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# A Discussion on the Concept of “Sacred Narrative”

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## Abstract

Sacred narratives are one of the foundations upon which human societies depend for their existence, since in all societies those narratives help establish the legitimacy of the social order and values. While Western societies have opted to regard tales of the supernatural as their main form of sacred narrative, ancient Chinese societies chose, instead, to regard ancient history as theirs. Even though the narrative contents of myths and ancient history differ, they fulfill the same social function and both are believed to represent “facts” from immemorial antiquity. Therefore, the author uses the concept of the sacred narrative to embrace both myths and ancient history, transcending differences in content between mythological and historical narratives and setting forth an argument based on their common social function. This not only allows mythology studies to be in keeping with historical reality but also contributes to an accurate understanding of the narrative foundations of different social and cultural systems.

## Keywords

ancient history – Chinese mythology – multicultural perspective – sacred narrative – social function

“Sacred narrative” is a definition of myth commonly seen in the modern academic field of mythology studies. In 1984, an anthology of essays by Western scholars edited by the American folklorist Alan Dundes was published under the title *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*. Dundes makes the anthology’s subject clear from the very first sentence of his introduction: “A myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be

in their present form.”<sup>1</sup> He regards the word “sacred” as the most important term in the definition of myth, thereby excluding all other narrative forms that would not emerge from a context of faith. This definition attaches great importance to the aspect of faith and to mythology’s social function.

If we affirm that “myth is a sacred narrative,” can we not also say that sacred narratives are myths? In a Western cultural context, this does not appear to be a problem because myth is the most fundamental form of sacred narrative. In fact, it is the only form of sacred narrative. However, could we affirm the same in China as well, that sacred narratives are necessarily myths? The present article answers this question in the light of facts regarding the specificity of Chinese sacred narratives.

### The Inability of the Current Concept of Myth to Reflect the Reality of Sacred Narratives in Chinese Culture

Social and cultural life is extrinsic to humans’ biological instincts. Sacred narratives must be deployed in order for each society’s member to internalize the social and cultural order and its values as compatible with his own individual psychological needs. They prove the existence of a particular order since time immemorial. In this sense, sacred narratives are one of the foundations on which human societies depend for existence.

Mythology is the form of sacred narrative with which we are most familiar. The concept of myth used in the Chinese academic world is not a term specific to China and was introduced from the late Qing dynasty [1644-1911] onward through the influence of modern studies in mythology from the West. The concept is usually defined using two different methods. The first one relies mostly on the myth’s narrative content. For example, the “minimum definition” of myth suggested in 1955 by the American folklorist Stith Thompson, and endorsed by Yang Lihui 楊利慧, states: “Myth has to do with the gods and their actions, with creation, and with the general nature of the universe and of the earth.”<sup>2</sup> The second method, represented by Bronislaw Malinowski, is based on the myth’s social function. Malinowski writes:

1 Alan Dundes, “Introduction,” in *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, ed. Alan Dundes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 1.

2 Quoted in Yang Lihui 楊利慧, “Shenhua yiding shi shensheng de xushi ma? 神話一定是“神聖的敘事”嗎? [Are Myths Necessarily ‘Sacred Narratives’?],” *Minzu wenzue yan jiu* 3 (2006): 85.

Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale but an active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.<sup>3</sup>

It should also be kept in mind that Lü Wei 呂微, who was deeply influenced by Malinowski, persists in defending this particular view in his work.<sup>4</sup>

Even though the two methods of definition mentioned above differ, they also share a common point—that is, the fact that both attribute the leading roles in mythology to deities. This is the most common and unanimous view currently shared by scholars with regard to myth. In addition, mythologists generally consider mythology the prevailing narrative form in ancient Chinese societies. The problem is that this view does not correspond to the narrative practices prevalent throughout Chinese history.

In ancient times, China did not have a concept of myth, but myths were still produced. For this reason, scholars adopted ancient Greek mythology as their model and took concepts from modern Western studies in mythology as their guide. Those scholars exploited a few story plots from ancient texts that presented a certain supernatural quality (i.e., myths). They thereby constructed the idea of “Chinese mythology,” a mythology that is now regarded as the cultural foundation of the Chinese nation. More than a hundred years ago, this idea gained a lot of influence. However, because of this particular construction, scholars were also confronted with two insurmountable difficulties.

First, the vast majority of records on ancient Chinese mythology that would fit the concepts introduced above are fragmentary. They remain scattered throughout the country, and no system connects the different mythological pieces. Early Chinese narrative forms were for the most part historical, but history is the narrative form concerned with recording human activities, and little content in it touches upon deities. In China, the period when epic poems and theatrical dramas were produced that could reveal some kind of mythological narrative or content came relatively late, hence it could not possibly have reflected the recording of classical mythology. Therefore, researchers have no

3 Bronislaw Malinowski, “The Role of Myth in Life,” in *Sacred Narrative*, 199.

4 Lü Wei 呂微, “Shenhuapian 神話篇 [Mythology Chapter],” in *Zhonghua minjian wenxue shi* 中華民間文學史 [*History of Chinese Folk Literature*], ed. Qi Lianxiu 祁連休 and Cheng Qiang 程薈 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999), 3-4.

choice but to look for those tales of the supernatural in ancient writings that are not narratives per se.

Scholars have realized that most myths could be found in works such as the geographical records of the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* [*Shanhaijing*, 山海經], the philosophical writings of *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and *Huainanzi* 淮南子 as well as the lyrical poems of the “Heavenly Questions [Tianwen 天問].” Those sources were later reputed to be the ancient texts containing the most recorded myths, a reputation supported by a variety of works on the history of literature. In fact, because the ancient books mentioned above are constrained by their own characteristics, it would have been simply impossible for them to record complete versions of myths, let alone do so systematically. Therefore, the Chinese myths gathered by mythologists or, more precisely, the mythology constructed by those scholars is bound to remain scattered and disorganized. Lu Xun 魯迅 [1881-1936], in *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction* [*Zhongguo xiaoshuo shi lue*, 中國小說史略], writes: “Myths usually centered round a group of gods: men described these gods and their feats.” He later adds: “But China has never had monumental works putting all these myths and legends together, as in the Greek epics.”<sup>5</sup> Scholars such as Lu Xun, Hu Shi 胡適 [1891-1962] and Mao Dun 茅盾 [1896-1981] explored the absence of any comprehensive Chinese mythological source, and all offered various explanations for it. They either attributed the fault to the geographical specificities of China’s environment, or directed their criticisms at Confucianism and the saying “The subjects on which the Master did not talk were—extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings,” which appears in the *Analects of Confucius* [*Lunyu*, 論語].<sup>6</sup> At the time, no one considered that this conundrum had been created by the mythologists themselves by borrowing the Western concept of myth without giving it careful consideration.

The second question is more critical. Following their incessant efforts to unearth the value and influence of Chinese myths, mythology experts ultimately became aware of the fact that, since the beginning of Chinese civilization—excluding the period of remote antiquity on which we are unable to perform textual research—mythology’s influence on historical developments has been limited. Mythology never enjoyed cultural prestige in Chinese history. In fact, it has long been reduced to being considered in a

5 Lu Xun (Lu Hsun), *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, trans. Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1959), 10, 19.

6 Confucius, “The Analects of Confucius,” in *The Chinese Classics*, trans. James Legge (Taipei: SMC, 2001), 1: 201.

similar vein as the “School of Minor Talks” [*Xiaoshuojia*, 小說家]<sup>7</sup> and has been essentially disparaged as “extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings.” Ancient Greek mythology, however, has achieved cultural prominence, and its influence on Western culture is monumental. In contrast, because of the awkward situation in which Chinese mythology finds itself, the actual value of the research conducted on the subject suffers considerably.

These two difficulties can also lead to problems at a deeper level. According to the principle that human societies need to be legitimated through sacred narratives, Chinese mythology, which is depicted as lacking both influence and prestige, could not possibly have provided sufficient support for maintaining order in traditional society. A society and culture that could not provide evidence that would attest to its legitimacy could hardly last. Based on Western mythology theory, China would fall into this category. However, Chinese traditional society’s “ultrastable structure”<sup>8</sup> and its unbroken continuity are widely acknowledged. We can therefore infer that the conclusions reached by contemporary Chinese mythologists are necessarily based on erroneous reasoning.

I believe that the problem came from Western influence on Chinese mythology studies and the fact that myth was considered the sole form of sacred narrative, which led us to overlook the actual historical narrative phenomena at work in China. What is known as “ancient history” (the period from the Zhou dynasty [1045-221 BCE] onward) in reality constitutes the main form of sacred narrative prevalent in Chinese traditional culture, thus for the Chinese, ancient history assumes—as quoted above—the role of “a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.” It was certainly a mistake to devote the resources of Chinese mythology studies to unearthing tales about divinities, because we lost sight of the historical narratives about emperors in remote antiquity.

Jiang Guanyun’s 蔣觀雲 [1865-1929] treatise “Figures Fostered by Myths and History,” published in 1903 when the Chinese field of mythology studies was founded, contains a very enlightening supposition expressing the possibility that history could be equally considered a sacred narrative:

7 Ban Gu 班固, “Yiwenzhi 藝文志 [Treatise on Literature],” in *Hanshu* 漢書 [History of the Han Dynasty]. This refers to a specific literary genre that recorded conversations heard on the street.

8 Jin Guantao 金觀濤 and Liu Qingfeng 劉青峰, *Xingsheng yu weiji: lun zhongguo fengjian shehui de chao wending jiegou* 興盛與危機——論中國封建社會的超穩定結構 [Traditional Society in China: An Ultrastable Structure] (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1984; Beijing: Falü chubanshe, 2011).

A country's mythology and history all have the greatest influence on popular consciousness. . . . things such as mythology and history can give birth to a country's greatest characters. However, they can accomplish this precisely because they reveal the genius of a country's people. Once a country's mythology and history are unable to arouse the interest of the people and to inspire them, the people's absence of genius becomes apparent.<sup>9</sup>

To affirm that "mythology and history [which refer specifically to written historical narratives] can give birth to a country's greatest characters" is clearly equivalent to saying that both mythology and history are sacred narratives. However, in the same treatise, Jiang considers ancient Chinese mythology devoid of any "sense of the sublime or elegance and of [any] solemnity or mystical quality" and qualifies ancient history as "a rigid enumeration of facts," hence asserting that improvements are once more needed. This illustrates that Jiang failed to understand the significance of historical writings of the pre-Qin period, and thus his treatment of history as a form of sacred narrative is based on mere supposition.

Following his own analysis of ancient documents, Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 [1893-1980] concludes in his famous theory that what is known as ancient history was formed through "an accumulation of superimposed layers."<sup>10</sup> In addition to confirming that legends found in ancient historical records were myths posing as reality, this conclusion reveals the close relationship that existed between the recording of history and the country's governance.<sup>11</sup> It thus becomes apparent that, even though ancient Chinese society did not produce the kind of mythology that is implied by Western studies, it did not lack the social and cultural sacred narratives necessary for its legitimation. Sacred narratives were simply manifested in the form of historical narratives from the pre-Qin period.

It is necessary to refute the long-standing idea that fictional, numinous mythology is humanity's only form of sacred narrative and to adopt a new perspective in order to investigate narrative practices throughout Chinese

9 Jiang Guanyun 蔣觀雲, "Shenhua, lishi yangcheng zhi renwu 神話、歷史養成之人物 [Figures Fostered by Myths and History]," in *Zhongguo shenhua xue lun xuan cui* 中國神話學論選萃 [*Chinese Mythology: A Selection of Writings*], ed. Ma Changyi 馬昌儀 (Beijing: Zhongguo chuango dianshi chubanshi, 1994), 18.

10 層累地造成的中國古史.

11 Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, *Yu Qian xuan tong xiansheng lun gu shishu* 與錢玄同先生論古史書 [*Discussions on Books on Ancient History with Qian Xuantong*] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Educational Publishing House, 2003), 4, 169.

history. Only then will it be possible to correctly apprehend Chinese culture and its narrative foundations, such as the sacred narratives constituted by the ancient legends of the Three August Ones and the Five Lords [*sanhuangwudi*, 三皇五帝].

### The Advantages of Adopting the Concept of Sacred Narrative

The previous section shows that, for people in ancient China, mythology and pre-Qin history shared the same function. However, to stop there would create another problem, because the line distinguishing ancient history and mythology would fade away.

In reality, these forms of narrative and their content have an important distinction: ancient history is concerned with historical narration and portrays human protagonists, while myths assign the main role to gods. Even though legends from ancient history occasionally also have certain supernatural qualities, those tales remain, in the final analysis, worlds apart from the supernaturalism found in myths. For this reason, when Confucius answered the question of whether the Yellow Emperor really was “four-faced” (i.e., whether he actually had four faces), he had to dispel the supernatural aspect of the Yellow Emperor and interpret this expression as indicating the four men who appear similar to the emperor and, for this reason, were sent to other parts of the country in order to represent and assist him.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 [b. 145 BCE] *Records of the Grand Historian* [*Shiji* 史記], which is considered a comprehensive history of China, does not open on a description of the mythological and excessively colorful Three August Ones (*san huang*) but, rather, begins with the “Annals of the Five Emperors [Wudibenji 五帝本紀].”

Therefore, mythological and historical narratives differ in content, but after they are analyzed based on their shared social function and the points in which they can be distinguished are clearly defined, they both fall under the concept of sacred narrative. In other words, with regard to their social function, ancient Chinese history and Western mythology are equivalent. This is Lü Wei’s opinion: he believes that the essence of myth lies in its social function and is not determined by its content. With regard to disparities in content, Lü affirms that the legends found in ancient historical texts are the result of historicizing primitive myths,

12 Shi Zi 尸子section, in *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 [*Imperial Readings of the Taiping Era*], scroll 79.



but the legends from ancient history retained the faith that myths had inspired, and continued to perform multiple functions such as acting as an authoritative discourse and setting a foundation for the transmission of values. In this sense, these legends are a particular manner of formulating the Chinese classical myths.<sup>13</sup>

In the “Mythology Chapter” in the *History of Chinese Folk Literature*, Lü convincingly demonstrates that the imperial system depicted in the legends taken from historical texts served as a sacred narrative during the era of the Eastern Zhou dynasty [770-256 BCE]. Lü’s remark that “these legends are a particular manner of formulating the Chinese classical myths” is certainly worthy of consideration, as it reinforces the distinction between mythology and ancient history. However, the expression “Chinese classical myths” seems to transmute “myth” into a synonym for “sacred narrative.” As a widespread adherence in the academic world to the demarcation between mythology and ancient history already exists, Lü’s perspective on the matter is unsatisfying.

Because we need a concept that is able to embrace both narrative forms, the term “sacred narrative,” which can refer to both mythology and ancient history, appears appropriate. In fact, the term originates in the social function emphasized in Malinowski’s definition of myth. We are thus converting it into a new concept that refers to a fundamental narrative form on which society and culture depend for their existence.

By recognizing previous practices of narrating remote antiquity, this concept attests to the legitimacy of the social order and its system of values and thus consists in “a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.” Because of the difference between society and culture, sacred narrative can adopt a variety of narrative forms, whether myths, epics, or ancient history.

According to this concept, myths and legends in ancient history constitute two fundamental forms of sacred narratives that retain their respective characteristics in terms of content (thereby preserving the demarcation line established by the academic world between ancient history and myth). In other words, we can say that in ancient China two types of sacred narrative existed, the first concerning the relatively scattered and disorganized tales of the supernatural (i.e., myths) and the second made up of the legends in ancient historical records, which by contrast are complete and organized systematically. The latter prevailed in ancient Chinese societies.

13 Lü, “Shenhuapian,” 4.



Considering those historical legends Chinese sacred narrative enables us to clearly recognize this society's narrative foundations and their important social impact. The state, the nation, and the cultural values represented by the Three August Ones and the Five Lords of the historical legends are in reality the cultural bases of Chinese traditional society. Those figures were regarded as the sages of remote antiquity, and their stories established them as models to be followed, in addition to laying the foundations for the social structure and state system of ancient China. For this reason, the Three August Ones and the Five Lords were far more influential in Chinese history (including the history of its literature) than mythology. In fact, these legends definitely compare favorably with the impact that ancient Greek mythology had on Western history. Adopting the concept of sacred narrative should certainly settle the problems brought about by the use of the concept of myth to research Chinese ancient history. In comparison with the scattered and unsystematic myths, which enjoy a lower cultural status, the ancient historical legends are not only far more complete and systematic but also have far-reaching effects on Chinese ancient society, providing ample support for the legitimation and consolidation of its social structure.

Moreover, regarding Chinese history as a sacred narrative could also resolve some issues in historical research. After the Doubting Antiquity School [*Gushibianpai*, 古史辨派] identified the fictitious nature of ancient historical legends, a majority of historians decided that, based on scientific principles, these legends were unworthy of attention because they were considered the result of the rulers' falsification of history. Although those scholars obviously respected scientific principles in doing so (because they viewed ancient history as a narrative created by man and because this narrative could not be considered a reliable record of historical events as they truly happened), the fact remains that this scientific method is flawed because it overlooks the social function and system of values embodied in ancient history as a sacred narrative. In spite of the fact that ancient history was written by men, it earned the recognition and support of people living in those times and was handed down for a significant amount of time. It clearly corresponded to the society's requirements at the time, and therefore it must have embodied certain mechanisms specific to the period's social structure and spiritual life. If this material is deemed useless, the historians' understanding of ancient societies would certainly remain superficial. We opted for the concept of sacred narrative to study ancient history: not only to establish the veracity of its narrative content itself but also to research its sacred social function. In order to spur further historical research, we must thus rescue this precious historical material that has previously been discarded by the academic world.

### Remaining Doubts Concerning the Concept of Sacred Narrative

The definition of myth as a sacred narrative is not endorsed unanimously by mythologists. The questions raised by those critics can obviously influence the concept of sacred narrative, which is favored here and embraces both myths and ancient narratives. We thus examine those objections, in order to clarify the points on which we differ.

Scholars first problematized the concept of sacred narrative in the field of mythology studies.

Yang Lihui considered that the sacredness of myth was far from universal and that it was not found in the essence of myth. She determined that defining myth as a sacred narrative would not benefit research on Chinese classical myths because those myths are fragmented, scattered, and, more often than not, lack context; therefore, there is no way to assess their sacredness. According to Yang, persisting with this definition would lead to a disparity between the actual reality of the object and its conceptualization—that is, the term used would not correspond to the material and the facts. There is also a risk that oral myths that are not intrinsically sacred but still circulating today would be excluded. Therefore, she defends the “minimum definition” of myth put forward by Thompson.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the definition of myth as a sacred narrative would certainly be inadequate if the myths’ sacredness depended on whether they were narrated by shamans and whether they were performed in a ceremony. At this level, I do endorse her opinion. However, Yang’s criticism does not stop there. The above-mentioned criticism concerning research on classical myths and folk myths is ill-founded and unreasonable. Although it is true that the bleak state of Chinese classical myths makes it extremely difficult to study their sacredness, this problem was not created by defining myths as sacred narratives. In fact, the flaws presented by classical records were produced by history (Malinowski refers to this material as having been “mummified”—that is, myths that have been revised by later generations).<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it would be unfair to criticize this definition for not conforming to reality. It is even more necessary to adhere to it in order to remind researchers that they must pay attention to the fact that data are incomplete and that they should refrain from offering in-depth interpretations. If we decide to adopt the “minimal definition” of myth as a way to take into account the lack of material, it would open the door to arbitrary interpretations. Chinese classical myths have long been the playground of every school of thought and deciphering

14 Yang, “Shenhua yiding shi shengsheng de xushi ma?” 85-86.

15 Malinowski, “The Role of Myth in Life,” 199.

ancient texts according to personal preference has become a common practice. It seems to me that this was precisely brought about by overlooking the sacredness of myths. Nowadays, the degree of people’s faith in myths varies. Accordingly, the degree of sacredness that can be perceived when myths are narrated orally depends on who is telling the story, to the point that even banter could be included. Nevertheless, this fact is not sufficient to negate the sacredness of myth. To refute this criticism, it merely suffices to regard the oral material that does not present any sacred quality as the borrowing of myths for other purposes.

In order to present a practical definition of myth that would be neither too narrow nor too broad, Yang later slightly modified Thompson’s “minimal definition” of the concept of myth so that it encompasses more aspects:

Myth is a narrative that has to do with deities, a people’s earliest ancestors, cultural heroes or sacred animals and their activities; it provides an explanation for the origin of the universe, humanity (which includes deities and specific ethnic communities) and its culture as well as the original establishment of the current social order.<sup>16</sup>

This definition alludes to the sacred character of myth. Which of the “deities, people’s earliest ancestors, cultural heroes, or sacred animals” does not possess sacredness? If the origin of all living things and the establishment of the current order are divorced from sacredness, how can we determine the boundary between myths and the magical stories found in children’s fairytales? Skirting the aspect of sacredness poses scholars with a difficult theoretical conundrum.

Myths appeal to the entire population; they can be approached from various angles, and their social function is multifaceted. Research on myths touches upon many branches of learning, and according to their respective needs, all those disciplines proceed from different bases. Consequently, it is to be expected that they would provide different definitions of myth. For example, research on classical literature emphasizes textual analysis and the analysis of symbols, therefore it is understandable that the literary studies’ definition of myth reflects relatively less of its sacredness. However, anthropology and folklore studies need to confront the totality of humanity’s culture and life. If we disregard the sacred social function, we are likely to forfeit the theoretical bases that allow us to analyze the relation between mythology and social life.

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16 Yang Lihui, *Shenhua yu shenhua xue* 神話與神話學 [*Myths and Mythology*] (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 2009), 5.

At the very least, we would sacrifice our discipline's expertise and advantage in the research of myths.

Finally, we need to discuss the use of the concept of sacred narrative when researching ancient Chinese history.

Some scholars call into question the characterization of ancient Chinese history as a sacred narrative, their reasoning being that if ancient history is regarded as a sacred narrative, then so should the history that follows. After we consider the purpose and the social function of later historical narratives, it becomes apparent that they are all sacred narratives.

The act of writing history has never consisted of a mere objective recording of events. Confucius compiled the *Spring and Autumn Annals* [*Chunqiu* 春秋], and his style can certainly be discerned, because, in the process of narrating facts, he necessarily inserted his personal moral judgment through the selection of laudatory or derogatory terms. For this reason, it is said in the *Mencius* [*Mengzi* 孟子] that "Confucius completed the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and rebellious ministers and villainous sons were struck with terror."<sup>17</sup>

The *Spring and Autumn Annals* were not an objective historical record; on the contrary, they were a sacred narrative that reflected Confucius' system of traditional values. The fact that they became one of the Confucian classics amply corroborates the sacred narrative quality of this historical record. In fact, not only ancient history but also the history of succeeding dynasties are sacred narratives, which explains why the past dynasties' imperial courts sought to monopolize the recording of national history.<sup>18</sup>

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17 Mencius, "The Works of Mencius," in *The Chinese Classics*, trans. James Legge (Taipei: SMC, 2001), 2:283.

18 On this subject, see Chen Lianshan 陳連山, "Zouchu xifang shenhua de yinying 走出西方神話的陰影 [To Escape Western Mythology's Shadow]," *Changjiang daxue xuebao, shehui xue ke ban* 6 (2007).

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