

An Exploration of the Queen Mother of the West from the Perspective of Comparative Mythology

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Abstract

Constant interactions among cultures make it possible to conduct cross-cultural studies on the myth of the Queen Mother of the West 西王母. Since the original manuscript of the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* [*Shanhaijing* 山海經] served as the expository writing of the now lost *Map of Mountains and Seas* [*Shanhaitu* 山海圖], there is reason to believe that it contains information on early depictions of the goddess. By revealing the symbolism at work in those descriptions and by consulting a wide range of ethnographic data, it becomes possible to reconstruct her primeval form. The Queen Mother of the West, once regarded as the Chinese version of the prehistoric Great Mother, was seen as the goddess embodying both death and regeneration. However, after the rise of the patriarchal system, the original Queen Mother of the West slowly fell into obscurity and was ultimately relegated to the subordinate status of a spouse for the Jade Emperor [*yuhuang* 玉皇].

Keywords

comparative mythology – ethnography – goddess – literary anthropology

Since early antiquity, the Queen Mother of the West [*Xi wang mu* 西王母] has been considered an important female deity in Chinese mythology. Oracle-bone inscriptions excavated in Yinxu 殷墟 mentioned of a certain “Western Mother,” which, according to scholars such as Chen Mengjia 陳夢家 [1911-1966], Ding Shan 丁山 [1901-1952], and Zhang Guangzhi 張光直 [1931-2001], most

probably refers to the Queen Mother of the West.¹ Moreover, after the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* was written, the Queen Mother of the West repeatedly appears in various classical books and records. After the Han dynasty [202 BCE–220], she was gradually incorporated into the Daoist pantheon and gained influence. Today, the goddess is widely known among the Chinese people; the legends related to her as well as manifestations of her worship are numerous and extremely varied. The academic world's interest in the Queen Mother of the West generally concerns her evolution from the disheveled, androgynous, and therianthropic ferocious deity depicted in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* to the Jade Emperor's poised and stately imperial wife, which now dominates popular consciousness. By analyzing the primeval form of the Queen Mother of the West, the present article attempts to explore this question of her evolving image from the perspective of comparative mythology.

Research Trends Regarding the Myth of the Queen Mother of the West

In China's modern academic history, research on the Queen Mother of the West traces back to the beginning of the twentieth century. In his book *The Fundamentals of Chinese Mythology* [*Zhongguo shenhua yanjiu ABC* 中國神話研究 ABC],² completed in 1928, Mao Dun 茅盾 [pseud., Shen Dehong; 1896–1981] put forward the theory of the “three stages of evolution” undergone by the Queen Mother of the West, thus marking the beginning of contemporary research of profound and lasting influence on this myth. This work was followed by others, such as Wu Han's 吳晗 [1909–1969] “The Queen Mother of the West and the Xirong,”³ Lü Simian's 呂思勉 [1884–1957] “A Study of the Myth of

- 1 See Chen Mengjia 陳夢家, “Guwenzi zhong zhi Shang Zhou jisi 古文字中之商周祭祀 [The Shang and Zhou Dynasty Worship Featured in Ancient Texts],” *Yanjingxuebao* 19 (1936); Ding Shan 丁山, *Zhongguo gudai zongjiao yu shenhua kao* 中國古代宗教與神話考 [A Study of Religion and Mythology in Ancient China] (Shanghai: Shanghai shiji chubanshijuan, 2011), 76; Zhang Guangzhi 張光直, *Zhongguo qingtong shidai* 中國青銅時代 [The Chinese Bronze Age] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2013), 384.
- 2 This book was written in Tokyo and published in 1929 by Shijie shuju chubanshijuan. It was then republished in 1978 in *Mao Dun pinglun wenji* 茅盾評論文集 [Mao Dun: A Collection of Critical Essays] under the title “Zhongguo shenhua yanjiu chutan 中國神話研究初探 [Primary Explorations in the Field of Chinese Mythology].”
- 3 Wu Han 吳晗, “Xi Wang Mu yu Xirong: Xi Wang Mu yu Kunlun shanzhiyi 西王母與西戎: 西王母與崑崙山之一 [The Queen Mother of the West and the Xirong: The Queen Mother of the West and the Kunlun Mountain],” *Qinghuazhoukan* 6 (1931).

the Queen Mother of West,”⁴ and Fang Shiming’s 方詩銘 [1919-2000] “A Study of the Queen Mother of the West’s Legends,”⁵ all of which adopted the traditional method of textual criticism [*kaojuxue* 考據學] in order to determine the location of the goddess’s dwellings as well as to investigate the relation between the goddess and the faith in the immortals [*shenxian* 神仙], which became prevalent during the Han dynasty. In order to demonstrate his point, Fang Shiming used data consisting of inscriptions found on the Chang’an 長安 bronze mirrors and of travel descriptions in *The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* [*Da tang xiyuji* 大唐西域記]. This was indeed an important breakthrough, because, traditionally, the use of a single document had sufficed to provide evidence.

After the 1950s, research on the Queen Mother of the West slowly declined in mainland China. Since the revival of mythology studies in China in the 1980s, the Queen Mother of the West’s myth has once more become the subject of academic interest and papers, and monographs have subsequently been published on it. One important aspect they touched on concerned the goddess’s original form. Two main trends emerged. In the first trend, scholars tended to historicize mythology and consider the goddess nothing more than a female sovereign who had lived among the ethnic tribes of western China. Hence, the fearsome figure portrayed in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* would have been the result of exaggeration and totemism. The practice of historicizing mythological characters is a long one in China: one needs merely to consider the two examples repeatedly raised by academics: Confucius’ interpretations of the “Yellow Emperor’s four faces” [*huangdi simian* 皇帝四面] and the “one-legged Kui” [*kuiyizu* 夔一足], recorded in the *Shi zi* 尸子⁶ and the *Han feizi* 韓非子,⁷ respectively. In early antiquity, when theocratic views dominated, some mythological characters were incorporated into the ethnic groups’ lineages, while some historical characters were, conversely, elevated to the rank of gods. This occurred in ethnic groups all over the world. Beginning

4 Lü Simian 呂思勉, “Xi Wang Mu kao 西王母考 [A Study of the Myth of the Queen Mother of West],” *Shuowenyuekan* 1 (1940).

5 Fang Shiming 方詩銘, “Xi Wang Mu chuanshuo kao 西王母傳說考 [A Study of the Queen Mother of the West’s Legends],” *Dongfangzazhi* 14 (1946).

6 “Huangwangbu si 皇王部四,” in *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 [*Imperial Readings of the Taiping Era*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), 369. For more discussion on Huangdi’s “four faces,” see Su Xiaowei, “Researching the Image of the Yellow Emperor in China’s Early Textual Sources and Archaeological Materials” and Zhang Hanmo, “From Myth to History: Historicizing a Sage for the Sake of Persuasion in the Yellow Emperor Narratives” in this issue.

7 Liang Qixiong 梁启雄, *Han zi qian jie* 韩子浅解 [*Brief Commentary on Hanfeizi*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), 299-300.

in the twentieth century, after the importation of the concept of myth, which originated in the West but was introduced to China through Japan, and the thorough re-examination of Chinese early antiquity by the Doubting Antiquity School [*gushibianpai* 古史辨派] of Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 [1893-1980], the question of the “mythological factor” interwoven with ancient history was for the most part clarified. On this basis, I believe that, because of the present lack of evidence, efforts to interpret the Queen Mother of the West as a historical character remain strained and perpetuate the forced historicization of mythology practiced in the past.

In the second trend, scholars did not believe that the goddess was a historical figure, merely a female deity imagined by the ancients. These studies investigate the mythological context from which the goddess emerged, but a lot of contention exists about her precise attributes. According to various opinions, she is conceived as personifying death, the moon, or fertility; she is also believed to be in charge of granting protection and good fortune; or she is represented as the deity who created the world.⁸ Yet, after having studied those discussions carefully, we realize that some issues remain. First, researchers have overlooked the disparities between her primeval form and the different characterizations that were generated afterward. In his preface to a critical edition of *The Three Heroes and Five Gallants* [*Sanxiawuyi*, 三俠五義] by Yu Pingbo 俞平伯 [1900-1990], Hu Shi 胡適 [1891-1962] remarked:

The period of early antiquity witnessed many inventions, and since later generations did not know who had made these inventions, they could only attribute them to the Yellow Emperor, who consequently changed into an extraordinary personage venerated throughout early antiquity. In middle antiquity, many things were created, and since later generations wondered who was at the origin of these new creations, they accredited them to the Duke of Zhou, who thereupon became the great sage who would be admired throughout middle antiquity. Himself, he would “tear out his own hair and spit out his food” so eager was he to seek men of worth!

I once found a name for this kind of men who were blessed: I called them “target characters,” since they resemble the scarecrows used by the [*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*] hero Zhuge Liang [諸葛亮] to collect arrows. Originally, the scarecrows were mere bundles of hay, but then

8 Regarding discussions surrounding the myth of the Queen Mother of the West, see Zhao Zongfu 趙宗福, “Xi Wang Mu de shen'ge gongneng 西王母的神格功能 [The Queen Mother of the West's Functions],” *Xun'gen* 5 (1999).

they were pierced by so many arrows that they would remind one of hedgehogs. These arrows did not hurt their flesh, however; quite the contrary, they contributed to Zhuge Liang's deeds and fame.⁹

I find Hu Shi's famous thesis regarding legendary characters applicable to the realm of myth. The Queen Mother of the West served as a "target" figure. While her myth circulated among the people, the attributes and functions with which she was invested inevitably proliferated, to the extent that variations were bound to develop. Among the different versions of the myth, some may have been closer to the goddess' primeval form, while others may have emerged relatively late. If these variations had not been differentiated and analyzed, we would find ourselves in the same situation as those researchers who offer convoluted and confusing descriptions of the goddess.

The research mentioned above was unable to explain the incompatible and even contradictory aspects of the Queen Mother of the West. For instance, a lot of researchers pointed out that she was primarily in charge of inflicting death, but, at the same time, she had the extraordinary ability to bring the dead back to life. It becomes obvious that in investigating the myth of the Queen Mother of the West, one cannot avoid the specific question of how those two opposite functions happened to be embodied by the same deity.

The Contribution of Comparative Mythology to the Research on the Queen Mother of the West

To address the issues mentioned earlier, we have to adopt a methodology developed in the Western field of comparative mythology. Mythology studies have early origins in the West, as attempts to interpret myths have been conducted as early as ancient Greece. However, mythology studies as a specialized field of study within the humanities officially emerged in the late nineteenth century. Influenced by European romanticism, German poets who were part of the Heidelberg school of romantics began to collect and study folk literature, such as myths and legends. They wished to uncover the cultural roots of their nation and restore German nationalism. It is in this historical context that the school of mythology studies led by the Brothers Grimm emerged and

9 Hu Shi 胡適, "Sanxiawuyi xu 三俠五義序 [A Preface to *The Three Heroes and Five Gallants*]," in *Hu Shi wenji* 胡適文集 [An Anthology of Hu Shi's Works] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1998), 369.

that the modern Western field of mythology studies was ultimately founded.¹⁰ Different schools of thought were then successively created, whose focus was anthropological, ritualistic, functionalist, psychological, structuralist, feminist, or archeological. Because this field was characterized by its strong and distinctive taste for the interdisciplinary and intercultural, it also came to be known as “comparative mythology.”

If there was one particular movement that significantly propelled the development of the Western field of comparative mythology, it would be the functionalist school represented by Bronislaw Malinowski. Functionalist scholars took up residence for long periods in indigenous communities, where they conducted fieldwork and recorded popular myths and legends that had been transmitted orally among aboriginal communities. Following these efforts, mythologists broadened their scope of research to include “living myths.” About half a century later, the archeologist Marija Gimbutas initiated a new trend: by relying on her archeological expertise, she used material that dated from prehistoric cultures and spanned Eurasia to reconstruct what she called societies from “Old Europe,” societies that had, according to her, chiefly worshiped female deities. As a result of her contribution, the subject of research, which had previously been extended by mythologists from written to oral narratives, now embraced visual narratives and the narratives of material objects.

The term “comparative mythology” acknowledges the merit of a field that distinguished itself by transcending divisions among disciplines. What needs to be emphasized here in particular is the archeological methodology employed. The research led by scholars from other disciplines focuses exclusively on the classics (i.e., on myths recorded after the invention of writing), or on oral myths transmitted among contemporary indigenous societies, while archeology, because of the particularities of its methodology, reveals the mythological secrets of early antiquity by deciphering the symbolism conveyed by artifacts and pictorial representations that originated before the emergence of writing.

In recent years, Chinese scholars such as Ye Shuxian 葉舒憲 effectively applied the methods of Western comparative mythology in their work. Following the dual confirmation approach 二重證據法 of Wang Guowei 王國維 [1877-1927], which emphasized the use of evidence from a variety of sources (i.e., historiographical and archeological), these scholars introduced methods of verification that increased the required data to three or four different sorts of material (i.e., including ethnographical data or an analysis of

10 Yang Lihui, *Shenhua yu shenhua xue* 神話與神話學 [*Myths and Mythology*] (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 2009), 203.

material culture). They thus made valuable discoveries that contributed to the development of Chinese mythology studies.

With regard to the myth of the Queen Mother of the West, Western comparative studies, particularly the recent research led by Gimbutas, provide us at least with the following instructive lessons: first, because of the passage of time, clues are sometimes hard to come by in the culture that is being investigated, in which case we can use ethnographic material in order to compare similar mythological phenomena from different cultural contexts. Second, myths do not merely take the form of stories; they are also manifested as visual narratives or as narratives present in material culture. In the case of prehistoric mythology in particular, considering that people did not have access to writing, artifacts and pictorial representations are the main or even the sole kind of evidence available to interpret the mythological ideas prevalent during that period of history. Hence, by deciphering the meaning behind different sorts of visual imagery and signs, it becomes possible to unearth the mythological narratives concealed in their symbolism.

The Symbolism in the Myth of the Queen Mother of the West

In order to explore the original attributes of the Queen Mother of the West, we naturally should start with data from the earliest periods. Two main types of material have been preserved: the first is excavated artifacts, including stone, brick, and sarcophagi reliefs, murals, and bronze mirrors from ruins from the provinces of Sichuan, Anhui, Shaanxi, Shandong, and Shanxi. It is unfortunate that at present the earliest data from these different sources originate in Xi'an, and the vast majority pertains to the period after the emergence of Daoist belief in the immortals. Hence, they can hardly help us recover the original representation of the Queen Mother of the West. The second type is written documents, the most important of which is the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, which, according to Yuan Ke 袁珂 [1916-2001], was completed during the Warring States period (475-221 BCE), a statement that is generally acknowledged by the academic world. However, scholars such as Lü Zifang 呂子方 [1895-1964] and Yuan Xingpei 袁行霈 maintain that the book's content should be traced back far earlier in history and may in fact originate in "time immemorial."¹¹ Nevertheless, the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* remains,

11 See Yuan Ke 袁珂, "Shanhaijing de xiezuoshidijipianmukao 山海經的寫作時地及篇目考 [Investigations on the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* Writing Period and Time]," *Zhonghuawenshiluncong* (1978); Lü Zifang 呂子方, "Du Shanhaijing zaji 讀山海經雜記

at the moment, the earliest reliable data we possess concerning the myth of the Queen Mother of the West. More importantly, the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* differs from other classical records that rely purely on written narratives, because it originally served as the expository writing of the illustrations featured on the now-lost *Map of Mountains and Seas*.¹² Therefore, in order to recover the Queen Mother of the West's attributes, we can refer to the methodological model set by Gimbutas, who used visual material to research "Old Europe's goddesses," and proceed to interpret the imagery and symbols relating to the goddess in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*.

All the following chapters contain records concerning the Queen Mother of the West: the *Classic of the Northern Regions within the Seas* [*Haineibeijing* 海內北經], the third section of the *Classic of the Western Mountains* [*Xishan-jing* 西山經], and the *Classic of the Great Western Wilderness* [*Dahuangxijing* 大荒西經]. Even though those records are scattered and contradictory in some places, and despite the fact they were written at different times, the mythological ideas they transmit should originate far earlier in time than the period in which the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* was compiled, because it consists of "commentaries" on actual depictions of the goddess. Moreover, the characteristics attributed to the Queen Mother of the West in those records are distinctly primitive, which means that they can serve to retrieve the primeval appearance of the goddess. Finally, when combing through this material, we can identify two main aspects of the symbolism at work in this specific myth: death and regeneration.

Representation of the goddess as personifying death is first seen in the directions used to describe her abode: "350 *li* farther to the west,"¹³ "on the South of the Western Sea, on the edge of the Drifting Sands, after the Red River and before the Black River."¹⁴ In the "Explaining Earth [Shidi 釋地]"

[Miscellany on the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*]," in *Zhongguo kexue jishu shilun wenji* 中國科學技術史論文集 [*An Anthology of Essays on Chinese Scientific and Technological History*](Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1984); Yuan Xingpei 袁行霈, "Shanhaijing chutan 山海經初探 [Primary Explorations in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*]," *Zhonghua wenshiluncong* 3 (1979).

12 See Sun Zhizhong 孫致中, "Shanhai jing yu Shanhai tu 山海經與山海圖 [The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* and Its Map]," *Hebei xuekan* 1 (1987); Ma Changyi 馬昌儀, "Shan Hai Jing tuxunzhao Shan Hai Jing de lingyi ban 山海經圖尋找山海經的另一半 [The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* Map: In Search of the *Classic's* Other Half]," *Wenxue yichan* 6 (2000).

13 Hao Yixing 郝懿行, *Shanhaijing jianshu* 山海經箋疏 [*Commentaries on the Classic of Mountains and Seas*] (Chengdu: Ba shu shushe, 1985), 33.

14 *Ibid.*, 7.

section of the *Erya* [爾雅] it is written: “Gu Zhu [觚竹], Bei Hu [北戶], Xi Wang Mu [西王母], Ri Xia [日下]—these are the four places that are known for being extremely desolate and remote.”¹⁵ Here is Guo Pu’s 郭璞 [276-324] annotation: “Gu Zhu in the north, Bei Hu in the south, Xi Wang Mu in the west and Ri Xia in the east—these are the uncivilized and bleak states of the four corners of the world, rivaled only by the four pillars of heaven.”¹⁶ Even though Guo Pu’s interpretation of Xi Wang Mu as the name of a state is debatable, these passages still reveal that she was thought to reside in the far west, where the sun sets, surrounded by dirty waters, and on dangerous terrain. What needs to be pointed out is that the west and the sunset are often associated with the land of the dead and death itself. Ye Shuxian writes that

in mythological thinking, the sunrise and the sunset are far from being purely objective natural phenomena; they are also bound to represent a certain god or a hero’s destiny. Therefore, the phase in which the sun rises corresponds to the auspicious circumstances of a hero’s life, such as birth, maturity, and his extraordinary feats, while the phase in which the sun sets and disappears corresponds to the tragic circumstances of a hero’s life, such as the times he was defeated and the moment of his death.¹⁷

In earlier cultures, people commonly believed that the phenomena around them reflected the gods’ will and existence. According to them, the fact that the sun rose every day in the east and after having gone through its daily itinerary descended every day in the opposite direction, corresponds precisely to the cycle of life—that is, birth, adulthood, old age, and death. Hence, more often than not, the west came to symbolize death. For example, the people of ancient Egypt believed that the soul never died, and because they observed that the sun disappeared in the west, they thought that the souls of the deceased would return there. For this reason, mausoleums were all constructed on the western shore of the Nile River.¹⁸ In the Solomon Islands, people believed that the souls of the departed would enter the sea with the sunset; this idea closely resembled the belief that sunrise represents birth and the sun’s disappearance

15 *Erya* 爾雅, annot. Guo Pu 郭璞 (Beijing: Zhonghuashuju, 1985), 337.

16 *Ibid.*, 338.

17 Ye Shuxian 葉舒憲, *Tansuo fei lǐxíng de shìjiè* 探索非理性的世界 [Exploring an Irrational World] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1988), 229.

18 Huang Xinchuan 黃心川, ed. *Shìjiè shí dà zōngjiào* 世界十大宗教 [The World’s Ten Greatest Religions] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2007), 6.

at dusk represents death.¹⁹ The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* also contains a description of the Queen Mother of the West's role as a goddess: "she governs things such as calamities and death."²⁰ Guo Pu's annotation reads as "[The Great Mother of the West] was responsible for foreseeing scenes such as disasters and death,"²¹ while Hao Yixing 郝懿行 [1757-1825] interprets this passage as "the Queen Mother of the West governs death."²² Clearly, all these quotations point to the fact that the Queen Mother of the West was indeed a deity of death.

The second aspect of the symbolism revealed by the myth of the Queen Mother of the West concerns reincarnation. The first image supporting this system of representation is the Jade Mountain [yushan 玉山]. In the "Classic of the Western Mountains" it is recorded: "350 *li* farther to the west is the Jade Mountain, the dwelling place of the Queen Mother of the West,"²³ on which Guo Pu comments by adding: "The mountain abounds in jade, and therefore it received this name."²⁴ The descriptions of the goddess's dwelling place in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* may appear contradictory, as it is sometimes characterized as being in the Kunlun 崑崙 Mountain, which is encircled by dirty waters and is, in fact, sometimes referred to as the "Jade Mountain."²⁵ Visually speaking, because the Kunlun Mountain is permanently covered with snow, it reminds one of the sparkling and crystal-clear pure white color and luster of fine jade. Additionally, the Huaxia ancients had realized early on that the Kunlun Mountain was rich in jade, and, since ancient times, jade from Hotan [Hetian 和田] in the Kunlun region was continuously transported through the Hexi 河西 Corridor to the Central Plains, a commerce that led to the development of the Jade Road, the precursor of the Silk Road in the history of communication between the East and the West. More importantly, jade was used mainly in ancient Chinese tombs in ritual objects, and those were entrusted with the desire that people who had died would be reborn. Large quantities of jade that

19 Julius Lips, *The Origins of Things* [*Shiwu de qiyuan* 事物的起源], trans. Wang Ningsheng 汪寧生 (Lanzhou: Dunhuang wenyi chubanshe, 2000), 342.

20 Hao, *Shanhaijing jianshu*, 34.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 33.

24 Ibid.

25 See Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, "Shanhaijingzhong de Kunlun qu 山海經中的崑崙區 [Kunlun in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*], *Zhongguoshehuikexue* 1 (1982); Ye Shuxian 葉舒憲, *Hexi zoulang xibu shenhua yu Huaxia yuanliu* 河西走廊西部神話與華夏源流 [*The Hexi Corridor: The Origin and Development of Western China's Mythology and Huaxia*] (Kunming: Yunnan jiaoyu chubanshe, 2008), 17.

had been buried with the deceased have already been discovered in prehistoric ruins. In the Lingjiatan 凌家灘 Neolithic ruins, located in Anhui Province, more than two hundred jade articles were excavated from tomb 07M23: more than twenty jade rings had been laid near the occupant's head, ten bracelets near the arms, and ten semicircular pendants near its waist.²⁶ Naturally, these articles were not used as mere ornaments but, rather, were offered to the dead for profound religious reasons. When confronted with death, the majority of people wished for it to consist of nothing more than reincarnation in a new body. The fact that people take great care in performing funerals for their loved ones clearly reflects this desire. Archeological discoveries such as the one just mentioned show that jade articles were deeply connected to faith in reincarnation and eternal life. In the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, the Queen Mother of the West's dwelling place is referred to as the "Jade Mountain," thus acknowledging her attributes as the deity granting reincarnation.

Moreover, there is Kunlun. In Chinese traditional culture, "Kunlun" does not refer merely to a mountain but is also permeated with symbolism. One of its symbolic connotations has to do precisely with creating and fostering life. Lü Wei 呂微 in his treatise "A Semantic Approach to Kunlun's Origins," which was based on a comprehensive review of multiple studies, points out:

Kunlun is an entity that exists spatially, but that can also embody many things; indeed, it is the mythological symbol representing the female sex, and the real-world model on which it was conceived concerns specifically the organs related to female fertility, such as the womb, the vagina, or even the entire abdomen of the mother.²⁷

The Queen Mother of the West, whose abode is located on Kunlun, the symbol of fertility itself, naturally possesses powers closely related to the creation of life and reincarnation.

Our analysis of the symbolism associated with the Queen Mother of the West gives us reason to believe that, in her earliest form, she appears as a version of the Great Mother, who presides both over death and reincarnation.

26 Zhang Jingguo 張敬國, "Anhui Hanshanxian Ling jia tan yizhi di wu ci fajue de xin faxian 安徽含山縣凌家灘遺址第五次發掘的新發現 [New Discoveries during the Fifth Excavation in the Lingjiatan Ruins (Hanshan County, Anhui)]," *Kaogu* 3 (2008).

27 Lü Wei 呂微, "Kunlun yuyishiyuan 崑崙語義釋源 [A Semantic Approach to Kunlun's Origins]," in *Zhongguo shenhua xue wenlun xuancui* 中國神話學文論選粹 [A Selection of Essays on Chinese Mythology], ed. Ma Changyi 馬昌儀 (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 1994), 504.

In prehistoric cultures, goddesses seem to have been similarly worshiped in every part of the world, until patriarchal societies emerged, and they were replaced with male deities. Nowadays, the worship of female deities that prevailed during prehistoric times is far from having vanished completely, and traces of faith in the goddesses can still be discerned in local religions, myths, legends, and customs. However, the question remains as to how death and reincarnation, which are usually regarded as opposites, can be embodied by the same goddess. Regarding this question, Miriam Robbins Dexter, the editor of *The Living Goddesses*, observes:

Unlike the early historical cultures, most of which venerated the givers of life . . . , while dishonoring those who brought death . . . , the Old Europeans did not divide the great-goddess into fragments of “good” and “bad.” The goddess was one and many, a unity and a multiplicity. The hybrid bird-and-snake goddess was the great-goddess of the life continuum, the goddess of birth, death, and rebirth.²⁸

Even though Dexter discusses primarily the goddesses in which people in Old Europe invested their faith, she provides an enlightening point of view that is certainly helpful in understanding the Queen Mother of the West’s contradictory attributes. In the eyes of the prehistoric ancients, life was essentially a cyclical process that continued perpetually, and death was just the beginning of a new life. For instance, based on the fact that every day the sun rises in the East and sets in the West and that every year vegetation withers and then grows again, people in ancient Egypt conceived the idea that rebirth would necessarily follow death, and they thus thought of every possible way to preserve the remains of the deceased, in addition to building gigantic mausoleums (i.e., pyramids) for them.²⁹

The English-speaking world had a similar understanding of life, and the connection between the roots of the words “tomb” and “womb” serves as proof in itself: not only is the tomb the final home reached at the end of one’s life but the womb is also nurturing the next cycle of life. The complete cycle of gestation, birth, death, and rebirth is hence reconstituted by connecting the different elements of symbolic imagery present in the Queen Mother of the West’s myth—Kunlun, the west, death, and jade. As a result, the Queen Mother

28 Marija Gimbutas, *The Living Goddesses*, ed. Miriam Robbins Dexter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), xvii.

29 Huang, *Shijieshidazongjiao*, 6.

of the West is simultaneously regarded as the goddess of death and as the deity who brings the dead back to life.

From a Goddess with the Teeth of a Tiger and Who is Skilled at Whistling to a Goddess Who Excels at Singing and Poetry

When studying the Queen Mother of the West, we can hardly avoid referring to the *Tale of King Mu, Son of Heaven* [*Mu tianzizhuan* 穆天子傳]. During the third reign period [372-396] of Emperor Xiao Wu 孝武 of the Eastern Jin dynasty [317-420], this book was discovered in Ji 汲 County, Henan, in a tomb dating to the Warring States period. Although it is widely believed to have been written during the late Warring States period, it retains some relatively early material on the myth of the goddess. Of the six extant chapters, the first five mainly narrate the journey westward of King Mu 穆 of Zhou. The third chapter includes King Mu's audience with the goddess and their exchange of gifts and poems:

On the auspicious *jiazi* 甲子 day, the son of Heaven paid a formal visit to the Queen Mother of the West. Grasping a white jade tablet and a dark jade circle, he had an audience with the Queen Mother of the West. He submitted 100 lengths of multicolored damask and 300 lengths of [xxx]. The Queen Mother of the West repeatedly bowed and accepted them.

On the *yichou* 乙丑 day, the son of Heaven toasted the Queen Mother of the West beside the Turquoise Pond. The Queen Mother of the West composed a ballad for the son of Heaven:

White clouds are in the heavens;
Mountains and mounds emerge of their own accord.
Our ways and byways are distant and far off;
Mountains and rivers separate them.
If I take you and make you deathless,
Perhaps you'll be able to come again.
The son of heaven replied to her:

I will return home to the eastern earth,
To harmonize and set in order the various Chinese tribes.
When the myriad people are peaceful and equitable,
I will turn my head back to see you.
Three years from now,
I will return to this wild place.

The Queen Mother of the West chanted again for the son of heaven:

I'm going off to that western land,
Where I reside in its wild places.
With tigers and leopards I form a pride;
Together with crows and magpies I share the same dwelling place.
Fortune and destiny cannot be transcended.
I am the emperor's daughter. . . .
Blow the pipes and sound the reeds!
My heart is soaring and wheeling!
Oh, son of the people of the world—
You are what is looked at from afar in heaven!³⁰

Scholars generally refer to this passage as indicating the first major transformation in the development of the figure of the Queen Mother of the West: the frightening depiction in the *Classics of Mountains and Seas* of a “disheveled” goddess “with the tail of a leopard and the teeth of a tiger,” “who excels at howling,” is thus replaced by a representation of the daughter of Heaven who can both sing and recite poetry beautifully and who is full of tenderness for King Mu. However, even at this precise moment, the attributes she had previously displayed have not yet vanished. Indeed, her dwelling place is still located in the far west and the lines

I'm going off to that western land,
Where I reside in its wild places.
With tigers and leopards I form a pride;
Together with crows and magpies I share the same dwelling place

still remind us of the disheveled and howling Great Mother who lived in desolate and wild places. In later developments, the Queen Mother of the West's primeval appearance never ceased to cast off one old skin after the other, until she ultimately adopted the definite form of the elegant and poised empress accompanying the Jade Emperor of the Daoist pantheon. This leads us to wonder about the reasons that could explain the emergence, during the goddess's evolution, of two figures that are poles apart from each other. Many scholars

30 *Mu tianzizhuan* 穆天子傳 [*Tale of King Mu, Son of Heaven*], annot. Guo Pu 郭璞 (Shanghai: Shanghai gujichubanshe, 1990), 68; translation from Suzanne E. Cahill, in *Transcendence & Divine Passion: The Queen Mother of the West in Medieval China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 50-51.

have attempted to provide an answer by approaching this question from the perspective of totemism. However, after we draw support from comparative mythology, we realize, first, that in the realm of myth, transformations such as these are far from accidental and, second, that they are far from rare. On the contrary, in many areas of the world, they commonly characterize the goddesses of death and regeneration. For instance, here is Gimbutas's description of the goddess Holla in her book *The Living Goddesses*:

The oral tradition of Germany preserves the ancient goddess of death and regeneration in many forms. . . . Myths portray her as nightmarish and fearsome. . . . She appears with her wolfdogs, who rip the flesh from the corpse. As mother of the dead, she escorts the dead to the otherworld in the inner depths of mountains and caves. . . . [she] is also a regeneratrix. She brings out the sun, and as a frog, she retrieves the red apple, symbol of life, from the well into which it falls at harvest. When ice melts in the spring, Holla sometimes appears as a beautiful nude woman bathing in a stream or lake. Then she personifies the returning powers of life after winter, as the dangerous death hag turns into a young spring maiden.³¹

Artemis in Ancient Greece can both grant happiness and bring death or calamity to humankind. Above everything else, she prefers hunting, and after she is done, she bathes in the limpid waters of the mountain springs. She is also a dark, cruel, and fierce goddess, and her name implies cruelty (the meaning of Artemis is "slaughterer"). In Laconia, until Lyncurgus abolished this custom, people paid their respects to her by offering sacrifices. However, near Ephesus, worship was widespread of a goddess named Artemis who had many breasts, which clearly indicates that she was the goddess of nurturing and fostering children.³²

Gimbutas enumerates a great quantity of goddesses who embodied simultaneously fierce and seductive features. Without a doubt, this can be explained by the fundamental differences in conceptions that existed between the ancients and their descendants: in patriarchal societies that emerged later on, people developed a habit of treating females as spouses or male subordinates, and they paid attention only to their power of reproduction. In line with this idea, varying images of a goddess more often than not stemmed from the male viewpoint, which emphasized only standards of beauty, while

31 Gimbutas, *The Living Goddesses*, 195.

32 Otto Seemann, *The Mythology of Greece and Rome* [*Xila luoma shenhua* 希臘羅馬神話], trans. Zhou Hui 周惠 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2005), 46.

in the early stage of civilization, the key questions that concerned people were the entire cycle of life from pregnancy to birth, maturity, death, and regeneration. Consequently, "The goddess manifested her countless forms during various cyclical phases to ensure that they functioned smoothly. She revealed herself in multiple ways through the myriad faces of life, and she is depicted in a very complex symbolism."³³ In other words, during the early phase of civilization, the focus of people's attention was not on whether the goddess conformed to standards of beauty but on the symbolic expression of her divine powers. This is why the early Queen Mother of the West in China was regarded as the goddess of death and reincarnation and she presented frightening features that can hardly be understood nowadays. Over the course of her evolution, the facet of the goddess that concerned death was slowly forgotten and those attributes were then assumed by a new deity representing the netherworld, while the Queen Mother of the West's regenerative powers gradually gained prominence. In comparison, the image of the goddess with the teeth of a tiger and the tail of a leopard was gradually altered by later generations and was transformed into the imperial wife who was skilled at singing and poetry, so as to coincide with the representation of her as a benevolent deity who presided over eternal life.

Concluding Remarks

The American scholar Riane Eisler once pointed out:

Facts have proven that the East and the West may have had similar histories, or to be more precise, that they might have had similar prehistories. . . . If I look back to the literature I once read on Chinese mythology and archeology, I am equally convinced that the prehistoric period of Asia probably once went through developments similar to those that occurred in the West.³⁴

These similarities between Eastern and Western culture provide potential for cross-cultural comparisons in literary anthropology. By consulting material from comparative mythologists, we realized that the Queen Mother of the

33 Gimbutas, *The Living Goddesses*, 3.

34 Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (Cambridge: Harper & Row, 1987); trans. Cheng Zhimin 程志民 as *Shengbei yu jian* 聖杯與劍 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2009), 1.

West, who, in prehistoric times, was once regarded as the Great Mother, simultaneously governed the realms of both death and reincarnation. In the eyes of the early ancients, the phenomena pertaining to life itself corresponded to the natural phenomena they witnessed, such as sunrise and sunset and changes in the seasons. All those phenomena were characterized by a cyclical process. For this reason, the Queen Mother of the West's dwelling place, which was in the sacred Kunlun Mountain, represented the tomb where one is laid at the end of his life as well as the mother's body and womb, which lead to a new cycle of life. Following the advent of the patriarchal system, however, the image of the goddess was gradually obscured by the patriarchal discourse, and she was ultimately relegated to the subordinate position of a spouse. Yet the limited records of the goddess's primeval form, preserved in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, as well as the extensive comparison of ethnographic material from different places across the globe, enable us to restore the primeval appearance of the Queen Mother of the West. Scholars such as Gimbutas, who broke down barriers between disciplines and cultures, provided us with an all-encompassing horizon, which definitely bears great significance for current research on Chinese mythology. Its outlook, far from being regional, embraces myths from cultures around the world and ultimately represents humanity's efforts at transcending the most extreme difficulties.

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