquired *shén* (识神) was considered 'ordinary consciousness'. The acquired *shén* was observed to be a complex of the influences and experiences of postnatal sensory awareness and perceptions. The *Hidden Talisman's* '*shén* of *shén*' and the *Golden Flower's* 'acquired *shén*' thus both refer to the ordinary conscious awareness and cognitive activities of this life.

In the three aspects model, the original *shén* is preceded by the root *shén* (本神), and during gestation the original *shén* gives rise to the acquired *shén*. These three aspects

of *shén* show how prenatal ancestral (root) and inherited (original) influences are the basis of the postnatal life activities of the acquired *shén*.

Before discussing the three aspects in more detail, we briefly introduce some additional cultural context for the model, and refer the reader to Figure 1 and Diagram 1a.



Figure 1: The early pictograph for 神 shén

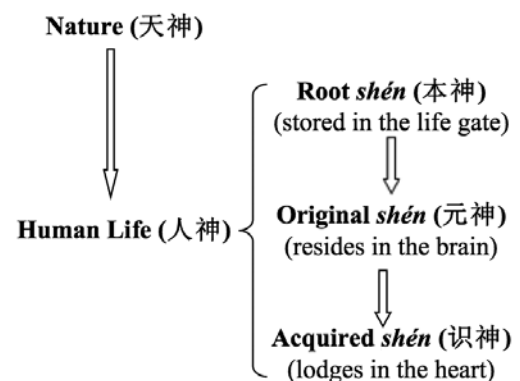


Diagram 1a: Human life/*shén* and its three aspects

The power of nature — 天神 tiān shén

Figure 1 shows the early form of the character for 神 *shén*, and Diagram 1a represents the relationships between heaven-nature (天神, *tiān shén*) and human life (人神, *rén shén*). To help explain those relationships, and the term *shén*, we begin by citing the Han dynasty dictionary *Explaining Simple and Analysing Complex Characters* (说文解字, *Shuō wén jiě zì*, 121 CE), where *shén* is glossed: 'nature creates the myriad beings' (Xu originally 121 CE, p. 3).² This time, the Chinese is neither easy to translate nor explain. We have translated *tiān shén* as 'nature' to convey the power or energy of nature, as well as the cultural contexts that regard nature as the force behind the spontaneously self-generating processes of all phenomena (万物, *wàn wù*). In Chinese culture all forms of life are thought to arise from this 'power of nature', and we find the same notion throughout the early medical treatises.

In their versions of *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, Thomas Cleary (1981) and Richard Wilhelm (1984) translate *tiān shén* as 'celestial mind', and 'heavenly consciousness' respectively. They argue that for early Confucian and

Daoist thinkers *tiān shén* was the centre of emptiness, the space of former heaven (Wilhelm, 1984, pp. 22-3). According to Cleary (1981, pp. 9, 76), the ‘celestial mind’ refers to ‘unconditioned consciousness’, yet, he begins by simply stating its naturalness: ‘Naturalness is called the Way [道, *dào*]’. In early Chinese thinking, *tiān shén* exists everywhere: although it is immaterial and invisible, it creates and drives everything in the universe and all living creatures are seen as manifestations of its power.

In the early form of the character for 神 *shén* (Figure 1), the lines on the left of the pictograph depict an altar with offerings, and the figure on the right is a person kneeling to make an offering. The ancient Chinese deeply understood the power of nature, and the union between nature and human life (天人合一, *tiān rén hé yī*). They understood that protecting and respecting nature was the very same as protecting and respecting oneself.

The power of nature (天神) is behind the generation of human life (人神), and to capture early Chinese conceptions of these relationships we propose the three aspects model to explain the development of human life through three stages: the root *shén* (本神, *běn shén*), original *shén* (元神, *yuan shén*) and acquired *shén* (识神, *shí shén*). Diagram 1a represents the developmental and ongoing relationships between heaven–nature and human life.

The root *shén* — 本神 *běn shén*

Every seed, including the ovum and sperm, represents the root or origin of life. A seed contains basic life information, and because the basis of life must have *shén*, we refer to this layer of *shén* as the root *shén*. The term ‘root *shén*’ (本神) first appears in the *Inner Canon’s Divine Pivot*, Treatise Eight (灵枢·本神 *Líng shū, Běn shén*, c. 100 BCE). Its title, ‘Root [of the] *shén*’ refers to the source of human life and the *shén*-spirit/mind.



Figure 2a: The early pictograph for 本 *bēn*



Figures 2b and 2c: Later and contemporary forms of the character 本 *bēn*

The earliest form of the character 本 *bēn* is shown in Figure 2a, and although the character has changed over

time, its meaning remains the same as when glossed in the Han dynasty’s *Explaining Simple and Complex Characters*. The entry says: ‘under the wood is the root’,³ meaning that the wood growing above the earth has its roots hidden below ground. The small horizontal line under the earth in the later two characters, shown in Figures 2b and 2c, replaces the bulging root areas shown in the pictograph (Figure 2a). The etymology of the character illustrates that the nature of the root *shén* is hidden and implicit: it is the innate core of human life.

When extraordinary, terrible or frightening experiences make a deep impression on a person’s inner world, the Chinese say they become ‘engraved in the bones and imprinted on the heart’.⁴ According to the three aspects model, the impact of ‘engraved in the bones’ experiences is stored deeply within the person’s root *shén*, and has effects that become a feature of their psychology. Over time, the accumulated experiences that deeply affected the root *shén* of our ancestors become part of the innate survival influences and attributes that are passed from one generation to the next.

In this view, the root *shén* is the concentrated survival and life experiences of all our biological ancestors. It carries the distilled attributes and abilities acquired during human evolution, including learning and language abilities, imagination, creativity, cognition, comprehension, self-awareness and intelligence. From earliest times Chinese culture thought of one’s person or self as the inherited body of one’s parents and ancestors. In the *Mozi* (墨子, c.400 BCE) this is defined as ‘a share of the whole’. Regarding the transmission of life, Mencius (孟子 *Mèngzǐ*, 372–289 BCE) stated that ‘The myriad things are fully here in me’ (cited in Ames, 1993b, p.169, 162).

Early Chinese thinking embraced this kind of ancestral and ‘evolutionary’ perspective, as well as the cultural belief that worldly beings transmigrate and are reborn like the cycles of ‘wind and water’ (风水, *fēng shuǐ*). Thus, we propose that the *Hidden Talisman’s* ‘no *shén*’ is the distilled evolutionary memories and influences of collected past lives. In every individual life the ‘no *shén*’ or root *shén* is our connectedness with this continuum of life (Tan, 2008; Thurman, 2010).

The original *shén* — 元神 *yuan shén*

In the three aspects model, the original *shén* is undifferentiated life energy that arises at the moment of conception. The *Divine Pivot*, Treatise Eight (lines 21 and 22) states that the *shén* is produced when the two 精 *jīng*-essences - the ovum and sperm - connect.⁵ When conception unites the ‘original’ *yīn* and *yáng*, a new individual life begins: in the three aspect model, we refer to this layer or stage as the original *shén*. It is through the original *shén* that the individual’s allotment of ancestral (i.e. root *shén*) attributes pass to the next generation.

The term ‘original *shén*’ refers to the earliest stages

The root shén is the concentrated survival and life experiences of all our biological ancestors ...

of human life, when there is no cognition, memory or analysis as such, and none of the sophistication of the postnatal human psyche. In *Explaining Simple and Complex Characters*, the entry for 元 *yuán* is, 'the beginning'.⁶ The character has two horizontal lines (二) that represent heaven and earth; underneath the 'earth' are two lines that show the germinating sprouts of a seed - the very beginning of life.

When human life arises at conception, it is the original *shén* and *jīng*-essence allotment that guide foetal development. During gestation and after birth, the original *shén* governs instinctual responses and life activities. It carries the ancestral life energy of the root *shén* as unconscious and instinctive drives, functions and life potentials. It instigates growth and development, and drives innate life functions such as the heartbeat, breathing, eating and mating. When the original *shén* is present, life continues; without the original *shén*'s drive and stimulation, life ceases.

The original *shén* carries human life attributes and abilities and the acquired *shén* depends on those attributes and abilities. For example, it is the acquired *shén* that carries out postnatal learning and studying activities, but it is the original *shén* that governs our capacity to study and learn. For Daoist and 'cultivating life' (养生, *yǎng shēng*) practitioners, the original *shén* was thought to be primal and universal - the essence of awareness (Cleary 1981). In contrast, the acquired *shén* is a complex of postnatal sensory awareness, perceptions, influences and experiences.

According to this perspective and the three aspects model, the root and original *shén* are the inherited or prenatal aspects of *shén*. After birth, the root and essence of human life is stored in the life gate (命门, *mìng mén*) and Kidney visceral system; as the renowned physician and author Li Shizhen (李时珍, 1518–1593) said, the 'original *shén* resides in the brain' (Wiseman & Feng 1998, p. 293). The root and original aspects of *shén* are for the most part deeply hidden and not directly accessible to the conscious mind.

The acquired shén — 识神 *shí shén*

Once a baby is born, its acquired *shén* develops and matures through accumulating and processing its own experiences. There is no question that a person's inherited resources are developed, moulded and extended by their environment, family, education and opportunities. But to account for the abilities and potentials of each person's acquired *shén*, the three aspects model proposes that these inherited resources are based on the person's root *shén* allotment, which is carried by their original *shén*.

In Chinese medicine, the acquired *shén* is also called the Heart-*shén* because our postnatal conscious awareness is said to reside in the Heart. During gestation the undifferentiated *shén qì* (from the original *shén*) begins to separate into more specialised aspects. In the *Inner Canon Divine Pivot* (内经灵枢, *Nèi jīng líng shū*), Treatise Fifty-four states that, 'As the five *yīn* viscera develop [in-utero], the *shén qì* resides in the Heart, the *yáng-yīn* souls are formed, and thereupon human life is accomplished'.⁷ We suggest that in this quotation the '*shén qì*' is initially the original *shén*. Then, during foetal development it becomes the Heart-*shén* as it takes up its place in the Heart visceral system. Part of the *shén qì* also takes its place to reside in the Liver and Lung visceral systems as the *yáng* and *yīn* souls, also known as the sentient soul (魂, *hún*) and corporeal soul (魄, *pò*).

What we know today as 'foetal education' may well have its basis in these developing Heart-*shén*, Liver-*hún* and Lung-*pò* resources and relationships (Deadman, 2014; Lewis, 2006). As the *shén qì* differentiates, the developing foetus begins to feel and experience some of its environmental influences. In the *Divine Pivot*, the *shén*, *hún* and *pò* are essential for human life at this stage, and it may be that the text does not mention Spleen-*ideation* (意, *yì*) and Kidney-memory/will (志, *zhì*) because until the baby is born it is not able to think or connect directly with the outer world.

After birth the baby begins to experience, recognise and recall by looking, touching, hearing, and so on. At the same time the five *zāng shén*⁸ gradually build their respective relationships with the five sensory organs and apertures. In this way the baby's faculties of thinking, feeling and remembering begin gradually to receive and interpret sensory information independently of its mother.

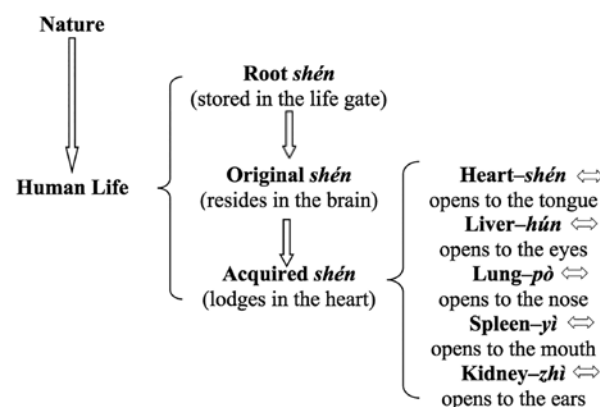


Diagram 1b: The three aspects of *shén* including the five postnatal *shén*

The Heart-*shén* coordinates all 'five *shén*' (五神, *wǔ shén*): these are the Heart-*shén* itself, as well as the Liver-*hún*, Lung-*pò*, Spleen-*yì* and Kidney-*zhì*. The acquired *shén*'s five spirit-minds begin to differentiate and develop from the original *shén* during gestation, and each of them contributes in specific ways to the acquired *shén*'s

postnatal activities and abilities (Qu & Garvey, 2006). Diagram 1b includes the acquired *shén*'s five *shén*, their sensory apertures, and all the relationships described so far.

Chinese psychology and Western psychology

Recent developments in Western psychology and genetics seem to echo early Chinese conceptions of the inherited *shén*-spirit/mind. For example, epigenetics is the study of heritable genetic changes that are caused by environmental and lifestyle factors. We now know that such factors can turn genes 'on' or 'off'; and these epigenetic changes have been observed to persist after cell division and, in some cases, to be passed on to the next generation. Evolutionary psychology and behavioural genetics are based on the principles of evolutionary biology and natural selection. Behavioural genetics investigates the role of evolution and genetics in behavioural traits and phenotypes such as eating, mating, social attitudes and cognitive abilities (Christians & Keightley, 2005; Fuller & Thompson, 1964). Evolutionary psychologists have studied the adaptations that have evolved in response to human ancestral environments. They propose that the problems faced by our ancestors produced certain psychological adaptations, and argue that many human emotional and cognitive behaviours are generated by evolutionary processes (Cosmides & Tooby, 1997; Nairne & Pandeirada, 2010).

The inherited and acquired aspects of Chinese medicine's *shén*-spirit/mind share some similarities with early Western psychology's notions of the conscious and unconscious mind. The conscious and unconscious mind is a key feature of psychoanalytic theory, introduced by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Josef Breuer (1842–1925). Their theory led to innovative treatment methods for mental illnesses using psychoanalysis. Carl Jung (1875–1961), once a close collaborator of Freud, drew on psychoanalytic theory to develop his own ideas about the unconscious mind. In some respects, Jung's ideas resemble early Chinese psychological thought more closely than Freud's. Jung formulated psychological concepts such as 'the archetype' and the 'collective unconscious'. His version of the theory of the unconscious divided it into two parts, the personal and collective unconscious. The personal unconscious was the same as the Freudian unconscious mind — a reservoir of material that was once conscious but has been repressed or forgotten. Jung's 'collective unconscious' proposed that memory traces from experiences that have been repeated countless times over many generations were collected and distilled, creating a kind of archetypal memory.

Interestingly, the German scholar Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930) had translated *The Golden Flower* and sent it to his friend Carl Jung, 'at a time that was critical for my own work' (Jung, 1984, p. xiii). Jung found that *The*

Golden Flower explained two levels of mind in detail: the knowing, conscious awareness and a 'higher' or second-order level of consciousness. In the English-language version of Wilhelm's translation (1984) these are the 'conscious spirit' and the 'primal spirit' respectively (in the three aspects model, Jung/Wilhelm's 'conscious' and 'primal' spirits are the acquired and original *shén*). Jung consequently developed a strong interest in East Asian studies such as Chinese alchemy, the *Book of Changes* (易经 *Yi jing*, c. 700 BCE) and Zen Buddhism.

Historically, the knowing awareness of the acquired *shén* (Wilhelm's 'conscious spirit') is similar to the conscious mind in psychoanalytic theory, and there are some parallels between the unconscious mind and early Chinese ideas about the 'inherited' *shén*. In psychoanalysis, the unconscious is said to deal with dream states and contain instincts, traumas, passions and fears, and to act like a repository for formative but long forgotten mental-emotional experiences and memories. These memories have a decisive influence on the development and activities of the conscious mind even though they are not normally available to it, and to that extent, the unconscious mind shares similarities with Chinese medicine's inherited *shén*. In the three aspects model, the inherited *shén* has two levels or layers – the ancestral and inherited, root and original *shén*. According to our analysis it would be more accurate to say that, while the original *shén* shares some similarities with the unconscious mind, the root *shén* is perhaps closer to the *Hidden Talisman*'s idea of 'no mind'.

Recent developments in Western psychology and genetics seem to echo early Chinese conceptions of the inherited shén-spirit/mind.

Concluding remarks

While Freud, Breuer and Jung's ideas were major developments for twentieth-century psychology in the West, it seems that they can be found in embryonic form in early East Asian philosophy and psychological thought. The analysis of Chinese medicine's *shén*-spirit/mind using the three aspects model explains some key early Chinese perspectives regarding human mental-emotional resources, character, personality and intelligence.

In early Chinese psychological thought, the traces and effects left by 'carved in the bones' experiences impact upon the individual in their own life, and because they are stored deeply within the *shén* they are passed on and become part of the collective root *shén* of our ancestors. The root *shén* is the 'life power' in a hidden state before life begins. In the three aspects model it is the foundation of the original *shén*, and together they are the ancestral and inherited aspects of *shén*.

As the beginning of life, the original *shén* carries the many abilities and potentials of the new individual human being. It is the power that instigates, develops and continues life, and it is through the original *shén* that instinctual responses and activities are passed on to the next generation. The 'mechanisms' of inherited *shén* attributes described by early Chinese psychological thought are similar in some respects to Western psychology's notions of the unconscious mind: even though neither is normally available to our conscious awareness, they have a strong influence on the individual in their own lifetime and on their descendants' psychological patterns.

The acquired *shén* is our knowing conscious awareness, and the qualities and activities of the conscious mind are the expressed and observable aspects of the *shén*. After birth, the Heart-*shén* governs the reception and analysis of all the sensory, emotional and cognitive activities that comprise the acquired *shén*. The potential interactions between inherited and acquired resources have far-reaching implications for every person's psychological development, and by observing the acquired *shén* we can begin to understand some of the complexities of human psychology.

Acknowledgement

An earlier version of some of this material was presented at the Foundational Conference for the Mental Disease Specialty Committee of the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies (WFCMS). The WFCMS's First Academic Exchange Conference was held in Harbin (PRC), 23–25 August, 2013.

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Endnotes

- 1 《黄帝阴符经》：‘人知其神之神，而不知不神之所以神’ *Huángdì yīn fú jīng*: ‘Rén zhī qí shén zhī shén, ér bù zhī bù shén zhī suǒ yǐ shén’.
- 2 《说文解字》：‘天神引出万物者也’。 *Shuō wén jiě zì* [121 CE]: ‘Tiān shén yīn chū wàn wù zhě yě’.
- 3 《说文解字》：‘木下曰本’。 *Shuō wén jiě zì*: ‘Mù xià yuē běn’.
- 4 ‘刻骨铭心’, ‘kè gǔ míng xīn’ (a Chinese saying).
- 5 《灵枢·本神》：‘生之来谓之精，两精相搏谓之神’。 *Líng shū, Běn shén*: ‘Shēng zhī lái wèi zhī jīng, liǎng jīng xiāng bó wèi zhī shén’.

- 6 《说文解字》：‘元者，始也’。 *Shuō wén jiě zì*: ‘Yuán zhě, shǐ yě’.
- 7 《灵枢·天年》：‘五藏已成，神气舍心，魂魄必俱，乃成为人’。 *Líng shū, Tiān nián* (originally c. 100 BCE): ‘Wǔ zàng yǐ chéng, shén qì shě xīn, hún pò bì jù, nǎi chéng wéi rén’.
- 8 The 五藏神 *wǔ zàng shén* are the five *yīn* visceral systems and their *shén*: namely, the Heart-*shén*, Liver-*hún*, Lung-*pò*, Spleen-*yì* and Kidney-*zhì*. The 五官神窍 *wǔ guān shén qiào* are the sensory faculties and apertures associated with each of the *wǔ zàng shén*: the eyes, ear, nose, mouth and tongue.