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A New Model in the Study of Chinese Mythology

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Abstract

Chinese mythology [*shenhua* 神話] does not exist independently as a cultural medium like mythology does in the West but, rather, comprises ideological and narrative forms that emerge according to historical and cultural trends. Not only have myths withstood humanity's conquest of nature, but they have drawn and continue to draw on the mysteries of scientific development for new content. It is possible to identify three highpoints of creativity in the history of Chinese mythology, each corresponding to shifts in the function and nuance of myths. The first highpoint occurred very early on in China's ancient history, in the period of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors [*wudi sanwang* 五帝三王], when myths were a way to articulate history—that is, history as myth. The second highpoint occurred in the period from the Qin through Jin dynasties, when mythology mainly expounded on philosophy and theory—that is, philosophy as myth. The third highpoint occurred during the Yuan and Ming dynasties, when the narrative content of mythology turned toward the religious—that is, religion as myth.

Keywords

ancient Chinese history – *The Classic of the Mountains and Seas* – myth – mythology

Mythology is a Western concept. The study of Chinese mythology dates back only to the broad dissemination of Western learning in early twentieth century China and, for most of the past century, has employed concepts, theories, classifications, and research methods developed by Western scholars. Few studies attempt to build a theoretical framework of Chinese myths that stems from a native understanding. The strong influence of Western perspectives has led

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the majority of Chinese humanities scholars to approach Chinese mythology as a cultural product of ancient times. Mao Dun 茅盾 [pseud., Shen Dehong, 1896-1981], one of the founding fathers of the study of Chinese mythology, once defined mythology as "a popular story form in folk cultures of Chinese antiquity."[1] Lin Huixiang 林惠祥 [1901-1958], a seminal figure in the study of Chinese humanities, also believed that "mythology is an expression of primitive psychology."[2] Educational materials on the history of Chinese culture published in the past half-century all subscribe to Marx's idea that "[mythology] disappears ... when real control over [natural] forces is established."[3] These tendencies have all treated mythology as a literature of distant ancestors and ancient times to be relegated to dusty tomes and primitive fantasy.

According to this dominant trend, the canon of Chinese mythology consists only of myths found in Han dynasty [202 BCE-220] sources, such as "Nüwa Mends the Sky [Nüwa butian 女媧補天]," "Nüwa Creates Mankind [Nüwa zaoren 女媧造人]," "Hou Yi Shoots down the Sun [Hou Yi sheri 后羿射日," "Gong Gong Destroys Mount Buzhou [Gong Gong chushan 共工觸山]," and "Pan Gu Creates Heaven and Earth [Pan Gu kaitian 盤古開天]." Myths that emerged after the Han dynasty, such as those in *In Search of the Supernatural* [*Sou shen ji* 搜神記] or *Investiture of the Gods* [*Fengshen yanyi* 封神演義]—whose titles even include the character 神 [*shen*, spirits, deities] as in 神話 [*shenhua*, myth]—have been retroactively called *zhiguai* 志怪 [tales of the supernatural] and *shenmo* 神魔 [gods and demons fiction], thus erasing their status as myths. Since the second half of the twentieth century, the large volume of myths emerging in film and television programs featuring visitors from outer space, intergalactic warfare, premodern people traveling to the present, or modern people paying visits to the past are called "science fiction" and "time travel" [*chuanyue* 穿越] fiction. If one were to ask why these stories that are indistinguishable from myth are not referred to as such, the inevitable response would be that they were not produced in ancient times.

In 2008, during the Creation Myths International Conference on Comparative Studies held in Beijing, a scholar lamented how unfortunate it is that the practice of archiving creation myths in China did not begin earlier. What this

1 Mao Dun 茅盾, *Shenhua yanjiu* 神話研究 [*Research on Mythology*] (Tianjin: Baihua Literary Arts Publishing House, 1981), 3.

2 Lin Huixiang 林惠祥, *Wenhua renleixue* 文化人類學 [*Cultural Anthropology*] (Shanghai: Shanghai Literary Arts Publishing House, 1996), 267.

3 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Makesi Engesi Xuanji* 馬克思恩格斯選集 [*Selected Works of Marx and Engels*] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1995), 29.

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point fails to see, however, is that such a critique essentially uses Western concepts and methodological standards to label our ancestors' actions as "unorthodox." What we should do is shed these Western frameworks and, instead, rethink the very theoretical questions we pose about Chinese mythology by starting with the myths themselves.

Yuan Ke 袁珂 [1916-2001], a scholar who devoted his life to the study of Chinese mythology, over the course of his career gradually noticed the limiting effects of Western theory. In 1982, he began to espouse the idea of "broadening the sense of myth."[4] He believed that "just as old myths exist to this day, so, too, do new myths emerge from this moment."[5] Many of these ideas can be found in his seminal work, *History of Chinese Mythology* [*Zhongguo shenhua shi* 中國神話史]. It is a great misfortune that his work and ideas have been either overlooked by scholars or marginalized because of the position they take vis-à-vis Western theory.

This paper argues that Chinese mythology does not exist independently as a cultural form but, rather, comprises ideological and narrative forms that emerge according to historical and cultural trends. It defines Chinese myths as a form of expressive art that centers thinking on the unknown and explaining it, including works referred to more widely in other categories, such as *zhiguai, shenmo*, sci-fi, and time travel. To find proof that myths continue to be generated even in our high-tech world, one needs to look no further than the television programs produced today. Although they experience rises and falls throughout history, myths will never cease to exist completely. In China, mythology has peaked and redefined itself at three distinct points in history: the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors Period [ca. twenty-ninth-twenty-first c. BCE], the Qin through Jin dynasties [221 BCE-420], and the Yuan and Ming dynasties [1279-1644]. These three periods, in turn, each represent a shift in the context and content of myth creation.

4 See Yuan Ke 袁珂, "Cong xiayi de shenhua dao guangyi de shenhua 從狹義的神話到廣義的神話 [From a Narrow Definition of Myth to a Broader Definition of Myth]," *Shehui kexue zhanxian* 社會科學戰線 [*Social Science Front*], 2 (1982); "Zai lun guangyi shenhua 再論廣義神話 [Revisiting the Topic on Broadening the Sense of Myth]," *Minjian wenxue luntan* 民間文學論壇 [*Tribune of Folk Literature*], 3 (1984).

5 Yuan Ke, "Xu yan 序言 [Preface]," in *Zhongguo shenhua shi* 中國神話史 [*History of Chinese Mythology*] (Shanghai: Shanghai Literary Arts Publishing House, 1988), 2.

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History as Myth during the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors Period

The first highpoint in Chinese mythology occurred during the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors period, which was also the height of religious authority and mysticism. This period receives the most attention from scholars of Chinese mythology because its myths most closely resemble what is understood as mythology in the West. Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors mythology is the subject of the chapter "Pre-Qin Myths [Shanggu shenhua 上古神話]," collected in *History of Chinese Literature* [*Zhongguo wenxue shi* 中國文學史], a volume edited by the preeminent scholar Yuan Xingpei 袁行霈.[6] In what follows, I discuss the characteristics and functions of the mythology of this period.

Current scholars of Chinese mythology agree with those in the Doubting Antiquity School [*Yi gu pai* 疑古派] of the early twentieth century that pre-Qin history is mythical history. According to them, the Five Emperors are fictional beings and the flood-taming folk hero Yu the Great [Da Yu 大禹] is the incarnation of a bug. The basis of these claims is theory and practice employed in the study of Western mythology. Unlike in China, the history of ancient mythology studies in the West is characterized by a dearth of historical sources. Subsequently, with no way to distinguish between historical and mythological materials of the same period, Western scholars had no choice but to rely on logic to formulate, classify, analyze, and explain myths. Their assessments depended more on this logical process than on material evidence. In China, by contrast, the great volume of historical sources and their continual discovery through archeological digging, have allowed researchers to approach mythology using multiple analytical lenses. Recent reflections on the current state of research reveal that, contrary to long-held notions influenced by Western mythology studies, it is not so much that pre-Qing history is mythical but, rather, that history was expressed through myth. At a time when the official records of history were not widely kept, mythology took on the function of passing down history. The historian Xu Xusheng 徐旭生 [1888-1976] once said, "Ancient legends all carry aspects of history or are, at heart, historical; they most certainly do not exist without basis."[7]

It is possible to explore the idea of "history as myth" in early China by taking a closer look at the story "Kua Fu Chases the Sun [Kua Fu zhuiri 夸父追日]."

6 Yuan Xingpei 袁行霈, ed., *Zhongguo wenxue shi* 中國文學史 [*History of Chinese Literature*], 4 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai Literary Arts Publishing House, 1988).

7 Xu Xusheng 徐旭生, *Zhongguo gushi de chuanshuo shidai* 中國古史的傳說時代 [*The Age of Legend in Ancient Chinese History*] (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2003), 24.

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It is thus recorded in the "Classic of the Great Wilderness: North [Dahuangbei jing 大荒北經]," in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* [*Shanhaijing* 山海經]:

> In the middle of the Great Wilderness, there is a mountain. Its name is Mount Success city-carries-the-sky. There is someone on this mountain. His ear ornaments are two yellow snakes, and he is holding two yellow snakes. His name is Kua Fu. Sovereign Earth [Hou Tu] gave birth to Faith [Xin]. Faith gave birth to Kua Fu. Kua Fu's strength knew no bounds. He longed to race against the light of the sun. He caught up with it at Ape Valley. He scooped some water from the great river to drink, but it wasn't enough. He ran toward Big Marsh, but just before he reached it, he died here by this mountain. Ying Long had already killed Chi You, and now he also killed Kua Fu. Then Ying Long left for the southern region and settled there. That is why there is so much rain in the southern region.[8]

This story is alternatively recounted in the "Classic of Regions Beyond the Seas: North [Hai wai bei jing 海外北經]," in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*:

> Kua Fu raced with the sun and ran with the setting sun. He became so parched that he longed to drink, and he drank from the Great River and the River Rapids. But the Great River and the River Rapids were not enough, so Kua Fu went north to drink from Big Marsh. Before he reached it, he fell parched on the way and died. He abandoned his stick there, and it changed into Climbton Forest.[9]

The tale of Kua Fu is a classic myth. The nature of Kua Fu's actions, whether his great ambition of chasing the sun or his superhuman ability to drink entire rivers dry, is far removed from reality. When analyzed from a historical perspective, however, the story reveals three key pieces of historical information.

The first of these is Kua Fu's identity. The character 夸 [*kua*] has been found on oracle-bone inscriptions containing the names of states as well as in markings on bronze drinking vessels and dagger-axes. It follows that Kua can be taken as a clan name. *Fu* 父 is glossed in the *Shuowen jiezi* [說文解字] as

8 Yuan Ke, *Shanhaijing jiaozhu* 山海經校注 [*Notes and Commentary on the* Classic of Mountains and Seas] (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 1980), 427; Anne Birrell, ed. and trans., *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (London: Penguin, 1999), 185-186.

9 Yuan, *Shanhaijing jiaozhu*, 238; Birrell, *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, 123.

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"a family elder who is also a leader and disciplinarian,"[10] which can be understood simply to refer to the head of a clan. This reading of the characters in Kua Fu's name is supported as well by a detail in the myth that describes him having wielded a stick or staff. In primeval times, staffs signified power and would be used only by someone who was a leader. In short, Kua Fu's name refers to his position as the head of the Kua clan. The sentences "Sovereign Earth gave birth to Faith. Faith gave birth to Kua Fu" tell us that Kua Fu's clan was a branch of the Hou Tu clan, which, according to passages found elsewhere in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, is descended from the Flame Emperor [Yan Di 炎帝]. From this, we know that Kua Fu is descended from the same clan as Yan Di.

Second, this tale reports on the battle between the Yellow Emperor [Huang Di 黃帝] and Chi You 蚩尤. The passages from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* reveal that Kua Fu failed in his rebellion against the Yellow Emperor. The sentence "Ying Long had already killed Chi You, and now he also killed Kua Fu," tells us that Kua Fu, along with Chi You, was a hero who opposed the Yellow Emperor and was killed by a member of the Yellow Emperor's faction. In legends passed down in the Miao tribe, Chi You is said to have had a general named Kua Fo 夸佛, who is likely the same person as Kua Fu. According to Miao lore, after Chi You was defeated and killed by the Yellow Emperor, it was his general Kua Fo who led the Miao people south. Kua Fu was shot to death by the Yellow Emperor's general, Ying Long, during this journey. Valiant men were selected from among those who accompanied Kua Fo to release the souls of the dead from purgatory and sing songs in praise of Chi You's and Kua Fo's accomplishments.[11] Miao lore, whose origins reach beyond antiquity, give us insights into the great war between the Flame Emperor and the Yellow Emperor. Their accounts are consistent with those recorded in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*.

Finally, the story of Kua Fu recounts the worsening of weather conditions in pre-Qin China. The sentence "he drank from the Great River and the River Rapids, but the Great River and the River Rapids were not enough" can be seen as a mythical way of referring to a historical event in which the Yellow and Wei Rivers nearly dried up because of a great drought. In sources that touch on the reign of the Yellow Emperor, a few weather-related accounts bear mentioning in this context. The first is in the chapter "Letting Be and Exercising Forbearance [Zai you 在宥]" in the *Zhuangzi*:

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10 Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注 [*Commentary on the* Shuowen jiezi] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1963), 64.

11 Pan Dingheng 潘定衡 and Yang Chaowen 楊朝文, *Chiyou de chuanshuo* 蚩尤的傳說 [*The Legend of Chiyou*] (Guiyang: Guizhou Minzu Publishing House, 1989), 99.

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> Huang-Di [the Yellow Emperor] had been on the throne for nineteen years, and his ordinances were in operation all through the kingdom, when he heard that Guang Chengzi was living on the summit of Kongtong, and went to see him. "I have heard," he said, "that you, Sir, are well acquainted with the perfect Dao. I venture to ask you what is the essential thing in it. I wish to take the subtlest influences of heaven and earth, and assist them with the (growth of the) five cereals for the (better) nourishment of the people. I also wish to direct the (operation of the) Yin and Yang, so as to secure the comfort of all living beings. How shall I proceed to accomplish those objects?" Kong Tong-zi replied, "What you wish to ask about is the original substance of all things; what you wish to have the direction of is that substance as it was shattered and divided. According to your government of the world, the vapours of the clouds, before they were collected, would descend in rain; the herbs and trees would shed their leaves before they became yellow; and the light of the sun and moon would hasten to extinction. Your mind is that of a flatterer with his plausible words—it is not fit that I should tell you the perfect Dao."[12]

While it is not possible to take a single word of the *Zhuangzi* at face value, each and every one can be said to derive from ancient legends. This passage suggests that weather during the reign of the Yellow Emperor was rife with anomalies and strange phenomena. Although the language is a bit exaggerated, one cannot discount its basis in reports of natural disasters at the time.

A similar weather-related account can be found in lore relating to Han Ba 旱魃 [referred to below as Droughtghoul], who is thus described in the "Classic of the Great Wilderness: The North" in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*:

> There is someone on this mountain wearing green clothes. Her name is Droughtghoul, daughter of the great god Yellow [the Yellow Emperor]. The god Chi You invented weapons. He attacked the great god Yellow. The great god Yellow then ordered Ying Long to do battle with Chi You in the Wilderness of Hope island. Ying Long hoarded up all the water. But the god Chi You asked the Lord of the Winds and the Leader of the Rains to let loose strong winds and heavy rain. So the great god Yellow sent down his sky daughter called Droughtghoul and the rain stopped. Then

12 Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 [*Collected Interpretations of the* Zhuangzi] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1961), 379-380; English translation in James Legge, trans., *The Sacred Book of China: The Texts of Taoism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 297-298.

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> she killed Chi You. Droughtghoul could not get back up to the sky. The place where she lives on earth never has rain.[13]

Add to these Kua Fu's story, and there are three accounts providing evidence of a drought during the reign of the Yellow Emperor. It would certainly provide a convincing explanation of how Kua Fu dies of thirst.

This interpretation of Kua Fu's death finds resonance in lore passed down in Lingbao County, Henan. Henan University professor Zhang Zhenli's investigations into the myth surrounding Mount Kua Fu in Lingbao tell us that, during the war between the Flame Emperor and the Yellow Emperor, the Flame Emperor fled to Shaanxi after being defeated. The Yellow Emperor sent his general Ying Long after him, forcing him to turn west, where he found himself in an area between Shaanxi and Henan. At this time, Kua Fu, a distant clansman of the Flame Emperor, was passing through Lingbao just as the area was suffering the heat of a ten-year drought. Kua Fu reached the northern foot of the Qinling Mountains, located 25 *li* south of Lingbao, where he died of thirst. The place where he was buried came to be known as Kua Fu Valley and the nearby peak, Mount Kua Fu.[14] The historical roots of this received account are convincing; those who share it do so with apparent respect and reverence for the memory of Kua Fu.

Elements from this tale that corroborate those found in other accounts include the shared clan lineage between Kua Fu and the Flame Emperor, the fact that Kua Fu headed west after his defeat, and that Kua Fu died during his westward retreat, though not by Ying Long's arrow but because of drought. Although the mysteries of any myth can never be fully unraveled, Zhang addresses this discrepancy by hypothesizing that the descendants of Kua Fu, unable to bear hearing how Kua Fu was killed by the Yellow Emperor, spun this tale about his dying of thirst while retreating.[15] Even so, I believe that the tale of Kua Fu has a strong historical basis. For instance, whether he died of thirst or was killed by the Yellow Emperor, this story places the war between the Flame Emperor and the Yellow Emperor in the same period as a severe climatic event, which is also consistent with descriptions of weather in the quoted passages from the *Zhuangzi* and the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. Evidence of a great

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13 Yuan, *Shanhaijing jiaozhu*, 430.

14 Zhang Zhenli 張振犁, "Kua Fu shenhua tanyuan 夸父神話探原 [Seeking the Origins of the Kua Fu Myth]," in *Minsu diaocha yu yanjiu* 民俗調查與研究 [*Research and Investigations into Folk Customs*], ed. Zhang Zichen 張紫晨 (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1988), 435.

15 Ibid., 436.

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drought can also explain differing accounts of the cause of Kua Fu's death. That Kua Fu and his clansmen fled from east to west might also explain how the legend of his chasing the sun came about.

From this, one can see that the myth of Kua Fu is actually the mythologization of Kua Fu's history. In the words of Xu Xusheng, it was a time where "it was difficult to think outside the framework of mythology."[16] Accordingly, historical accounts carried a strong mythmaking sensibility. In fact, mythical figures such as the Yellow Emperor, the Flame Emperor, Chi You, Hou Yi, and Da Yu are all historical figures who contributed to the development of human civilization. It is fair to say that the function of mythology during the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors period was to record history. Although the figures who appear in these records might expound on nature, society, and life, history remains the primary theme of this period's mythology.

Philosophy as Myth from the Qin through Jin Dynasties

The second rise of Chinese mythology took place from the Qin through the Jin dynasties. Rational thought reached its height in the Warring States period, but, by the end of this era, it had begun to decline to the point of near extinction. In its place, mysticism emerged as the dominant ideological trend, particularly concerning the quest for immortality. This trend was widespread in both ordinary society and the imperial court. The first emperor, Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇 [259-210 BCE] was known for ordering multiple expeditions to sea in search of the elixir of life. Such actions may appear to be a gullible response to the words of an alchemist. However, they were driven just as much by the larger ideological trends taking hold at the time, signaling a new return to mysticism. As is well known, the word *di* 帝 originally referred to a deity. Its eventual use to refer to a human monarch not only implied that such a monarch was simultaneously human and divine but also signaled the expanding influence of mystical thought at the time. *Di* had fallen out of use as a term for rulers for over a thousand years before reemerging at the end of the Warring States period. In 288 BCE, the rulers of the Qin and Qi kingdoms reclaimed *di* as a title, referring to themselves respectively as Emperor of the West [Xi Di 西帝] and Emperor of the East [Dong Di 東帝].

The spread of mysticism during the Qin-Han period has attracted the attention of many modern and contemporary scholars. The Qin-Han chapter of the *General History of Chinese Thought* [*Zhongguo sixiang tongshi* 中國思想通史],

16 Xu, *Zhongguo gushi de chuanshuo shidai*, 24.

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edited by Hou Wailu 候外盧 [1903-1987] and others, lists numerous articles on theology in medieval China through the lens of orthodoxy, form, thought, theory, and politics. Jin Chunfeng's 金春峰 *Han Period Thought* [*Handai sixiang shi* 漢代思想史] also includes chapters dealing with such topics as the relationship between heaven and man, the quest for immortality, divination, mysticism, and Han theology. Lin Jianming 林劍鳴 is a contributing editor to *Society and Civilization of the Qin-Han Period* [*Qin Han shehui wenming* 秦漢社會文明], a book that claims to focus on the topic of "highly superstitious spiritual orientations."

Although mythology receded into the background during the Warring States period, it flourished with the rise of mysticism during the Qin-Han era. During the latter, mysticism was so prevalent that even the grand historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 [ca. 145-86 BCE] could not escape its influence. A passage from the first of his biographies, "Biography of Emperor Gaozu [Gaozu ben ji 高祖本記]," reads: "It was recorded in later texts that before Liu Bang [Gaozu] rose in rebellion, he had killed a white snake. At that, an older woman had begun to cry, expressing her disbelief that her child, the son of the White Emperor, had been slain by a son of the Red Emperor."[17] This would be hard to imagine without understanding the intellectual trends influencing Sima Qian.

Mysticism persisted into the Wei-Jin period, particularly in poetry, in which gods and immortals became a recurring image. Cao Cao's 曹操 [155-220] "The Song of Qiu Hu [Qiu Hu xing 秋湖行]" expresses his wish to "climb Mount Hua" and "wander leisurely among gods and deities." Similarly, in "Poems of the Wandering Transcendents [You xian shi 遊仙詩]," Ji Kang 稽康 [ca. 223-263] writes that he would like to "wander through eternal gardens without a care" and "have occasion to meet with the Yellow Emperor and Laozi." In "Singing My Feelings [Yong huai shi 咏懷詩]," Ruan Ji 阮籍 [210-263] writes, "I wander in the wilderness with an easy heart, and bid farewell to the Queen Mother of the West." These poems demonstrate that the lives of gods and immortals had an effect of mystical seduction for poets in this period. As Liu Xie 劉勰 [ca. 465-522] wrote in the chapter "Elucidating Poetry [Ming shi 明詩]" in *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* [*Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍], "During the Zhengshi reign period [240-249], the Daoist idea of detachment from worldly affairs was quite popular; thus, this idea also seeped into poetry."[18] In fact, this trend extends beyond the Zhengshi reign period; it appears in

17 Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 [*Records of the Grand Historian*] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1996), 341.

18 Fan Wenlan 范文瀾, *Wenxin diaolong zhu* 文心雕龍注 [*Annotations on* The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons] (Beijing: Renmin University Press, 2014), 67.

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works such as the *In Search of the Supernatural* and *Research into Lost Records* [*Shi yi ji* 拾遺記] during the Jin dynasty, when the highpoint of mysticism comes to an end.

If, as argued in the previous section, mythology functioned as historical writing in the pre-Qin period, then from the Qin through Jin dynasties, mythology was a way to express philosophy. Because those living during the Warring States period were in a constant state of existential crisis, they favored a rational approach to thought, taking the principles of yin-yang and the five elements [*yin yang wu xing* 陰陽五行] as key to understanding the universe. People in the Qin-Han dynasty broadened the application of these principles by reinterpreting them through myths; thus, mythology during this period has a philosophical nuance. For instance, based on the principle that "the shifting relationship between yin and yang is what constitutes the Way,"[19] people in the Qin-Han period began to approach heretofore single gods as part of a marital unit. They coupled Nüwa with Fuxi, Hou Yi with Chang'e, and Queen Mother of the West with King Lord of the East. "The Cowherd and the Weaving Maid [Niulang zhinü 牛郎織女]" and "Married to a Heavenly Immortal [Tian xian pei 天仙配]" are two widely known myths passed down from the Han dynasty that also illustrate this application of yin-yang theory to myth and marriage. In other words, the cosmic duality of yin and yang were treated by people in the Han dynasty as a formal element: if yang represents "heaven" and "man" and yin, "earth" and "woman," then the interaction between the two forces is what supports the structure of all things. Aside from this application of cosmic duality, deification of certain philosophical concepts that emerged in the pre-Qin also occurred in this period. For instance, the concept of *tai yi* 太一, which is understood from the chapter "All under Heaven [Tian xia 天下]," in the *Zhuangzi* to mean Great Unity, referred to the original form of all things in the universe. During the Han period, however, *tai yi* became an alternative way of referring to the Heavenly Sovereign, whose authority dwarfed even that of the Five Emperors.[20]

Now let us turn our attention to two myths that have been treated as canonical in Chinese literary history: "Nüwa Mends the Sky" and "Hou Yi Shoots down

19 "Zhou Yi zheng yi 周易正義 [Commentary on the *Book of Changes*]," in *Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經注疏 [*Commentary on the Thirteen Classics*], ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2011), 161.

20 See "Dong huang tai yi 東黃太一 [The Sovereign of the East: The One]," one of the "nine songs [*jiu ge* 九歌]" in the *Chu ci* 楚辭 [*Lyrics of Chu*]. *Tai yi* is treated here as a title for a deity. Some scholars suspect that this was added on later during the Han. Their doubt is not unfounded.

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the Sun." Both can be found in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 along with textual interpretations of the two stories. The work offers the following reading of "Nüwa Mends the Sky": "When there is obstruction to the flow of yin and yang, flush it out to reestablish the link. When disruptive energy hurts material objects and the ability of the people to accumulate material wealth, stop and abolish it."[21] Regarding "Hou Yi Shoots down the Sun," the work explains:

> To aid those who live impoverished lives and help those who have material needs is a way to foster one's reputation; take action to benefit the people by ridding society of its ills, suppress the chaos of rebellions, and put a stop to violence—this is the way to have accomplishments.[22]

Both passages expound on philosophy in the context of narrating a myth, demonstrating the philosophical preoccupation of mythology in this era.

Another prominent phenomenon in this period is the use of myth to interpret philosophical questions that were left unanswered during the pre-Qin. For instance, Qu Yuan 屈原 [ca. 340-278 BCE] writes in "Heavenly Questions [Tian wen 天問]":

> Who passed down the story of the far-off, ancient beginning of things? How can we be sure what it was like before the sky above and the earth below had taken shape? Since none could penetrate that murk when darkness and light were yet undivided, how do we know about the chaos of insubstantial forms?[23]

It is recorded in the chapter "The Revolution of Heaven [Tian yun 天運]" in the *Zhuangzi*:

> How (ceaselessly) heaven revolves! How (constantly) earth abides at rest! And do the sun and moon contend about their (respective) places? Who presides over and directs these (things)? Who binds and connects them

21 Zhang Shuangdi 張雙棣, *Huainanzi jiaoshi* 淮南子校釋 [*Commentary on the* Huainanzi] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1997), 678.

22 Ibid., 828.

23 Huang Linggeng 黃靈庚, *Chuci zhangju shuzheng* 楚辭章句疏證 [*Annotations and Commentary on* Chu Ci] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2007), 999; David Hawkes, trans., "Heavenly Questions," in *Classical Chinese Literature: From Antiquity to the Tang Dynasty*, ed. John Minford and Joseph S.M. Lau (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 39.

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> together? Who is it that, without trouble or exertion on his part, causes and maintains them? Is it, perhaps, that there is some secret spring, in consequence of which they cannot be but as they are? Or is it, perhaps, that they move and turn as they do, and cannot stop of themselves?[24]

These passages show us that people in the Warring States era were deeply invested in postulating on the beginning of existence; yet, at the same time, no creation myths have been discovered from this period. In other words, they raised questions but did not provide answers. Creation myths did, however, begin to appear during the Han period and tend to have a pervasive quality of philosophical explication.

Take, for instance, this passage from the book "On the Essential Spirit [Jing shen xun 精神訓]" in the *Huainanzi*:

> In ancient times, when heaven and earth were not yet formed, when the things were unclear and forms vague, it was a state of dark chaos and murky depths, where it was impossible to tell left from right. Then two deities emerged, and, together, they established and made the world. This occurrence was vast without end, broad without bounds. It was at this time that Heaven, Earth, yin, and yang became distinct, scattering to form the four directions and eight extremities, the forces of yin and yang thus worked in tandem to give material form to the myriad things.[25]

The "two deities" mentioned here refer to the deification of yin and yang, once again referencing the Han fixation with cosmic duality and anthropomorphism.

During the Three Kingdoms period [220-280] Xu Zheng 徐整 wrote in the *Historical Records of the Three Sovereign Divinities and the Five Gods* [*San wu li ji* 三五歷紀]:

> Before the beginning of time, Heaven and Earth were a mass of chaos resembling an egg. It was within this chaos that Pan Gu was born. After 18,000 years, this mass split into Heaven and Earth. The energy of yang rose light and clear to form the sky, whilst the energy of yin sunk muddy and dense to form the earth. Pan Gu, living between Heaven and Earth, went through many changes each day. His wisdom stretched beyond the sky and his abilities possessed more strength than the earth. With each passing day, the sky rose by many measures, the earth thickened by many

24 Guo, *Zhuangzi jishi*, 493; Legge, *Sacred Books of China*, 345.

25 Zhang, *Huainanzi jiaoshi*, 719.

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> measures, and so, too, did Pan Gu grow in size. Thus another 18,000 years passed. By this time, the sky had reached extreme heights and the earth had grown to extreme depths, and Pan Gu's size and height were also extremely great. It was after the formation of Heaven and Earth that the Three Sovereigns of the human world appeared.[26]

A Chronicle of the Five Cycles of Time [*Wu yun li nianji* 五運歷年記] offers a different account of creation that nonetheless has a strong mythological flavor:

> It is from hazy obscurity, a great mass of boundless energy, that all sprouted its first buds of life and that Heaven and Earth emerged distinct. That which was essentially yang became air, rising up and up to form the sky. That which was essentially yin solidified and became the earth. The forces of yin and yang continued to stir, differentiate, and transform, eventually giving birth to fair-minded and peaceful people. Pan Gu, who was the first living thing to emerge from the chaos, underwent a great transformation just before death. The air he expelled became the wind and clouds of the sky; his four limbs and five extremities became four pillars to hold up the sky and five great mountains; his blood became the water of rivers and lakes; his veins became roads and mountain ranges; his muscles and skin became fields and soil; his hair and whiskers became the stars in the sky; his fur became grass and trees; his bones and teeth became mineral, rock, and metal; his essence and marrow become pearls and precious jade; the sweat dripping from his skin became the dew that moistens all things; even the parasites on his body, catalyzed by the wind, became the hordes of common people living in the world.[27]

This passage is an illustration of the Daoist principle, found in chapter 42 in the *Laozi*, that "The *Dao* 道 begat one; one begat two; two begat three; three begat all things." Its philosophical implications far surpass its mythical ones. This conjunction of philosophy and myth is precisely the main characteristic of Qin-Jin era mythology.

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26 Li Fang 李昉 et al., ed., *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 [*Imperial Readings of the Taiping Era*] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1985), 8.

27 Ma Su 馬驌, *Yi shi* 繹史 [*Continuous History*] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2002), 2.

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Religion as Myth during the Yuan-Ming Period

A resurgence of fixation on the mysterious and supernatural, particularly through the rising trend of "god-making" [*zao shen* 造神] took place in the Yuan-Ming period. Although both tales and the ritual worship of god-spirits persisted in folk culture before this period, some even documented in sources on rituals, during the Yuan-Ming period, people built on this foundation to create new gods and spiritual icons in even greater volume. A higher number of the 365 proper gods recognized by Jiang Ziya 姜子牙 [ca. 1156-1017] in *Investiture of the Gods* do not appear in any source material dated prior to this period.[28] For example, whereas a general Lei Shen 雷神 [God of Lightning] was mentioned in earlier sources, Jiang's catalog lists twenty-four names of deities under the heading *lei* 雷 [lightning]. Many previously undocumented deities are also mentioned in the novel *Journey to the West* [*Xi you ji* 西遊記]. It is written in the book "On Rituals [Li zhi 禮志]" in the *History of the Ming* [*Ming shi* 明史]: "In ancient times, there was no practice of making sacrifices to Jupiter or the positions of the moon; this began during the Ming dynasty. Having a cloud deity after the wind deity was also a practice that began during the Ming dynasty."[29] This reflects the intensification of god-making during the Yuan-Ming period.

A noteworthy work that appeared in this period, the *Great Compendium on the Origins and Development of the Three Teachings and Search for the Sacred* [*Sanjiao yuanliu soushen daquan* 三教源流搜神大全], compiles entries on over 180 deities from the three teachings: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Each entry includes the deity's name, designation, rank and domain, posthumous titles, and mythical deeds. The majority also have accompanying images of the deity. Some notable entries are those of the Great Jade Emperor [Yu huang shang di], Houtu Goddess of the Earth [Houtu huang di qi], the Immortal Donghua [Dong hua di shen], and the Divine Queen Mother of the West [Xi ling wang mu]. Despite the Confucian tradition of not discussing gods and supernatural forces, this compilation also includes names of Confucian figures. Rather than academic intent, the work reflects fascination with the numinous that draws on the praxis of religious and theological studies.

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28 Xu Zhonglin 徐仲琳, *Fengshen yanyi* 封神演義 [*Investiture of the Gods*] (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1992).

29 Zhang Tingyu 張廷玉 et al., *Mingshi* 明史 [*History of the Ming*] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974), 1282.

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If we take a closer look at the process of god-making in this period, we can sense a whimsical tone in the narration that is akin to a primeval wonderment at nature. One example is the following excerpt from the *Yong chuang xiaopin* [涌幢小品]:

> The Great Golden Dragon King was named Xie Xu. He resided hidden in Jinlongshan. He heard that the army of the Yuan had entered Lin'an, fell into the lake, and drowned, and that the stiff corpses did not rot. Zhu Yuanzhang raised an army in response. The Great Golden Dragon King aided him in his dreams, resulting in their swift victory. Thereafter, he opened a canal at Lülianghong. Those who prayed as they passed through on boat would have their wishes granted, so a temple was built. While Pan Xiuxun [潘秀馴; 1521-1595] tamed the Yellow River, the many prayers he expressed there were all answered and thus the people grew even more devout in making him offerings.[30]

See also this excerpt from *Gu sheng* [觚剩]:

> After the first Ming emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang, secured all under Heaven, he granted titles and land to officers with great achievements. Once, he dreamed of holding an audience at court with tens of thousands of soldiers bowing before him, saying, "We died on the battlefield; please grant compensation to our grieving families." To this he replied, "There are too many of you. I cannot possibly investigate each of your names. However, if you were to group yourselves into units of five, I could distribute your offerings by locale." Thus, he commanded the people in the Jiangnan region to build small temples for the offerings. These temples were commonly known as "five holy shrines [*wu sheng ci* 五聖祠]."[31]

Finally, it is written in the "Four Yanzhou Drafts [Yanzhou sibu gao 弇州四部稿]," by Wang Shizhen 王世真 [1526-1590]:

> The Ming emperor Zhu Di dreamed of two deities who informed him that they were on the shores of the southern seas and would go to help him govern the country. The next day, the official in charge of rituals

30 Yao Zhiyin 姚之駰, "Yuan Ming shi lei chao 元明事類鈔 [Collected Anecdotes from the Yuan and Ming]," in *Wen yuan ge siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書 (Taibei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1986), 884:326.

31 Ibid.

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> spoke of the deeds of two immortal saviors, Xu Zhi'e and Xu Zhizheng, in Fujian. The emperor then sent two envoys with boxes of incense as offerings to invite back the deities. Thus, likenesses of the two were placed in the southeastern part of the palace, where a temple was built for them so that they could be worshiped.[32]

To create a god based on a dream is an act that requires a context in which belief in the supernatural is the norm. Interestingly, the name of the Ming dynasty itself comes from a reference to a religious sect. One can sense the mystical religiosity that pervaded the Ming from this practice of naming.

It is within the context of this mysticism that the third highpoint of mythology emerged. During this era countless mythical works of fiction appeared, including *Journey to the West, Investiture of the Gods, Zheng He's Expedition to the Western Ocean* [*Sanbao taijian xiyang ji*], *Suppressing Demons* [*Pingyao zhuan* 平妖傳], *Biographies of 24 Arhats* [*Ershisi zun de dao luohan zhuan* 二十四尊的道羅漢傳], and *The Legend of the Cowherd and the Weaving Maid* [*Niulang zhinü zhuan* 牛郎織女傳]. According to the *Guben xijian xiaoshuo huikao* [古本稀見小說匯考] and *Zhongguo tongsu xiaoshuo shumu* [中國通俗小說書目]—which span over thirty genres.[33] Dramatic works of the Yuan-Ming period with mythical elements also number over a hundred, quite an impressive number for the genre.

Fictional works generally are not considered mythology, but works from this period nonetheless contain mythical elements—such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* [*Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義], one of the four great classic novels of Chinese literature. The following passage is in the opening chapter:

> On the fifteenth day of the fourth month of the second year of the reign Established Calm (*jian ning*), the Emperor arrived at the Great Hall of Benign Virtue for the full-moon ancestral rites. As he was about to seat himself, a strong wind began issuing out of the corner of the hall. From the same direction a green serpent appeared, slid down off a beam, and coiled itself on the throne. The Emperor fainted and was rushed to his private chambers. The assembled officials fled. The next moment the

32 Wang Shizhen 王世真, "Yanzhou sibu gao 弇州四部稿," in *Wen yuan ge siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書, 884:750.

33 See Tan Zhengbi 譚正璧 and Tan Xun 譚尋, *Guben xijian xiaoshuo huikao* 古本稀見小說匯考 (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2012); Sun Kaidi 孫楷第, *Zhongguo tongsu xiaoshuo shumu* 中國通俗小說書目 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2012).

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> serpent vanished, and a sudden thunderstorm broke. Rain laced with hailstones pelted down for half the night, wrecking countless buildings.
>
> In the second month of the fourth year of Established Calm an earthquake struck Luoyang, the capital, and tidal waves swept coastal dwellers out to sea. In the first year of Radiant Harmony (Guang He) hens were transformed into roosters. And on the first day of the sixth month a murky cloud more than one hundred spans in length floated into the Great Hall of Benign Virtue.[34]

Chapter 1 of the Ming dynasty novel *The Water Margin* [*Shui hu zhuan* 水滸傳] is titled "Zhang the Divine Teacher Prays to Dispel a Plague/Marshall Hong Releases Demons by Mistake." The opening passages describe how, on the day "Tai Zu, the Emperor of Military Virtue" was born, "a red glow suffused the sky when this sage came into the world, and fragrance still filled the air the following morning. He was in fact the God of Thunder descended to earth."[35] Even *The Plum in the Golden Vase* [*Jin ping mei* 金瓶梅], famous for its explicit treatment of relationships between men and women, opens with a poem purportedly written by an immortal.[36] These examples attest to the reemergence of mythology as a trend.

Further, this third highpoint of mythmaking draws on many religious elements and concerns. In chapter 90 of *The Water Margin*, an abbot says, "May the country be peaceful and the people serene for years to come, the five grains abundant, the three religions glorious, with calm on all four sides, and everything exactly as wished."[37] In chapter 47 of *Journey to the West*, Sun Wukong says, "I hope that you can return the three teachings to their original unity, that you may be respectful to the monks as well as the Taoists, and nurture talent amongst the people. If you do so, I guarantee your lands will forever be secure."[38] In chapter 28 of *Zheng He's Expedition to the Western Sea*, the elder Jin Bifeng says, "It was best said in the olden times: 'the three teachings all

34 Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中, *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義 [*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*] (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1997), 1; Moss Roberts, trans., *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 5.

35 Shi Nai'an 施耐庵, *Shuihuzhuan* 水滸傳 [*The Water Margin*] (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1997), 1; Sidney Shapiro, trans., Shi Nai'an, *The Water Margin* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2001), 7-8.

36 Lanlingxiaoxiaosheng 蘭陵笑笑生 and Wang Rumei 王汝梅, ed., *Jin ping mei* 金瓶梅 [*The Plum in the Golden Vase*] (Jinan: Qilu Book Company, 1987), 2.

37 Shi, *Shuihuzhuan*, 675; Shapiro, *Water Margin*, 892.

38 Wu Cheng'en 吴承恩, *Xiyouji* 西遊記 [*Journey to the West*] (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1992), 605.

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originate from the same house.'"[39] The opening of *Zheng He's Expedition to the Western Sea* likewise discusses the origins of the three teachings. *Investiture of the Gods* tells the story of conflict between two religious sects; *Journey to the West* is a story of retrieving religious scriptures—both describe spiritual powers in their depictions of exorcising demons. In these cases, interest in religious concepts converges with the reemergence of myths as a new way to reflect on spiritual themes and figures.

Many works in Ming dynasty drama demonstrate additional effects of this convergence. *Lü Dongbin taoliu shengxian meng* [呂洞賓桃柳昇仙夢] tells the story of a man, Lü Dongbin, who attains immortality after expiating two tree spirits from sin. In *Guang Chengzi zhuhe qi tian shou* [廣成子祝賀齊天壽], the character Guang Chengzi bustles about preparing to celebrate the longevity of the Heavenly Son. *Qing fengnian wu gui nao Zhong Kui* [慶豐年五鬼鬧鍾馗] features the demon queller, Zhong Kui, who takes on the role of an official. *Shi Jia fo shuang lin zuohua* [釋迦佛雙林坐化] relates how Shi Jia sits meditating in a forest until he meets his death. These works extol the capaciousness of Buddhist principles and the immortal youth of gods and spirits. They depict the process of becoming immortal through self-cultivation and celebrate the longevity of immortal figures. The themes of these plays blend a strong religious aura with aspects of Yuan-Ming material culture. This reflects a change in consciousness not present in earlier periods.

Concluding Thoughts

We can see from these three shifts in the history of Chinese mythology that myths do not disappear; rather, their function and characteristics evolve along with the ideology of any given period. The myths of antiquity attached themselves to history, the myths of the Qin through the Jin period attached themselves to philosophy, and the myths of the Yuan-Ming period attached themselves to religious spirituality.

In the end, mythology is rooted in the spirit of pondering the mysterious and unknown and tirelessly keeping stride with the narrative themes that ever change and develop over time. In China today, where society is led by such slogans as "Innovate with science and technology," mythmaking shifts to science fiction themes in order to express people's hopes and fears regarding the role

39 Luo Maodeng 羅懋登, Lu Shulun 陸樹崙 et al., ed., *Sanbao taijian xiyangji* 三寶太監西洋記 [*Zheng He's Expedition to the Western Sea*] (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 1985), 361.

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of technology in the present and the future. In this way, historical shifts feed, rather than threaten, mythology's core fixation with the unknown. Through this essay, I hope to bring attention to the problem of treating mythology as a singular cultural form that only references primeval times. In order to rectify this tendency, studies on mythology must reconsider the longer history of thought that informs its theory.

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