

THE MYTHOLOGY OF EARLY CHINA

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This chapter surveys early Chinese “mythology,” a vexed term which will require a brief discussion prior to the body of the work. This is a topic that did not exist prior to the 20th century, because the very notion of a “mythology” did not emerge within China, but was imported from the West. Only under the impact of Western social sciences did the Chinese become convinced that they, too, had a mythology and then begin the search to recover it. Consequently, many of the studies of the topic have begun with the assertion that the singular lack of early Chinese myths is a phenomenon that requires explanation, even while producing massive articles and books that sort through substantial amounts of material. This procedure will not be repeated here, but I will begin with a brief review of earlier systematic studies, in order to understand why modern scholars perceived an absence of mythology in the face of clear evidence to the contrary. This will be followed by a brief discussion of the problem of defining the term “myth,” a problem which is central to the earlier question of prior investigations of the Chinese case. The balance of the chapter will then group the most important earlier Chinese myths into five categories: myths of the early culture-hero sage kings (two sections), myths of historical figures, myths of figures found in tombs, myths related to local cults, and myths related to crafts.

Earlier studies of Chinese myths

The systematic study of Chinese mythology, or perhaps we should say its invention, began with the critical assault on accounts of the Golden Age of the sage kings in high antiquity. These accounts, elaborated in the Eastern Zhou and early imperial periods, had served as the model of an idealized ancient world that underpinned the imperial system. The attack on this tradition had begun with Qing dynasty textual criticism, which demonstrated that several of the classics and related texts were later forgeries. However, this criticism had been carried out by committed Confucians hoping to produce a correct version of the Golden

Age by eliminating later dross. The full assault on the glorification of antiquity began with the group around Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893–1980) who produced the multi-volume *Critiques of ancient history* (*Gushi bian* 古史辨) between 1926 and 1941. Inspired by Hu Shi's 胡適 call to use the vernacular language and associated popular culture as a means of creating a strong Chinese nation, Gu Jiegang had begun his career in association with the Folklore Movement. However, he approached folklore from a historical point of view, hoping to use materials gathered in the countryside to critically re-think the Chinese past in order to assist its future.¹ This early turn to folklore, while not crucial to Gu's work, is of significance for the history of myth studies in China.

It was in the essays compiled in *Critiques of ancient history* that Gu Jiegang and his followers initiated the study of mythology in China. Arguing through detailed textual criticism that all the texts which provided the basis for Chinese accounts of high antiquity were written after the fall of the Western Zhou (771 BC), he drew two crucial conclusions. First, the entire history of China's high antiquity was spurious. Second, and more important both for him and us, while the "fraudulent" texts told us nothing about the truth of the ancient past, they were invaluable as sources for the periods that produced them. By working through the sequence in which the texts emerged, and the issues with which they dealt, the critical historian could shed new light on the concerns, values and conduct of the intellectuals of the Warring States and early empires. On the basis of these insights the contributors to *Critiques* systematically dismantled the genealogy of the early sage kings and the assorted stories dealing with their deeds.²

While the initial project was fundamentally historical and political, the patterns which Gu Jiegang discerned in the formation of his texts unveiled the working of myths. Thus one of Gu's great discoveries was that the later a text was composed, the earlier was the supposed career of its leading figure, and the more detailed and fabulous were the narratives. The later genealogy of the sage kings began with the Yellow Emperor 黃帝, passed through Yao 堯 and Shun 舜, to be followed by Yu 禹 the flood-tamer and finally the kings of the Shang and the Zhou. However, the earliest texts, such as the *Book of songs* (*Shijing* 詩經), mentioned only

¹ Lawrence Schneider, *Ku Chieh-kang and China's new history: nationalism and the quest for alternative traditions* (Berkeley, 1971), ch. 4–5. Hung Chang-tai, *Going to the people: Chinese intellectuals and folk literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985).

² Schneider, *Ku Chieh-kang*, ch. 6.

Yu, while Yao and Shun were not mentioned until the later chapters of the *Book of documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書), and the Yellow Emperor was not mentioned until texts from the late Warring States. Second, and more important, in the earlier texts Yu appeared as a powerful spirit, while over time he was progressively humanized. (One must note here that Gu's argument hinged on the exclusion of less canonical works from the later period, such as the *Classic of mountains and seas* [*Shanhai jing* 山海經].) This led Gu and his followers to hypothesize that the early sage kings had originally been gods or powerful spirits, frequently attributed to specific regional and even non-Han traditions, who had been transformed into humans by rationalist scholars seeking ancient precedents for their own intellectual programs. These ideas were given their most thorough elaboration in Yang Kuan's 楊寬 monumental *Introduction to the ancient history of China* (*Zhongguo shanggu shi daolun* 中國上古史導論), which, as the final volume of the *Critiques*, reworked virtually the entirety of China's accounts of its high antiquity into tales—often regional in origin—of assorted nature deities and animal spirits.³

Even as the authors of the *Critiques* were unmasking a world of ancient regional gods and myths hidden by the intellectual programs of the early Confucians, a handful of leading Western scholars were developing similar lines of argument. In his “Légendes mythologiques dans le *Chou King*,” Henri Maspero used modern ethnographic accounts of myths collected in France's Southeast Asian colonies to argue that the accounts of Yao, Shun and Yu were derived from early creation myths in which the sage kings had originally figured as gods.⁴ Two years later Marcel Granet published *Danses et légendes de la Chine ancienne*, which remains in many ways the single most brilliant work written on Chinese myth. Like Gu Jiegang, whose major work began to appear in the same year, he was committed to the idea that the legends of ancient China were the keys to the reconstruction not of a high antiquity but of the later times

³ Schneider, *Ku Chieh-kang*, ch. 7; Sarah Allan, *The shape of the turtle: myth, art, and cosmos in early China* (Albany, 1991), pp. 20–21; Gu Jiegang et al., *Gushi bian*, 7 vols, reprint edition (Shanghai, 1982). On the significance of Yang Kuan's work, see also K.C. Chang, *Early Chinese civilization: anthropological perspectives* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), pp. 168–70, 174.

⁴ Henri Maspero, “Légendes mythologiques dans le *Chou King*,” *Journal Asiatique* CCIV (1924), 11–100.

that produced those myths. He also shared with Gu the hypothesis that the tales with which he dealt were “historicized legends.”⁵

Subsequent studies in China, the West and Japan have become empirically much richer, but in terms of providing insight into early China or its myths they have gone little beyond these pioneers. In 1942 Wolfram Eberhard published the two volumes of *Lokalkulturen im alten China*. With an approach stemming largely from the traditions of folklore, he collected textual and modern versions of tales which he assembled into clusters based on their regional distribution.⁶ In this way he sought to reconstruct the diverse ethnic and regional cultures which had combined to form China. However, his decision to bring together versions from across the full sweep of Chinese history renders the work of limited utility for the study of early myths.

In 1946 Bernhard Karlgren published the massive “Legends and cults in ancient China.” This work is notable for two points. First, he argued that the superhuman or animal characteristics of the early sage kings were due to the fact that they were the ancestors of Zhou noble houses who had been “mythologized” by their clans. Second, since the late Warring States period had witnessed the destruction of this nobility, any analysis had to rigorously distinguish between “free” texts from Zhou times and “systematizing” texts from the early empire. As Eberhard pointed out in an early review, both of these arguments are clearly wrong. First, modern ethnological studies had invalidated the old argument of Euhemerus that gods were originally human heroes. Second, the date at which a story is first recorded cannot be treated as the date of its origin. Long-existent traditions may be set down relatively late.⁷ While Karlgren’s central arguments are now rejected, the work remains a valuable compendium of stories.

With the exception of a brief but useful essay by Derk Bodde—which sketches the problems in studying early Chinese myths, cites his leading predecessors and studies the major etiological myths—all subsequent overarching works on Chinese mythology are compendia of varying thoroughness. A series of leading Japanese scholars have written surveys

⁵ Marcel Granet, *Danses et légendes de la Chine ancienne*, 3rd ed., corrected and annotated by Rémi Mathieu (Paris, 1994).

⁶ Wolfram Eberhard, *Lokalkulturen im alten China*, vol. 1 (Leiden, 1942); vol. 2 (Beijing, 1942).

⁷ Bernhard Karlgren, “Legends and cults in ancient China,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 18 (1946), 199–365; Wolfram Eberhard, Review of Karlgren, “Legends and cults,” in *Artibus Asiae* IX (1946), 355–64.

of mythology organized by theme or topic. The leading Chinese scholar, Yuan Ke 袁珂, has similarly devoted himself to compiling sourcebooks of myths and an annotated edition of the *Classic of mountains and seas*. Rémi Mathieu has done similar work in French. Finally, Anne Birrell has likewise done a translation of the *Mountains and seas* and a thematically organized compendium of Chinese myths.⁸

One point that unites all approaches to Chinese myth is the conviction that those who transmitted them to us were attempting to hide or eliminate them. In the case of Gu Jiegang and his followers this was part of a conscious political critique of the imperial heritage grounded in the tales of the sage kings. By showing how these were inventions of rationalizing Confucians, the *Critiques* group created the possibility of recasting tales of early China as a “national” mythology in the manner that had become essential to nationalisms in Europe. However, it is notable that they did not actually attempt such a national mythology, which was left to the Marxist social historians and the Guomindang.⁹ While the Europeans had no such explicit political agenda, a shared conviction that the writings of the Warring States and early imperial periods did not show a “mythology” along the model provided by the Greeks, Romans and South Asians, while still having many tales of superhuman beings and culture heroes, led to a similar conviction that a self-interested political group had tried to re-write or purge an existing mythology. While the hypotheses of what had been hidden varied with the program of the writer—regional legends buried under a centralized political order, tales of noble ancestors eliminated along with the clans who worshipped them or tales of a rural and feudal order purged by the rationalizing agents of an imperial structure—they agreed that the texts of the Warring States and early empires were fundamentally duplicitous.

These arguments are weak for three reasons. First, for all the claims that the texts are rationalizing or engaging in reverse euhemerization,

⁸ Anne Birrell, *Chinese mythology: an introduction* (Baltimore, 1993). Pp. 15–17 of her useful introduction list most of the major titles, which also appear in her bibliography.

⁹ Schneider, *Ku Chieh-kang*, pp. 251–57. On attempts to form a nationalist mythology, once again in association with folklore, see also Lawrence Schneider, *A madman of Ch'u: the Chinese myth of loyalty and dissent* (Berkeley, 1980), ch. 3–5; Hung, *Going to the people*, ch. 4. On myths and nationalism in Europe, see George S. Williamson, *The longing for myth in modern Germany: religion and aesthetic culture from romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago, 2004).

the super-human or non-human aspects of the major characters remain apparent. Even the few texts of a moderate skepticism, such as Wang Chong's *Balanced assessments* (*Lunheng* 論衡), testify to the nearly universal acceptance of numerous tales of the supernatural, many of which they record. Second, the belief that the limited number of accounts dealing with gods results from censorship hinges on taking the Greek and South Asian cases—where the distinction between gods and men is fixed and fundamental—as definitive of “mythology.” For the entire historical period, the boundary between gods and men in China was blurred or porous; the vast majority of gods were dead men.¹⁰ Consequently, the blurring of this line in early stories reflects a basic pre-supposition of the culture that produced them. Claims by Western scholars, such as Bodde, that myths necessarily pertain to gods are not useful in the Chinese case. Finally, the supposed skepticism about spirits and divinities that many scholars have attributed to early Chinese intellectuals is not visible in the texts which have been recently excavated, nor is it visible in the received literary record if carefully read. If the Warring States and early imperial writers had been truly rationalist or skeptical, the elaborate reconstructions of 20th-century mythographers would have been impossible.

Consequently, I will adopt a different approach. Since our earliest usable stories date from the Eastern Zhou, primarily from the Warring States and later, I will read those stories as evidence of the attitudes of the people of that period. In doing so, I do not reject the recent attempts of certain scholars to work out traces of a Shang mythology on the basis of echoes of later mythic texts found in the oracle bones and bronze décor. However, the nature of the Shang sources means that such arguments are at best suggestive, so I will not deal with any tentatively reconstructed mythology of the Shang period.¹¹ Since the Eastern Zhou sources are biased toward literati concerns, the stories will serve as evidence of the commitments and dilemmas of the literati. In addition, scattered evidence on local cults, ideas of the less intellectually committed members of the elite as suggested in tomb art and cults pertaining to workers will also be discussed.

¹⁰ Jean Levi, *Les fonctionnaires divins: politique, despotisme, et mystique en Chine ancienne* (Paris, 1989), pp. 203–18.

¹¹ Chang, *Early Chinese civilization*, ch. 8–9; Allan, *The shape of the turtle*, ch. 2–4. For an important early attempt to recover a Shang mythology, see Chen Mengjia, “Shang dai de shenhua yu wushu,” *Yanjing xuebao* 20 (1936), 485–576.

Defining “myths”

In this essay “myth” refers to any “traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance,” where “traditional” means that it has no identifiable author but appears in several sources and develops over time. These stories “express dramatically the ideology under which a society lives,” reflect on the elements and tensions that form a society and “justify the rules and traditional practices without which everything in a society would disintegrate.”¹² Myths thus belong to and serve to define particular groups, and both their form and significance depend upon the uses to which they are put by those groups. These groups could include virtually all of a given society, or only particular occupational or status groups. As the groups change across time, the form of the myths and their uses will likewise change, or the stories will simply be forgotten. Preservation across time of the stories thus indicates their continued utility and interest to those who told them.

This account of myths means that they cannot be defined as an objective “substance” that exists outside or apart from the people who create and employ them. The impossibility of any “substantial” definition of myth has been pointed out in recent years by scholars who have shown that myths are not a distinctive mode or genre of narrative that can be distinguished from other stories by any substantive trait or linguistic mark. Such scholars have usually concluded that the category “myth” is an illusion or a modern construct used to deride certain stories in the service of some rival program that claims to transcend “primitive” myths, e.g., philosophy, dogmatic religion, science or history. Rival intellectual programs, such as Gnosticism or some forms of Romanticism, embraced the same hypostasized concept of “myth” as a weapon against the all-encompassing claims of dogma, reason or modernity.¹³

¹² Walter Burkert, *Structure and history in Greek mythology and ritual* (Berkeley, 1979), p. 23; Georges Dumézil, *The destiny of the warrior*, trans. Alf Hiltebeitel (Chicago, 1970), pp. 1–2; G.S. Kirk, *Myth: its meaning and functions in ancient and other cultures* (Berkeley, 1970), pp. 31–41, 251–62. On the importance of myth’s being “anonymous” and “traditional,” see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The raw and the cooked*, trans. J. Weightman and D. Weightman (New York, 1970), p. 18.

¹³ Marcel Detienne, *L’Invention de la mythologie* (Paris, 1981), esp. ch. 7, “Le mythe introuvable”; Ivan Strenski, *Four theories of myth in twentieth-century history: Cassirer, Eliade, Lévi-Strauss, and Malinowski* (Iowa City, 1987); Robert Elwood, *The politics of myth: a study of C.J. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell* (Albany, 1999); Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing myth: narrative, ideology, and scholarship* (Chicago, 1999); Andrew

However, this dismissal of the category of “myth” can be challenged in several ways.

First, while “myths” are not distinguished from other stories by any definitive attributes, they can be “operationally” defined in terms of who told them, on what occasion and for what purposes. Thus Lowell Edmunds in his introduction to *Approaches to Greek myth* examines discussions of stories and storytelling in ancient Greece, and shows how certain stories that we would call myths were distinguished by the Greeks on the basis of their subject matter (supernatural or heroic), their variable forms of transmission (poetry for pan-Hellenic or oral for local), the motives for telling them and their constant reappearance in new versions depending on their range (pan-Hellenic or local) or context.¹⁴ While the theory of a category of stories called “myths” was not formulated until Plato created it as a negative term to valorize his own definition of “philosophy,” Edmunds shows how an incipient category already operated in the writings of Pindar, Aristophanes and Herodotus.

Second, even the critics who coined “myth” as a negative term to set off the glories of their own programs elaborated their own myths. Plato’s use of stories about the afterlife, Atlantis, the origins of the world and other clearly “mythic” themes has been the object of considerable study. The traditional myths condemned by Plato were in turn interpreted as poetic truths by Aristotle, or as veridical allegories by the Hellenistic philosophers.¹⁵ The apostle Paul contrasted the “godless and silly myths” of the Greeks with the Christian *logos* (adopting Plato’s categories), Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus denounced classical mythology as demonic, and the rejection of Gnosticism hinged in part on its reliance on an elaborate mythology. Nevertheless, elaborate tales spun out from the New Testament and, later, lives of saints formed a “Christian mythology” as analyzed by scholars of the Enlightenment and the early

Von Hendy, *The modern construction of myth* (Bloomington, 2002); Richard Terdiman, *Present past: modernity and memory crisis* (Ithaca, 1993), pp. 3–4; Hans Blumenberg, *Work on myth*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), Part II, ch. 2–3.

¹⁴ Lowell Edmunds, ed., *Approaches to Greek myth* (Baltimore, 1990), pp. 1–20. See also Luc Brisson, *Platon, les mots et les mythes* (Paris, 1982), pp. 168–73.

¹⁵ Luc Brisson, *How philosophers saved myths: allegorical interpretations of classical mythology*, trans. Catherine Tihanyi (Chicago, 2004). On the pivotal role of the allegorical reading in preserving classical myths, see also Von Hendy, *The modern construction of myth*, ch. 1.

Romantic movement.¹⁶ Similarly, propagandists proclaimed that modern science supplanted the errors of myth, which Francis Bacon and others described as a primitive attempt to answer the questions that true science would resolve. Nevertheless science elaborated mythic accounts of its own heroic origins, e.g., the misrepresented trial of Galileo. As Kurt Hübner has shown, the tale of science supplanting myth is only one version of numerous mythicizing accounts of the end of mythology.¹⁷ Finally, whereas historians from the time of Thucydides have defined themselves against myth, and modern positivist historiography made the supplanting of earlier myths one of its chief tasks, increasing numbers of modern historians have incorporated myths into their work, making studying the work of mythology a central topic of their research. This constant resurgence of mythic tales within the works of those who demonize mythology suggests that it is not purely the invention of those critics.¹⁸

Finally, the operative definition of myth avoids the criticism that the category of “myth” is an “illusion” or “invention” by defining it not through the nature of the tales but through the attitudes of their tellers and listeners. This point is clearest in Hans Blumenberg’s *Work on myth* (*Arbeit am Mythos*). As the title indicates, this book elaborates its theory of mythology in terms of what is done *with* the stories, rather than some quality of the stories themselves. Blumenberg applies to myth the same sort of ideas as those used for literature in the “reception” theories elaborated by Ingarden, Iser and Jauss, in which the assumptions and rules of reading provided by the audience re-shape the meaning of the text. The primary difference is that unlike literature, where new readings are applied to a fixed text, in the case of a myth the story itself is adapted and rewritten as the concerns of its tellers and audience change. It is for this reason that myths are “stories that are distinguished by a high degree of constancy in their narrative core” but by an equally pronounced capacity for variation. It is these correlate attributes that allow myths to be transmitted over centuries; their constancy produces the attraction and the authority of familiarity,

¹⁶ Williamson, *The longing for myth in modern Germany*, ch. 1, 4; Blumenberg, *Work on myth*, Part II, ch. 2–3.

¹⁷ Christoph Jamme, *Einführung in die Philosophie des Mythos, Band 2: Neuzeit und Gegenwart* (Darmstadt, 1991), pp. 10–11, 139; Kurt Hübner, *Die Wahrheit des Mythos* (Munich, 1985). See also Blumenberg, *Work on myth*, “Translator’s introduction.”

¹⁸ Joseph Mali, *Mythistory: the making of a modern historiography* (Chicago, 2003).

while their variability allows for constant adaptation to new intellectual needs.¹⁹ This combination helps account for the power of myths, which, as Blumenberg argues, are the product of a “Darwinism of words” in which stories that seize attention and help people cope with their world are selected for repetition, and in which these same stories are adapted over time to changing circumstances.

This variability of myths, in which new versions are constantly elaborated to gloss or supplant old ones, also helps to explain why mythology is routinely theorized by those who claim to refute it, only to fashion new myths in their own turn. As Lowell Edmunds has pointed out, even before “myth” was theoretically formulated by Plato as a negative category, the term was often applied to stories which the author rejected in favor of another version or tale. Thus in Aristophanes’s *Wasps* Bdelycleon tells his father not to tell “myths [*mythoi*]” about supernatural creatures, but “stories of the human kind.” Likewise Pindar prefaces his version of the story of Pelops by repudiating a version of the myth that he claims was started by “malicious neighbors” of Pelops’ family. Thus Edmunds concludes that for many Greeks, “My version is the truth, but yours is a *mythos*.”²⁰ Since the coining of variants and competition between these versions was a feature of the tales that emerged as myths, the repeated theorization of mythology as a target of criticism is not a proof of the illusory character of the category, but rather of its mode of generation and perpetuation.

While I have defined myths in a manner which rejects any specific properties that would distinguish them as a form of narrative, save for their significance to the people who tell them, one use of narratives as a mode of argument is worth noting here. In contrast with the dogmatic propositions of religions or formal arguments of philosophy, which result in such statements as “thou shalt not kill” or “killing is bad,” narratives cannot assert universal truths or commands. A story can be incorporated in an argument, but does not itself constitute one. In this way, telling or citing stories often serves to assert a particular truth or value, while

¹⁹ Blumenberg, *Work on myth*, pp. 5–7, 21, 34, 150–54, 270–71. For useful evaluations of the book, see the “Translator’s introduction” and Von Hendy, *The modern construction of myth*, pp. 320–26. Blumenberg demonstrates this capacity of myths to evolve by devoting the second half of his book to a study of the myth of Prometheus from its earliest appearance in Hesiod to its 20th-century versions in Kafka and Gide.

²⁰ Edmunds, *Approaches to Greek myth*, pp. 2–3, 13–15.

at the same time incorporating—often unacknowledged—contradictory values that are essential to the teller and audience.

Thus the aforementioned absolute condemnation of killing in the Decalogue also condemns rulers who engage in wars and punish criminals. While some rigorous religious thinkers accepted this, others reconciled the contradictory rejection of killing and support of political rulers with analogies which served as miniature, nested myths. Thus Augustine suggested that a state was a bandit gang with justice, while Luther identified rulers as “God’s hangmen.” These miniature myths allow two contradictory values to be reconciled (“The God who condemns killing recognizes the necessity of killing bad people, so he appoints rulers to do this for him.”). This idea of myths as narratives that mediate a society’s internal contradictions is inspired by Levi-Strauss’s discussion of this function of myths. However, it does not employ his arguments or methods, which rely on a systematic decoding of myths into structurally framed antithetical elements hidden within surface narratives.²¹

One final point that should be discussed before outlining the myths themselves is the status of “comparative mythology” in light of the above arguments. To argue that the category “myth” has no substantive character, but is determined by the concerns of the culture that produces a given story or stories, entails certain consequences for any application of comparative methods, an approach which is advocated by Anne Birrell in her aforementioned compendium of Chinese myths. If there is nothing inherent in the structure or content of a story that marks it as a myth, than any resemblance in such contents or structures across cultures is not necessarily of any significance, and the tracing of such resemblances without first analyzing the place(s) and meaning(s) of a story within its own culture will not produce useful insights. Any argument, such as that of Schelling in 1857, that myth has its own autonomy as a mode of thought ultimately depends on the elaboration of some theory that sets myths apart as a distinctive form of thought or language. In the absence of such a theory, to posit myth as an autonomous realm with its own order is incoherent, and explanations of stories in one culture

²¹ For a brief summation of Levi-Strauss’s methods as potentially applied to Chinese myths, see Sarah Allan, *The heir and the sage: dynastic legend in early China* (San Francisco, 1981), pp. 13–24. On the manner in which Levi-Strauss’s approach to myth denies their character as narratives, in an attempt to turn them into charts, see Von Hendy, *The modern construction of myth*, pp. 240–50.

by reference to those from another which is not historically related are illusory.²²

Mythology of the sage kings

First, it is important to note that although modern scholars state that the early Chinese treated the sage kings as human beings, this was not entirely true. During the Warring States and early empires the idea became widespread, if not universal, that the sage kings and dynastic founders—including the Han founder, about whom even the moderately skeptical Sima Qian recorded that he was sired by a dragon—were in fact the offspring of powerful spirits, dragons or forces of nature sired on human women. This assumption shows that the sage kings were not in any sense simply human. They were rather semi-divine beings, who marked the interface between the human world and the spirits.²³ This clear distinction between the sage and the ordinary human led many people of the period to assert that the sage kings had no emotions or did not dream.²⁴ The idea that Confucius was a prophet who had foretold the rise of the Han and its institutional form was part of the same complex of ideas. Thus the early Chinese for the most part believed that the sage kings were not mere human beings, but creatures

²² Birrell explicitly rejects any single disciplinary or theoretical approach that would distinguish myths, while at the same time arguing that myths form an autonomous intellectual sphere where a myth in one culture is best explained in light of one from another. See pp. 2–5, 10–13. As an example of the weakness of this approach, I would cite her discussion of Chang O on p. 11. Dismissing earlier studies that treat this woman “in a limited way [!] in the context of immortality and lunar iconography,” she asserts that she could best be viewed as a “trickster” figure. In fact, if one considers the numerous recurring early Chinese stories in which women like Chang O either bestow the arts of immortality on men or take them away, looks at the role of goddesses in the realms of immortality and the tomb, and reflects on the image of sex as a battleground for the energies that will prolong life, the traditional approach to Chang O reveals major aspects of Chinese culture. Furthermore, comparison of these stories with such major Greek myths as those of Medea (who uses the lure of immortality to take away life) or Meleager and his mother, as well as Indian myths on sexual relations and immortality, would draw the Chang O myths into a major and insightful comparative endeavor. By contrast, to simply attach to her the rubric “trickster,” a term almost as emptied through overuse as “hero,” tells us virtually nothing.

²³ Lewis, *Sanctioned violence in early China* (Albany, 1990), pp. 180–81, 307 note 54; Lewis, *Writing and authority in early China* (Albany, 1999), pp. 219, 547–48 note 117.

²⁴ Jean-Pierre Diény, “Le saint ne rêve pas: de Zhuangzi à Michel Juvet,” *Études chinoises* 20.1–2 (spring-fall, 2001), 127–200.

who were separated from humans through their magical paternity and the powers that this bestowed on them.

The tales of the sage kings were told by the Warring States and early imperial Chinese elite to explain the origins and define the nature of their political and social institutions. As “charter myths,” these tales of the deeds and creations of ancient sage kings provided a sacred prototype for the usage and institutions of their own day. They offered a means of representing a complex social reality, formulating its principles in vivid and dramatic terms and reflecting on its inherent tensions. Some of these stories were reworked or reinterpreted versions of earlier tales; others were original creations which due to their aptness or power became widely known and frequently cited, but they all formed a common repertoire of stories that provided both etiologies and models for social action.

These tales through which the elite dramatically expressed their ideology and self-understanding took the form of accounts of the emergence of human civilization. Their heroes were the sage kings, whose super-human powers allowed them to recognize the celestial patterns hidden in nature and bring mankind into accord with them. To the sage kings were attributed—as given classical expression in the “Attached phrases” (*Xici* 繫辭) commentary to the *Book of changes* (*Yijing* 易經)—all the tools and procedures that formed Chinese civilization. Consequently the invention of tools became a hallmark of the sage kings denied to lesser beings.²⁵

But the sage kings were not simply inventors of tools. They introduced all the values and institutions that enabled a human existence, as understood by the Warring States elite. In his defeat of Chiyu 蚩尤 and other rivals, the Yellow Emperor provided a model for the creation of a stable political order based on organized violence. In yielding the throne to the most capable, Yao and Shun set a distinctive public rule apart from the claims of kinship and inheritance, provided a mythic charter for the claims of officials against the ruler, and offered a rationalization and model for the practice of changing dynasties. In taming the flood, Yu defined the nature of an ordered human geography, provided a mythical prototype for the irrigation and water control projects of the

²⁵ Qi Sihe, “Huangdi de zhi qi gushi,” in *Zhongguo shi tanyan* (Beijing, 1981), pp. 201–17.

Warring States period, and established links between the cultivation of the body and the establishment of political order.²⁶

However, the scattered references to the work of the sage kings lack the systematic character suggested here. The sage kings did not arise together in a pantheon of mutual opposition and complementarity, with the diverse spheres of the human and natural worlds parceled out among their patrons. As discussed above, modern scholars of myth generally agree that the sage kings were partially humanized transformations of earlier, supernatural beings who figured in shamanic rituals, cosmogonic myths or tales of the origins of tribes and clans.²⁷ The sage kings arose independently in various regions or among different peoples, and they were drawn into a single pantheon—or, rather, a “genealogy”—through the centuries-long process of amalgamation and assimilation that created the Chinese empire. Consequently, the feats or attributes of one can occasionally be attributed to another. However, the divisions between the works and characters of the different sage kings are generally consistent.

In addition to being the products of distinct local cultures, certain sage kings were promoted by specific philosophical schools. At the end of his chapter on the “Five Emperors,” Sima Qian 司馬遷 observed that scholars had spoken of the Five Emperors from of old, but the *Book of documents* preserved by the Confucians recorded nothing prior to Yao. While the “myriad schools” spoke of the Yellow Emperor, their writings were “neither proper nor in accord with reason,” and even the discussions of the Yellow Emperor attributed to Confucius were not transmitted by the Confucians of Sima Qian’s day. Ban Gu 班固 observed that the Confucians “traced their ancestry back to Yao and Shun,” while the “earlier” sage kings fell outside their intellectual genealogy. The Yellow Emperor, for his part, was intellectually associated with the Huang-Lao (黃老) tradition of political Daoism and the “scholars of [esoteric] techniques” (*fangshi* 方士). In a similar fashion, the Divine Husbandman

²⁶ Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned violence*, ch. 5; Mori Yasutarō, *Kōtei densetsu: kodai Chūgoku shinwa no kenkyū* (Kyoto, 1970), ch. 1; Sarah Allan, *The heir and the sage: dynastic legend in early China*; Mark Edward Lewis, *The flood myths of early China* (Albany, 2006); Deborah Porter, *From deluge to discourse: myth, history, and the generation of Chinese fiction* (Albany, 1996); Rémi Mathieu, “Yu le grand et le myth du déluge dans la Chine ancienne,” *T’oung Pao* 78 (1992), 162–90; William B. Boltz, “Kung Kung and the flood: reverse euhemerism in the Yao Tien,” *T’oung Pao* 67 (1981), 141–53.

²⁷ In addition to the works discussed in the section on “Earlier Studies,” see Gu Jiegang and Yang Xiangkui, *Sanhuang kao* (Beijing, 1936).

神農 was the patron sage of a school of agrarian primitivists who argued that everyone, including the king and his high ministers, should grow his own crops.²⁸ Thus the Warring States myths of the sage kings were generally adapted as elements in the political or social program of a given school, which means that they were tied into attempts to think about the emerging political order.

In this way the tales of the sage kings gradually formed a coherent body of myths that articulated the interests, concerns and dilemmas of the Chinese elite. Specifically, they constituted a mythology of statecraft, dealing with the concerns produced by the creation of a new form of polity by the rising territorial lords. The stories of the Yellow Emperor's battles dramatically represented the re-organization and revaluation of political violence as mass, peasant armies under the command of the court replaced the chariot armies of the warrior aristocracy and new forms of law redefined the social order. The tales of Yao and Shun dealt with the competing claims of virtue/talent and heredity that became an issue as dependent ministers recruited for their skills replaced the nobility that had held office as a hereditary privilege. The myths of Yu's taming of the flood reflected the transformed relation of the political order to the land in a state that was created through the extension of direct control into the countryside, the mobilization of the agrarian populace and the allocation of land in exchange for taxes and service.²⁹ In reformulating cosmogonies and clan myths, the makers and advocates of the new order traced the principles that underlay their rule to the very origins of human civilization.

For the mythology of the sage kings was a history of the emergence of humankind out of a savage state of nature, an emergence achieved through the powers of supremely able rulers who served as prototypes for political actors in the Warring States. Underlying the tales about the sage kings was the belief that in the earliest times people had not been distinguished from animals. They lived intermixed with animals in the

²⁸ *Shiji* (Beijing, 1959), ch. 1, p. 46; ch. 28, pp. 1368–69; ch. 74, pp. 2346–47; *Hanshu* (Beijing, 1962), ch. 30, p. 1728; Kanaya Osamu, *Shin kan shisō shi kenkyū* (Kyoto, 1981), pp. 113–226; Gu Jiegang, *Qin Han de fangshi yu rusheng*, rep. ed. (Shanghai, 1955); Chen Pan, “Zhanguo Qin Han jian fangshi kaolun,” *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 17 (1948), 7–57; A.C. Graham, “The *nung-chia* ‘school of the tillers’ and origins of peasant utopianism in China,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 42 (1979), 66–100; Oshima Riichi, “Shin Nō no nōkasha ryū,” in *Haneda Hakushi shōju kinen tōyōshi ronsō* (Kyoto, 1950), pp. 353–81.

²⁹ Lewis, *Sanctioned violence*, esp. ch. 5.

wilds, went naked or wore animal skins, built nests in trees or dwelt in caves, and ate wild plants or raw meat. The fundamental work of the sage kings was to create a distinctive human world by separating people from animals. This work had three basic aspects: the physical separation, the transformation of the material conditions of existence through inventing tools and technological processes, and the introduction of a specifically human code of conduct. These aspects were united in the overarching image of “separation” or “distinction”: physical separation, the distinctions of correct perception and the social divisions of superior and subordinate that uniquely characterized man. Through the drawing of lines and the introduction of appropriate divisions, the sage kings created the human world out of physical and moral chaos.³⁰

The idea that humanity was created *within* history by the sage kings was shared by all the philosophical traditions of the period, but each tradition defined its own ideal of society through specifying different innovations as the crucial ones. Thus Legalist texts such as the *Book of Lord Shang* (*Shangjun shu* 商君書) and the *Master Guan* (*Guanzi* 管子) described how the sage kings distinguished men from animals through creating the laws and units of measure which were central to their own programs. The fundamental text of the Mohist school tells of a primal “Humpty Dumpty” world in which each man used the terms of moral judgment in whatever manner he chose. This moral and linguistic chaos shattered all social bonds and reduced humanity to the level of birds and beasts. So the first rulers had to unify the language of moral judgments. This argument posits rigorous linguistic definitions, such as those elaborated in the later chapters of the Mohist canon reconstructed by A.C. Graham, as to what separated people from beasts. The major Daoist texts also described a “state of nature” in which men were mixed with animals, and they attributed the subsequent separation to the former rulers. They disagreed with the other schools only in that they celebrated the primal unity and treated the separation as a decline. One passage in the *Master Zhuang* (*Zhuangzi* 莊子) stated that what made a human a human was having the distinction between right and wrong, and then argued that this distinction should be abandoned. Consequently the Daoists denied the title of “sage” to the former kings and reserved

³⁰ Lewis, *Sanctioned violence*, pp. 169–72. On the relations between men and animals as an issue in early China, see Roel Sterckx, *The animal and the daemon in early China* (Albany, 2002). On animals as spirit powers in early Chinese art, see Chang, *Early Chinese civilization*, ch. 9.

that term for their own ideal of the perfected man.³¹ Thus the various feats by which the sage kings separated ancient men from animals, feats which were probably derived from earlier accounts of primal battles and floods, were reworked to justify or give vivid form to the political programs of the rival intellectual traditions of the period.

Perhaps because they assigned the highest importance to the authority of the past and the careers of former rulers, the Confucians presented the most detailed versions of the creation of human society out of a primal chaos. The *Mencius* 孟子 elaborates the entire process of the creation of the human world through separation from animals:

In the time of Yao the world was not yet stabilized. Floods ran rampant and inundated the world, grasses and trees grew in profusion, birds and animals multiplied wildly, and the five grains did not grow. These birds and animals pressed close to men, and their tracks crisscrossed throughout the Middle Kingdoms. Yao, in his solitude, worried about this, and he raised up Shun and sent him to rectify it. Shun commanded Yi 益 to take fire and set the mountains and highlands ablaze, so the animals fled and hid. Yu then channeled the nine rivers and led them, rippling and swirling, to the sea... Hou Ji 后稷 taught the people husbandry, the planting and reaping of the five grains. The five grains ripened, and the people thrived.

It is the way of men that when they can eat their fill, have warm clothing, live at peace, but have no instruction, then they are like beasts. Among the sage kings there were those who cared for men, and they sent Qi 契 to be Overseer of the Masses and instruct them in the proper human relations. So fathers and sons had familial affection, lords and servants had duty, husbands and wives were properly distinguished, seniors and juniors had their proper order, and comrades had mutual trust.³²

Here the three steps of physical separation, technological inventions and moral instruction were neatly laid out in a program of the creation of human society. It is also noteworthy that the physical separation is parallel to a *moral* separation which is the ultimate end of the process. It is through instruction and the imposition of hierarchy that people,

³¹ *Shang Jun shu zhuyi*, pp. 182–83; ch. 14, pp. 296–97; ch. 18, pp. 374–76; *Guanzi jiaozheng*, in *Xinbian zhuzi jicheng* (Taipei, 1974), vol. 5, p. 174; *Han Feizi jishi* (Shanghai, 1974), p. 1040; *Mozi jiangou*, in *Xinbian zhuzi jicheng* (Taipei, 1974), vol. 6, pp. 44, 47; *Laozi daode jing zhu*, in *Xinbian zhuzi jicheng* (Taipei, 1974), vol. 3, pp. 10, 18–19, 23, 46–47; *Zhuangzi jijie*, in *Xinbian zhuzi jicheng* (Taipei, 1974), vol. 4, pp. 57–58, 194–98. For the reconstructed later Mohist chapters, see A.C. Graham, *Later Mohist logic, ethics and science* (Hong Kong, 1978).

³² *Mengzi zhengyi*, in *Xinbian zhuzi jicheng* (Taipei, 1974), vol. 1, p. 219.

even when no longer living amidst animals, cease to be animals themselves.

This parallel of physical and moral separation, with the ultimate focus on the elimination of deviance or criminality, is elaborated in another passage from the same text that ties the taming of the flood directly to the suppression of criminality, in the form of deviant rulers and philosophers:

In the time of Yao the waters reversed their course and overflowed the Middle Kingdoms so that snakes and dragons dwelt there. The people had no fixed dwellings, so those in lower regions made nests in trees, while those in higher ones lived in mountain caves... Yao had Yu impose order on it. Yu dredged out the land and channeled the rivers to the sea. He expelled the snakes and dragons to the grassy swamps. The movement of the water outward from the land formed the Jiang, Huai, Han, and Yellow rivers. As the dangers were removed to the distant regions, the harm of the snakes and dragons vanished. Only then were people able to obtain level land to dwell on.

When Yao and Shun died, the Way of the sages declined, and violent rulers arose in succession. They destroyed houses to make them into pools and ponds, so the people had no place to rest. They eliminated agricultural fields to make them into gardens and orchards, so the people had no clothes or food. Heterodox doctrines and violent conduct also arose. Since pools, ponds, gardens, orchards, and marshes were numerous, the birds and wild animals arrived. When it reached the time of King Zhou 紂 [of Shang], the whole world was again chaotic. The Duke of Zhou 周公 assisted King Wu 武 to execute Zhou. He attacked Yin [Shang] and after three years punished its ruler. He expelled Feilian 飛廉 to the edge of the sea and executed him. He destroyed fifty states. He drove out the tigers, leopards, rhinoceroses, and elephants to distant lands, and the whole world was happy...

The generations degenerated and the Way declined. Heterodox theories and violent conduct again arose. There were ministers who assassinated their rulers and sons who killed their fathers. Confucius 孔子 was afraid, so he wrote the *Spring and autumn annals*. This is the task of the Son of Heaven. Therefore Confucius said, "Will those who appreciate me do it only through the *Annals*? Will those who regard me as a criminal do it only because of the *Annals*?" A sage king does not now arise, the feudal lords are unrestrained, and unemployed scholars engage in wild criticism. The words of Yang Zhu 楊朱 and Mo Di 墨翟 fill the world. All discourse in the world that does not tend toward Yang tends toward Mo. Master Yang's advocacy of being for oneself means having no ruler. Master Mo's advocacy of caring equally for all means having no father. To have no ruler and no father means to be a bird or beast. Gongming Yi 公明儀 said, "If the ruler's kitchens have fat meat and his stables sleek horses, while the people appear hungry and there are bodies of those who have starved in

the fields, this is leading the animals to eat people.” If the Way of Yang and Mo does not cease and the Way of Confucius does not become well-known, then heterodox theories and slanderous people will block up the teachings of humanity and duty. If the teachings of humanity and duty are blocked up, then you will lead the animals to eat people, and people will also eat one another. For this reason, I am afraid. I study the former sages, block Yang and Mo, and reject excessive phrases, so that heterodox theories cannot arise...

Long ago Yu suppressed the flood and the world became level. The Duke of Zhou conquered the barbarians, expelled the wild beasts, and the peasants were at peace. Confucius completed the *Annals*, and rebellious ministers and criminal sons became afraid... I also desire to correct people's minds, halt heterodox theories, block disputatious conduct, expel excessive phrases, and thereby be heir to the three sages. How could it be that I love disputation? I have no alternative. One who through words can block Yang and Mo is the disciple of the sages.³³

In this account, the flood is only the earliest and most graphic form of a regularly repeated social collapse. As in the preceding passage, the image that epitomizes this collapse is the disappearance of the distinction between men and beasts. Yu ends the flood, but he is celebrated for expelling the snakes and dragons from the human world to the edges of the earth. In the same way, the Duke of Zhou ends the succession of evil kings by defeating King Zhou of Shang, but this achievement is paired with the expulsion of harmful wild animals that had been allowed back into the human realm by the rulers' crimes. Finally, the chaos triggered by rejecting Confucius and embracing rival schools is also marked by animals eating people, and by people becoming animals through the crime of cannibalism. Thus both of the *Mencius*' accounts of the flood are not about the control of water or its separation from dry land, but about finding in the original construction of an ordered, human space a mythic prototype for the text's own social and intellectual program. In this schema the flood, and the primal chaos with which it is linked, stand for all the criminality, bad government and intellectual deviance that threatened the social order. It demonstrates graphically how the accounts of the sage kings formed a central element in the polemics of the Warring States period, and how these polemics served to criticize government policies and rival intellectual traditions.

The manner in which the Mencian narrative equates contemporary deviance with the resurgence of animality highlights one final element

³³ *Mengzi zhengyi*, pp. 263–72.

of the mythology of the sage kings. One consequence of the idea that humanity was created through a historical separation from the animal world was that the fundamental distinction between men and animals was not biological but technological and, above all, moral. Man was an animal with a particular ensemble of productive skills and social relations, and should he lose them he would return to his animal state. The humanity of man was not given at birth. As Xun Kuang 荀况 said (*pace* Plato), “The reason a man is a man is not simply that he has two legs and no feathers; it is because he has distinctions [intellectual, moral, and social].”³⁴ Since humanity was acquired through education it could, under certain circumstances, be lost.

Nor was this threat simply a theoretical possibility, for the early Chinese lived in a world where men became beasts. Philosophers stated that people without specified moral virtues or ritual conduct were animals. The mythic evil rulers at the end of the Xia and Shang were also said to be beasts. Examples of apparent men who were truly beasts were even more common in accounts of the tribes who lived at the edges of the Chinese world. These people lacked the agriculture, sericulture and fixed dwellings of the Chinese, and their kinship systems and social hierarchies were not readily comprehensible. As a result they lacked the “duty” and “moral instruction” that were the hallmarks of humanity. Not only did the Chinese regularly tag the characters for their generic and tribal names with animal signifiers, but Chinese authors stated explicitly that they were “wild beasts.” If the central, Chinese states lost the rituals that preserved social order, their people would also become animals themselves. Finally, the most common category of men who fell into the animal realm was the warrior. Due to their strength, savagery and violent nature, such men were routinely named and even attired as beasts.³⁵

This fragility of the boundaries between humanity and animality, and the constant danger of reverting to the latter, were the fundamental underpinnings of the myths of the sage kings. The idea that in the beginning men were not separate from beasts, and that humanity had

³⁴ Xunzi jijie, in *Xinbian zhuzi jicheng* (Taipei, 1974), vol. 2, p. 50. See also p. 7: “If you carry out duty then you are a man; if you abandon it then you are a beast.” That men who abandon duty become beasts is also stated in the *Zuo zhuan*. See *Chun qiu Zuo zhuan zhu* (Beijing, 1981), p. 626.

³⁵ In addition to examples in the preceding note, see Lewis, *Sancioned violence*, p. 304 notes 22–29.

been created by *rulers* and *ministers* through their superhuman powers, marked an extraordinary claim to political authority. If people became people solely through a set of technologies and teachings created by former kings and maintained by present rulers, then subjects were human only through submission to their masters. Without the controls and institutions imposed by the elite, the common people were nothing but beasts. In their accounts of ancient history, the Warring States elite thus justified their political authority as the definition of humanity.

The sage kings

The earliest of these accounts in terms of the time where they were set, although they arose late in the Warring States period, were tales of the Divine Husbandman. These related certain miracles associated with the introduction of agriculture by this sage. They went on to describe an agrarian utopia prior to the existence of the state, a realm resembling Daoist accounts of the blessed state of non-differentiation, except that men and women had to toil in order to feed and clothe themselves. What set this realm apart from others was the absence of a social or political hierarchy, or of any division of labor. Instead, each household produced everything for its own needs through the labor of its own members. This mythic antecedent of the “Peach blossom spring” (*taohua yuan ji* 桃花源記) was advocated by a school known only through being criticized in the *Mencius*. However, essential aspects of it became part of Legalist and Confucian political discourse because of its celebration of agriculture as the ultimate foundation of society, and the rejection of the mercantile exchange and crafts that defined an alternative, urban order. This privileging of agriculture as the basis of society reflected the political structure of the Warring States and early imperial polity, where peasants were the primary payers of taxes and providers of service in the infantry armies.³⁶

While the myth looks like a straightforward invention or reworking of a mythic golden age to underpin a contemporary political argument, it also shows how tales of the sage kings both mediated and highlighted internal contradictions of philosophy. Thus, on the one hand, the vision of a world where all men were farmers and all women weavers directly

³⁶ Graham, “The *nung-chia*,” Lewis, *Sanctioned violence*, pp. 53–96, 176–78.

expressed the belief that the farming household was the necessary foundation of any society and the sole source of wealth. On the other hand, the exclusion of rulers and merchants from such a world highlighted the contradiction between any utilitarian or sentimental advocacy of the state as the protector of the peasantry, and the actual conflict of interests between the farmers and their supposed protectors. These tensions, in turn, manifested themselves in the total failure of Han policies that were supposedly intended to “protect” the small, free-holding peasantry, but actually ruined them.³⁷

The sole intellectual attempt to square the circle of positing an agrarian-centered state located in the cities was an argument in the *Mencius* insisting on the necessity of a division of labor within society in order to provide all the goods necessary for a human existence. This argument was also a denunciation of the ideal of autarky embodied in a noble's estate as celebrated in the *Book of songs*, precisely in the centuries when the last of the old nobility was disappearing. However, the *Mencius's* argument is again tangled in contradictions, as it is based on a demonstration of the necessity of merchants, and only justifies the existence of rulers through an intellectual sleight of hand.³⁸ Thus the state can be re-introduced only in conjunction with the merchants and an urban-based world, which expresses the actual urban-based nature of the Warring States and early imperial polity, but which contradicts the explicit political and intellectual hostility to merchants.

The utopia of the Divine Husbandman served as a mythic prelude to the emergence of the next great sage, the Yellow Emperor. Texts of the period contrast the two in that the Husbandman ruled without force—no hunting, punishments or warfare—while the Yellow Emperor was the first to introduce both punishments and warfare as the foundations of the state. Thus, the myths of the Yellow Emperor resolve the challenge of the stateless world of the Divine Husbandman; as the texts of the period note, the Husbandman (or his descendants) could not stop violence, because they themselves lacked the instruments of force. The preservation of order required the introduction of punishments and warfare, which was the highest form of punishment. This provides a necessary role for the ruler and his servants, who had been

³⁷ Mark Edward Lewis, *The early Chinese empires: Qin and Han* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), ch. 5.

³⁸ Mark Edward Lewis, *The construction of space in early China* (Albany, 2006), pp. 101–03.

undifferentiated members of the agrarian community in the world of the Divine Husbandman.³⁹

Like the other sage kings, the Yellow Emperor was the subject of tales or remarks that provide evidence of his earlier nature as a god, and of the manner in which his divine attributes facilitated his transformation into a superhuman ruler. According to the *Records of the historian* (*Shiji* 史記), whose author still had access to Qin chronicles, the Yellow Emperor first received sacrifice from Qin state in the 5th century BC in association with a deity known as the Fiery Emperor (Yandi 炎帝). Several stories, as well as the personal name of the Yellow Emperor, indicate that he was a dragon spirit who acted as a deity of the storm, while the associated Fiery Emperor was a spirit of drought. Stories of battles between these deities, and of their use of “natural” weapons of water and fire, show their early ritual links to combat.⁴⁰

In later versions of the story, however, these accounts of natural violence were reworked into tales of the origins of punishments and warfare as licit and necessary forms of political action. The primary figure in these stories, in addition to the Yellow Emperor, was a being named Chiyou. While the myths and rituals related to this figure are varied, they cluster around his role as an animal or demon (sometimes tiger, sometimes bear, sometimes horned beast or dragon) who served as the mythic prototype for the “exorcist” who played a central role in the New Year’s festivals and in sacrifices to protect travelers. In the myths of the Yellow Emperor, he figured as the inventor of weapons (or metal weapons) who introduced violence into the world, rebelled against the Yellow Emperor, but was ultimately vanquished by him. Some versions also describe how Chiyou himself, or his image, was used by the Yellow Emperor to suppress rebels and malefactors. These mythic roles paralleled the ritual role of the exorcist, who dressed as a demonic animal that was used to quell or expel other demons.

These stories are notable in that they repeatedly invoke a double origin of violence. In an account of the origin of law, Chiyou is said to have introduced disorder into the world, presumably through his invention of weapons and his rebelliousness. This led to the introduction of a

³⁹ Lewis, *Sanctioned violence*, pp. 174–79.

⁴⁰ Lewis, *Sanctioned violence*, pp. 179–83; Mitarai Masaru, “On the legends of the Yellow Sovereign,” in *East Asian civilizations: new attempts at understanding traditions*, ed., Wolfram Eberhard, Krzysztof Gawlikowski, and Carl-Albrecht Seyschab (Bremen, 1983), pp. 67–96.

violent law without legal process, which simply replicated the criminality that it punished. The Yellow Emperor then instituted “punishments of Heaven” that were based on celestial patterns and proper procedure, thereby humanizing the violence of rampant punishments and restoring order to the world. Accounts of warfare similarly contrast Chiyou’s rebel war—based on his violent use of weapons—with the licit warfare introduced by the Yellow Emperor. The proper nature of the Yellow Emperor’s warfare is based on several features. First, he created armies made up of wild beasts who submitted to his potent charisma. Second, he received magically revealed texts or tools that transformed combat into a mental art. Third, he modeled his combat on the celestial patterns of Heaven through introducing the doctrine of employing combat in the killing seasons of the year, fall and winter.⁴¹

These stories, like those of the other feats of the sage kings, are first of all a critique of the old political order and a defense of the new polity that emerged in the Warring States and early empires. The Zhou state had been dominated by a warrior aristocracy whose violence in the forms of hunting, warfare, and sacrifice had been both the expression and mainstay of their power. The mythic negation of martial prowess, in the figure of Chiyou, expressed the political elimination and philosophical rejection of this aristocracy. At the same time, the innovations of the Yellow Emperor—his reliance on discipline that transformed beasts into soldiers, his employment of revealed texts that embodied the commander’s art, and his subsuming of political violence to natural pattern through calendrical rituals—gave mythic origins to the elements of the new style of warfare that had emerged. These included the reliance on infantry armies composed of peasants, the emergence of military specialists who were masters of new doctrines and technologies, and the incorporation of these armies and specialists into a state order defined by the semi-divine ruler and his ritual performances. The tales of the origins of a proper law based on celestial pattern likewise provided a mythic sanction for the legal codes that had become fundamental to the political order.

The double origin of violence in these stories both mediates internal contradictions and expresses the failure of that mediation. The rejection of violence was fundamental to the political and philosophical programs of the period in three ways. First, as noted above, this violence had been

⁴¹ Lewis, *Sanctioned violence*, pp. 98–103, 148–60, 183–205, 231–39.

the hallmark of the Zhou nobility whose elimination was central to the emergence of the new state order. Second, violence in the forms of criminality and rebellion threatened any state. Third, in the new order, rank was inversely proportional to actual participation in violence. Combat was the duty of peasants, and the carrying out of legal punishments was performed by designated torturers or executioners. Command of armies or the adjudication of cases was performed by servants of the ruler trained in specific skills and arts. Finally, the ruler himself was the guarantor of links to Heaven or the natural world which guaranteed the correctness of state-sanctioned violence, but himself played no part in it. (This excludes his role as an occasional sacrificer, the violent character of which was steadily suppressed.) Thus violence in its original state figured as an evil, but violence humanized through education, law, mental arts, and divine pattern could become a source of order.

However, the transformation of bestial violence into the licit foundations of the state as performed in the myths was never secure or complete. Throughout the early imperial period, and indeed the rest of Chinese history, the claims of licit violence were perpetually undercut. One of the most dramatic cases of this was the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven, in which a violent rebel, if successful, was supposed to be magically transformed into the chosen one of Heaven. However, the denunciations as criminals of the “sage” founders of the Shang and Zhou in the *Master Han Fei* (*Han Feizi* 韓非子) and related texts show that the fact of rebellion could never be fully suppressed or ignored. Violence against a ruler, no matter how morally deficient he was, always remained problematic.⁴² Similarly the idea that proper laws or procedure could legitimate the violence of mutilating punishments and executions was perpetually undercut by denunciations of the conduct of officials, debates over the propriety of mutilating punishments, and constant pressure on the ruler to grant ever more frequent pardons in the name of his life-giving, celestial character.⁴³ Finally, the attempted legitimization of warfare as a form of punishment or the fulfillment of celestial pattern never eliminated the idea that it was a mark of the

⁴² Lewis, *Sanctioned violence*, pp. 205–10; Allan, *The heir and the sage*, pp. 30, 49, 89.

⁴³ Criticisms of officials' use of the law are frequent, but a handy compendium is *Shiji* 122, the “Biographies of the harsh officials.” On amnesties, see Brian McKnight, *The quality of mercy: amnesties and traditional Chinese justice* (Honolulu, 1981), ch. 2; A.F.P. Hulswé, *Remnants of Han law* (Leiden, 1955), pp. 209–14, 225–50. This also contains a translation of *Hanshu* 23, which is full of debates over the propriety of mutilating punishments.

ruler's failure. All the intellectual traditions of early China agreed that a truly successful ruler would eliminate the need for warfare, whether through his rigorous enforcement of laws or the transforming power of his life-giving moral charisma. Thus any recourse to war meant that the ruler had failed. Similarly, actual performance of combat by the decent and obedient subjects of the empire was repeatedly called into question, and the Han government gradually transferred all combat roles to barbarians, convicts and volunteers drawn from bullies and troublemakers.⁴⁴ Even in the service of the state, warfare repeatedly reverted to the bestial.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that the Yellow Emperor played a different mythic role in the Daoist traditions related to the cultivation of the body, the medical traditions and those of sexual yoga. In these fields he was often a founding patron, but rarely a master. Instead he routinely received instruction from ministers, medical experts or Daoist sages who initiated him in the methods of healing or perfecting the body. Only in his seven dialogues with Lei Gong 雷公 does he actually appear as a master of esoteric lore in the Daoist and medical traditions.⁴⁵ A related phenomenon was the tales of his receipt from Daoist spirit women of magically revealed military texts or weapons that allowed him to conquer his enemies. Stories of the Yellow Emperor in the Huang-Lao manuscripts discovered at Mawangdui 馬王堆 also emphasize the importance of the guidance that he receives from his ministers.⁴⁶

The central role of ministers in these tales of the Yellow Emperor became the major theme of the next set of myths, which deal with the sage kings Yao and Shun. These tales focus on the transfer of political power, both from ruler to ruler and from dynasty to dynasty. While the details vary, what became the standard versions assert that Yao and Shun had immoral sons who were not fit to receive the throne, so

⁴⁴ Mark Edward Lewis, "The Han abolition of universal military service," in *Warfare in Chinese history*, ed., Hans Van de Ven (Cambridge, 2000).

⁴⁵ Anna K. Seidel, *La divinisation de Lao Tseu dans le taoïsme des Han* (Paris, 1969), p. 51; Paul U. Unschuld, *Huang Di nei jing su wen: nature, knowledge, imagery in an ancient Chinese medical text* (Berkeley, 2003), pp. 8–14; R.H. Van Gulik, *Sexual life in ancient China: a preliminary survey of Chinese sex and society from ca. 1500 BC till 1644 AD*, rev. ed. (Leiden, 2003), pp. 73–78.

⁴⁶ Robin D.S. Yates, *Five lost classics: dao, Huanglao, and yin-yang in Han China* (New York, 1997); R.P. Peerenboom, *Law and morality in ancient China: the silk manuscripts of Huang-Lao* (Albany, 1993), pp. 84–92, 164–67; Jan Yun-hua, "The change of images: the Yellow Emperor in ancient Chinese literature," *Journal of Oriental Studies* 19.2 (1981), 123.

they yielded it to the best man in the kingdom. In the case of Yao, this meant leaving the throne to Shun, while Shun yielded the throne to Yu. In some versions Shun and Yu had proven their worth by decades of work as ministers, and in some texts Yao had effectively adopted Shun by giving the latter his two daughters in marriage. In other versions the ruler first offered the throne to a figure who declined out of modesty, or because he was a hermit who regarded world rulership as a fatal trap. In some cases the ultimate recipient of the throne was first set up as regent, so his assumption of the throne contrasts with figures such as the Duke of Zhou (see below) who served as regents only to yield the throne to the true heir, sometimes after being accused of harboring rebellious thoughts.⁴⁷

These stories are often linked with accounts of later changes in the methods of transferring power. In the conventional narratives Yu becomes the first ruler to transfer the throne to his son, thereby replacing the principle of moral virtue with that of heredity. In one or two versions, however, Yu leaves the throne to a virtuous minister, but his son rebels and thereby brings an end to the period of rule through virtue. These events are followed in turn by accounts of the foundations of the Shang and the Zhou dynasties, in which “evil last rulers” are overthrown by virtuous rebels. In this way the accounts were gradually built into a continuous narrative in which transfer of power by yielding was replaced by heredity, and then by force. However, as Sarah Allan has demonstrated, most accounts of transfer by force also tell of a virtuous minister whose assistance is crucial to establishing the new dynasty. Such ministers to a degree constitute a masked continuation of the practice of passing the throne to the most virtuous minister.⁴⁸ However, in its new form the practice of yielding to the virtuous appears only in the transition between dynasties, while other transfers of power follow the principle of heredity.

As analyzed by Sarah Allan, who makes a thorough study of the numerous variations and their systematic relationships, these tales constitute an extended attempt to mythically mediate the contradiction

⁴⁷ Allan, *The heir and the sage*, ch. 2. Accusations against the Duke of Zhou are the subject of the “Metal case” (“Jinteng”) chapter of the *Book of documents*. Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and authority*, pp. 211–16.

⁴⁸ Allan, *The heir and the sage*, ch. 3–5. This crucial role of the “founding minister” is also analyzed in Allan, “The identities of Taigong Wang in Zhou and Han literature,” *Monumenta Serica* 30 (1972–73), 57–99.

between the rule by hereditary right that defined the dynasty, and the rule by virtue that justified ministerial appointments. This became an issue of particular import in China beginning in the Eastern Zhou, as the old kin-based nobility—for whom loyalty to the kin group was also loyalty to the state—disappeared, to be replaced by a new form of state built through the recruitment of non-kin on the basis of their presumed talents.⁴⁹ In this way the stories represented the claims of philosophers or aspiring officials to the right to share in ruling the realm, without ultimately denying the dynastic principle that justified the power of their political masters.

However, once again this mediation of contradictory principles tends to break down, or to manifest itself in unpleasant corollaries. First, the comprehensive narrative places in high antiquity the principle of yielding to the most virtuous, which tends to indicate that it is a superior practice. This idea is particularly strong in those versions of the text which contrast the peaceful yielding of power in antiquity with the forcible transfer through rebellion that appears in later eras. It is even clearer in the aforementioned versions in which Yu's son rebels against his father's designated successor. These stories treat hereditary succession, which defined the Warring States and early imperial polities, as a criminal aberration.

This mythic denigration of the hereditary principle, treating it as a symptom of decay, manifested itself in several aspects of later Chinese history. First, as Miyakawa Hisayuki 宮川尚志 has demonstrated, during the Northern and Southern Dynasties and into the Tang, the ritual for transferring power from one dynasty to another was patterned on the peaceful yielding of the throne as dramatized in the early accounts of Yao and Shun.⁵⁰ While the moral condemnation of a "bad last ruler" was one political option for justifying the establishment of a new dynasty, and is often treated by Western scholars as though it were a universal recourse, in reality the Chinese of the early imperial period preferred to stage a peaceful yielding of the throne modeled on myths that condemned the hereditary principle. In the Tang dynasty this appeal to virtue over heredity was routinely enacted in the accession rituals so that, even in the case of choosing an heir from within the Tang imperial family, it

⁴⁹ Allan, *The heir and the sage*, pp. 9–12, 141–43.

⁵⁰ Miyakawa Hisayuki, *Rikuchō shi kenkyū: seiji shakai hen* (Kyoto, 1964), pp. 73–172.

was claimed that the specific son chosen had been designated on the basis of his surpassing virtue rather than mere kin ties.⁵¹

The correlate of this suppression of the hereditary principle that actually underpinned the state was the literati emphasis on their own fundamental importance to the political order. To the extent that the “founding minister” was the mythic embodiment of the continuation of the principle of virtue in the age of heredity, officials could claim that they were the true embodiment of the ideal state that had existed in high antiquity, while the rulers were manifestations of the decay of later times. While such an explicit challenge to the emperor could never actually be written, the glorification of ministers in these myths did encourage a vaulting sense of literati entitlement. The perpetual frustration of this mythically-sanctioned greatness manifested itself at the levels of the individual, in the endless works of literature bemoaning the ruler’s failure to appreciate the author and of the literati group as a whole, in the perpetual shifts of power away from the formal bureaucracy to an inner court, and the consequent shedding of ink and blood elicited by some officials’ refusal to accept the objective limits of their own position.

A final negative corollary of these myths of yielding the throne was the mythic elaboration of the idea that the sage kings were bad fathers and sons. Given that the sage kings had to yield the throne to an official because of the moral failings of their sons, they were clearly bad fathers. To the extent that the recipient of the throne accepted the de facto paternity of the previous ruler, and hence denied his own parent, he was a bad son. These ideas were elaborated in tales pertaining to Yao, Shun, and Yu in which each of them had a morally deficient father and in turn spawned degenerate sons. Indeed the writers of the period argued that since they were the sons of such morally exemplary parents, the wicked sons of the sage kings had to be the greatest villains that ever lived. This pattern was noted by Warring States writers, some of whom used it to attack the unfilial character of the sage kings themselves. For others, the period in which the throne was yielded to the most virtuous came to be understood as an era prior to the existence of true families

⁵¹ Howard Wechsler, *Offerings of jade and silk: ritual and symbol in the legitimization of the T'ang dynasty* (New Haven, 1985). On the accession rituals, see ch. 4.

or lineages.⁵² In this way the exaltation of antiquity as a time when ministers were uniquely honored threatened to undercut the devotion to kin that became an increasingly absolute virtue under the Han.

The next set of tales on the sage kings dealt with Yu—already noted above in accounts of the shifting pattern of transferring power—and his taming of the flood. In addition to Yu, in a few texts the feat of taming the flood was also attributed to Gun and Nüwa, who will be discussed below, but these versions of the tales are best understood in the context of the tales that conventionally attribute the achievement to Yu. These stories dealing with the rescue of the world and its inhabitants from the chaos of a universal flood dramatized early Chinese ideas about the construction of an ordered, human space, which provided an ideal geographic image of the empire. In fact references to Yu's work in the *Book of songs* and on a recently discovered bronze show that the story of his feats may be the most ancient preserved in the mythology of the Warring States.

However, the earliest surviving full account of his deeds appears in a series of chapters in the *Book of documents* culminating in the "Tribute of Yu" ("Yugong" 禹貢), and subsequently in the *Classic of mountains and seas*. These works describe Yu's labors in restoring the world to order, as well as the structure of the world that he fashioned. Thus the mythology of the flood provided a background for accounts of the structure of the Warring States and early imperial Chinese world, and of the forces that made that structure possible. In narrating the *re-creation* of the world, for the taming of the flood paralleled within human history the process by which the physical world had first emerged, the myths of the flood provided a charter for institutions of Warring States and early imperial China.

In addition to their use in modeling the world, and thereby providing a sanction for the major political institutions which created a unified world, the early Chinese accounts of the flood also offered a mythology of contemporary practices of water control, in both its literal and figurative uses. This mythology was based on the contrast between the techniques of Gun 鯀 and Gonggong 共工, on the one hand, and those of Yu, on the other. The former two were accused of trying to block up floods with walls, while the latter eliminated floods by dredging channels

⁵² Lewis, *The flood myths of early China* (Albany, 2006), pp. 81–85. Much of the relevant material is also scattered through Allan, *The heir and the sage*.

and guiding water to the sea. This contrast provided a classic sanction for Warring States and early imperial innovations in hydrology, and was also invoked to criticize the failures of contemporary rulers and to call for creating a single state that encompassed the entire world. The superiority of drainage to blocking also provided a standard image for regulating the world through the use of its own internal tendencies, as opposed to trying to impose order by the application of external force.⁵³

While certain stories dealt with water control, many also used accounts of the flood as a means of discussing social order and criminality. In these accounts, as in the passage from the *Mencius* cited above, the flood served as an image for the collapse of all distinctions. It was equated with the disappearance of the fundamental division between men and beasts, and became the prototype for all later periods of social collapse. Given this equation, accounts of taming the flood dealt largely with the expulsion of the beasts and the re-imposition of order through executing archetypal criminals or exiling them to the edges of the earth. In the most common forms of the latter version, order was restored through exiling a group of four named malefactors to the four edges of the earth, where they became forces for order. Such accounts of the flood and its suppression provided a mythic prototype for the classic model of the world structured as a fixed center ringed by the four cardinal directions.⁵⁴ They also posited the ruler's punishing power, already seen as a major theme of the myths of the Yellow Emperor, as essential to the creation of an ordered human space.

One notable feature of the accounts of expulsions was that the four malefactors were identified as the offspring or descendants of earlier rulers. While this in part indicated the belief that a new regime had to expel the polluting traces of earlier rulers, it also indicates the key role of father-son relations in accounts of the flood. The most common accounts of Yu's work indicate that he was preceded by his father, Gun, who failed in the task. Not only did Yu surpass his father, but, in many accounts, his father was executed prior to Yu's appointment. Moreover, accounts of Yu's toils in the flood often emphasize how he neglected his own wife and children in the decades that he devoted to his work. Finally, one of the central roles of Yu within another body of myths was to mark the shift from the transmission of the ruler's authority to the

⁵³ Lewis, *The flood myths*, ch. 1.

⁵⁴ Lewis, *The flood myths*, ch. 2.

best man in the next generation, to that of transmission from father to son. These myths thus provided an account of the origins of the lineage system formed by the regular transfer of property and status from father to son through the generations.⁵⁵

These tales of the origins of lineages can best be explained within the broader context of the aforementioned tales of Yao and Shun, in which the ideal of transfer of authority on the basis of merit necessitated the belief that the sage kings invariably had evil parents and produced evil offspring. For some writers of the period, the absence of transmission of political authority from father to son demonstrated that families in the full sense of the term did not yet exist. In this context, Yu's taming of the flood and his transfer of authority to his son converged as two simultaneous forms of constructing order. At the same time that he fashioned an orderly world, he also founded the lineage based on properly defined roles of fathers and sons.

The mythological equation of the ordering of the world and that of the lineage as marked in the shift from Shun to Yu not only provided an account of the origins of kin groups, but also mediated fundamental tensions within those groups. Specifically, the opposition between fathers and sons in myths of the generational alternation of virtues at the time of the sage kings reflected an enduring tension in the Chinese lineage. Several early literary sources spoke of offspring who were destined to destroy their families and, consequently, should be killed. These offspring fell into two categories: those who had an animal nature and hence were alien to their own families, and those who were too close a duplication of their parents. It is the latter category that is particularly important for the stories of the sage kings' families as prototypes for the tensions of Chinese kinship.

In the most important cases where sage kings had villainous parents and children, particularly the father-to-son succession of Gu Sou 瞽叟-Shun-Shang Jun 商均 and that of Gun-Yu-Qi 啓, the sage shared major mythic attributes with both his father and his son. Thus the wicked Gu Sou, who repeatedly attempted to murder his son Shun, was a spirit of music as was Shun himself. In the next generation, the irremediably wicked Shang Jun figures in several texts as an agricultural deity, a role also assigned to Shun. Gun and Yu likewise share many attributes as snake or dragon spirits, as well as being linked as tamers

⁵⁵ Lewis, *The flood myths*, ch. 3.

of the flood. Indeed, in a few accounts Yu is directly born from Gun's body. Similarly, many of the same historical enemies or achievements, such as founding the Xia dynasty, are attributed either to Yu or Qi. Thus the tension between generations in the sage kings' families reflects the same principle as do the beliefs about dangerous children. In both cases the overly close identification of father and son results in moral wickedness or menace.⁵⁶

The threat of a son who is identical to his father manifests itself primarily in the question of succession and inheritance. In the process of becoming a father, the son transforms his own father into a dead ancestor. Furthermore, to the extent that the father-son relationship was imagined in terms of an authority parallel to that of a ruler and his ministers, which had become a cliché in Chinese political thought, the son's inducing the death of his father in the act of becoming an adult took on the trappings of rebellion or regicide. It is these problems generated in the conflation of household and state authority that are elaborated within the mythology of Yu through linking his actions as world fashioner, ruler and father.⁵⁷

A final aspect of spatial order treated in the stories of the flood deals with the creation of the married couple and ultimately of the human body that was generated by such couples. This theme is clearest in the mythology of Nüwa 女媧, who in different texts is fashioner of the human body, goddess of fertility in her guise as the High Matchmaker, founder of marriage, presiding deity of the physical transformations of the human fetus and tamer of the flood. However, since Nüwa is not a sage king, and since she is most prominent as a figure in Han tomb art, I will discuss her myths and those of her consort Fuxi in the section on the mythology of beings depicted in the tomb.

The themes of sexual coupling, the generation of bodies, and their controlled transformations also run through the myths of Yu. First, Yu and Nüwa are described as husband and wife in several accounts of the taming of the flood. Second, Yu is described in several texts as the mythic prototype for the god of the altar of the soil. This altar had many parallels with the altar of the High Matchmaker, of which Nüwa was the primary mythic prototype. These parallels included playing a central role in rituals dealing with mating and fertility, as well as

⁵⁶ Lewis, *The flood myths*, pp. 100–06.

⁵⁷ Lewis, *The flood myths*, pp. 85–99.

the placing of a stone or a stone figure on the altar as the recipient of sacrifices. Such stones are closely linked to fertility in early Chinese mythology, in the cases of both Nüwa and Yu. Specifically, several texts recount that Yu was born from a stone, or in a place named for a stone. In other versions his mother was inseminated by a magical stone or meteor. Other texts tell how Yu's son Qi was also born from a stone, or rather a mother—in some texts identified with Nüwa—who had been transformed into a stone.⁵⁸

In addition to Yu's role in rituals of fertility, and the birth myths associated with that role, the body of Yu also figured prominently in tales of the flood. In several stories Yu's taming of the flood is associated with his transformation into a dragon or bear so he can work more effectively. More commonly, the stories emphasize the physical toil entailed in Yu's taming of the flood, and mark the extent of this toil with references to the alterations or deformations inflicted on his body. Some tell how his body lost its hair and nails, reverting to a fishlike condition which may well reflect his origins in an aquatic deity. Others speak of his being lamed, or reduced to a strange, hobbling gait. This latter was reproduced in the "Pace of Yu" (*Yubu* 禹步) which became a central element in ritual procedures associated with two of the spatial realms with which Yu's work is linked: the ordering of the world and the formation of the body. In the former context, the Pace of Yu was employed in rituals to protect travelers, often those whose journeys entailed moving through mountains in a manner that recapitulated Yu's structuring of the world. In the latter context, the Pace was used in rituals to cure a variety of ailments and thus restore the body to proper order. In one medical text this bodily treatment was also presented as a means of restoring order within the household, thus drawing in the aforementioned role of Yu as patron and protector of the kin group or family.⁵⁹

In summation, the flood myths that developed around the figures of Yu and Nüwa provided a comprehensive mythology for the origins of virtually all the units in terms of which the early Chinese articulated their notions of a structured space. These tales elaborated in dramatic form the principles that underlay an orderly world, lineage, household/couple and human body. While availing themselves of earlier stories and of central religious rituals of the period, the versions of these stories

⁵⁸ Lewis, *The flood myths*, pp. 134–39.

⁵⁹ Lewis, *The flood myths*, pp. 103–04, 139–43.

that developed in the Warring States and early empires turned both Yu and Nüwa into early rulers, or ministers who became rulers. By transforming the creators of orderly space into political figures, these tales paralleled the other accounts of the sage kings in the same period which interpreted the emergence of all aspects of human civilization as the work of early rulers. In so doing they provided both etiologies and legitimation for the political institutions that emerged in the Warring States and culminated in the unitary empire. In the tales of Yu, as in those of all the sage kings, the literate Chinese of the period created mythic prototypes for their own actions, which they claimed imposed order and definition upon a world that would otherwise collapse into chaos.

Mythology depicted in tombs

Although the sage kings were the most prominent figures in the myths of the period found in texts, images from tombs provide a very different pantheon of spiritual powers. While one could devote a monograph to the images in Han tombs, and the identifications of the figures depicted, I will here focus on only a few of the most important figures: Chiyou, Nüwa, Fuxi and the Queen Mother of the West. These figures are notable in that, with the possible exception of Chiyou, they are much more prominent in the tomb art of the period than in the texts. They are also significant in that the most important of them—Nüwa and the Queen Mother—are women. The significance of this will be discussed below.

Since Chiyou has been discussed earlier, I will here only briefly sketch his role in the tomb and the manner in which it relates to his ritual roles in the period. Chiyou served as the mythic prototype for the exorcist, who imitated him by wearing animal skins and four eyes and carrying a weapon with which to ward off evil influences. One of the exorcist's roles was to clear the road of evil influences in order to protect travelers, a role also assigned to Chiyou in a prayer from the period. The exorcist also cleared the road for funeral processions on the way to the tomb, and struck the four corners of the tomb chamber with his spear to make it safe for the deceased.

The most direct evidence of Chiyou's role in securing the tomb, however, comes from the use of his image in Eastern Han funerary art. The most notable example is in the tomb at Yinan 沂南, where he appears on the northern wall of the front tomb chamber, directly

over the doorway leading to the central chamber where the corpse was interred. With his weapons, tiger visage and horns in the form of a crossbow, he functioned as a tomb guardian to keep evil spirits and perhaps grave robbers from intruding in the inner chambers. Equally notable is the fact that he is surrounded by images of the animals of the four quarters, just as he was in the prayer for the travel sacrifice. Since this sacrifice was performed prior to carrying the corpse to the tomb, these wall illustrations permanently fixed in defense of the corpse the spirit forces marshaled to guard it on the way to the tomb.⁶⁰

The second major figure I will discuss is Nüwa, who figures in tomb art only together with her consort Fuxi, where the two appear as half-human, half-snake beings whose snake-like lower bodies intertwine. In this form they constitute a primal couple that joins together in sexual union to generate and maintain the world. In later accounts they are described as a sibling pair, which is also found in tales throughout Southeast Asia and the Pacific, whose incestuous mating re-populated the world after the human race had been destroyed by the flood. While it is uncertain that such stories existed in early times, or even that the couple was specifically involved in tales of the flood, their images in Han art show how they were related to the themes of the flood myth.

First, they were depicted as hybrid beings whose intertwining lower halves were snakes or dragons, while their upper bodies were human. Compositionally linked on coffin lids to the sun and the moon, and often shown holding the compass and the carpenter's square, they embodied the tripartite division of the world into Heaven, Earth and the human realm, and through their tools symbolized the processes that maintained these divisions. Second, regularly placed on doorways in association with guardian figures, they served to divide "inner" from "outer." They thereby established the tomb as a distinct realm, and maintained that realm from the incursions of the watery forces of pollution and chaos. It is notable in this regard that the Chinese underworld was imagined as a realm of water known as the "Yellow Springs." In these ways the conjoined images of Nüwa and Fuxi produced a spatial order structured in both the vertical and horizontal dimensions, an order that was generated within the sexual act that conventionally produced the human body. Their close link to the tomb is indicated by the fact that as pointed

⁶⁰ Lewis, *Sanctioned violence*, pp. 187–91.

out by Hayashi Minao 林巳奈夫, they appear only in art related to the tomb, and not on mirrors and other surviving Han artifacts.⁶¹

The symbolism of the tomb art can be supplemented with the brief textual accounts of Nüwa's taming of the flood. The best preserved of these accounts derives the techniques she employs from her other mythical roles. Thus when the world is plunged into chaos by the flood, she patches up the sky with smelted "five-colored stones," which elsewhere figure as powerful medicines. Versions of the same stones also appear in accounts of metallurgy where the casting of swords is treated as a sexual process that parallels the generation of a body, and may even incorporate bodily parts. Nüwa also restores the world to an even level by placing it on four giant tortoise legs. She thus not only uses bodily parts to restore the world, but also turns the world into one vast tortoise body with the shell equivalent to the sky, the plastron to the five regions that make up the earth and the legs to support it. She also staunched the flood with burned reeds, another organic substance that appears elsewhere as the material for her mythological inventions of musical instruments that generate life and encourage fertility.⁶²

Fuxi, for his part, has a distinct mythological role in texts which has no clear relation to his generative and structuring function within the tomb. In the full-blown sequence of sage kings that took shape by the beginning of the empire, he was described as the creator of the role of king, whose key mythological inventions were the trigrams of the *Book of changes*, and by extension of writing and mathematics. All the other inventions of the sage kings existed *in nuce* within the potent symbols of the trigrams, which as generative forces in their own right produced the entirety of human civilization. The one feature of the written myths linked to his role in the tomb is the fact that his name and several late-appearing stories suggest that Fuxi was a dragon spirit, closely linked to his snake body in the art.⁶³

The last mythic figure who plays a prominent role in Han tomb art, indeed the *most* prominent role, is the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu 西王母). Like Fuxi and Nüwa, she appears in a handful of references in Warring States and early Han philosophy and poetry.

⁶¹ Lewis, *The flood myths*, pp. 125–33; Hayashi Minao, *Kan dai no kamigami* (Kyoto, 1989), p. 294.

⁶² Lewis, *The flood myths*, pp. 110–16.

⁶³ The full mythology of Fuxi is elaborated in Lewis, *Writing and authority*, pp. 197–209.

Although they vary in accounts of her appearance and powers, she is most commonly described as an eternal goddess living on a mountain at the western edge of the world. She has animal aspects or assistants, controls certain astral phenomena and is the mistress of arts related to immortality. These accounts suggest that she was a cosmic deity associated with death, which was linked to the west. More notably, she appears in Han historical records as the patron deity of a mass movement that arose in 3 BC in response to a major drought in the northeast. Large processions of people, wearing their hair loose and going barefoot, carried straw figurines and tokens of the deity as they paraded through the fields and into the towns, staging torch-lit processions across the roofs at night. They proclaimed the imminent arrival of the Queen Mother, and declared that her believers would not die. While these records were placed in the dynastic history only because they were after the fact interpreted as omens of the usurpation of Wang Mang 王莽, they show the existence of the cult of the Queen Mother at the popular level.⁶⁴

Although the scattered literary remarks are of interest, the clearest evidence of the important role of the Queen Mother in Han religion comes from art. She was depicted in wall carvings on shrines, wall paintings in tombs, stamped clay bricks from tomb walls, the non-reflecting side of mirrors, stands of the bronze “money trees” found in Sichuan, some lacquer ware and at least one jade screen. Her iconography includes her distinctive headdress, her animal attendants (dragon and tiger as a seat, hare grinding the elixirs of immortality, the toad in the moon, the crow in the sun, the nine-tailed fox), a cosmic tree or pillar, Mt. Kunlun and, sometimes, the game/divination device *liubo* 六博. Her image is found throughout China, indicating that her cult was widespread, if not universal. In the art of both the shrines and tombs she is often located in a paradise which appears to be the ultimate goal of the departed, and she or her assistants may guide them. Inscriptions on the mirrors where she appears generally refer to her long life and to the blessed life of the immortals, over whom she is the ruling deity. In summation, she appears as a deity of the west, located at the peak of a mountain that links Heaven to earth, who presides over a paradise of immortals. She

⁶⁴ There is a large secondary literature about the Queen Mother in the Warring States and Han. Among the most useful are Suzanne Cahill, *Transcendence and divine passion: the Queen Mother of the West in medieval China* (Berkeley, 1993), pp. 11–32; Michael Loewe, *Ways to paradise: the Chinese quest for immortality* (London, 1979), ch. 4.

acts as a protector or guide of the dead, a master of communication between the divine and the human world and a deity who presides over the cosmic order embodied in the major asterisms.⁶⁵

Unlike the sage kings, for whom we possess stories which only allow us to guess at their cultic roots, we possess considerable evidence of the Queen Mother's cultic nature, while lacking much mythology. Even the limited body of written evidence largely consists of descriptions of her divine attributes, with almost no early narratives. The one surviving exception is the *Biography of the Son of Heaven Mu* (*Mu tianzi zhuan* 穆天子傳). In this text, which was discovered in a tomb in 281 AD and probably dates from the late Warring States, King Mu of the Zhou travels to the far west where he encounters the Queen Mother, exchanges poems with her which touch on the theme of immortality and then returns home. As Deborah Porter has shown, the work draws heavily on the "Tribute of Yu" chapter of the *Book of documents*, and thus is closely related to the mythology of Yu. The Queen Mother in this text already has many of the major attributes that appear in the Han accounts, so it clearly represents a myth tied to her cult.

In post-Han fiction and prose the Queen Mother emerged in a whole set of elaborate accounts in which she appears to an earthly ruler, notably King Mu or Emperor Wu 武 of the Han, and either bestows immortality upon him, or ultimately fails to do so. In this way the Queen Mother mythically served as the highest of the female divinities who bestowed the arts of sexuality and immortality on earthly men, figures who were briefly cited above in the myths of the Yellow Emperor as patron of the arts of the body. The stories of her meetings with earthly rulers might also be related to a broader set of astral myths on key meetings in the sky, a set which includes the tales of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl.⁶⁶

Before concluding this discussion of the mythic figures depicted in tombs, it is important to note that in contrast with the tales of the

⁶⁵ The most exhaustive study of her iconography is Li Song, *Lun Han dai yishu zhong de Xi Wang Mu tuxiang* (Changsha, 2000). For briefer studies in English, see Cahill, *Transcendence and divine passion*, pp. 24–31; Loewe, *Ways to paradise*, pp. 101–15; Jean James, *A guide to the tomb and shrine art of the Han dynasty* (Lewiston, 1996), pp. 30–32, 69–76, 81–86, 91, 98, 109, 112–113, 115, 119–20; and the chapter by Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens in Volume Two.

⁶⁶ Porter, *From deluge to discourse*, ch. 2, esp. p. 27; pp. 61–65, 73–75, 79–84, 89–90, 119–23, 130–31, 137–38, 144–47; Mark Edward Lewis, *The construction of space in early China* (Albany, 2006), pp. 258–60; Loewe, *Ways to paradise*, pp. 115–26; Cahill, *Transcendence and divine passion*, ch. 3.

sage kings, several of the most important figures are women. This has several explanations. First, the tombs represent the beliefs and interests of a broader segment of the population than do the texts, which were limited to a highly literate minority. While still elite products, the tomb art was produced for many people of no literary pretensions. Second, the tomb and shrine art preserves a religious character which is hidden in the tales of the sage kings, and female deities played a crucial role throughout the history of Chinese religion. Third, the tomb was constructed as the earthly equivalent of the household, as a dwelling place for the deceased. Consequently, it reflected both the physical and social structure of the household, in which women played a much more important role than in the lineage or the state.⁶⁷ For all of these reasons, the mythology hinted at in the tombs is much more cognizant of female powers than are the tales of the early sage kings.

Historical myths

While myth and history are often presented as contradictory methods of narrating the past, it is also conventional to think of much of our own approach to the historical past as myth. Thus the 15–21 September 2007 issue of *The Economist* states that Margaret Thatcher “is now entering the phase of myth, with all its distortions” (see p. 72). The use of the word “Munich” as a code for appeasement has likewise entered the realm of myth. In a not entirely serious variation on Lévi-Strauss’ theory of myth as the play of structural oppositions, E.R. Leach noted that conventional knowledge about Henry VIII and Elizabeth I focused on the contrast between the father with six wives, who indulged in the pleasures of the flesh, and his virgin daughter. A classic American historical myth is the tale of the first Thanksgiving feast, celebrated when friendly Native Americans helped the settlers avoid famine. This imaginative reworking of an actual event not only served as the charter for a national holiday invented centuries later, but also communicated a whole set of falsifying ideological messages about relations with the natives, the priority of the northern colonies over the southern (records of harvest festivals in Virginia antedate those in New England), and

⁶⁷ Lewis, *The construction of space*, pp. 119–30.

the absence of a debt to England (where harvest festivals had been celebrated for centuries).

Such mythical transformations of historical events and characters were also a major element of early Chinese storytelling. Any reader of later Chinese history, poetry or literature encounters numerous cases of such early historical figures who have become iconic tokens for talking about certain ideas or problems. Here I will only examine a few particularly important cases, and also a few cases of historical figures who became deities in later imperial China.

Probably the first clear case of a historical figure who entered the realm of myth was the Duke of Zhou. An actual brother of the founder of the Zhou dynasty, this figure played a significant role in conquering the eastern part of the Yellow River's flood plain, and records of him have been found on Zhou bronzes. However, by the time of the composition of the earlier chapters of the *Book of documents* he had already begun to transform into a mythic embodiment, perhaps the prototype, of the "founding minister" cited above in the myths of Yao and Shun. A loyal regent who served as king without actually usurping his position, he came to embody the ideal of a de facto kingship based on talent rather than heredity that was embraced by ambitious ministers as a charter for their own powers. Speeches attributed to him in the *Documents* proclaim a policy of making appointments on the basis of worth. These speeches, which read the Eastern Zhou situation back into the time of dynastic founding, suggest that the elevation of the Duke of Zhou to a position of co-founder reflected the decline of royal power and the rise of ducal and ministerial lines who sought to claim for themselves a position on a par with that of direct descendants of the king.

In association with these myths of the Duke of Zhou as the ministerial double of the monarch, there developed a range of stories and attributions that made him the archetype for rule through the power of writing. In addition to the chapters of the *Documents* attributed to him, he was also credited with being the inventor of the Zhou ritual system, or author of the later *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮) text. Furthermore, he was credited with the development of the *Changes*, and with the composition of at least one of the *Songs*. In this way virtually the entirety of the Zhou canon was linked to his name, just as it would later be linked to Confucius.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Lewis, *Writing and authority*, pp. 210–18.

Confucius himself was the single most important mythic historical figure of Chinese antiquity. Around the earliest collections of his remarks gathered by his friends or disciples, there gradually developed an elaborate body of anecdotes that were preserved in what became the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) and later parts of the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記). As he became a more eminent figure, the authors of the *Master Zhuang* likewise began to write stories in which Confucius was instructed in Daoism's truths by Lao Dan 老聃, or in which Confucius testified to his own disciples about his inferiority to the true Daoist sages. By the early Han there had developed a considerable body of lore about Confucius and his relations to the texts of the Confucian canon, and these were brought together for the first time into a single narrative by Sima Qian.⁶⁹ In these stories Confucius emerged as the prototype of the worthy scholar who fails to find a worthy ruler to employ him, and so must ultimately confine his activities to the textual realm of "empty words." As the "uncrowned king" who had magically predicted the rise and institutional form of the Han, he even rose to the rank of a near divinity, but ultimately sank back into the role of the model teacher, whose state-sponsored cult provided ritualized consolation to all those who had aspired to worldly greatness but had to settle for teaching children and youths.

Almost on a par with the tales of Confucius as a mythic prototype for the vaulting ambitions and perennial discontents of the literati was yet another historical myth, that of Qu Yuan 屈原. Probably an actual minister in late Warring States Chu, he first appeared in a couple of early literary works as an upright official who had lost favor with the monarch, resigned and committed suicide through drowning. Over the course of the century following his death, several poems apparently derived from songs enacting failed meetings of goddesses and mortals (anticipating motifs associated with the Queen Mother) were attributed to him and re-read as allegories of the failure of a righteous official to establish ties to the ruler. These poems established the prototype for an entire genre of poetry on this theme that was elaborated over the course of the Han. In this way Qu Yuan became the mythic model for verse lamentations by literati for career failures, just as Confucius did for recourse to textual scholarship as a substitute for a political life.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Lewis, *Writing and authority*, pp. 218–38.

⁷⁰ Lewis, *Writing and authority*, pp. 185–92; Schneider, *A madman of Ch'u*, ch. 1.

Another notable feature of the mythology that developed around Qu Yuan was that his association with drowning led to the identification of numerous rituals and sacrifices offered to southern rivers or the Hangzhou tidal bore as commemorations of his death. Originally, most of these rituals had involved the sacrifice of women and offerings to goddesses of the waters, but during the Han they were made more acceptable to the imperial elite by naming a masculine deity as the recipient. The earliest records of this gender change identified the recipient as Wu Zixu 伍子胥, a semi-historical figure associated with the wars between Wu and Yue in the lower Yangzi in the 6th century BC. Like the later Qu Yuan, he had supposedly been drowned, although he had been executed rather than committed suicide. The rituals were explained as attempts to appease his angry spirit. After the Han, the violent and rebellious Wu Zixu was gradually supplanted among the elite, and ultimately among the people, by the less dangerous Qu Yuan.⁷¹

This replacement of local water spirits, goddesses and the ghosts of drowned women with historical figures from the literary records indicates one of the most important functions of turning people into gods in Chinese civilization. In the cases of both Wu Zixu and Qu Yuan, the deification of these historical humans permitted the incorporation of illicit local cults and customs into the ritual repertoire of the elite. As the imperial system and its adherents penetrated into the south, or any frontier region, the beliefs and practices of the local people could be made acceptable to the political center by converting wild, often non-human, gods into canonical figures from Chinese historical sources. By telling new stories about the local gods, i.e., by Sinicizing their myths, alien and threatening beings could be converted into benign spiritual agents of the imperial order. Such absorption into China through the rewriting of myths could well have been actively supported by local elites seeking the heightened status of ties to the imperial court. This pattern of extending Chinese political and cultural hegemony into new regions through the mythic conversion of local gods will be discussed further in the next section.

⁷¹ David Johnson, "The Wu Tzu-hsu pien-wen and its sources: Part II," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 40.2 (Dec., 1980), 472–80; Schneider, *A madman of Ch'u*, ch. 4; Edward H. Schafer, *The divine woman: dragon ladies and rain maidens in T'ang literature* (Berkeley, 1973), pp. 22–29, 46, 116.

Local mythology

Local mythology took at least four forms. First, there were tales of local nature divinities: dragons, tigers, snakes, mountains, strange rocks, springs, trees and so on. Second, there were stories of local heroes or people held to be remarkable in the community or region. Third, there were tales of the local activities of the ancient sage kings or other sanctioned figures from the imperial center to whom were assigned achievements in a given locality, presumably by members of the local elite with a strong literary background. Fourth, there were tales of immortals who, often linked to notable local mountains, became emblematic figures of tensions between localities and the court. I will discuss each of these in turn.

Records of the first category of local deity, potent nature spirits, are very rare from the Han dynasty. In general they figure only briefly in written records where members of the government came into conflict with them, or in accounts by local officials of the ridiculous character of local cults that rise and fall with remarkable rapidity to strange trees or plants. A useful compendium of such stories is the chapter on “Strange spirits” (“Guaishen” 怪神) in the late-Han *Comprehensive meaning of customs* (*Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義). However, the much greater frequency of accounts of such cults from subsequent centuries would indicate that there were many such cults, but that they existed below the level of early literati concerns. One exception is local cults to mountains, which are recorded in numerous stone inscriptions, but there is only a limited “mythology” for such mountains. First, they could bring rain. Second, as will be discussed below, there were mountain temples devoted to Yu and his family.⁷²

Evidence of unsanctioned cults to local heroes, sometimes in explicit opposition to the imperial state, is also rare for the Han, but not unknown. The best documented case is the cult of King Jing of Chengyang 城陽景王. Originally established as a legal cult in his hometown

⁷² *Fengsu tongyi jiaoshi* (Tianjin, 1980), pp. 325–64. On Han local mountain cults, see K.E. Brashier, “The spirit lord of Baishi Mountain: feeding the deities or heeding the yinyang,” *Early China* 26–27 (2001–2002), 159–231; Marianne Bujard, “Célébration et promotion des cultes locaux: six stèles des Han Orientaux,” *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 87 (2000), 247–66; Lewis, *The construction of space*, pp. 233–34. On records of tensions between local nature spirits and the imperial state in later centuries, see David Johnson, “The city-god cults of T'ang and Sung China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 45.2 (Dec., 1985), 424–50.

for the services that he rendered to the Han state, it spread across Shandong. When the Red Eyebrows rebelled against Wang Mang in Shandong it became their primary cult. At the end of the Eastern Han, Ying Shao 應劭 in the *Comprehensive meaning of customs* gave a detailed description of the widespread illicit cult to King Jing, and of the state's attempts to destroy it.⁷³

A more striking example, although one that is probably post-Han, was the cult to Xiang Yu 項羽, the southern-based historical rival of the Han founder, in the region of Lake Tai in modern Zhejiang. As reconstructed by Miyakawa Hisayuki, the spirit of Xiang Yu had been conflated by the local people with the god of Bian Mountain, where a temple to the dead general was located. Here we see yet another case of a local nature spirit being mythically re-written as a historical individual. However, the cult to Xiang Yu was purely local in character. The story arose that the spirit of Xiang Yu had occupied the local yamen and killed any official dispatched by the central government who did not make offerings to him. According to the records repeated officials sent out from the court died under mysterious circumstances, until the angry spirit of the general was finally pacified by a particularly resolute official in the early 6th century. Nevertheless, the unsanctioned cult to Xiang Yu continued to thrive in the locality.⁷⁴

In addition to cults to local or regional heroes, there were also local myths and cults devoted to the sage kings or comparable figures. The most prominent example of this was the sage Yu, who due to his role as the creator of a structured Chinese space was also the creator of the diverse regions and localities that made up China. Two notable examples are the aforementioned mountain inscriptions devoted to Yu. One of these was set up at Songgao Mountain in 123 AD, and the other at Mt. Hua, the western marchmount near the Western Han capital. In the course of his work in taming the flood, Yu had established the “nine provinces” that defined China, and also the sacred mountain for each province. Thus, local people who hoped to have their mountain cult recognized by the state began their inscription with a recounting of the deeds of Yu.⁷⁵

⁷³ Lewis, *The construction of space*, pp. 229–230.

⁷⁴ Miyakawa Hisayuki, *Rikuchō shi kenkyū: shūkyō hen* (Kyoto, 1964), ch. 15.

⁷⁵ Lewis, *The flood myths*, pp. 43–44.

There is also evidence for the importance of Yu as a local deity in the region occupied by the Yue people, to the south of modern Hangzhou Bay. Both the *Annals of Wu and Yue* (*Wu Yue chunqiu* 吳越春秋) and the *Book of the destruction of Yue* (*Yue jue shu* 越絕書), works probably largely compiled in the Eastern Han although later modified, trace the origins of the region's culture to Yu. This is elaborated at the greatest length in the *Book of the destruction of Yue*, which makes Yu the king who established Yue as a state, describes him as a visitor to the region, locates the culminating act of his construction of world order in Yue, lists his grave as Yue's first sacred site, explains local mores and distinctive practices as a result of his work, and gives the location of a temple and an altar of grain dedicated to him.

The most widespread myth linking Yu to the Yue region pertains to the great assembly of the spirits which he gathered there at Guiji 會稽. One version of the story appears in the *Discourses of the states* (*Guoyu* 國語), probably from the late 4th century BC. It tells how Confucius identified a giant bone discovered at Guiji as that of the giant Fangfeng 防風 who was executed for arriving late to Yu's assembly. This story is significant, because texts dating back to Ren Fang's 任昉 (AD 460–508) *Record of strange phenomena* (*Shuyi ji* 述異記) describe an active cult to Fangfeng in the Hangzhou Bay region. A major variant of this story appeared in the 4th-century BC *Zuo commentary* (*Zuozhuan* 左傳), which stated that Yu assembled the feudal lords at Mt. Tu. This is noteworthy because Mt. Tu was the place of origin of Yu's wife in certain myths. The *History of the Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書) also refers to the fact that Yue state was established by Yu. The flood tamer in these texts acts as the patron divinity of the southeast region, a figure who both established Yue as a distinct region and initiated its defining mores and religious practices.⁷⁶

There is also evidence of Yu as a patron of local culture in Sichuan. First, a fragment of a *Chronicle of the kings of Shu*, written at the end of the Western Han by Yang Xiong 楊雄, recounts Yu's miraculous birth. Since the old Shu state, the land of Yang Xiong's birth, had been in Sichuan, the inclusion of such a myth shows that this eminent native scholar traced the history of his home region back to Yu. Moreover the earliest surviving Chinese local history, the *Record of the lands south of Mt. Hua* (*Huayang guozhi* 華陽國志), is devoted to Sichuan.

⁷⁶ Lewis, *The flood myths*, pp. 44–46.

It begins with an account of Yu's fashioning of the Nine Provinces and then focuses on his unique relation to Sichuan. This text even locates the scene of Yu's wedding ceremony on a mountain in this region. Like the sites in the Hangzhou Bay area associated with Yu, this mountain became the site of temples dedicated to him and his wife. Also like those around Hangzhou Bay, these temples were treated as among the most important in their region. In a purge of shrines in Sichuan during the Jin dynasty in the 3rd century AD, only the temples to Yu and Han Emperor Wu were left untouched.

More important for their local significance than the myths of Yu was a derivative set of stories located in Sichuan that was patterned on his work as a flood tamer. These deal with the achievements of the historical Li Bing 李冰 and his mythic son Erlang 二郎 as tamers of floods. Li Bing was an actual man, a Qin administrator who in the 3rd century BC had built the great Dujiangyan 都江堰 water diversion and irrigation system that had turned the Chengdu plain into one of the most productive regions in China. However, as early as the Han he had become a legendary being who was depicted in sculpture, received regular offerings in a temple and figured as the hero of a set of tales in which he tamed the river by defeating its god in armed combat. As several scholars have pointed out, there are numerous common points between these stories dealing with Li Bing and the earlier myths of Yu. Thus the role of Yu as the founder of Sichuan's culture and the cultic importance attributed to Li Bing there express their shared mythic attributes.

The theme of taming floods by defeating hostile gods of nature developed even further in Sichuan in stories of a local god, Erlang, who was eventually identified as the son of Li Bing and received sacrifices together with him. In the later versions of these stories, which are preserved in local histories, as well as oral tales collected in this century, it is Erlang who discovers the wicked dragon that causes the floods in Sichuan, defeats the miscreant in combat and imprisons him in a deep pond beneath a stone pillar. Li Bing, the hero of the earlier tales, plays no role in these later versions.⁷⁷

The final major form of explicitly local myths in the Han was stories devoted to immortals. Several stone inscriptions devoted to local cults to immortals which include the myths pertaining to these figures have been discovered. The most notable of these inscriptions describes the

⁷⁷ Lewis, *The flood myths*, pp. 46–47.

career of the immortal Tang Gongfang 唐公房 in the Hanzhong region of Shaanxi. The stele narrates how he became an immortal, used his powers to assist the local government, was recommended to a governor for whom he trapped and killed a rat that had damaged the governor's chariot canopy, refused to divulge his arts to the governor and fled the latter's wrath with a magic potion that allowed him and his entire household to rise into the sky. After comparing him favorably to the famous immortals of antiquity, the inscription states that, due to his lingering influence, neither insects in the summer nor frosts in the winter harmed the people. Epidemics and evil influences did not linger, all pests were eradicated and harvests were more abundant than in other places. The head of the commandery, in association with a group of local patrons, states that he had repaired the temple to Tang Gongfang and had the inscription carved in order to pray for blessings and to preserve the memory of the immortal.

This story insists on the local nature of the cult. Tang benefited his own town, but was menaced and forced to flee by a provincial governor. After departing he continued to bless his own locality, granting it good fortune not found elsewhere. The list of donors on the back of the stele names 15 people, two of whom are from Tang Gongfang's home town, and the rest from a neighboring district. These appear to be local notables, many of whom had served as local magistrates or minor officials, and the rest are described as "retired scholars." None of them appears in any literary source, which indicates that they did not make a career in the higher levels of the imperial government. From later sources, we know that several temples to the cult were built in nearby towns.

A more recently discovered inscription tells of an otherwise unknown immortal named Fei Zhi 肥致. In addition to relating his eccentric behavior and his relations with the imperial court, the inscription tells how he gathered disciples, especially members of the Xu family. Xu You 許由 is said to have encountered the Queen Mother of the West, and his son Xu Jian 建 initiated sacrifices to Fei Zhi in AD 169. Five disciples of Xu You are said to have consumed a drug called "stone marrow" and thus become immortals. In addition to these two stelae, historical documents also mention a cult to the immortal Wangzi Qiao 王子喬 established in AD 165 near Mount Song.

There are also many references to local cults dedicated to immortals in the *Biographies of arrayed immortals* (*Liexian zhuan* 列仙傳). This work was almost certainly begun under the Han, although the current edition includes later additions. It is an anthology of the lives of

celebrated immortals, but many biographies describe the popular cults which grew up around their subjects. Thus Xiaofu, a man who repaired sandals in the market of his town, never grew old and ultimately rose into the sky. Many people in his town offered sacrifice to him. Ma Dan, a man of Jin in the Spring and Autumn period, departed in a whirlwind and “the men of the north honored and made sacrifices to him.” Ge You ascended Mt. Sui as an immortal, followed by many of the nobles of Shu. Several dozen shrines to him were erected at the base of the mountain. Master Guan was put to death by a ruler to whom he refused to reveal his arts, much like Tang Gongfang. He re-appeared several decades later, only to fly off after a few weeks. As a result “every household in Song made offerings to him.” Many other stories in the collection follow this pattern in which an immortal departs from the human world and then becomes the object of a cult. They are notable in that all of the cults, even those to figures such as Wangzi Qiao who were known throughout the empire, are described as being confined to a single site or region, often the place where he or she was last seen. Other figures are associated with particular families, such as You Bozi, who reappears several times over the course of the decade to assist the Su family, with whom he had been a retainer under the Zhou. Given the evidence of the discovered stelae, there is no reason to doubt the historicity of local cults of this nature, and their associated myths.⁷⁸

It is not surprising that immortals and hermits, both associated with the mountains and wild areas just beyond the city and clearly distinguished from the state-sponsored exemplars on the sacrificial registers, became local benefactors and the deities of cults devoted exclusively to the well-being of a specific town or small region. In the stories, the recurring theme of tensions with kings and high officials likewise expresses the particularist, local nature of many of these cults.

Myths of crafts

A final category of myths that date from the early empires is the myths of the patron deities of particular crafts. The *Annals of Wu and Yue* contains the story of the miraculous casting of the swords Ganjiang and Moye 干將莫邪 through a modified form of human sacrifice. In

⁷⁸ Lewis, *The construction of space*, pp. 231–32.

some later versions of this story this involves the actual sacrifice of the caster's wife who then joins sexually with the Furnace God. While the story probably dates to the Han, and belief in some deity of the forge is more than likely, we have no clear Han testimony to that affect.⁷⁹

There is, however, evidence of a deity specifically associated with the casting of iron. The aforementioned *Record of the lands south of Mt. Hua* tells of a shrine dedicated to the Iron Ancestor (Tiezu 鐵祖) on a mountain at the southwest edge of the Chengdu plain. This was an area with much iron ore, where the Zhuo 卓 family described by Sima Qian in his chapter on merchant capitalists had set up a large ironworks under the Qin. A later gazetteer mentions a shrine to the Iron Ancestor still in the vicinity, where the families of ironworkers made frequent sacrifices. The exact identity of the Iron Ancestor remains uncertain, but he was presumably either a mythic inventor of iron casting, or possibly a divinized ancestor of the Zhuo family to whom the birth of the iron industry in the region was attributed.

There is also evidence from the Qin and Han periods of belief in a spirit called the Lacquer King (Qiwang 漆王). Unlike the Iron Ancestor, we are fortunate to have an account of the origins of this spirit. According to the ritual text for eliminating lacquer poisoning that is preserved in the *Recipes for fifty-two ailments* (*Wushi'er bingfang* 五十二病方) discovered at Mawangdui, the Lacquer King was sent to earth by the Lord of Heaven (Tiandi 天帝) to help artisans apply lacquer to weapons and armor. However, he rebelled against his divine master and caused a rash to appear on the craftsmen's skin. To heal the disease, the shaman-doctor smeared pig, chicken or rat feces on a statue of the Lacquer King, hit it with his shoe, threatened to stab it or had the victim spit on it seven times (14 in the case of a woman). These constituted either modes of exorcism (for which the use of animal feces was routine) or forms of punishment that would force the deity to cease his attacks on the skin of the worker.⁸⁰

This account provides more insight into the Lacquer King than is available for the Iron Master. An agent of a celestial ruler, his title indicates a position comparable to that of the kings enfeoffed by the Han emperor. He was credited with the introduction of lacquer technology

⁷⁹ On the story of Ganjiang and Moye, see Lewis, *The flood myths*, pp. 114–15.

⁸⁰ On the Iron Ancestor and Lacquer King, see Anthony Barbieri-Low, *Artisans in early imperial China* (Seattle, 2007), ch. 2, section 6, "Religious beliefs of artisans."

into the world, or at any rate with assuring the successful completion of its production. However, he is also held responsible for a contradiction in the process of producing lacquer, which was an essential and valuable product but which caused a form of contact dermatitis in those who fashioned it. Thus he is described as both rebel and servant, in the manner of Chiyōu, who simultaneously introduces a useful technology and the harm associated with it. This parallel is suggestive, since in funerary texts the Heavenly Emperor appears as another version of the Yellow Emperor, commanding Chiyōu and his weapons to drive away demonic forces that menace the tomb.⁸¹

Conclusion

This chapter has not dealt with all the tales of early China that could be called “myths.” Apart from the numerous historical figures who had entered the realm of myth, I have also omitted, for example, tales of the origin of the world or humanity. I have done so because there are few such tales, and they play a minor role in early Chinese mythology. In fact, the tales of the separation of Heaven and earth, the closest that we possess to an account of a physical creation among the surviving stories from the period, primarily deal with the origins of sacrifice, social hierarchy and the politicized hierarchy of substances in the human body. The only story of the creation of the human race, a late Eastern Han account of the work of Nūwa, is primarily a myth of the origins of social classes, and only secondarily of the physical creation of mankind.⁸² Thus even the tales of physical origins become primarily extensions of the myths of the sage kings, i.e., accounts of the institutions and practices that constitute human society.

The focus of Warring States and early imperial Chinese myths, in fact, directly expressed the nature of religion in the period, even though

⁸¹ Anna Seidel, “Traces of Han religion in funerary texts found in tombs,” in *Dōkyō to shūkyō bunka*, ed., Akizuki Kan'ei (Tokyo, 1987), pp. 28–30.

⁸² Several anthologists of myth have assembled the few accounts of origins, fleshed out with lengthy commentaries, at the beginning of their collections. See Birrell, *Chinese mythology*, pp. 23–39; Rémi Mathieu, *Anthologie des mythes et légendes de la Chine ancienne* (Paris, 1989), pp. 27–41. In his essay on Chinese myth, Bodde discusses no myths except those of origins, including the flood. See Bodde, “Myths of ancient China,” pp. 382–403. On the social focus of what seem like tales of creation, see Bodde, “Myths of ancient China,” pp. 389–94; Lewis, *The construction of space*, pp. 42–46.

the myths are not limited to religion. As has often been noted, Chinese religion throughout its history has been largely embedded within the social structure. Each constituent group of the society has a religious aspect, and the head or heads of that group are religious leaders or chief sacrificers. This was even truer in the Warring States and early empires, prior to the rise of institutional Daoism and Buddhism. The state was a religious or ritual institution, with the king or emperor as the chief sacrificer. Regions and localities had their defining rituals and cults directed by their powerful families, and lineages and households each participated in ancestor worship under the direction of their respective heads.

In the same way, the myths of the sage kings dealt with the issues that concerned those who served the state (or aspired to do so), and the tensions elicited by the political developments of the period or the problem of defining newly emergent roles. The local cults and myths served to define the distinctive customs of the region, and to establish its relations to the central power. These could consist either of resistance (immortals and nature deities) or attempts to establish membership (re-writing local myths in terms of heroes or sage kings recognized in the literary tradition). The deities in tomb art both dramatized the distinctive attributes of the household, with its powerful females, and linked the members of the household to the broader structures of the cosmos. Finally, the few traces that we have of cults related to crafts show that even in the lower reaches of society groups of people organized themselves around the worship of their distinctive deities, and told stories about those deities that both legitimized their activities and highlighted their tensions.