

Guideways to the land of gods, heroes, demons and monsters

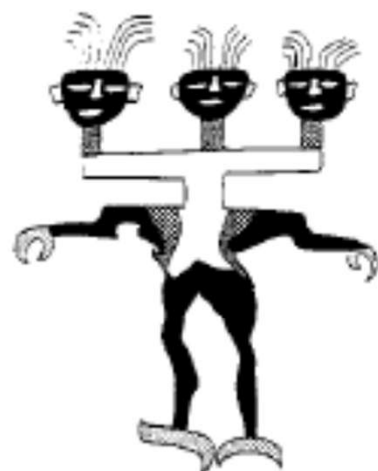
**The *Shanhai jing* and early Chinese
mythology**



no. 2



no. 6



no. 7



no. 8



no. 10

FIGURE 16b. Details of gods from the modern reconstruction of the Chu Silk Manuscript. From Noel Barnhard (1973).

Mythology in traditional China?

- ❑ Notion of “mythology” did not emerge within China; imported from the West
- ❑ Interest in myths was a by-product of historical criticism in the early 20th century: Gu Jiegang (1893-1980): *Critiques of ancient history* (*Gushi bian* 古史辨), produced 1926-1941
- ❑ the later a text was composed, the earlier was the supposed career of its leading figure; the more detailed and fabulous the narrative
- ❑ Powerful spirits were humanized over time



Definition

- ❑ Any “traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance” (Mark Edward Lewis)
- ❑ Myths express ideology of a society
- ❑ Reflect on the elements and tensions that form a society
- ❑ Justify the roles and traditional practices without which a society would disintegrate

Groups of myths

Mark Lewis: 5 types of myths:

1. Myths of early culture-hero sage kings
2. Myths of historical figures
3. Myths of figures found in tombs
4. Myths related to local cults
5. Myths related to crafts

Anne Birrel, *Introduction to Chinese Mythology*:

1. Origins
2. Culture bearers
3. Savors
4. Destroyers
5. Miraculous birth
6. Yellow emperor etc.
7. Goddesses
8. Immortality
9. Metamorphoses
10. Love
11. Heroes
12. Fabled flora and fauna
13. Strange lands and peoples
14. Founding myths

Chronology of mythic narratives

- ❑ No myths recorded on Shang oracle bones
- ❑ Eastern Zhou (450-221 BCE): main period for classical mythic narratives
- ❑ Early imperial – early medieval period period: ca. 221 BCE to 5th century AD
- ❑ 6th cent. – early 17th century: period of mythopoeia (“myth-making”); Song encyclopedias

Nature of Chinese mythic narratives

- ❑ Recorded in piecemeal fashion; no reworking into *Iliad*, *Odyssey* (both Homer), or *Metamorphoses* (Ovid) – lack of gifted poets? Aversion against the supernatural?
- ❑ Myths included into canonical literature of the Chinese (incl. philosophical, historical and literary works)
- ❑ Myths employed by writers of different persuasions to make a point

Zhiguai 志怪 and *chuanqi* 传奇

- *zhiguai* 志怪: *zhi* ‘to record’, *guai* ‘strange’, ‘anomaly’ → ‘Record of the Strange’, ‘Strange Writing’
- *chuanqi* 传奇: *chuan* ‘to transmit’, *qi* ‘unusual’, ‘strange’ → ‘Tales of the Supernatural’
- *gong’an* 公案 ‘public cases’ → detective stories

Origins and early examples

- *zhiguai* (designates a literary genre since Ming):
 - Later Han Dynasty (25-220), Six Dynasties Period (220-589) material
 - Representative works: *Soushen ji* 搜神 *Records of an Inquest in to the Spirit Realm* by Gan Bao 干宝 (ca. 280-356)
 - *Lieyi zhuan* 列异传 (*Tales of Marvels*, c. 220), Cao Pi 曹丕
 - *Bowu zhi* 博物志 (*Record of Strange Things*, c. 290), Zhang Hua 张华

Origins and early examples

- *chuanqi* 传奇: Tang (618-907) – Song (960-1279)
 - *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (*Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*); 978 AD
 - 7000 stories from Han-Song in 500 *juan* 卷

Birth of fiction?

Two approaches:

- *zhiguai* = ‘fiction’, ‘proto-fiction’ or ‘antecedent to fiction’ → understanding *zhiguai* instrumental in and prerequisite to understanding features and development of later Chinese narrative literature
 - Example: Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936), *Zhongguo xiaoshu shilüe* 中国小说史略

Exploring a new terrain - Campany

- religious-historical approach
- *zhiguai* “attempt [...] to come to terms [...] with areas of human life and experience that were new and unfamiliar in the sense that had never before been deliberately explored in writing” (Campany)
- *zhiguai* cover that about which “the Master would not speak” *zi bu yu* 子不语

Fact or fiction?

- ❑ “spirit world is not a lie” (Gan Bao, Preface to his *Soushen ji*)
- ❑ *zhiguai* authors had no reservations about credibility of their material
- ❑ incorporate local traditions of non-Chinese cultures
- ❑ folk, oral material
- ❑ *zhiguai* writer an ‘ethnographer’ → aim of “bringing order and permanence to the substance of a barbarian culture” (DeWoskin, Chih-kuai, p. 38.)



Dongming ji 洞冥记 (*Record of Penetration into the Mysteries*), Preface by Guo Xian

“Here I am compiling what former historians did not record, putting together as best as I can what I have seen or heard to make a book for this school of thought, the *Tung-ming chi* 洞冥記 in four *jüan*. I hope that gentleman whose understanding extends beyond the familiar will embrace this work and marvel at its contents. Because Emperor Wu bore an expressed desire to learn all he could of spirits and immortals, unknown frontiers and untraveled lands made tribute of their precious and marvelous things, and furthermore, men practiced in the Taoist arts prospered under the ruler during the Han. For these reasons I am gathering and organizing these materials.”

(Trans. DeWoskin, *Chih-kuai*, p. 31.



Fact or fiction?

Two questions:

- ❑ Do readers of *zhiguai* believe in the existence of ghosts and unusual events? YES!
- ❑ Do they regard the accounts of the ‘supernatural’ as historical or fictitious?

History and fiction

- ❑ demarcation line difficult to draw
- ❑ Chinese historical works often contain ‘fictitious’ passages, something made up or imagined.
- ❑ “no narrative is a pure example of history or fiction, as commonly defined, but [...] all narratives fall between the two” (DeWoskin, Chih-kuai, p. 25)

History and fiction

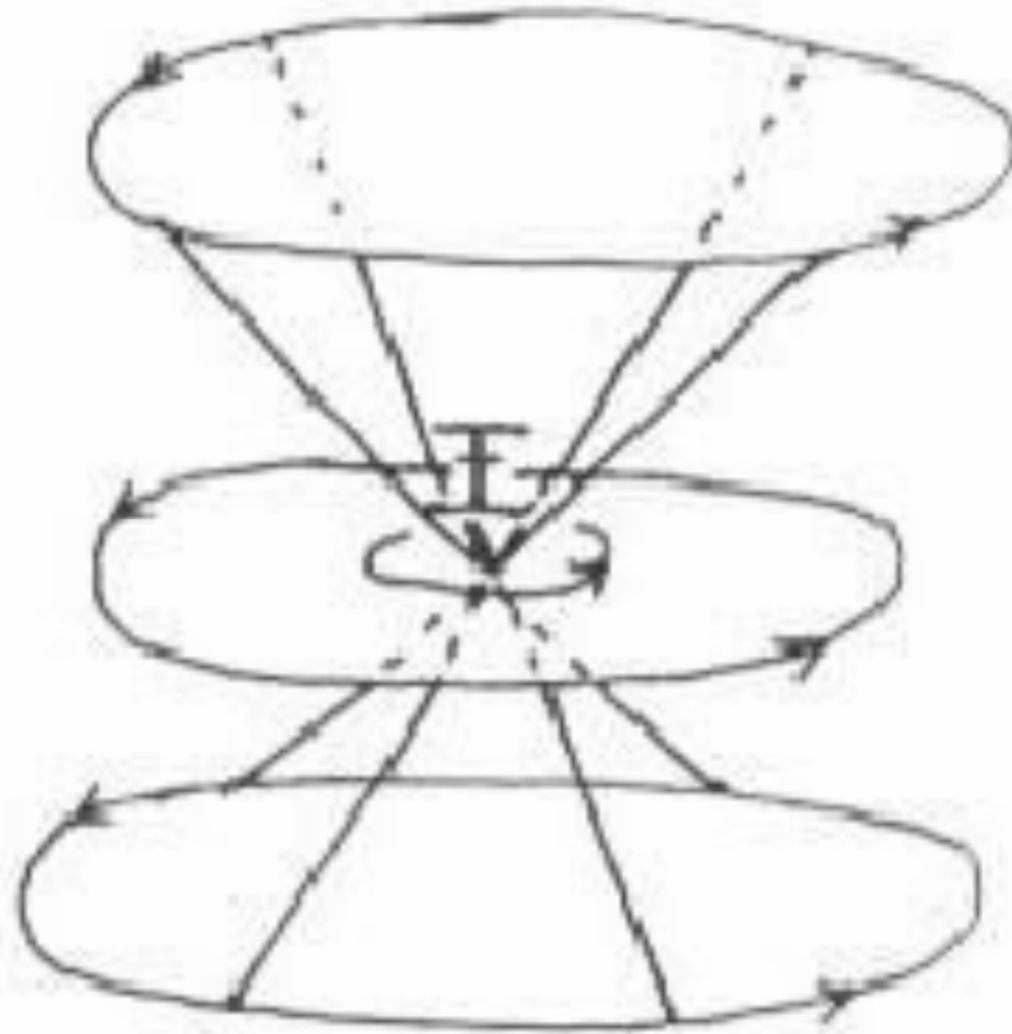
- ❑ DeWoskin: material originally considered fiction, later given a historical garb
- ❑ narrative writing could not be divorced from historiography → affinity to historical writing
- collections entitled ‘accounts’ ‘records’ ‘biographies’
- formal features and writing conventions borrowed from historiography
- 2nd order historiography; ‘mediocre history’ (Liu Zhiji)



Fundamental ideas in myth

- ❑ Correspondence between Heaven, Earth, and Man
- ❑ Dynamism of the natural world → metaphysics of resonance and transformation
- ❑ Metamorphosis and transformation can happen across animal-human boundary
- ❑ Euhemerisation: myths and gods transformed into authentic history; animal figures anthropomorphised

Heaven, man, and earth in synchronous motion



Shanhai jing 山海经

- ❑ Mythogeography --> encyclopaedic vision of the world
- ❑ Compiled partly in Warring States (475-221 BCE) period and partly in Western Han dynasty (206 BCE-9 AD)
- ❑ Shamans as “primary professional community” (Strassberg)
- ❑ Links to shamanistic culture of ancient China
- ❑ Why were these ‘stories’ written down?

Painted image of a wu-shaman.
Detail of decorative images
on a zither excavated from
a Warring States-period
tomb in Chu
(modern Changtaiguan,
Xinyang,
Henan) in 1957.
Henan
Provincial
Museum.



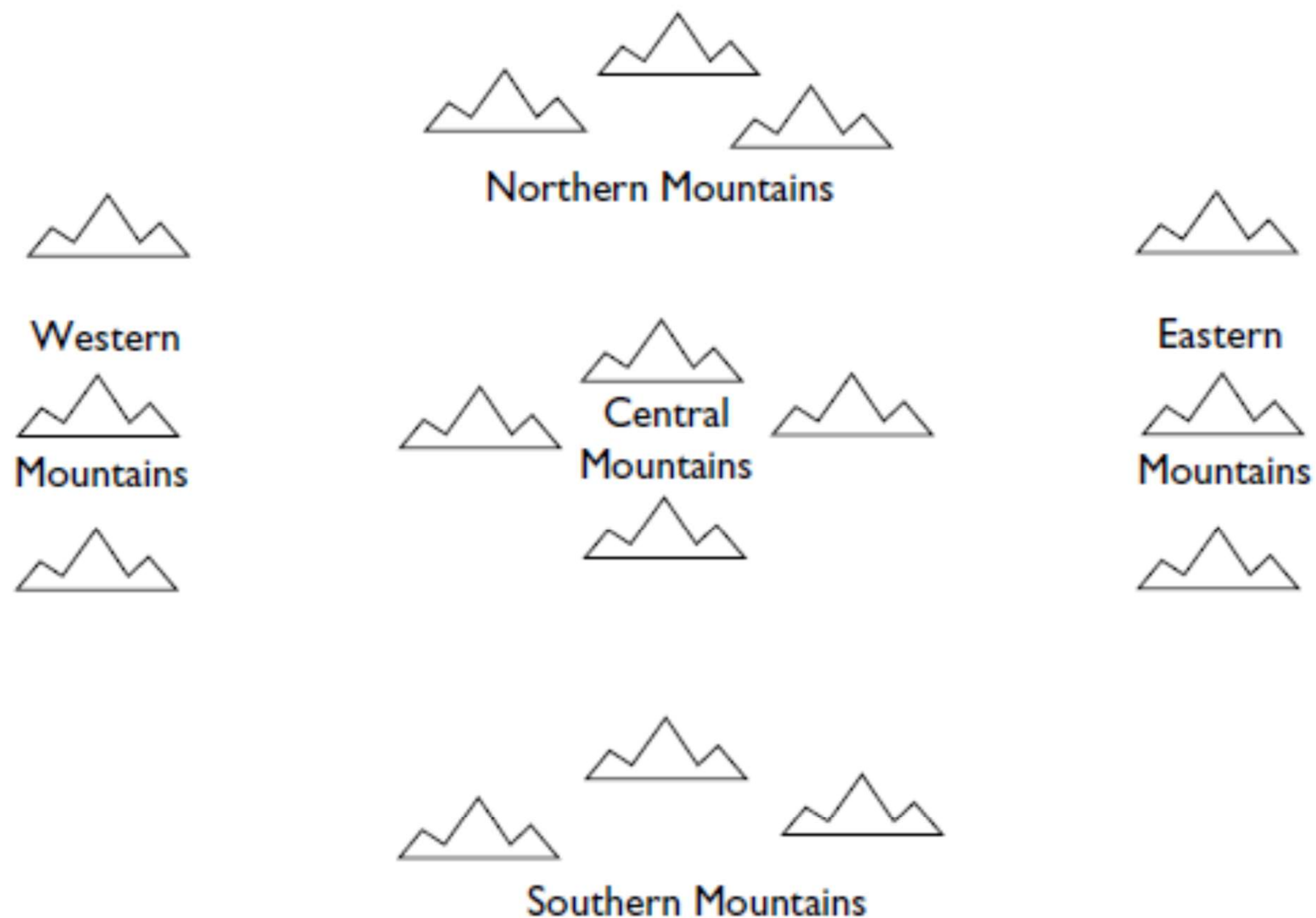


FIGURE 9. The world according to the *Guideways through Mountains* (chapters 1–5).

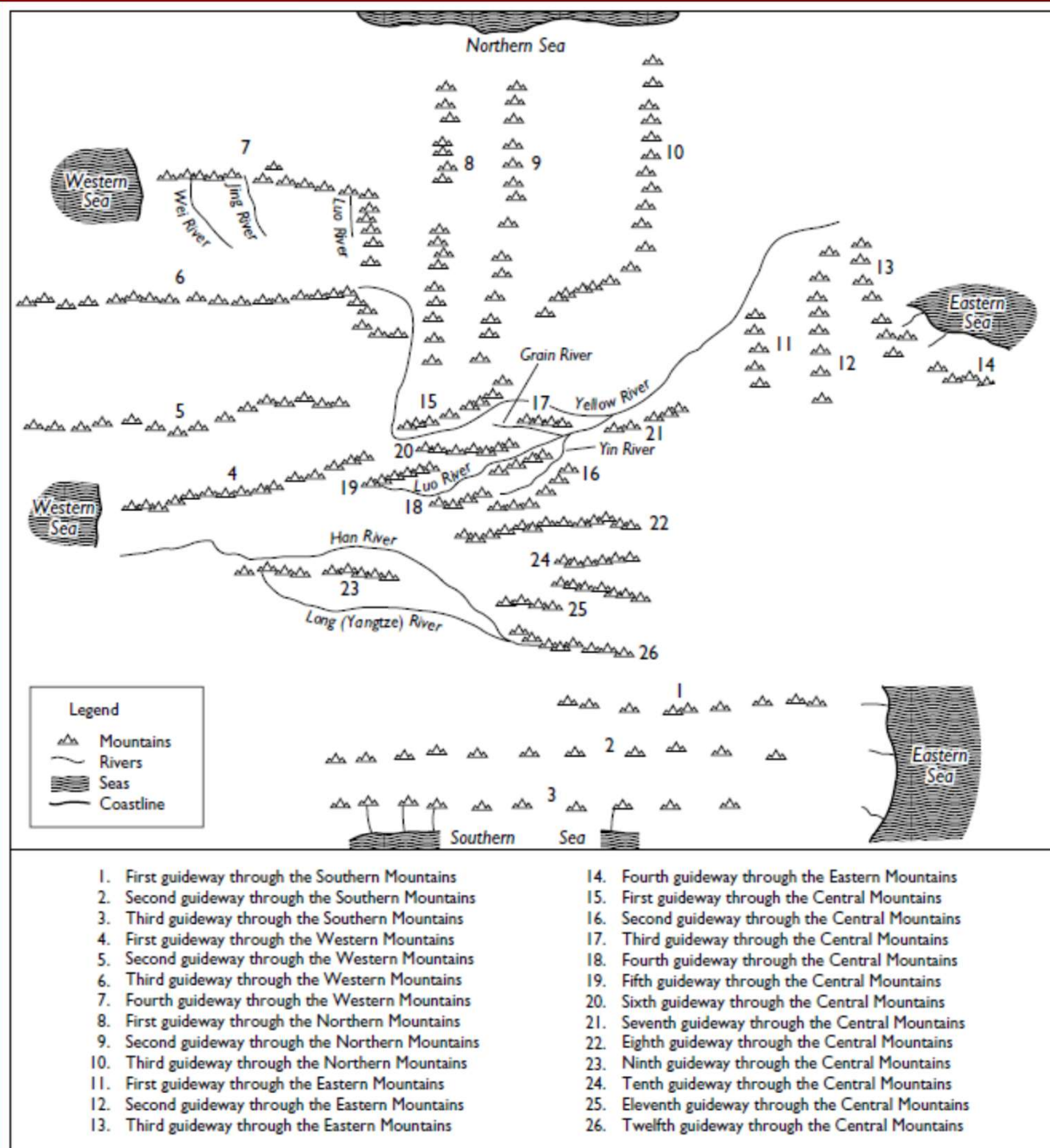


FIGURE 10. Modern map of mountains in the *Guideways through Mountains* (chapters 1–5). From Wang Chengzu (1982), 19, map 2.

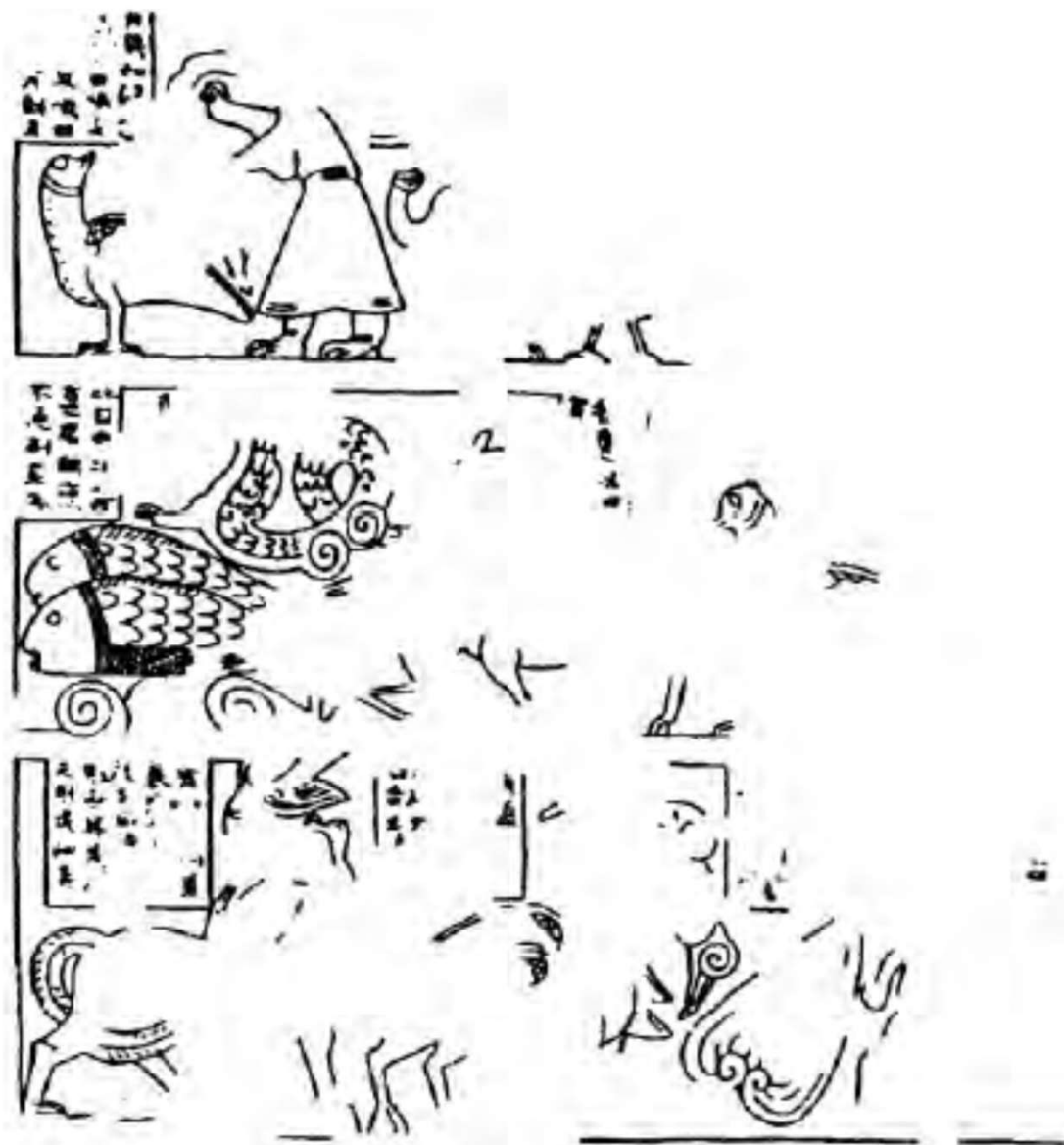


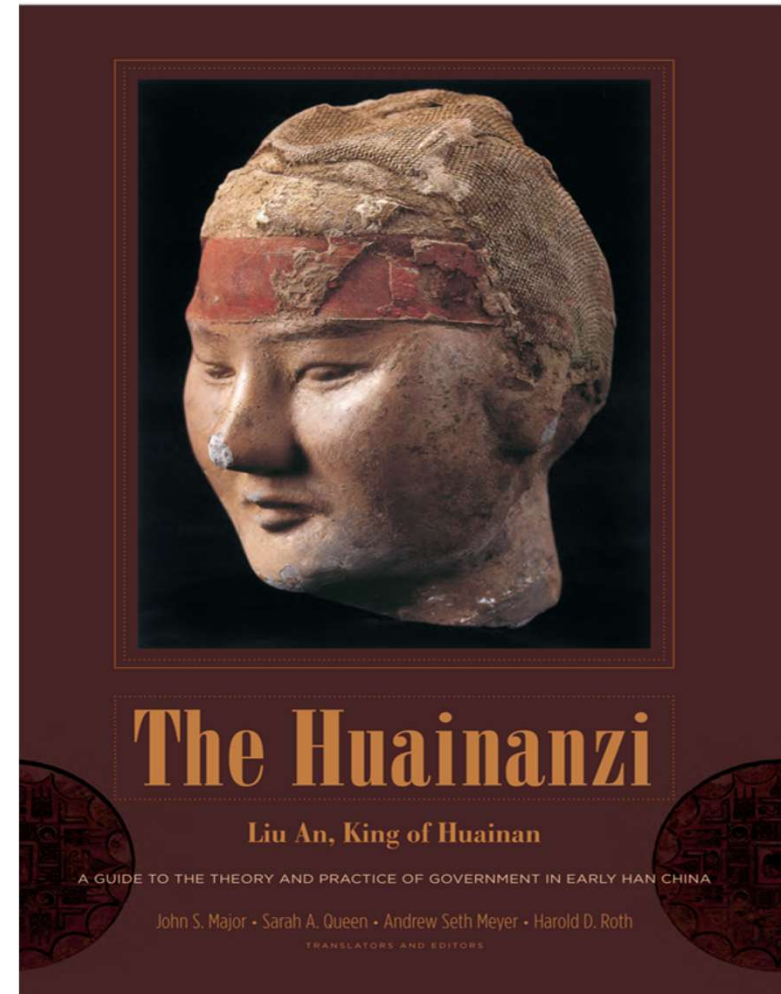
FIGURE 19. Reconstruction of ominous strange creatures engraved in the Wu Liang Shrine (c. 151 C.E.) in modern Jiaxiang, Shandong. The creatures from top to bottom have been identified as the Bifang-Bird [no. 69], the Shared-Eyes Fish [see no. 230], and the Zhujian [no. 102] recorded in the *Guideways*, based on the similarity of the texts of the colophons. From Hayashi (1974), fig. 46.

Detail from
**"Illustrations of
 Auspicious Anomalies"**
 from Dunhuang, Gansu
 (c. 8th–9th cent.), ink and
 colors on paper. The entry
 to the right on the Jiao-
 Dragon [no. 274] is
 missing an image that was
 not yet painted in. The
 text below cites the
 Guideways but is actually
 Guo Pu's commentary to
 the relevant passage on
 this creature in chapter 5.
 The image to the left is
 identified as Yellow-
 Dragon (Huanglong).
 Bibliothèque Nationale de
 France (P.2683), Paris.



Huainanzi 淮南子 (ca. 139 BC)

- Compiled at the beginning of the Western Han dynasty by Liu An, King of Huainan, and his aides.
- *Huainanzi* preserves many ancient myths, legends, and historical accounts.



Important books

1. Lewis, Mark E. *The Flood Myths of Early China*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006.
2. Loewe, Michael. *Divination, Mythology and Monarchy in Han China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. (esp. ch. 1)
3. Puett, Michael. *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divination in Early China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.
4. Birrell, Anne. "Female Gendered Myth in the Classic of Mountain and Seas." *Sino-Platonic Papers* 120 (July 2002), 47 pp.
5. Birrell, Anne. *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
6. Allan, Sarah. *The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legend in Early China*. Rev. ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016.



Important studies and translations

DeWoskin, Kenneth. "The Six Dynasties Chih-kuai and the Birth of Fiction."

In: Andrew Plaks (ed.). *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays*. Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1977, 21-52.

Campany, Robert Ford. *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.

Campany, Robert Ford. "Ghosts Matter: The Culture of Ghosts in Six Dynasties Zhiguai." *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles Reviews* 13 (1991), 15-34. (JSTOR)

Translations

DeWoskin, Kenneth J.; Crump, J.I. (transl.). *In Search of the Supernatural: The Written Record*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.

Pu, Songling; Minford, John (transl.). *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. London: Penguin, 2006.

Ancient Chinese Culture Heroes

- ❑ Inventing Agriculture (Shennong – the Divine Farmer)
- ❑ Acquisition of Fire (Sui ren)
- ❑ Discovery of Chinese Medicine (Shennong – the Divine Farmer)
- ❑ Inventing Chinese Characters (Cangjie)
- ❑ Inventing Musical Instruments (Fuxi (伏羲))
- ❑ The Flood and Its Control (The Great Yu)

Chinese Theories of Myth

- Yuan Ke (1916–2001), views myth in its broadest sense, including novels such as *Journey to the West*, Buddhist stories about Guanyin and so forth.
- Lü Wei contends that
 - Myths are sacred stories that are told in the form of narrative and employ symbols, such as images of gods
 - Myths attempt to understand the cosmos through explaining the origins of the world, humans, and culture.
 - Myths provide sacred evidence to testify to the validity, rationality, and legitimacy of cultural and social institutions.

Problems with this description? What is missing?

Suigongxu Bronze Vessel (Beijing Baoli yishu bowuguan 北京保利藝術博物館)



- 1 Heaven charged Yu to spread the earth, collapsing mountains and deepening rivers,
- 2 So he distinguished the Regions and set up the governing (structures), descended among the people and examined their *de*
- 3 So, based on this, (Yu) created the sacrificial feast matching (his sacrifices in return for Heaven's mandate) and the people became parents,
- 4 Giving birth to Our King and acting as his servants, what they displayed was *de*.



Levi-Strauss: Structuralist approach to myth

- Mythical thought as rigorous as modern scientific thinking but different in
 - Things to which it is applied and
 - Purpose
- Bricoleur → bricolage



Myth's “slated structure”

“A myth exhibits a “slated” structure, which comes to the surface, so to speak, through the process of repetition. However, the slates are not absolutely identical. And since the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real), a theoretically infinite number of slates will be generated, each one slightly different from the others.” (p. 23; Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 226.)

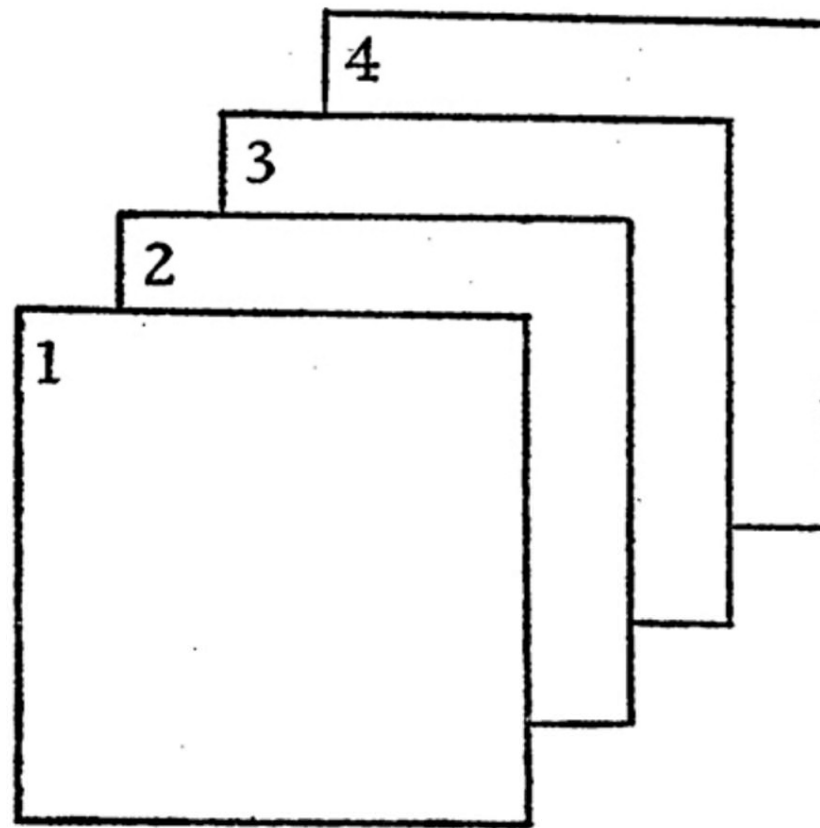


Fig. 1.

Kadmos seeks his sister
Europa ravished by
Zeus

Kadmos kills the
dragon

The Spartoi kill
each other

Labdacos (Laios' fa-
ther) = *lame* (?)

Oedipus kills his
father Laios

Laios (Oedipus' fa-
ther) = *left-sided* (?)

Oedipus kills the
Sphinx

Oedipus marries his
mother Jocasta

Eteocles kills his
brother Polynices

Oedipus = *swollen-
foot* (?)

Antigone buries her
brother Polynices despite
prohibition



Slated Structure

- **Layered Narrative:** Myths are not told in a simple linear fashion. They often repeat elements, themes, or events in a layered or "slated" manner.
- **Repetition with Variation:** These layers are not identical repetitions. They involve variations, additions, or shifts in perspective, gradually unfolding the myth's narrative and revealing its deeper structure.
- **Spiral Growth:** Lévi-Strauss describes this as a "spiral growth" – the myth advances by repeating and elaborating on key elements, building upon itself like a spiral staircase.

Transfer of power myths in China

Xu You
|
Yao → Shun
|
Dan Zhu

Sage and the Heir

Yao had Dan Zhu; and Shun had Shang Jun; Qi had the Wu Guan; the Shang had Tai Jia; Wu Wang had Guan and Cai. Those punished by these five rulers were all related to them as father to son or younger to elder brother.

堯有丹朱而舜有商均啓有五觀商有太甲武王有管蔡五王之所誅者皆父兄子弟之親也 (Hanfeizi 17/8a)

Yao had ten sons; he did not give [the throne] to his sons, but bestowed it on Shun.
堯有子十人不與其子而授舜 (Lüshi chunqiu 1/11b)

Yao and Shun were virtuous rulers. They both made men of worth their successors and were unwilling to give [the throne] to their descendants.

堯舜賢主也皆以賢者為後不肯與其子孫 (Lüshi chunqiu 3/11a)



Ruler and Refuser

A man who accepted all-under-heaven and was yet a man of worth is Shun. . . . A man who refused it and was yet a man of worth is Xu You.

夫受而賢者舜也. . . . 夫辭而賢者許由也 (Lüshi chunqiu 18/14a)

Shun and Xu You were both sages, although their conduct was different.

舜許由異行而皆聖 (Huainanzi 20/7a)