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Time, space, and the calendar in early Chinese mythology

Robert André LaFleur[1]

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Abstract Chinese mythology was grounded in the temporal and spatial rhythms of the agricultural year. In time, these actions were solidified in the form of a calendar. Early Chinese festivals grew directly out of those calendrical rhythms, and produced China's first mythical themes. Myth is a living story, told and retold in a continual process. The eventual recording of those myths removed them from those festivals and created an altered kind of story. The Chinese mythological tradition itself focuses far more directly upon stories of culture heroes building a shared society and polity than the origins of the universe. The eventual "origin" tale in China emerged more than a millennium after the first myths, and was far removed from the stories generated by rural farmers in their agricultural festivals.

Keywords Calendar · Culture-hero · *yin-yang* · Origin myth · Writing

Labor and mythology of the heart in China's heartland

Spring awakenings, autumnal closings

On a day in the second lunar month of 2020—what is called "March 8" in much of the Western world—the Chinese agricultural calendar recognized a solar year cycle called "Insects Awaken" (*jingzhi* 驚蟄).[1] It also noted the seventh of seventy-two brief micro-periods, 5 days each, called "Peaches Begin to Flower" (*tao shihua* 桃

[1] All translations from Chinese and French are my own. Quotations from English language sources take the precise form of the original (including British spellings).

✉ Robert André LaFleur
lafleur@beloit.edu

[1] Beloit College, Beloit, USA

始華). These solar segments mark a key moment in the agricultural year, as snows continue melting, river ice thaws, and the first buds of botanical growth begin to dot the landscape. Further, the calendar prescribes that it is a good day to pay respects to ancestors (*jisi* 祭祀), meet with friends (*huiyou* 會友), go out and about (*chuxing* 出行), and move residences (*yixi* 移徙), among a variety of items. It also happens to be a particularly inauspicious day for haircuts and styling (*lifa* 理髮), trimming nails (*zhengjia* 整甲) and planting crops (*zaizhong* 栽種). This last prohibition would certainly be unnecessary in the days that followed, as the weather continued to warm.

All of this, and more, is contained in just one column of a text, the Chinese agricultural calendar (*nongli* 農曆), which has shown a remarkable consistency over the past two millennia.[2] Agriculturalists in China's first millennium BCE observed these prescriptions and proscriptions for daily activities, and in a manner that bears resemblance to many of today's patterns.[3] Those early farmers paid close attention to even the tiniest rhythms of the year. They "read" the patterns of annual freezing and thawing carefully, prepared their implements, and were ready for plowing as soon as the earth was.

But first, they would celebrate on rural mountainsides; first, they would join with others—often strangers, or acquaintances seen only once or twice a year. First, they would dance, together. In those very gatherings they would tell each other the tales that today we have come to call "Chinese mythology". Through a study of these temporal patterns and myths, we can gain a deeper understanding of Chinese civilization, from the earliest eras of its history to the present.[4]

The sinologist and sociologist Marcel Granet (1884–1940) has written memorably about the early spring celebrations that occurred in the days on either side of the vernal equinox. For the careful reader of the calendar, the year has already been building to this point. The seasonal period names reflect miniature environmental rhythms that only those who are deeply in touch with their surroundings can grasp. The sequence of five-day periods begins each year in early February, with names that are even more resonant than those of the twelve months for Westerners. The six that occur before "peach blossoms open" are "east wind melts the ice" (*dongfeng jie dong* 東風解凍), "dormant insects begin to twitch" (*zhichong shi zhen* 蟄蟲始振), "fish break through ice" (*yu shang bing* 魚上冰), "river otters sacrifice fish" (*ta ji yu* 獺祭魚), "wild geese arrive" (*hongyan lai* 鴻雁來), and "vegetation sprouts" (*caomu mengdong* 草木萌動).[5] These seasonal period names show, if we

[2] I use the *jubaolou* (聚寶樓) version of the Almanac, which is widely available in Chinese bookstores in Hong Kong and most major world cities.

[3] Even the earliest calendars in Chinese history connected agriculture and the ruling house. Examples can be found in several first millennium BCE texts, including the *Guanzi* (管子) and the *Spring and Autumn Annals of M. Lu* (呂氏春秋). See Rickett (1985) as well as Knoblock and Riegel (2001).

[4] Useful collections and analyses of Chinese mythology include Birrell (1993), Yang and An (2005), and Werner (1994). My own televised lectures on East Asian and Pacific mythology (including three lectures on Chinese mythology) appear as Lectures 37–48 with *The Great Courses* in the series *Great Mythologies of the World*. For those who read Chinese, the works of Yuan Ke (袁珂; 1916–2001) are indispensable. I have referred often in my own work to Yuan (1996, 1998). An English translation of some of Yuan Ke's work is provided in Yuan (1993).

[5] In *East Wind Melts the Ice*, Liza Dalby (2007) writes memorably about these seasonal patterns.

follow their environmental logic, the *yang* (陽)-melts-*yin* (陰)—warmth overcomes cold—momentum of the changing year. First, there is melting, and then creatures begin to stir. Soon thereafter, the rivers, ponds, and lakes open again after a long freeze. Within days, wildlife appears, and green replaces the brown (and often still snow-laden) earth of the early days of the year.

Marcel Granet tells what happens next: people gather before they plow; love and excitement fill the air.

> Holy was the place, sacred the slopes of the valley that they climbed and descended, the rivers—skirts wrapped up—that they crossed, the blooming flowers they gathered, the ferns, the bushes, the white elms, the great oaks, and the bundles they drew from it: the crackling bonfires, the smell of bouquets, the spring water in which they bathed, and the wind that dried them as they returned. All things had virtues, unlimited virtues, and held a promise given to all hopes.
>
> Those early feasts were, above all, gatherings of initiation, bringing young people—until then confined to the hamlets of their families—together in social communion […]. It is difficult to imagine the depth and breadth of their emotions [as they stood in rows, facing one each other, and their chants] possessed such power that, in their melodic exchange, they invented poetry and created the first Chinese forms of the expression of feelings. When, in tournaments, they faced each other in those gender-opposed lines, their rivalrous action was always rhythmic; whatever the competition, it appeared in the form of an interplay of dance and song.
>
> They composed a litany of seasonal sayings—with all of the images of the ritual landscape, flowers, foliage, the rainbow uniting two regions of Space, flowing waters uniting together—through which they linked their wishes and enchanted each other […]. The power of poetry finally brought them together, and they no longer resisted the duty to unite (Granet 1998, pp. 29–30; 32–34).[6]

From these spring gatherings flowed young love, friendship among strangers, and the seasonal sayings themselves. That very "poetry", in the form of chanted song, constituted the living heartbeat of Chinese mythology.

Such a statement would likely have sounded perfectly natural to many people living in any part of the world in approximately 500 BCE—a farmer in early Greece, a west African horticulturalist, or a rural Chinese agriculturalist, to name just a few. The significance lies less in the facts surrounding cycles of cold and heat—those are natural and obvious to anyone paying close attention—than in the peculiar mix of human labor, creativity, and imagination connected to those cycles. That mixture created the living urgency of shared story that would later be brought home for smaller family retellings the rest of the year, before it all began again the next spring.

[6] Unless otherwise noted, all omissions and entries in square brackets in all quotations are by the author.

According to Marcel Granet, these actions *created* society, just as they created mythology. Indeed, the very word for "society" in the Chinese language has roots in this practice of communal gathering in sacred spaces. "Society" (*shehui* 社會) literally means "gathering" (*hui* 會) at the grain shrine (*she* 社)"—uniting together in sacred space.

Through this lens, we can come to know something of the rhythmic cadences of early Chinese social and working lives, most of which took place far beyond the gaze of power holders and writers of history and literature. There is an old saying in China, and it is relevant to much of the world where fields were tilled and myth created—"heaven is high and the ruler is far away" (*tiangao diyuan* 天高帝遠). The state in China may have codified and distributed copies of the calendar in an increasingly literate society, but the distant agriculturalists knew better that they, themselves, and not the state, were solely responsible for negotiating the cycles of growth and decay. The power of mythology flowed from there.

Writing changes everything

This manner of thinking contrasts with some basic assumptions that many people have of mythology. The assumption, which I find quite mistaken, is that myths are intellectual, and quite often "individual", in the sense that what dominates is a *story* and an individual's reception of it. But that approach gets it quite backward. It may be what readers do today in literate societies, but those stories emerged not from books, but rather through human gathering and song—fueling mythical themes that are quintessentially social, relational, and linked to the rhythms of the calendar. Those are the elements that give myth its force.

The power of these seasonal gatherings lay at the heart of Chinese mythology, just as campfire and nighttime gatherings have fueled myth and legend in many other societies across the world. It was only in a later stage that they were codified, when the myths were transcribed by literate individuals and fashioned into documents that could be studied and passed on in textual form for readers far beyond those hillsides.

But myth only remains alive when told and retold, repeatedly, with different variations emerging in a natural process over time. Writing freezes those tellings in time and space. As folklorists and anthropologists have shown, this process seriously damages the vibrancy of the meant-to-be retold tales by taking one variant and embedding it in a written text. Even the thorough work of dedicated scholars, taking down as many variants of each myth as they can find, still freeze the tales at the time of their recording, giving only specific versions at specific times. Yet the power of myth—the reason that it was a living force in early societies, as well as later ones that did not disrupt the process—lies in repeated gathering and retelling, especially over the course of many years and, indeed, generations. When a myth is frozen, it weakens, and often dies. When ripped from its context, the only ways to keep it relevant, fresh, are through education and—even more importantly—periodic renewal, often in the form of calendrical events, from festivals to community or family gatherings.

Herdboy and weaving maiden

An example of this process can be seen in one of China's most beloved mythical tales. In the late summer months each year, all of China awaits the seventh day of the seventh lunar month. The date always comes after midsummer, just as the still-sweltering year moves almost imperceptibly toward a more autumnal pacing. And it is on that day that a lonely herdboy and a tender weaving maiden come together for one beautiful evening, before setting off (and apart) again in their cosmic circulations.

Herdboy and Weaving Maiden—they are constellations, but they are also much more than that. The pair is the very picture of love, and Chinese mythology has always acknowledged them as central. Moreover, their story is also one of the few remnants of oral mythology that survives in any trace resembling its original form in China. So powerful was the way of literacy (not to mention "academic" tinkering) that almost everything has been transformed by writing. So, too, have the Herdboy and Weaving Maiden, but their power is such that the myth still retains much from its origins.

Here is the story in an abbreviated telling[7]:

> There once was a herdboy, working alone to tend his animals. Among the cattle was a very special cow—golden, plump, and able to speak the herdboy's language. The cow convinces the herdboy to pursue (with magical bovine aid) the seventh daughter of the White Jade ruler in the realm above, laying out an elaborate plan to trap her into his possession. He climbs onto the cow and ascends through the clouds, finding a world of jade trees, forests of chyrophrase, and flowers of coral. After much chicanery, he lures the daughter, and she agrees to marriage. For a time, they lived happily, but the White Jade ruler summoned her back to her weaving duties, while the herdboy was compelled to tend to his own labors. Now, they are separated 364 days a year. They unite together but once a year, on the seventh day of the seventh month, when they cross the Silver River (the Milky Way) and link in constellation communion. It is celebrated as a kind of Valentine's Day in China to this day.[8]

More than occasionally, readers of Chinese mythology mistake this story for a sentimental little tradition of no particular importance. This is a serious mistake. In fact, the Herdboy and the Weaving Maiden are part of a much deeper and richer tradition, one that taps into the rhythmic festivals that opened and closed each agricultural year in early China. If we are to understand the full mythological force of the story behind these amorous constellations, we must ponder the dancing and chanting farmers and their festivals—something Marcel Granet called "rural concord forged

[7] All retellings of the myths in this essay, unless otherwise noted, are those of the author. In keeping with one of the major themes of this essay, there is no "core text" for myth. They are always told and retold, with sometimes changing details. Nonetheless, after each retelling, I will note English sources that can be consulted.

[8] Versions of this myth can be found in Werner (1994, pp. 189–191) and Granet (1975, pp. 54–56).

in rhythmic time" (Granet 1998, p. 30).[9] To understand it more fully will require a deeper sense of that rhythmic time in the powerful principle that lies behind all Chinese mythology.

Yin, yang, light, dark

The natural world and human society are closely intertwined in Chinese thought. Few things are more important in the ongoing mythological tradition than gathering together in social communion before retiring back into lonely labor. Individualistic Western ears often cannot "hear" this significant social theme, and kinship is only a part of it. Sharing work, food, and companionship (as do the Herdboy and the Weaving Maiden) is the real key. To understand these natural rhythms of gathering and dispersal, we must return to the terms, *yin* and *yang*, which are often badly misunderstood to be polar opposites. They are, in fact, reciprocal; each *needs* the other, just as the tale of the Herdboy and Weaving Maiden show.

Imagine the following scene. Somewhere in the mountains of China, seated back-to-back at elegant little tables in an open-air café, two stony figures pass the time, cups of tea before them. Hour after hour, the world twirls, spins, and orbits in endless, cosmic rhythm. They remain motionless—seated in place, like stones. Right now, it is mid-morning. Wearing bright white robes, the first figure (let us call it East Face) sips piping hot tea. Behind sits a positional companion. Clad in black (let us call it West Face), it sits with a tepid, and cooling, brew. Time passes, as morning passes to midday.

By mid-afternoon, something startling has happened to our pair. Their roles have reversed—it was so gradual as to be unnoticed. But suddenly, it became obvious. Now the hot tea is in the west, where the sun fairly beats down upon the cup. Even West Face's robes appear to be light, almost white, in the bright, afternoon sunlight. East Face's garments have gone dark…and the tea is now cold. What takes place each day with our imagined stone mountain figures is a miniature version of *yin-yang* change. It is no more, nor less, than nature's unending movement.

In basic Western portrayals, there is a clumsy notion that *yang* "means" male, light, strong, and hot. The parallel notion assumes that *yin* "means" female, dark, receptive, and cool. Actually, these are reasonable *approximations* of what "is" *yin* and what "is" *yang*, except that these definitions lack an absolutely central point, without which we can never understand these key elements of Chinese mythology and religion: neither *yin* nor *yang* ever "is" anything. They are both in continual phases of *becoming*.

Yin and *yang* are in constant motion, always on the road to becoming the other, after which they cycle back through the various phases and return to wherever the story "began"—in a constant, cyclical process of change. The moment one realizes that it is 12:36:05 on a digital clock…it isn't, anymore. "It" has moved on, and keeps moving relentlessly; it can only be isolated for analysis. In similar fashion, the first thing to understand is that *yin* and *yang* are not "things". They are ways of thinking, and not

[9] Granet's full quotation is "Everyone in these gatherings—where rural concord was forged in rhythmic time—celebrated a sentiment of exultant power, imagining that they were a part of the harmony found in nature itself.".

opposed, dual, binary, or logical structures. Their cyclicality is central to the agricultural year, the calendar, and Chinese mythology

Always becoming

Early Chinese dictionaries define *yang* as the sunny side of a slope; *yin* is the dark side. As we have seen, these positions change over the course of a day, and the sunny morning side becomes, by afternoon, the shady afternoon side. Day after day after day, the process continues.

On a slightly larger scale, consider day (*yang*) and night (*yin*). Day is always moving toward night, and night moving toward day. The details change with the position in the earth's orbit around the sun, but every human (and most animals) have noticed the endless cycles. Daylight gives way to darkness, and darkness, in turn, brightens into daylight, endlessly.

There is another dimension to these principles, and one that gives added clarity to this backbone concept in Chinese mythology. The Chinese calendar consists of six *yang* (warming) months and six *yin* (cooling) months. It never ends. Each year has the same process—warm becomes cool, after which cool becomes warm; *yin* becomes *yang*, after which *yang*, in turn, becomes *yin*. Even arctic and equatorial regions share the pattern of variation. The Herdboy and the Weaving Maiden are not fixed; they, too, are always moving, like the calendar itself. This is why the pair is among the most important forces in all of Chinese mythology. It is not the love story that makes it so. It is the movement, the flow, the gathering, and the separation.

Hou Ji, Lord of Millet

To show further dimensions of these *yin-yang* rhythms, as well as the changes wrought by the process of writing upon mythology, let us consider another tale that shares all of the potential features of rhythm, pacing, flow, and change found in the myth of the Herdboy and Weaving Maiden. These tales surround the figure of Hou Ji 后稷, the Lord of Millet. He was born of a childless mother who became pregnant when she stepped into the footprint of a deity. Worried that this was inauspicious, she left the baby to die, but it was protected by animals and birds in the wild. Noticing this, she resumed her maternal duties. Eventually, Hou Ji would serve as a great minister of agriculture in the hazy mythistory (Mali 2003, p. xi) of the Xia 夏 dynasty (tr. 2205–1766 BCE).[10]

As a youngster, Hou Ji reveled in nature, channeled the *yin-yang* rhythms of his environment, and delighted in planting, tilling, and spreading knowledge of farming

[10] Joseph Mali (2003), in his preface to *Mythistory*, notes that, for someone living and teaching in Jerusalem, "[…]ethowever however modern we might have all become, our life and history are still largely determined by some very ancient myths." I maintain that a similarly general power of myth and early history continue to play a role in Chinese life and culture.

among the people. He spoke of the five kinds of grains, and his carefully tended fields were said to be the best around.[11]

Hou Ji could have been celebrated on those early hillside festivals, where the farmers danced, swayed, and swooned in the forged cadences of rhythmic time. Because of his supernatural origins and his deep connections to the labors of the agricultural year, Hou Ji had the potential, in those early days, to be just as important as the Herdboy and the Weaving Maiden—arguably even more important, given his millet-championing work on behalf of a hungry people.

And yet, Hou Ji has been a mere afterthought in almost every discussion of Chinese mythology for the last 2000 years. Why, then, did the Herdboy and Weaving Maiden remain fixed in the Chinese mythical imagination while Hou Ji's substantive tale died?

The loving pair has a place on the calendar. Even the most ill-tempered of literary scholars could not pry them out of the *yin-yang* rhythms of the year. And yet, the Hou Ji story was taken over by the scholarly class, becoming a mere tool of those very same scholars, whose misplaced seriousness stripped the legend of the living value Hou Ji might have had. When the literati set down to work on him, they sought to make him a great figure among the Chinese people. They first refined the themes of his heavenly birth, and that miraculous birth quickly gave way to the picture of a civilising genius who was connected to all of the great feudal families. He was made to be a powerful governmental minister, and celebrated by the men in cities, wielding their writing brushes (Granet 1998, pp. 129–130).

As time went on, the farmers who originally danced to earlier tellings of Hou Ji's story (forged in rhythmic time) became bored with the scholarly caricature. Marcel Granet puts it this way.

> The [written] myth is well-ordered, skillfully constructed, and expressed in beautiful verse. It did not live. The Zhou dynasty was hardly gone when Hou Ji was of interest only to scholars seeking assorted historical facts. Hou Ji has, since then, spent twenty centuries in oblivion. Even the Christian missionaries who first attempted to resuscitate his myth have abandoned him to his fate. The first propagators of Christianity in China […] thought that they saw, in the legend of Hou Ji, the sign of a pre-revelation from which the Chinese could be favored […] but finally realized that the myth was dead, and awakened no sense of faith. Such must be the fate of a myth steeped in apologetic and didactic intention. The ladies and fairies of popular beliefs have remained young, like the Weaving Maiden. The divine hypostases invented by learned theology sometimes have momentary success, but then they die, and live on only in books. (Granet 1998, pp. 130–131).

[11] Versions of this myth can be found in Yang and An (2005, pp. 131–135).

Writing it all down

The cycles of *yin* and *yang* lie behind almost every natural process human beings experience, from day to night and summer to winter. It is also the core social principle that drove traditional cycles of work and rest. Men lived separate from women during the summer months, living close to the fields they tilled. Women stayed near home, engaging in gardening and sericulture. The spring festival had them saying an elaborate goodbye, and the autumnal celebrations were, in turn, a kind of annual homecoming. These rhythms of life and gender-divided labor were expressed beautifully in the myth of the Herdboy and the Weaving Maiden.

Everything that we know about Chinese mythology emerges from those early festival gatherings. And yet, that does not mean that we really know much at all about the details of those early beliefs. That is because everything has been categorized, organized, classified, and *written down* by scholars over the centuries. The writing process unhinges almost everything that was seamlessly linked in the melodic interactions of those early festivals.

The anthropologist Jack Goody speaks directly to this process in an analysis of literacy and criticism in complex socieites. One of its core points is that the power of the stories themselves often are so overwhelming that readers can fall into the habit of forgetting the layers of change that emerge from writing and multiple readings. For example, it is one thing for members of an oral culture to express a belief, and another to organize it with writing and printing. It is an even further set of steps to create references, cross-references, compendia, and so forth, aided by generations of scholars focusing upon these questions. Such scholarship can take a fascinating germ of orally-transmitted thought and transform it in myriad ways; this is precisely what happened when living myths were written down, compiled into categories, and studied. Goody speaks to larger dimensions of the process.

> In many cases, it is "oral" and "literate" that need to be opposed rather than "traditional" and "modern." […] [With writing], speech is no longer tied to an "occasion"; it becomes timeless. Nor is it attached to a person; on paper, it becomes more abstract, more depersonalized […]. "Traditional" societies are marked not so much by the absence of reflective thinking as by the absence of the proper tools for constructive rumination. (Goody 1977, pp. 43–44).

Exhibiting this dynamic, there is a bit of folk wisdom that still exists today, even though it seems clearly to have begun with everyday sayings in the villages and festivals of early China. Today's Chinese almanac (where the calendar is "housed") has a brief section that tells of people's fortunes if particular things happen in their midst. These are everyday occurences that seemed originally to be sayings told to connect a, usually minor, present situation with some form of auspicious or inauspicious future event. People from areas of the Midwestern United States (and, indeed, all over the world in specific local, cultural forms) may recall their elders saying—when, for example, a spoon falls to the ground during a meal—something akin to "…and that means the preacher will be coming to visit soon."

This section of the Chinese almanac lists these types of occurrences: twitching of the eye (*yantiao* 眼跳), ringing in an ear (*erming* 耳鳴), burning in the ears (*erre*

耳熱), a dog barking (*quanfei* 犬吠), and one's face flushing (*mianre* 面熱). Taking just the first example, the twitch-of-an-eye, it is not difficult—following the cultural logic of these sayings all over the world—to imagine something similar to the (purely hypothetical) example of "a twitch in the eye brings fortune nigh". It has a bit of rhythm to it, and the experiences of everyday life would quickly reinforce it. It would be easy to re-tell, and this is one way such sayings take root and spread within a culture; *they are alive*.

When literacy and classification are added to oral transmission, profound changes occur. With writing, not to mention the power of both the clock and calendar, a simple saying can grow increasingly complex. That is what emerges today. The very "symptom" (a twitch in the eye) is transformed in today's almanac in a manner that reflects centuries of writing and classification, even in a seemingly simple country almanac. What an earlier oral culture might have treated as "one symptom, one saying", the power of writing and classification has transformed into fully twenty-four variables. The almanac's text breaks "the symptom" into the twelve traditional 2-hour periods of the day, and then doubles those by focusing upon either the left or right eye. That is a level of detail that requires a chart, as is found in the almanac, and not an easily-remembered saying. No traditional family could likely keep all of those details in memory, and certainly not twelve-to-twenty-four variables for dozens of different situations.[12]

The process is similar with mythology. Writing changes those myths. The learned scholars took the bubbling, rhythmic, flowing world of rural gathering, linkages, and festivities, framing them in conceptual categories so complex that they withered the interest of all but a few fellow scholars.[13]

Hou Ji was a victim of their work, and only the Herdboy and Weaving Maiden have managed to escape at least part of their literary force.

[12] Among the numerous useful works on mythology as an intellectual process, several have been key resources for my own research, including Doty (1986), as well as multiple texts by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. The most accessible of those is *Myth and Meaning* (Lévi-Strauss 1995), a brief introduction to mythological thought. His classical studies of myth and structure include "The Structural Study of Myth" in Lévi-Strauss (1963), as well as his four-volume analysis of South American and North American mythology, beginning with *The Raw and the Cooked* (Lévi-Strauss 1969), and continuing through three more volumes.

[13] A fascinating, further, point that is beyond the scope of this essay is that this kind of classification and categorization has, in turn, come back to play a role in everyday life. The almanac and calendar have been a constant in Chinese society throughout the imperial period, and it is still printed, although not as influential, to this day. These very compilations of traditional sayings, in times when almost every household in Chinese society possessed an almanac, became something that a literate individual in the community could interpret, even for illiterate individuals. This influence of writing, even upon everyday life in mostly illiterate communities, is one of the most distinctive elements of Chinese culture.

Expanding stories

Having examined the key foundational elements of mythology in China and beyond, it is useful to consider some of the earliest and most significant myths in Chinese civilization. Although a consideration of the full range of themes would take up many hundreds of pages, all bear elements of rhythm and *yin-yang* alternation. Yet these myths contain many surprises to readers who have studied the mythology of other parts of the world. In China, it was the culture heroes—bearers of civilization—who dominated the narratives, while cosmogony lay in the recesses of the mythical imagination.

Out of the trees and into the (cultural) world

The tales the Chinese farmers told, and which were echoed by the elites (not the other way around), did not begin with the origins of the world. The question that preoccupied the men in their summer huts and women in their evening gatherings, was *how did this life we share come to be*? The foundational tale—quickly lodged firmly into writing—goes something like this. Long, long ago, near the muddy, clay banks of the Yellow River, China's elemental myths were established. The culture hero Fu Xi 伏羲 created something that was more important in the Chinese tradition than almost anything else ever accomplished by either deities or humans.[14]

With one powerful and fundamental act, Fu Xi created the very foundations of China's five-thousand-year tradition, and it is at variance with many mythical traditions across the world. In the earliest times, the people, afraid of the dangerous creatures around them, sought protection high in the trees. The philosophical thinker Han Fei spoke to that era in a third century BCE essay.

> In high antiquity, people were few and beasts were numerous. Human beings were unable to overcome the birds, beasts, snakes, and vermin. At that time, a sage came to be. He taught people to build nests from wood and branches to protect them from harm. This solution delighted the people, made him the ruler of all under heaven, calling him "Sir Nest Builder" (Han Fei 2014, Sect. 49).

According to this set of early myths, Fu Xi coaxed those earliest humans to come down out of their nests. Confronting a self-absorbed world of proto-humanity, he transformed it into social, cultural, and economic life in a hazy mythical time almost forty centuries ago. Fu Xi is known as a giver of creativity, and talking the humanoids down, out of the branches and leaves, is only a small part of his story. This celebrated culture hero eventually taught those same people how to fish, trap, and write; to this day, the tomb that commemorates him in Henan province is a popular tourist destination.

[14] Many of these myths of cultural growth can be found in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子. A fine English translation of the entire text can be found in Major et al. (2010).

Carving culture from nature

Coaxing humanity from tree branches is not what many readers expect when they think of the first glimmers of a society's "mythology", but it is a useful reminder that not every mythical tradition begins with cosmogony—the beginnings of the universe. There is a surprising persistence of the "culture first" theme in a number of East Asian and Pacific societies. Still, it raises a significant question with regard to Chinese mythology. What is it about living together in communal fashion (rather than up in the foliage, alone) that would make it appear first—before the beginning of the world itself?

Convincing primitive humanoids to come down out of their trees and form social institutions holds a peculiar kind of cultural logic that is only confusing to those who assume that first myths must be about the origin of universe in which we live. Yet, in China, the swirling vapors at the beginnings of time pale in comparison to domesticating tree people and forming human society into the kinds of groups who would eventually farm, weave, and celebrate together.

Getting those very same early humans to build fires, learn to weave, plant grains, and manage the newly agricultural enterprise fills many pages of text. Where the cloth or grains *came from* has nary a word, but the techniques themselves are the very stuff of Chinese mythology.

Fu Xi and Nü Gua

Fu Xi is everywhere in the early mythology. He is the first in a line of eminent forces in Chinese mythical life that include the Agriculture God (Shennong 神農) and the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝). These three figures, together with the goddess Nü Gua 女媧, move the mythical narrative from isolated life amidst arboreal vegetation to human society in an agricultural world. In this fashion, mythology, like the pigs and chickens on the farm, was thereby domesticated.

And yet, the story really begins with one further element in the narrative. In several early texts that fueled the Chinese mythological tradition, there is a tantalising reference to a form of creation—the creation of human beings, including the crafting of their bodily shapes.

The goddess Nü Gua is said to have kneaded yellow earth and molded it into human beings. The account continues by stressing that, running short on time, she drew her cord in a furrow and lifted it out of the mud to create even more human beings. There is the hint of a class element beneath this story—the yellow earth humans would be the aristocrats; the furrow-mud humans would be the commoners.

By the time we next hear of Nü Gua, she is entwined as one with Fu Xi, jointly holding a knotted cord of measurement. Each also holds aloft in the other hand a more precise measuring device—he a carpenter's square and she a pair of compasses. They are a god-like presence—precise, measured bearers of culture. The image of them with their interlocking dragon tails and human-like upper bodies (adorned with crowns and carrying those instruments of cultural precision) is common in China to this day.

From there, the details begin to dominate the narratives. Fu Xi was a consummate inventor. His name means something akin to "prostrate breath", and hints at traditions embedded in Chinese medical and philosophical thought emphasising the importance of breaths and vapors. Related, and on a more basic level, Fu Xi and Nü Gua gave a form of cultural breath to their people. Indeed, Fu Xi brought to those yellow earth and mud humans fishing nets, musical melody, fire, the eight trigrams of Chinese cosmological reckoning, and both spatial and temporal measurements that would make feats of engineering and water control possible during the swirling times of change that would later confront the Chinese people.

Origin envy

Chinese mythological narratives are filled with visions of cultural and even political formation that show a world of human institutions and technology being carved from the raw and inchoate material of nature. There are so many of these stories that it is clear that they are important in the Chinese world—well beyond a cursory note or two about how human beings developed into groups. In many distinctive ways, these culture tales *are* the mythology of China.

> The better part of a millennium went by before the learned men sought some kind of resolution to the question of origins, a situation influenced by foreign traders arriving on early versions of the Silk Road, not to mention the extraordinary urban growth in Han dynasty China (206 BCE–220 CE).
> That question rose to enough prominence at the end of the first millennium BCE that the scholars felt that the world's origins needed to be addressed. It certainly was not going to happen in the festivals in the rural areas that would remain a source of living mythology well into the twentieth century.

And so it was that, after a thousand-year lag, a series of questions finally rose to prominence in China. How did the world begin? How was the universe formed? How did earth and sky come to be? And what of the underworld? Creation is difficult labor in most of the world's myths, and the acts required of a creator (or creators) often result in a large bulk of tales, followed by a well-deserved rest at the end of the creation process. It is perplexing that many readers today seem to assume that a society's mythology *must* begin with creation, and that assumption has had a large effect on the portrayals of mythology in China to this day.

The situation is even more problematic than it first appears. The "Chinese origin myth" that almost every book and website discusses these days came so late in the process of mythological creation as to be almost an afterthought. The resulting tale has a large number of Indo-European elements—and they differ markedly from the few strands we have of early Chinese creation tales—that many elements are almost certainly of foreign provenance. At the very least, it is highly unusual for a tradition that has myths recorded in texts from periods as far back as 1000 BCE to find its origin myth in a document written almost thirteen centuries later.

This late occurence is another outcome of the influence of writing, since the myth was not a part of those hillside festivals among rural farmers. It was not even

contained in early literary works such as the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 詩經), which sought to channel those rural themes into literary form. Those scholars unleashed their skills upon Hou Ji, but, even then, did not address the origins of the world. That came only with an empire, foreign trade, libraries, and generations of scholars.

Pan Gu cracks the cosmic egg

The origin myth that eventually took form begins in the midst of a churning expanse of chaos. A brief account of the life and transformative death of Pan Gu (盤古) takes the following form.

> Heaven and earth were in states of tumult and disarray. Into this confusion, Pan Gu was born. Over the course of the next 18,000 years, Pan Gu grew. Approaching death, he saw his body transformed. His breath became the winds and clouds; his voice transformed into peals of thunder. His left eye became the sun, and his right, the moon. From there, his four limbs and five extremities became cardinal directions and sacred mountain peaks, while his blood and semen formed the waters and rivers. His muscles and veins became the earth's arteries, while his flesh was transformed into fields and land. In time, the hair on his head became the stars above, his bodily hair becoming earth's foliage. His teeth and bones formed metal and stone, while his vital marrow became precious pearls and jade. Finally, Pan Gu's sweat and bodily fluids transformed into rain falling from above, while the mites that adhered to his body were blown by the wind and formed into people. These latter came to be called the black-haired people (*limin* 黎民).[15]

The outline above certainly represents a quite "satisfying" origin tale. But readers should never forget that what it relates was not a very significant question to most early Chinese thinkers, not to mention the farmers, dancing and chanting in rhythmic concord in the thawing warmth of early spring.

Heavenly questions

There are a few hidden gems from much earlier Chinese texts that deal with the origins of the world, and these blend much more closely with the themes of Chinese cultural creation than the Pan Gu tale. One of the most resonant passages comes from the *Songs of Chu* (*Chuci* 楚辭), a fascinating concatenation of dream travel, *yin-yang* energy, and numerical symbolism. The text's section with "origin" material is called "Heavenly Questions" (*Tian Wen* 天問), and it describes how misty vapors emerged from a formless expanse under the alternating powers of *yin* (darkness) and *yang* (light). Moreover, highly-charged symbolic numbers course their way through the text (eight is a *yin* number and nine is a *yang* number; seventy-two—the

[15] Versions of this myth can be found in Yang and An (2005, pp. 176–181), Werner (1994, pp. 76–81), and Birrell (1993, pp. 29–33).

blending of both—is mythological perfection, and those numbers retain a psychic and even economic power even today).

In short, the "Heavenly Questions" contain many of the "power themes" in Chinese thought, while the Pan Gu tale looks even more like an afterthought in comparison. It has a powerfully *Chinese* origin story to tell, but in the form of a series of questions that is far more in keeping with the Chinese mythological tradition. The text's first questions look like these.

> The ancient origin of things—who transmitted those to subsequent generations?
> Before the realms above and below took form—how can we know what things were like?
> The hazy murk before darkness and light were separated—how can we know about the chaos of their insubstantial forms?
> Lightness and darkness—what gives them their meaning?
> The merging together of *yin* and *yang*—what are its foundations?
> *Yin* and *yang*'s linkages—how did they originate and transform all beings in existence?
> As for the ninefold heavens—whose compass was it that measured them; who undertook those labors, and how was it undertaken?
> The entwined cords—where were they fastened? The pole above—where was it fixed? The Eight Pillars—where did they touch the heavens?
> Heaven itself—how are its movements coordinated? The Twelve Houses—how were they separated? The sun and the moon above—how did they hold their orbits, and how do the stars above remain in place? (Qu Yuan, *Chuci tianwen*, 3.1b).

These lines, and those that follow, contain almost all of the themes found in early Chinese mythology. To be sure, it is not a "story" in the manner of the Pan Gu legend, but that is precisely the point in the world of Chinese thought.[16] These questions ask how the truly important things came to be—such as the ninefold heavens, eight pillars, twelve houses of the calendar, and the alternation of elements—without mention of limbs and flesh becoming earth and sky.

They are questions, not answers. And despite the more satisfying blends of *yin, yang,* and magical numbers, there really is not much in this or the small handful of other cosmogony texts that treat the issue of origins and creation—at least not in the way that Western readers have come to expect in everything from Greek mythology and American Indian creation tales to the *Book of Genesis*.

Building shared culture

Even with a satisfying and indigenous set of origin questions, much mythological work remained left to be done, and several further cultural actions dominated that

[16] An analysis of "Questions of Heaven" can be found in Birrell (1993, pp. 26–29).

story for both farmers and scholars. Shennong (his name is a combination of "spiritual force" and "agriculture") sacrificed himself to teach human beings to make the transition from what we would today call the Paleolithic to the new world of the Neolithic. He implored them to stop eating uncooked plants and shellfish, arguing that these raw foods were dangerous and led to poisoning. The story goes that he sacrificed his own health to create a vast catalogue of safe and unsafe foodstuffs, risking poisoning himself at every turn. One account has him wracked with illness caused by food-borne poisons, at one point on seventy occasions in a single day. It might not be surprising that Shennong is also the Chinese deity associated with medical treatment.

The Yellow Emperor is an ambiguous figure in the mythology of early China. This is so not because of his feats—which dovetail very nicely with the others considered here—but rather because of the seriousness with which he was portrayed by established thinkers in later times. The great historian Sima Qian (c.145–c.86 BCE) treats him as a founding emperor, and not a vaguely mythical culture hero such as Fu Xi, Nü Gua, or Shennong. It was not until the early twentieth century that both Chinese and Western historians placed the Yellow Emperor securely back in the line of culture bearers in the realm of "mythistory" (Mali 2003, p. 6).

As with the others, the Yellow Emperor is accorded both wisdom and a large range of inventions. He brought to human beings the techniques for domesticating animals, shelters to protect them from the elements, and the building of carts, boats, and wagons. Perhaps most significantly, and most in keeping with the distinctive Chinese mythological tradition, he gave human beings the calendar, astronomy, mathematical calculations, a legal code, and even an early form of sport that was a combination of football (soccer) and "circle-kicking".

Mythical repair work

There are, however, a few cracks in this grand narrative of culture steadily-a-building. Perhaps the most prominent of these "repair" tales shows the craftsmanship of the goddess Nü Gua again—she, the fashioner of yellow earth and mud human beings. In keeping with many mythological themes across the world, the initial creation is commonly followed by a breakdown in its structure and functions. From the *Book of Genesis* to China's Yellow River valley, mythical disorder is sometimes followed by a mending process. A synopsis of Nü Gua's labors begins with the world in renewed chaos.

> The support beams holding heaven above the earth collapsed, causing fires to rage and waters to rise to dangerous levels. In response, Nü Gua smelted the "five-color stones" that would aid her in mending the sky. From there, she dammed the flood waters, piled up wood and ashes, and reset the structural beams of the earth. As a result, the waters dried, the fires abated, and the earth

was saved. The tale concludes by stating that the pillars were again firmly rooted, and embraced the round sky.[17]

While cultural creation remained the central focus of Chinese mythology, these elements of repair and regeneration worked their ways into the larger political and historical discourse that would dominate China's imperial history into the twentieth century, with the core idea that a dynasty careening toward failure could still be restored through the vision and actions of an able ruler.

Conclusion

Living mythology, encased stories

All of these tales were fueled, generation-by-generation, by the *yin-yang* rhythms of the year and the patterns of labor and rest in the agricultural life of early China. And yet, even as the men and women continued to work in the fields, and in their homes, over the generations, a change was overcoming China in the last half-millennium before the Common Era. Literacy grew among a small but significant slice of the population, and cities expanded to ever-larger dimensions. By even the early years of the Common Era, the lives of rural farmers continued apace, while the imperial city became the home of an elaborate network of scholars and texts dedicated to bringing those rural mythical labors into the realm of literature. All that remains today are rows and rows of books and essays inspired by the assembled farmers—chanting and dancing in rural concord upon the thawing spring hillsides of early China.

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Conflict of interest I vow that there is no conflict of interest in this essay, and that there is no conflict of interest with any other author or institution for the publication of this essay.

Ethical Statements I declare that this manuscript is the result of my own independent creation under the reviewers' comments. I am the only author of this manuscript. Except for the quoted contents, this manuscript does not contain any research results that have been published or written by other individuals or groups. The legal responsibility is fully mine.

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[17] Versions of the Nü Gua (sometimes written Nüwa) myth can be found in Birrell (1993, pp. 163–165), Yang and An (2005, pp. 170–176), and Werner (1994, pp. 81–82).

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