

THE WORLD OF CHINESE MYTHOLOGY: AN INTRODUCTION¹

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Abstract

So far ancient myths recorded in written documents have been the central subject of Chinese myth studies, but more and more myths orally transmitted among contemporary Han people, and myths spreading among other ethnic groups have become part of myth research. This paper provides a concise yet comprehensive survey of these three sources of Chinese mythology. It explores the primary written literature that recorded abundant ancient myths and three features the written records manifest. Second, by scrutinizing two projects as examples, the paper investigates the myths orally transmitted among contemporary Han people. Finally, it examines the rich myth legacies told among other ethnic groups in China.

Keywords: Myth, ancient China, contemporary China, Han people, ethnic minority

The Main Sources of Chinese Mythology

By “Chinese mythology” we mean the body of myths historically recorded and currently transmitted within the present geographic boundaries of China. It should include not only myths transmitted by Han people who form more than 92% of the country’s population, but also those cherished by the other fifty-five ethnic groups living in this vast area. Since almost every ethnic group has its own mythical gods and stories about their creative actions, there is not a systematic, integrated, and homogeneous “Chinese mythology” held and transmitted

¹ The present article is a re-worked version of the first chapter of our *Handbook of Chinese Mythology*. Santa Barbara, Denver and Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2005. Rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

by all the Chinese. Even among Han people, no integrated system of myths exists.

The earliest records of ancient myths can be traced back to about 3,000 years ago in the form of inscriptions, designs, or paintings on shells, bones, and bronzes. In early 21st century, a bronze vessel named “Suigongxu” that was dated to ninth or eighth century BC aroused scholar’s attention and discussion. The inscription on the inside bottom of the vessel consists of 98 Chinese characters, praising the achievements of the mythic hero Yu. It tells the story that Heaven ordered Yu to scatter earth, so Yu went around all the mountains, cutting down the trees in the forests and deepening the seas and rivers to drain all the water on earth into the sea (Li Xueqin 2002). This inscription shows that the technique of recording myth in Chinese characters had become relatively mature nearly 3,000 years ago. Additionally, it illustrates that at least as late as in the middle of the Western Zhou dynasty, the myth about Yu controlling the flood had already been spread, and it had been historicized into a legend about a great hero or a great king in the upper class of society.

But these inscriptions, designs, and paintings on shells, bones, and bronzes only refer to myths concisely or indirectly, sometimes even without using words. This makes the mythological stories they illustrate hard to understand. Therefore, Chinese scholars rely primarily on accounts of myths recorded in later ancient writings in and after the Zhou dynasty (between the eleventh century BC and the third century BC) to study these myths.

In China, there is no sacred canon recording myths, beliefs, or sacred history like the Bible or the Koran, nor were there any literati, troubadours, or shamans who collected myths from oral tradition and compiled them into a systematic and integrated mythology, like the Greek collections attributed to Homer and Hesiod. Rather, myths in ancient China were usually spread in scattered and fragmented forms in various written material. These sources contain information about archaeology, literature, philosophy, geography, history, witchcraft, ethnography, religion, folklore, and so on. Many of them preserve only a few myths, but some of them hold a comparatively large number of myths and thus become treasures of ancient Chinese myths. Among them, *Shan Hai Jing* (The Classic of Mountains and Seas), *Chu Ci* (The Songs of Chu), and *Huainanzi* are thought to be the major repositories of Chinese ancient myth.

Shan Hai Jing

As an important book in ancient Chinese mythology studies, *Shan Hai Jing* describes various mountains and seas, products of the mountains such as plants or medicines, myths, witchcraft, and religion of ancient China. It also records the geography, history, medicine, custom, and ethnicities in ancient times. Some consider the whole book as an encyclopedia of ancient China. Its eighteen chapters can be divided into two main parts: the Classic of Mountains, which consists of five chapters, and the Classic of Seas, which includes thirteen chapters.

There is no widely accepted conclusion as to who wrote *Shan Hai Jing* and when it was written.² But most scholars believe that *Shan Hai Jing* was written by many different authors in different times. As for dating *Shan Hai Jing*, most think this book was written in the period from the middle of the Warring States period to the beginning of the Western Han dynasty (c. fourth century BC to the early period of second century BC).³

The focus of *Shan Hai Jing* is also quite controversial. Some scholars qualify it as a geographic book, because there are abundant descriptions of various mountains, seas, rivers, roads, mines, and local products. Other scholars argue that *Shan Hai Jing* is a book about witchcraft, noting numerous descriptions in the text about gods and shamans' activities, such as how they went up and down sky ladders and communicated between gods and humans, how they produced winds and rains, and how they rescued dead gods with the elixir of immortality. The book also describes many sacrificial products and rituals, and even many shamans' names. Some scholars think *Shan Hai Jing* illustrates how primitive Chinese people in the central plain imagined the outside world (Ito 1990). Some argue that *Shan Hai Jing*, especially the chapters about regions beyond the seas and chapters about the great

² There are more than twenty hypotheses about the author (or authors) and dates of this work. See Ye, Xiao, and Zheng 2004:10, vol. 1.

³ There are still disagreements about the time each chapter was written. Recently, a Chinese linguist, Wang Jianjun, re-examined the question about the time of writing of this work, especially the time of writing of each chapter. Basing his research on pragmatics, he concludes that the Classic of the Great Wilderness, the Classic of Regions within the Seas, and the Classic of Regions beyond the Seas were written perhaps in the Warring States period. He suggests that the Classic of Mountains was mostly written in the Warring States period, but most of it was supplemented by people in the Qin and Han dynasties. He argues that the last chapter Classic of Regions within the Seas was written in the Qin and Han dynasties. See Wang 2000.

wildness, is in fact meant as a description and interpretation of the ancient calendar system and calendrical rites (Liu Zongdi 2001).

Nevertheless, *Shan Hai Jing* is commonly referred to as one of the treasures of Chinese mythology. Many well-known myths can be found in this book in their early versions, such as myths of Nüwa, Xi Wangmu (the Queen Mother of the West), Gun and Yu, Jingwei, Huang Di (or the Yellow Emperor) and Chiyu, and also myths about the sky ladders, the pillars holding up the sky, the three-legged crow carrying the suns, and many others. Usually the plots of these myths were recorded only skeletally and fragmentally. For example, as Chapter 16 describes, “There are ten gods who named Nüwa’s gut. Nüwa’s gut turned into spirits. They took different routes and settled into the wilderness Liguan.” There is no further explanation about Nüwa, the gut spirits, and the mythological event.

But sometimes *Shan Hai Jing* contains complete stories, written in the concise and condensed style that is common in most ancient Chinese records. For instance, a text in chapter 17 states that there was a mountain called Chengdu Zaitian in the great wilderness. A god named Kua Fu lived in it. There were two yellow snakes circling his ears and another two yellow snakes in his hands. He was the grandson of Hou Tu. Kua Fu overvalued his own strength, so he wanted to chase the sun’s shadow and catch the sun at the Yu Valley. He felt very thirsty halfway there, so he decided to drink from the river. Since the river water was not enough for him, he then decided to go to the great marsh. But he died of thirst on his way. Another text in chapter 8 states a similar version in which Kua Fu competed with the sun in a race. He entered into the aureole of the sun. Being very thirsty, he went to drink in the Yellow River and the Wei River, but they were not enough for him. Then he decided to go northwards to the great marsh. He died of thirst before he arrived there. His walking stick transformed into a forest of peach trees.

The story recorded in these texts is concise but complete. Besides the Kua Fu story, there are myths about the battle between Huang Di and Chiyu, the divine bird Jingwei filling up the sea, and the culture heroes⁴ Gun and Yu controlling the flood are also found in complete

⁴ A culture hero is a deity to whom are attributed the early achievements of civilization, such as the discovery of fire, the invention of tools or writing, the origin of agriculture, fishing, and hunting, the domestication of animals, the development of medicine, the founding of ceremonies, rituals, and customs. And he also acts as the

forms. For this reason, it is difficult to agree with the opinionated argument that the narratives in Chinese myths are weak, and there are only few Chinese myths narrating full stories.⁵

Chu Ci

Chu Ci is an ancient poem collection from the end of the Warring States period and the early Western Han dynasty (between the fourth century and the third century BC). It was written mainly by Qu Yuan (ca. 340–278 BC), the earliest celebrated poet in ancient China, as well as several other poets. *Chu Ci* literally means “the songs of Chu.” Originally it was widely used to refer to songs popular in the Chu area (now Hubei and Hunan provinces in southern China) and sung by the Chu people. Because of this collection, compiled by the Han scholar Liu Xiang (ca. 77–6 BC), *Chu Ci* became a title for a specific new poetry style in the Warring States period represented by Qu Yuan. Its style is characterized by strong local flavor: using the Chu dialect, being sung in Chu rhythm, and recording many Chu places and local products. Besides, differing from the folksongs of the central plain at that time, whose style followed an orderly four-character poem, the sentences in Songs of Chu had different lengths. And, a more obvious characteristic of a Chu song is that, in the middle of every sentence (and sometimes at the end), a syllable is used as the mood indicator pronounced as /xi/. Apart from the Chu folk songs, *Chu Ci* was also deeply influenced by Chu customs. Chu people believed in witchcraft and liked to offer sacrifices to gods and ghosts. When they offered sacrifices they often composed music and songs to amuse the gods. Born in Chu area, the poet Qu Yuan was deeply influenced by Chu culture. He not only wrote poems by learning from folk sacrificial songs, but also adopted a lot of Chu myths and legends to compose his poems. Among his poems, *Tianwen* (Questions of Heaven) contains the most myths.

Tianwen was said to have been written by Qu Yuan after he was unjustly exiled from the capital of Chu. When he saw paintings of gods and ancestors on the walls of the ancestral temple of Chu, he wrote

mythic hero who dispels and eliminates the evil gods and monsters, clears up the chaos, as establishes the general order of social life on the earth.

⁵ Examples of such argument could be found in Plaks 1996:40–48.

this poem on the wall to express his indignation and doubt about reality and the universe. The poem asks 172 questions related to popularly spread myths, legends, and pieces of history. Among them are many myths, including myths about Gun and Yu restraining the great flood; Yi shooting down the surplus suns; Gong Gong destroying the mountain which supported the heavens; and myths about the Kunlun Mountain, Zhulong (literally meaning “Torch Dragon”), the eight poles supporting the sky, the toad on the moon, and the like. *Tianwen* sometimes provides rich details about some ancient myths, such as the Gun myth.

If Gun was not able to control the flood,
 Why did the others recommend him?
 They all said: “Don’t worry!
 Why not let him try and then see whether he can restrain it?”
 When the sparrow hawk and turtle joined together (and offered strategies),
 Why did Gun accept their suggestions?
 He obeyed everyone’s plea to stop the flood,
 Why did the Supreme Divinity kill him?
 His corpse was abandoned at Yushan,
 Why did it not rot for three years?
 When his belly was opened up, his son Yu emerged,
 How could this miraculously happen? (...)

Many unique details of the Gun myth in this text are absent in other writings. For instance, it states that when Gun began to try to control the flood, the sparrow hawk and turtle appeared and joined together. Scholars infer that Gun might have accepted some strategies suggested by the sparrow hawk and turtle as he started his work (Yuan 1996 [1979]:297–8). Other plots of the Gun myth recorded in this poem are also unique, such as Gun being detained at Yushan, or Yu Mountain, after his death, and not allowed to go west. He manages, taking on the image of a yellow bear, to surmount those steep peaks to find shamans to help him come back to life.

However, since this poem was written in the form of questions, stories in the poem usually appear in fragments. Therefore, it is almost impossible to derive a full myth from it. Sometimes the questions were written in such a vague and succinct way that it is difficult to understand what questions Qu Yuan was actually asking.⁶ This shortcoming limits the role of *Tianwen* in Chinese myth studies.

⁶ For example, in one part of this poem, Qu Yuan asks, “S/he ascended the throne to be the ruler, / Who guided and respected him/her? / Nüwa has her body, and

Huainanzi

Huainanzi (ca. 139 BC) is a book written and compiled in the beginning of the Western Han dynasty by Liu An, the King of Huainan, and many of his aides. Liu An is said to have enjoyed reading books and playing music. He wanted to accomplish something beneficial to others and become a legacy. So he gathered thousands of literary scholars and alchemists to write *Huainanzi*, which is attributed to the Eclectics, a school of thought that combined various philosophies and flourished during the pre-Qin period.

Huainanzi preserves many ancient myths, legends, and historical accounts. The myths that it contains include the following: Nüwa repairs the broken sky; Yi shoots down the extra nine suns; Chang'e steals the elixir of immortality and flees to the moon; Yu controls the flood; Gong Gong butts into Mt. Buzhou and destroys the sky pillar and the cords holding up the earth. Some of these myths are recorded only in *Huainanzi* and some of them provide important contrasts to other ancient writings. Therefore, many of its records are often cited in studies of Chinese myths. Generally speaking, myths in *Huainanzi* are usually complete. Comparing to myths recorded in *Shan Hai Jing* and "Tianwen", which are usually recorded fragmentally, myths in *Huainanzi* are often written in a more complete form, with detailed story plots. For example, the myth of the goddess Nüwa in *Huainanzi* (Ch. 6) states that:

In remote antiquity, the four poles supporting the sky collapsed, the land of the nine divisions of ancient China broke up. The sky could not completely cover the earth, and the earth could not totally carry the world. Fires raged fiercely and did not go out. Floodwater ran everywhere and did not subside. The fierce beasts devoured kind people, and violent birds seized the old and the weak. Nüwa then melted stones of five different colors to patch the sky; cut the legs off of a huge tortoise and set them up to support the four extremities of the sky; slaughtered the Black Dragon to save the people; and collected ashes of reeds to stop the flood. After that the sky got renewed, the four sky pillars were set up again, the flood was stopped, and the nine divisions became peaceful (Fig. 4).

This text narrates a complete event: the setting, the reasons of the goddess' actions, the process of the solution, and the result. It presents

whoever created her?" These two questions, especially the first one, are puzzling. Scholars wonder whether the first question relates to Nüwa, and if it relates to her they still don't know what it means.



4. “Nüwa mends the broken sky,” drawing by Xiao Yuncong,
17th century.

a precious record of an ancient Nüwa myth and thus is often cited by researchers.

Three Features of the Written Records

When we examine the written records of ancient myths in the Chinese language, three features seem to be obvious and often are argued by scholars:

1. Scattered and Fragmented. Myths in ancient China are preserved in various written accounts and usually in a fragmented form only. They were not collected and organized into a single, systematic mythology of China. This phenomenon is usually taken as evidence of the scarcity and underdevelopment of Chinese myths. Some scholars explain that this is because Chinese people pay more attention to real life than to the supernatural world. When criticizing the false impression that China has a deficiency of myths, Yuan Ke pointed out three major reasons that caused this characteristic. The first reason comes from the lack of gifted poets like Homer and Hesiod to collect various ancient Chinese myths from oral tradition and retell them in an eloquent style. The second reason is that, in ancient times, Chinese writings are usually in “unwieldy and ideographic forms,” not yet sophisticated enough to express the complexities of Chinese myths. And the third reason is the negative attitude of ancient Chinese scholars (especially the Confucians) toward the miraculous and marvelous elements in myths (Yuan 1993:xi–xii). In contrast to the common idea that this characteristic is a disadvantage for the records of Chinese myths, Yuan Ke thinks it has some advantages. Chinese myths have not suffered what Yuan Ke describes as a complete reworking by literati and others, like Homer’s and Hesiod’s work, and thus remain in a more or less “pristine condition.” Additionally, they are “more reliable documentary evidence of a primitive and archaic oral tradition in the world of myth” (ibid. xii).

2. Historicized. This point of early myth records has been recognized by many scholars. Zhong Jingwen and Yang Lihui have examined the history of myth study in ancient China, pointing out that the historicizing or rationalizing of myths is prevalent during the 2,000 years before the fall of the Qing dynasty. In ancient China, when an intellectual discovered something strange or incredible in ancient historical or literary texts, they would remove or rationalize such findings.

An anecdote about Confucius (551 BC–479 BC) states that when he was asked whether the one-legged mythical monster Kui was really “one-legged” (*yi zu* in Chinese) as it was popularly said, he replied that the popular saying was not right. According to him, Kui was actually the master of music for the sage king Shun. He adjusted the tune and harmonized the music and thus greatly contributed to the education and governance of society. So, Confucius interpreted: if an emperor had an excellent official like Kui, one was enough (*yi zu* can also be explained as “one is enough”). By this way, Confucius skillfully dissolved this myth and rationalized the Kui story. He turned Kui, the one-legged mythical monster, into a virtuous and talented historical official. Another example comes from Luo Mi, a scholar in the Southern Song dynasty. When he wrote a book of history, he interpreted the myth of Nüwa repairing the broken sky as a historical event in which the ancient emperor Nüwa put down a rebellion made by one of her dukes. After this rationalization, ancient scholars would then interpret these myths to be accounts of the history of China (Zhong and Yang 1996).

However, recently some Chinese scholars have put forward different ideas. They think that the historicizing of ancient Chinese myths is a presumption or hypothesis made by Chinese scholars themselves. When Chinese scholars began to build a modern discipline of Chinese mythology at the beginning of twentieth century, they were deeply influenced by Western scholarship and wanted to look for the subject of mythology in historical documents. Thus, there are arguments that these scholars changed history into myths. In the viewpoint of some scholars today, there is no such thing as the historicizing of myths. Instead, there was the mythologizing of history.⁷

3. Rewritten as Literature and Philosophy. Examples of this can be found in Daoist writers, especially in the book *Zhuangzi*. When the famous Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (or Zhuang Zhou, ca. 369–286 BC “Zi” is an ancient respectful address for a learned man)

⁷ For example, Chang Jincang argues that the mythological heroes like Gun, Yu, and Yi were all heroes in ancient Chinese history. They were mythologized into semi-gods during the Warring States period (Chang 2000). While Liu Zongdi insists that the myth about ten suns living on a tree named Fusang in east sea and being carried by the three-legged crows is in fact a historical fact in ancient China. The Fusang tree was a sundial, the ten suns around it were actually the motion of the sun. So, he thinks, the myth was produced later by misinterpreting the real fact of ancient calendar system (Liu Zongdi 2001:33–34).

appropriated ancient myths for the convenience of his writings, he decorated them with many descriptions and filled them with his Daoist ideas. An example of this is the Hundun myth. Hundun is a god who has no openings on his body whatsoever. The gods Shu and Hu, hoping to pay a debt of gratitude to Hundun, tried to chisel openings into Hundun's body. They chiseled one hole each day. After seven days of their work, Hundun died. Like many other myths or legends appearing in this classic *Zhuangzi*, the Hundun story has clearly been reshaped by Zhuangzi to illustrate his Daoist philosophy. The two meddling gods Shu and Hu are used to symbolize the artificial order (time and direction), while Hundun symbolizes the primeval chaos, which is a natural, unspecified, unified whole. In the story the artificial order destroyed the natural and harmonic whole. In this example, Zhuangzi used a very simple story to express his idea that one should respect nature and should not insist on doing something that is not natural. He stressed that politicians should let events take their own course, and they should not intervene with this natural order without understanding it completely.

Myths Orally Transmitted Among Contemporary Han People

Textual analysis of ancient written recordings has long been the traditional method of Chinese mythologists. Though this method of literary text research is necessary and beneficial to Chinese mythology, it can be abused and cause misleading conclusions.⁸ Today more and more Chinese mythologists consciously use a synthetic method to study myth by combining ancient written texts with material from archeological findings and oral tradition.

⁸ In his article, Derk Bodde pointed out the problems in ancient records of Chinese myth, and he criticized the textual analyses approach Chinese scholars adopted: since myths were recorded in fragments, and the texts full of homophones and characters easily confused with one another, Chinese scholars have been committed themselves to seek for new identifications. The identification was based on such arguments: character X of text A seems to be character Y of text B; character Y seems to be character Z of text C, therefore, they concluded that character X of text A was equal to character Z of text C. Bodde suggested that if this approach is excessively used, "it can lead to quite startling results" (Bodde 1961:377). Yang Lihui also discusses the shortcoming of the textual research, and she further suggests the advantages of utilizing myths orally transmitted as the data (Yang 1997:225-229).

The first concern for myths collected from oral tradition can be traced back to the early ages of the twentieth century.⁹ But the first large-scale collection of myths orally transmitted in modern China occurred during the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁰ However, so far the largest project of myth collecting from oral tradition in modern China is the national project *San Tao Jicheng* or the Three Collections of Folk Literature.

The San Tao Jicheng Project

Formally begun in 1984, this project aims to be a general investigation of Chinese folk literature. It is managed by the Ministry of Culture, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, and the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, and was carried out by the Society for the Study of Folk Literature and Art, which is now called the Chinese Folk Literature and Art Society. The goal of the project is not exclusively to collect myths, though. It consists of three collections: stories (including myths, legends, fairy tales, jokes, and numerous other forms), folk songs and rhymes, and proverbs. The participants of this project first collected and transcribed these stories, folksongs, and proverbs in villages, then compiled part of the material into a county collection.

⁹ In as early as 1920s, the eminent folklorist Zhong Jingwen gathered myths, legends, and folktales and edited them into volumes. In the 1930s Zhong wrote several articles about the myths orally transmitted in modern China. He pointed out that except for those myths that are recorded in ancient documents, most Chinese myths are preserved in later literature and in living folk traditions through oral tellings of myths in various contexts. Studying these “living myths” will greatly benefit the study of sociology, folklore, religion, ethnic studies, and cultural anthropology. Instead of relying on data from ancient written documents, Zhong used the myths he collected or that others collected from the oral tradition to study Panhu myths, floods myths, and the myths of origins of plants (Zhong 1985).

¹⁰ At that time the new government of the People’s Republic of China organized many scholars and officials to investigate the society and history of Chinese ethnic groups in order to understand their cultures, identify their ethnic distinctions, and benefit the government’s administration of these areas. The investigation of ethnic groups was widely carried out throughout the country, with researchers collecting and compiling a large amount of data about the cultures and histories of Chinese minorities. These data include population, language, economy, social organization, political system, folk custom, trade, communication, and many others. Among them were myths collected from the oral traditions of these people. Unfortunately, these rich collections have seldom been seriously used to study Chinese myth until recently.

These county collections were then compiled into volumes for each province.¹¹

In the process of conducting this research, many orally transmitted myths have been collected and published. These myths were mainly gathered from the Han people, but some also spread to the vast areas inhabited by other ethnic groups living in China. For example, as a result of the project, in Huzhou, Zhejiang province, more than twenty myths, all from Han people, were selected for the district's volume of stories. In Sichuan province, a book titled *Selected Myths from Sichuan Province* was published in 1992. This book contains more than 120 myths and various versions that are spread among ten ethnic groups in contemporary Sichuan province. Among them, over ninety Han myths and versions have been collected. Others have been gathered from Tibetan, Yi, Lisu, Qiang, Tujia, Miao, Hui, Naxi, and Mongol people (Hou and He 1992).

Some Chinese mythologists pay much attention to these myths collected from oral tradition, especially from *San Tao Jicheng* collections to study Chinese myths comparatively. For example, Zhong Jingwen studied the brother-sister marriage myth using material collected for *San Tao Jicheng* (Zhong 1994[1990]:223–247). Using data that he and his research team collected from Han people in the central plain area,¹² as well as myths from this area collected in the San Tao Jicheng project, Zhang Zhenli, compared these recently collected myths with ancient ones (Zhang Zhenli 1991). Yang Lihui used more than 500 versions of stories about Nüwa and the brother-sister marriage, mainly from the San Tao Jicheng project, but also from her own fieldwork in Han communities in modern Hebei, Henan, and Gansu provinces in her book *The Cult of Nüwa: Myths and Beliefs in China* (Yang 1997:82–120).

¹¹ From 1984 to 1990, more than 2 million people have been involved in this huge national project, and over 7 million proverbs, 3 million folk songs and rhymes, and nearly 2 million stories have been collected (Liu Xicheg 2006:711). The whole project was accomplished in 2004.

¹² Zhang Zhenli, a professor of Henan University, sponsored a research team in 1983 and investigated the myths in oral tradition and relevant customs in the central plain region of China (mainly Henan Province). In 1987 they compiled a source book titled “The Collection of Classical Myths Transmitting in Contemporary Central Plain” (In Chinese. Zhang and Cheng 1987). In this book, more than 100 myths were contained.

The Project of “Myths Orally Transmitted in Contemporary China”

In 2010, a new research project titled “Myths Orally Transmitted in Contemporary China: An Ethnographic Study of Four Communities of Han People” was finished by Yang Lihui and her graduate students. Based on long lasting field studies in four Han communities located respectively in Chongqing City, Shaanxi, Henan and Shanxi provinces, the project aims at exploring questions rarely investigated by Chinese mythologists and sinologists before: How do myths function in specific communities in today’s China? What roles do myths play in people’s social life? How about their functions and meanings? Who tell myths and how do they perceive myth? How do myths change in situated contexts? How do the dramatic social changes in contemporary China influence the transmission of myth?

The outcome of this project is fruitful. It manifests various features of myths among today’s Han people from a new perspective.¹³

Functions and Meanings

The functions and meanings of myths orally transmitted among contemporary Han people are diverse. On one hand, those myths that are delivered in belief settings and religious ceremonies still function as sacred “sociological charter” (Malinowski 1926). On the other hand, orally transmitted myths have many other functions and meanings as well. They are widely used in people’s foundation of a worldview or as an effective source to strengthen social life. They also play a role in education and entertainment, in strengthening individual and collective identities, and in striving for political and commercial benefits. For individual myth tellers, the functions and meanings of myth seem much more situated and varied. For example, in her investigation of the two myth-telling performances in a Renzu (literally means “human ancestors”) Temple festival in Huaiyang (Fig. 5), Yang Lihui found that myth-telling becomes a crucial way for myth tellers to express themselves and to build their own social relationship (see Yang’s article in this collection). In Sigu village in the City of Chongqing, telling the myth about Yu controlling the flood is a notable medium for people to chat with each other and at the same time, to manifest their belief in Yu as a great cultural hero. In Ankang area in Shaanxi province,

¹³ For more details and discussions about the project, please see Yang Lihui, Zhang Xia, Li Hongwu, Xu Fang, and Tong Yunli, 2010, in press.



5. Statue of Fuxi, Renzu Temple, Huaiyang, Henan province.

myth tellers understand and use myths differently according to their personal interests: as tools to understand history or as resources to develop local tourism; as chances to promote one's social status or just for entertainment. In Huaiyang, the functions of Renzu myth changed historically and considerably since the 1930s. Before 1949 myths about Renzu were traditionally used to form the foundation of social and moral principles in local communities. Since the 1990s, however, for the purpose of developing local economy, Renzu myth is reinterpreted as a proof of the long history of this area and utilized by the government as a local cultural brand. Under such circumstance, myth becomes important rhetoric capital for claiming and gaining social and political resource and power.

Creative Bearers, Passive Bearers of Myth Traditions and Their Conceptions of Myth

Myth tellers play significant roles in maintaining myth traditions. By obtaining relevant knowledge and telling myths to others, they pass on myths from generation to generation and spread myths to many places. Myth tellers endow meaning and life to myths. Among contemporary Han people, myth tellers are not only confined to those talented storytellers, singers or shamans. Rather, this group can involve every ordinary person in a community. For instance, in Renzu Temple festival at Huaiyang, almost every pilgrim can tell brother-sister-marriage myth. However, this doesn't mean people homogeneously grasp knowledge of myth. Those people who have richer knowledge, are willing to tell myths, and usually able to deliver myths completely and vividly can be identified as "creative bearer of myth tradition." While those who preserve less mythological knowledge, are reluctant to tell myths, and can only tell myths in incomplete forms are "passive bearers of myth tradition" (Yang and An 2008 [2005]:61). Nevertheless, both of these people are important in transmitting and preserving myth traditions.

It is noticeable that in many communities of today's Han, tour guides more and more play active role in transmitting and reconstructing myth traditions. In Renzu temple in Huaiyang, for example, many tour guides work everyday to spread Renzu myth and related local knowledge to tourists (Fig. 6). Because they have certifications that authorized by local government, and their narratives usually contain more information stemming from both oral tradition and written literature, their storytelling are often thought more "authentic" by local people.



6. A tour guide in Renzu Temple tells Renzu myths to tourists and ethnographers, Huaiyang, Henan province.

Myth tellers often hold different conceptions of myth. In Ankang, for instance, some myth tellers consider myth as real historical events, while some attribute it to fancy fiction to entertain people in leisure time. In Huaiyang, most pilgrims believe the brother-sister-marriage myth is true and sacred, but an old local intellectual who tells this myth extremely vivid simply concludes it as “totally nonsense.”

Occasions for Myth-telling

Among contemporary Han the occasions for myth-telling vary from a solemn religious ritual to a casual setting, or even an amusing context. For example, in Sigu village, the well known storyteller Wei Xiande told the myth about Yu controlling the flood when it was heavily raining. In Ankang, myths about Fuxi and Nüwa can be told in a wedding ceremony or a funeral, for New Year’s entertainment, during farming time, and so forth. In Huaiyang, the occasions changed historically in the past 70 years. In the 1930s, myhtelling was, to most extent, a natural part of everyday life. People did it whenever they wanted: in a Renzu temple, on the square outside the temple, at the dining table, in the farmland, or when chatting with friends or educating children. During the Cultural Revolution Movement (1966–1976), myth-telling disappeared from the local public space. It was denounced as “feudal superstitions,” but still persisted in some private settings. Over the past 30 years, along with the State’s more tolerant cultural policy, Renzu myth obtained a more open and wide performing space.

Means of Transmitting

The project reveals that, on the one hand, oral transmission is still the main mean of spreading myth in contemporary Han people. Myth-telling is primarily accomplished by a direct face-to-face communication within a group. But on the other hand, the means are becoming more and more diverse. In Ankang area, for instance, written literature and mass media are increasingly playing an important role in transmitting myths. The ethnographer Li Hongwu predicts that mass media will become a crucial way of diffusing myth in the future. Tong Yunli finds that in Huaiyang, broadcast, TV, and films work together and influenced to a large extent local people’s conceptions about Renzu belief and myth. The situation is more clearly shown by an investigation made by Yang Lihui among her young undergraduate students in Beijing Normal University in 2010. Among 103 students born after

1980s, 90% are Han. When asked “What are the main mean(s) for you to know Chinese myths?” all of them chose multiple answers. Among the various means, reading and face-to-face oral communication (including teaching in classes, narrating by parents or friends, or guided tours) are the most popular ways. Watching TV and films is the third chief means for them to become familiar with myths.

Myths in Other Ethnic Groups

The Richness of Myth in China's Ethnic Groups

Many Western readers think China is a single-nationality state and Chinese mythology is equally unified, integrated, and homogenous. In addition, because the Han people make up the majority of the population in China, when some Western scholars introduce Chinese myths they usually discuss only the myths of the Han people (especially the ancient written ones). But in fact, China has 56 ethnic groups including the Han. China is rich not only in numbers of myths, but also in types, themes and motifs. Almost every ethnic group has its own body of myths. There are, for example, quite a few types explaining the origins of humans.

1. *Humans were made by gods.* This type has many subtypes, such as: (1) Gods created humans from mud. This subtype can be found in Han, Kazak, and many other ethnic groups. (2) Humans were made from carvings on wood. This type of myth can be found in Man, Lahu, and others. (3) Humans were made by combining many plants together. A myth spread in Tujia people states that the goddess Yiluo created human beings, using bamboo as their bones, lotus leaf as the liver, cowpea as their gut, radish as their flesh, and a gourd as their head. Then she poked seven apertures into the head (two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, and one mouth) and blew air into them, and after that the human was alive. (4) Gods created humans by cutting a rein into pieces and then scattering them everywhere; these pieces transformed into human beings. This type of myth can be found in the Baima Tibetan ethnic group in Sichuan province.

2. *Humans were sown from seeds.* A myth told by the Zou people in Taiwan states that a god sowed the seed of humans into the earth, and later humans grew.

3. *Humans were spat out from gods'/goddess' mouths.* In Uighur people, it is popularly said that a goddess inhaled the dust and air of the universe and then spat out the sun, the moon, the earth, stars, and humans.

4. *Humans were made from sound.* A myth spread among the Miao people in Yunnan province describes that after the huge flood, only a mother and her son were left. A god turned the mother into a girl to marry the son. When the son found the girl he married was none other than his mother, he ran into the wilderness and shouted. His mother followed him and also shouted. Where their voices sounded, humans emerged.

5. *Humans came from the shadows of deities.* Humans were made by a god and a goddess projecting their shadows onto the earth. This type of myth can be found among the Miao and other groups.

6. *Humans were created by two gods touching their knees together.* This myth, told by Yamei people in Taiwan, states that the first human couple was created this way.

7. *Humans were transformed from animals.* Among the Yao people in Guangxi province, a popular myth explains that the great goddess Miluotuo carried a beehive home and refined the bees several times a day. After nine months, the bees changed into humans.

8. *Humans were transformed from plants.* A creation myth of the De'ang people, Yunnan province, describes that 102 tea leaves went around and around in the air for 30,000 years and then metamorphosed into fifty-one young men and fifty-one girls.

There are many other types, themes, and motifs concerning the origin of humans in various ethnic groups, such as a first human originating from a cave, a gourd or a huge stone; humans were procreated by animals or plants; humans were born after a man married a god, or after a man married an animal; humans were procreated by the sun; humans were made from a corpse of a divine creature, and so on (Ma 1996:1-3).

Flood Myths

Most types and themes of Chinese myths are not confined to only one or two ethnic groups. They have usually been transmitted in several ethnic groups. Flood myths widely spread in 43 ethnic groups. These myths have different formal characteristics in different ethnic groups. Based on his study of over 400 versions of flood myths, Chen Jianxian,

a modern Chinese mythologist, divided the flood myths in China into four principal subtypes (Chen 1996).

1. *The sibling ancestors received miraculous omens or instructions from gods*

The main plot of this type states that a kind brother and his sister receive a prophecy from a god or goddess that there will be a destructive flood. Usually they are told to watch for omens of the flood (the eyes of a stone tortoise or a stone lion will turn red, a mortar will produce water, etc.). Because of the instruction or warning, the siblings survive the flood by hiding in the stomach of the stone tortoise or the stone lion. In order to recreate human beings, the siblings have to marry each other, but before that, they divine to decide whether they should do so (if they throw two pieces of millstones separately from two mountains but the two pieces still touch when they reach the bottom; or they create fires on two different mountains but the smoke twists together). After their marriage, the sister gives birth to humans, or they create humans by molding mud. Chen found that although this type of flood myth exists among the Bai, Man, and Hui peoples, it mainly occurs in Han myths. Therefore, he presumes that this type originated from Han people and has been transmitted primarily by Hans.

2. *The Thunder God's Revenge induced the flood*

This subtype states that two brothers, the Thunder God and the ancestor of humans (his name differs in different texts), often quarreled with each other. One day, the human ancestor caught the Thunder God. But when he went out, his two young children (a brother and his sister; their names differ in different texts) set the god free. Before the Thunder God went back to heaven, he sent the siblings one of his teeth (or sometimes a seed of a gourd or pumpkin) and told them there would be a huge flood and they should do what they were told. When the flood came, humans were destroyed except the brother and sister who hid in a big gourd that grew from the seed sent by the Thunder God. In order to recreate humans, the siblings divined (their methods are various, and some are similar to the methods mentioned in the first subtype above) and then married. The sister later gave birth to a gourd. They cut the gourd into pieces and the pieces turned into humans. Alternately, they opened the gourd and from it came the ancestors of many ethnic groups. This type of myth can be found in fifteen ethnic groups such as the Miao, Yao, Buyi, Dong, Gelao,

Ha'ni, Han, Maonan, Mulao, Qiang, She, Shui, Tujia, Zhuang, and Li, but it is mainly transmitted by Miao people. Chen presumed that this type might have begun in Miao regions, especially in southeast Guizhou province. From there it was diffused to other ethnic peoples in different regions.

3. *The only surviving man sought the Heavenly Maiden*

According to this subtype, the human ancestor plowed fields with his siblings. But after every day of tilling, the plowed field became uncultivated again during the night. They found out that a wild boar had done this, but when the siblings wanted to kill the boar, the human ancestor stopped them. As a reward, he received a prophecy from a god (disguised as the wild boar) that there would be flood. He survived the flood by hiding into a skin-covered drum (or a wooden box). He went to heaven and wanted to marry a heavenly maiden. He passed many tests and finally married the girl. They gave birth to three sons who became the ancestors of the Tibetan, Naxi and Bai peoples. This type can be found in Yi, Naxi, Tibetan, Pumi, De'ang, Dulong, Lahu, and Mongol, but is mainly told among Yi and Naxi groups.

4. *The brother and sister plowed the wilderness*

This subtype is a combination of the above three types. A myth of this type collected from Gelao people (western Guizhou province, Southwest China) states that two brothers plowed a wild field with their sister. But every day they found the plowed field had become uncultivated during the night. They found that an old man, who in fact was a god, had done this. The god told them that there would be a flood, and the elder brother (who was unkind) should take a stone boat and the kind young brother and the sister should hide in a huge gourd. As a result, the younger brother and the sister were the only survivors of the flood. They divined to learn whether they should marry to recreate humans (by the similar ways mentioned above). After the verification, they got married and later gave birth to a son. The son married a heavenly maiden and they became the ancestors of humans. This type spread mainly among Yi (Fig. 7) and Miao peoples, so that Chen deduced that the variants had been formed from a mix of the different types of flood myths of the Yi and Miao peoples.

According to Chen's conclusions from his impressive research, flood myths in China are quite rich not only in amount but also in forms and types. The subtypes show different social lives and cultural char-



7. Yi shamans (*beima*) chant the brother-sister-marriage myth in a ritual of offering sacrifice to a sacred tree.

acteristics of different ethnic groups, they reflect ethnic identity, and illustrate the cultural communication and interfusion between ethnic groups in China (*ibid.*). Though his classification and denomination of the subtypes need further analysis¹⁴, Chen's research provides a good example of how a type of myth spreads among many ethnic groups in China, how these myths relate to or differ from each other in different ethnic groups, and how they are transformed to fit the social life of different ethnicities and cultures.

Occasions of Myth-telling in Ethnic groups

Similar to the occasions of myth-telling among Han people, myths in other ethnic groups are also told either in everyday life or during special ritual ceremonies. Maonan and Li ethnic groups in southern China, for example, tell myths as they tell other oral stories, and not necessarily told in specific rituals or at special occasions. Anyone can tell myths and there is no strict method for myth tellers to learn the art of professional myth-telling (Meng 1990:157–8).

Nevertheless, in her inspirational book about “living myths” in Chinese ethnic groups, Meng Huiying, a folklorist who specializes in the oral tradition and folk belief of Chinese ethnic groups, points out that the typical “living myths” rely on rituals and other special occasions where myths are told in heightened performances. Meng divided the rituals in which myths are told into four types according to their different functions: rituals offering sacrifices to heaven or ancestors, funeral rites, weddings, and rituals for daily activities such as rites of passage, praying for children, or building a new house, and so forth. Examples for the first type of ritual come from the Naxi and Achang peoples. When Naxi people offer sacrifices to the sky, according to tradition, they will invite a *Dongba* (shaman) to preside over the ritual. In the ritual, this *Dongba* will chant classic texts (*jing*), which tell about the origin of their ethnic group and about how this world was created by their ancestor Renli'en. The Achang people divide their ancestors' souls into two types: *Dajiagui* (meaning “big family ghost”) and *Xiaoji-agui* (“little family ghost”). When offering sacrifices to *Dajiagui*, the sha-

¹⁴ Scholar Lu Yilu admitted that Chen's classification is the most comprehensive one up to now, but she argued that his denominations of these types are not very proper (Lu 2002:16–17).

man will chant a creation epic that lasts one day and one night. The epic is *Zhepama and Zhemima*. Zhepama and Zhemima were the first human couple in Achang mythology and belief. The epic describes how the sky and earth were created by these two ancestors, and how they created humans and cultural artifacts in this world. By chanting the creation epic in this ritual, people ask for blessings from their divine ancestors. At the same time, this epic reminds everyone in the community that they are children of the same ancestors. Thus, the mythic epic can be used to maintain the tradition and bring together the members of this ethnic community (ibid. 159–163).

Funeral rites are the second type of ritual in which myths are told. In some ethnic groups, myths are told in funeral rites. In the Achang ethnic group, for example, a person is believed to have three souls. After death, one soul will be sent into the grave and one soul will be sent to the ancestors. The third soul will remain in the home to be worshipped. The Achang believe that only a shaman can properly arrange the three souls. After someone dies, the family will invite all members of the community to attend a funeral, and will request a shaman to come and chant the classic texts. Before the shaman arranges for the souls, he will chant for an entire day. What he chants includes two parts. The first part is concerned with the telling of the creation epic *Zhepama and Zhemima*, the first couple, who created this world and the first humans. Thus the ritual instructs the souls and the audience who they are and who their ancestors are. In the second part of this ritual the shaman chants the history of the nomadic movement of the ancestors, which aims to tell the soul how to travel to meet the ancestors. So the creation epic chanted in funeral rites directs the dead soul toward the ancestors and reminds the living that death is not terrible, it is a way to leave this world and live in another land with the divine ancestors. In this way the creation epic consoles the dead and the living, and builds a bridge to communicate between the dead and the living (ibid. 164).

A third ritual in which myths appear is the wedding. Researcher Lan Ke reported how creation myths were told in a wedding ceremony in 1974 in a Jingpo village, Yunnan province, southwest China. The ceremony continued from morning to night with feast, music, and dance. When evening came, the singing and dancing stopped, and guests went into the host's bamboo house. In the center of the house, people gathered and sat around a fire pit, then in a very solemn atmosphere, the *Jaiwa* (shaman) chanted an epic named *Munau*

Jaiwa.¹⁵ This epic mainly consists of creation myths and flood myths. The myths tell that in remote antiquity a flood destroyed the world. Only a girl and her young brother survived by hiding in a wooden drum. They were married following the suggestions of the Mountain God. Then they gave birth to a baby which could not eat or sleep and cried all day. The Mountain God cut the baby into eight parts. Four parts became four men and the others became four women. Later they became the ancestors of some ethnic groups. Among them, the fourth one became the ancestor of the Jingpo people, who established the rule that from then on Jingpo people should not marry a sibling or a person with the same family name, but choose husbands and wives from certain other clans. This kind of myth told in rituals serves to confirm traditional history and remind people of the rules for marriage (Lan 1986).

Other instances in which people tell myths include rituals such as praying for children, rituals when building a new house, rites of passage, or offering sacrifices to gods. For example, before the middle of the twentieth century, Wa people in Yunnan province hunted for human heads to offer to a great god Muiji, who created the sky and earth, and to Xi'aobu (the Corn God). Every March and April before sowing, people of the same clan went out to hunt for heads. The resulting heads would be placed on altars, and the shaman would lead everyone of the clan into worshipping them. In the ritual, the shaman would chant the creation myth Sigangli. In the remote past the great god and human ancestor Muiji had ordered one god to create the earth and another to create the sky, the sun, and the moon. Muiji created animals, plants, and humans. He put humans into a stone cave and led a small bird to peck the stone cave until it opened. The first human to come out belonged to the Wa people, followed by Han, Lahu, Dai, and Dan. Gradually the Wa people learned to settle down, to speak, and to build houses. They asked Muiji for seeds and Muiji ordered Xi'aobu to be the corn god. But when the Wa people planted the seeds they did not sprout, and when the harvest time came, a flood

¹⁵ It seems that here "Munau Jaiwa" should be "Labau Jaiwa." According to an ethnologist and expert in Jingpo language and culture, Xiao Jiacheng, "Jaiwa" could mean "poem" or "creation poem," and also means "shaman" in the Jingpo language, "Labau" means history. Labau Jaiwa is a well known creation epic in Jingpo ethnic people, while "Munau Jaiwa" is a big sacrificial ritual in which the creation epic Labau Jaiwa is often chanted (Xiao 1992:1-25).

destroyed the village. And then Muyiji told the Wa that they should offer human heads as sacrifices to the gods, and after they did this it would always rain during planting and growing, and there would be no more flood during harvest. Later the Wa moved to Yunnan province where they still live today in and the custom of using heads to offer sacrifices to Muyiji and the corn god was transmitted over time (ibid.) and could still be found in the central Wa area in Yunnan until the middle of the 1950s (Li Zixian 1991:197–8).

Myth Tellers in Ethnic Groups

When discussing myth tellers, scholars usually emphasize the importance of professional shamans. This is true to some degree, but there are others as well. Below, three kinds of myth performers in the ethnic groups will be discussed: shaman, storyteller or singer, and the common person. It should be noted that these three kinds of myth tellers also exist among the Han people.

Shamans

Shamans play an extremely important part in preserving and transmitting traditional knowledge. Myth-telling is often part of the shaman's work. In many places, they are seen as most knowledgeable about myths. In the postscript of his book *Mythological Stories of the Manchu People*, Fu Yingren, a Manchu folklore collector and formerly a shaman himself in Heilongjiang province of northeast China, introduces the sources of the myths and sacred stories about gods that he gathered, and also the importance of the shaman in transmitting knowledge about gods. He writes that years ago, when shamanism was still popular, shamans were not allowed to tell others at will their knowledge about gods' origins and achievements. This could only be done when a shaman was very old, and he/she then told these sacred stories to his/her favorite students. When the old shaman taught these stories, he/she and the students must burn incense, wash their hands, and gargle. The students must kneel down to listen. After the era of the Republic of China, this strict rule was gradually broken, and more and more people learned Manchu myths. Fu himself became a shaman when he was fifteen years old, but he did not succeed. However, as a former shaman, he was later able to inquire into many myths and mythological stories. He came to know so much about these stories that even older shamans often learned from him. The stories he

compiled into his book were all told by shamans who were his relatives (Fu 1985:133–4).

A talented Yi folklorist Bamo Qubumo has written about the learning experience and performance development of a skilled epic performer of Nuosu people, a subgroup of the Yi ethnic people in southeast China's Sichuan province. Qumo Yynuo was born into a professional *Bimo* (shaman) family in 1977. He began to learn to perform rituals from his father when he was seven years old. When he was fourteen, he achieved expert status and became a master of ceremonies by himself. At age fifteen, he formally began to study the *kenre* (a kind of verbal dueling) tradition and mastered the *kenre* skill. He attended many ceremonies where he chanted epics in the *kenre* form, and gradually became a famous and skilled epic performer. Among his knowledge about Yi epics, the *Hnewo* epic tradition is significant. *Hnewo* can be chanted in weddings, funerals, and soul-sending ceremonies in the specific narrative form of *kenre*. It has two forms: female and male. The male parts are all about heaven, and female parts are all about the earth. There are twelve acts in the female part, which are used especially in wedding ceremonies. There are seven acts in the male part, generally used in funerals and in ceremonies one or two years after a funeral to send the ghost away to the ancestors. The content of the male part is to tell how the gods were summoned by the god of heaven and how they created the sky and the earth. One of the gods called the sun and moon and they appeared. The hero Zhyge Alu shot down the surplus suns and moons. The female part explains why the gods in heaven wanted to create humans, how the snow on earth came into being and how it changed. With his extensive knowledge of Yi culture, Qumo has achieved a wide reputation. He not only inherits the shaman tradition, but inherits the epic tradition as well (Bamo 2004).

Storytellers and Singers

Talented singers or storytellers can also be important bearers of myth traditions. When the Dong people in southern China offer sacrifices to their ancestors, they gather to sing songs and dance to entertain the gods. The ritual can be presided over by a shaman or sometimes by a middle-aged singer. People who attend will be divided into groups according to gender. They join hands and make two circles, one inside the other. One circle is male and one is female. In these circles they sing and dance. Several people lead the singing and others follow. The

content of the songs include the creation myths of the Dong people (Meng 1990:150).

In Xiuyan county, Liaoning province in Northeast China, there are many Manchu people. In the 1980s, researchers collected 115 stories from a distinguished female Manchu storyteller named Li Chengming (1914–). Among the forty-six published stories five are myths. These myths explain how humans were created by the first brother and sister couple after the cosmos was destroyed; why human lost the paradise of harvesting endless grains because they took these grains for granted; how the sun and the moon were created and why people could not look at the sun directly with their eyes; how the divine maiden Hailun repaired the broken sky; and how the ancestor of the Manchu people was born after his mother consumed a hawthorn fruit and miraculously became pregnant. Li's repertoire of stories comes mainly from her father and grandfather. As an ordinary Chinese farmer, she often told stories to her neighbors and children during the slow seasons in farming, the occasions of working with other people, or the relaxed long winter nights on her warm *kang* (a brick bed that is warmed by a fire built underneath, popular in northern China) (Zhang and Dong, 1984:576–592). The two collectors of her stories state that in these contexts, the storytellers in Xiuyan County transmit the wealth of stories they inherit from previous generations (ibid. 589).

Common People as Bearers of Myth Traditions

The above mentioned professionals play the main roles in preserving and transmitting traditional mythical knowledge. Without being specifically connected to professional or highlighted myth-telling activities, ordinary people are also familiar with some of this knowledge, but their fragmented and scarce knowledge usually makes them reluctant to tell myths. Such people can be called “passive bearers of myth tradition.” When Yang Lihui asked some ordinary pilgrims in Renzu Temple whether they knew any story about Fuxi and Nüwa, most of them could not tell a full story, but they did know that the first humans were created by the Ancestors in the remote past. In another small village in Gansu province, northwest China, when Yang asked several old men and women chatting beside a country road about the flood myth, two of them knew only that in remote antiquity there had indeed been a flood that destroyed almost the whole world. And then they sighed deeply about the complicated development of this world and the hardship of their lives. So, though these common people are

passive bearers of myth traditions, they also use mythological material to create their own ways to express their views and attitudes about history, the world, and their lives.

In the past century, a popular prejudice held among many sinologists and Chinese mythologists argued that the myth tradition in China was quite limited and incomplete in comparison with classical mythology in Greece and Rome¹⁶. This prejudice will only disappear thanks to more comprehensive knowledge of Chinese mythology by taking into consideration not only ancient myths recorded in written documents, but also oral myth traditions of contemporary Han people and other ethnic groups. China's rich traditions of myth form a solid and fascinating foundation for future Chinese myth studies.

¹⁶ For an example of this prevailing prejudice, please see Zhong Jingwen's article "A Response to Wolfram Eberhard's letter about Chinese mythology." In this article Zhong analyzed some reasons that caused the prejudice and further disproved it by advocating attentions to the rich oral traditions of myth in China (Zhong 1985: 492-7).