

PERFORMING MYTHS TODAY:
A FIELD STUDY OF THE RENZU TEMPLE FESTIVAL

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Abstract

Differing from most Chinese myth studies that focus on written myths in ancient China, this paper explores the myths orally transmitted in contemporary China. By scrutinizing two events of telling the brother-sister marriage myth in the Renzu temple festival in Huaiyang County in central China, it tries to explore the dynamic process in which mythical texts are performed and shaped, furthermore, to investigate the reasons why myth-tellers perform myth today, and what the function of myth-telling is in their social lives. In addition, it tries out a more comprehensive approach to studying orally transmitted myths in modern society. It argues that mythical texts are formed during dynamic processes of performances, in which myth-tellers practice and embody the relevant knowledge of myth tradition as they grasp it. The processes are often influenced by various complex factors, and therefore produce different versions in the process. The case study demonstrates that through performing myth, myth-tellers not only show their talents and grasp of traditional knowledge in interactions with other participants, but also express their own beliefs in human ancestors and their understanding about ethics, sciences, human origins and the nature of cosmos. As a result, performing myth becomes their own important way of expressing themselves, constructing their social relationships, and fulfilling their social lives. To comprehend these dynamic and complicated processes, we need to foster a more “synthetic approach.”

Keywords: brother-sister marriage, contemporary China, performance, synthetic approach

I *Preface*

Ancient written myths recorded in various documents have been the core of Chinese mythology for a long time. Relying on these ancient documents, or assisted by archeological discoveries scholars (including most Chinese mythologists and sinologists who study Chinese myths)

conducted numerous textual analyses on myths of ancient China. By tracing the possible “original” forms of these myths, their transforming tracks during the long history, as well as the “original” appearances and functions of those gods and goddesses, these scholars gained remarkable achievements during the past century. Corresponding with this research interest, methods such as historical document analyses and exegetical studies of ancient texts have played the central roles in the methodology of Chinese mythology.

However, as compared to the mainstream of ancient written myths study, investigations on myths still orally transmitted in contemporary China are rather insignificant, or non-existent (Yang 2009 chapters 7–8). The conventional methods such as historical document analyses and exegetical study of ancient texts are insufficient to approach oral myths.

Moreover, up till the recent past, the thin studies on myths orally transmitted in contemporary China also have their insufficiencies. Most of these studies focus on textual analyses of myths that are recently collected. The materials used for comparison often cover a wide range of time and space. Thorough investigations of specific myth-tellers and the contexts of myth-telling events are seldom included. As a result, researchers rarely examine the following questions, which are important to myth studies: for instance, how are myths performed and re-constructed in myth-telling events? How about the variations when different myth-tellers tell a same type of myths? How about the dynamic processes in which myths are performed in concrete situations? How do myth-tellers and audiences as well as traditions and personal creativities interact during the process? What are the main forces that finally shape the mythical texts? Are myths transformed to adapt to contemporary societies? And so forth.

Because of these deficiencies, myth studies in China often make people “perceive the woods but without seeing single trees”. Although we know the long transforming history of Nüwa myths and flood myths, as well as their wide geographical distributions within the country, we still do not comprehend the very moment when these myths are told and transformed in certain situations, nor do we understand how these myths are told by specific tellers and why they change them, and how a specific version is produced during the myth-telling process (Fig. 35).



35. Nüwa Temple ceremony in April 2006 in She county, Hebei province.

Considering the shortcomings mentioned above, this paper has two hopes. Firstly, by scrutinizing two events of telling the brother-sister marriage myth in the Renzu (“human ancestors”) temple festival in Huaiyang County of Henan province in central China, it tries to explore the following questions hardly discussed before in Chinese myth studies: how are mythical texts produced in the processes of performances? What kinds of forces participate in the processes and finally shape the texts? Why do myth-tellers keep retelling myths in different contexts, and how? How are myths transformed and utilized by creative myth-tellers to endow their current lives with meanings? Secondly, though this paper benefits a lot from “Performance Theory (Bauman 1977 and 1986),” but it also reflects the limitations of this perspective and argues a more “synthetic approach” towards the myth studies.

II *Tradition of Brother-Sister Marriage Myth in China*

Brother-sister marriage myths enjoy worldwide popularity and are especially abundant in East and South-east Asia. Some scholars maintain that this type of myth comprises the culture trait of the culture complex of South-east Asia (Rui 1972:1059).

China also enjoys a sheer abundance of brother-sister marriage myths. However, what scholars used to focus on were mainly those versions spread in ethnic minorities in the south, especially southwest China, while those versions that orally spread among Han people, which now make up nearly 92 percent of the country’s population, were considered to be “poor in quantity” for a long time. Even though sometimes mentioned in researches, they took only a subordinate position. In recent years, because of the big progress in collecting folk culture, especially the remarkable achievement of the national project *San Tao Jicheng*, or the *Three Collections of Folk Literature*, the versions of this type transmitted among Han people began to show its richness. Among the 418 versions I have collected from various sources, 237 versions are from Han, and they are being told almost all over the country. In some areas such as Henan province, this type of myth seems especially popular.

The brother-sister marriage myth has many versions. Its plots vary according to the region, ethnicity and myth-teller concerned. Nevertheless, the basic plot structure remains comparatively clear and stable.

The basic plot of this type of myth in China can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Because of a great disaster (usually flood, also fire mixed with oil, uncommon snow, etc.), all humans in the world were destroyed except for a brother and his sister.
- (2) They wanted to marry each other in order to repopulate the earth but wondered whether this was proper.
- (3) So they divined to decide. They agreed that if certain unimaginable things happened (for instance, separately rolling two pieces of a millstone from a mountain and the pieces recovered each other at the bottom of the mountain; lighting a fire from different places, and the two lines of smoke joining each other instead of dispersing, so on and so forth) in a test, they should get married.
- (4) The unimaginable things all happened perfectly, so they got married.
- (5) The couple gave birth to normal children or abnormal fetus (such as a spherical piece of flesh, a gourd, a knife stone, and so on), and reproduced new human beings (by opening the abnormal fetus or cutting it into pieces).

This above plot structure represents the most common narrative pattern of this type of myth.

As for the brother and sister in this type of myth, they usually do not have specific names, only being defined as “a brother and his sister.” Sometimes the variants can be an aunt and her nephew, a mother and her son, a father and his daughter, and so forth. In some versions, the brother and his sister do have their own names, and their names vary considerably according to regions and ethnic groups. But some names are relatively common and stable, for example, “the brother Fuxi and his sister Nüwa” among Han people, “the brother Zhadi and his sister Nadi” (Lahu), “the brother Zhapama and his sister Zhemima” (Achang), and so on (Yang 1999:15–21).

Fuxi and Nüwa are both well known primeval god and goddess in Chinese mythology. According to ancient documents, Fuxi invented the Eight Diagrams and fishing net, established the marriage rule, and taught people to cook food. He is also the god of spring and the direction of East. In later traditions he is known as a human ancestor who procreated humans by marrying his sister, often said to be Nüwa, who

is the Great Mother of humans, a culture heroine, and one of the most important and powerful primeval goddesses in Chinese mythology. She repaired the broken sky and created human beings by molding them from yellow earth. In other versions she married her brother and produced humans. Many Chinese scholars maintain that Fuxi and Nüwa did not probably have any connections in the beginning, nor have any relations with brother-sister marriage myth. Not until the Han dynasty were Fuxi and Nüwa frequently associated with each other in historical books and funeral stone carvings. And their intimate connection with brother-sister marriage myth may occur even later. Until Tang dynasty, its most comprehensive records appeared in *Duyizhi (A Treatise on Strange Beings and Things)*, by Tang dynasty writer Li Rong, c. 846–874). It stated that at the very beginning of the world, there were no other people except for Nüwa and her older brother. They lived on the mythical mountain Kunlun. They wanted to become husband and wife so as to have children and populate the earth, but they felt ashamed by the idea because of their blood relationship. They prayed to heaven from the top of the mountain: “If Thou wouldst send us two forth as man and wife, then make this smoke gather. If not, then make the smoke disperse.” The smoke gathered immediately, so they got married. However, Nüwa still felt very shy and embarrassed, so that she weaved grass into a fan to cover her face (which explains why brides often hold fans during their wedding ceremonies).

Since the brother and sister reproduced (or produced for the first time) humans, they are popularly worshiped as Renzu, or Renzuye (“Grandfather of human beings”) and Renzu Nainai or Renzupo (“Grandmother of human beings”) in some areas.

III *Brother-sister Marriage Myth Performance in the Renzu Temple Festival in Huaiyang County*

In March and April of 1993, I went to Huaiyang and Xihua counties in Henan province and She County in Hebei province to do fieldwork in order to investigate myths and beliefs of Nüwa for my dissertation. I was accompanied by a team made up of other three folklorists (Zhang Zhenli, Chen Jiangfeng, and Wu Xiaoqun) from Henan University.

Huaiyang County is located in the eastern part of Henan province, 32 kilometers (20 miles) northeast of Zhoukou city. It has an

area of 1,469 square kilometers (588 square miles) and a population of 1.24 million. Under its administration are six towns and fourteen villages. Huaiyang is said to be the legendary capital of the god Fuxi's mythic kingdom. In the northern part of the county is the Renzu Temple complex (Temple of the Ancestors of Humans). According to a 1936 report, many temples were intact at the Renzu complex at that time, including several to Fuxi and one to Nüwa. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), many of the temples—including Nüwa's—were destroyed because they were thought to be “feudal superstitions.” Yet in 1993, the local government was planning to reconstruct the Nüwa temple because the government now believes that the worship of human ancestors (Fuxi and Nüwa) can be a cultural resource and attract tourists and donations. This has encouraged folk beliefs and caused a folk-culture revival.

During the lunar cycle from February 2 to March 3, a festival is now held at the Renzu Temple complex to celebrate Fuxi's birthday. The festival draws tens of thousands of pilgrims daily from nearby villages, counties, and provinces. They come to Renzu for many different purposes: to make supplications to the ancestors; to thank the ancestors for fulfilling their supplications; and to pray for children, happiness, health, wealth, going into college, and many other things. Most of the pilgrims are women. Many of them travel here together in pilgrim associations usually led by women. Some stay for the full month of the celebration (Fig. 36).

It is a genuine festival of the local community. Outside the temples, business stalls extend for miles, selling local snacks, local handicrafts (such as “mud dogs” and cloth tigers), farm tools, and spiritual statues (Fuxi and Nüwa, Buddha, and even Chairman Mao Zedong). In the temples, there are more lively and exciting scenes. Besides the many vendors' stalls, the area is full of pilgrims: they may dance danjingtiao (a folk dance literally meaning “Carrying Pole Dance”), sing songs praising the ancestors, tell fortunes, and play local operas to please the ancestors. Among them, some women will bring shoes to Nüwa that they embroidered. They sacrifice the shoes to Nüwa by displaying them in the Renzu temple complex or burning them with incense, paper money, or paper buildings (intended as ancestors' dwellings). By doing these things, they believe the ancestors will receive their tributes and be pleased, and thus will grant them what they hope for.



36. *Nini gou*, clay figure of an incarnation of Fuxi (tiger) and Nüwa (straw hat), Tai Hao Mausoleum, Huaiyang, Henan province.

There are many customs specific to the Renzu Festival. Some that relate to myths and beliefs are ninigou and jingge. Ninigou (“mud dog”) is a general name for toys made of mud. These toys are usually monkeys, swallows, turtles, or tigers, or a combination of monkeys riding a tiger or a horse. The craftsmen who make the mud dogs explain their origin with a myth that the sibling ancestors created humans by mud. The ancestors’ children want to imitate their ancestors’ mythical activity and thus to remember them. These kinds of festival crafts illustrate how myths exist in local communities, even as toys, therefore finding a place in nearly every level of society from ritual to play.

Jingge is a type of folk song that is usually sung to express people’s folk beliefs, but sometimes people use the melodies to make fun and sing about their ordinary life. During the Renzu Festival, many pilgrims (especially women) will sing jingge to commemorate and praise the ancestors, simultaneously believing they can obtain the ancestors’ blessings by doing so. As for the content, many jingge not only tell the myths about the ancestors but also often end with moral education or propagation (Yang and An Deming, Jessica Anderson 16–20).

We went into the temple complex in the afternoon of March 22nd. There we inquired several pilgrims about Nüwa and Fuxi myths and beliefs. They all knew the brother-sister marriage myth but they could only tell it in a rather simple and fragmentary way. The first important myth-teller we met was Wang Donglian, a 58-year-old female peasant from Dongguan district of Huaiyang County. She was selling local snacks beside a cart when we happened to talk to her.

We first asked her whether she knew something about the background of the temple. She immediately told us a legend about how Fuxi rescued an emperor in the Ming dynasty and how the emperor had this old temple rebuilt later. Soon after her storytelling, we were at once surrounded by some pilgrims, most of them standing beside us and listening. When we asked Wang some questions, some of them also joined in our conversation to answer and some even further raised doubts about Wang’s narrative skills and her understanding of the myth. All of this constructed an open, fluid and interactive situation of communication and thus exerted a significant impact on the myth-teller’s performance, her narrative strategies and the final text of brother-sister marriage myth.

After she had finished telling the story, I asked her whether she knew stories about human ancestors, she told us the following story:

Yang Lihui: Could you please tell us something about that time when “the heaven collapsed and the earth sank?”

Wang Donglian [Laughed]: Well, that happened quite long ago.

Chen Jiangfeng: Then, please tell us.

Wang [Laughter]: I can’t tell it well.

Yang: It doesn’t matter. The stories you just told us are both fine.

Chen: Yes, they are both good.

Zhang Zhenli: If you could tell lots of stories, we will organize a special interview for you.

Wang [Laughs]: You can’t do that. I don’t receive any education and I’m not professional. You can’t do that.

Zhang: We are especially looking for some uneducated one.

...

Yang: It doesn’t matter.

Wang: You are recording, aren’t you?

Chen, Yang: Yes, we are.

Wang: [Begins to narrate] This turtle [...]

Audience A: They are videorecording. (Actually we are recording the stories with two tape recorders.)

Wang: [Laughed] We are only telling stories for fun.

Yang: Yes, stories for fun.

Wang: And we are talking about this—turtle. The heaven collapsed [...] when the heaven collapsed and the earth sank, no humans existed in the world any more, right? (Yang: Right.) No humans existed, and there was a turtle. The turtle hid itself in the river. And we have river beaches here, don’t we?—But I don’t believe it myself. I don’t believe it myself. (Yang: It is only a casual chat.) Oh, yes... The heaven collapsed and the earth sank, and there was nothing in the world, but there were two students, and they went to school every day. This... these things may happen in books, right? When the heaven collapsed and the earth sank, they brought a steamed bun every day and the steamed bun—was fed to the turtle, they brought another one the second day, [and it was fed to the turtle again.] They were brother and sister and they brought steamed buns for three meals a day and they let the turtle eat them, they threw them in to the belly (=the mouth) of the turtle and let it eat the buns. They were eaten—and people said—this—had come to a certain degree—and—the heaven collapsed and the earth sank, oh, the two, what should the two students do? No humans any more, the other students, when they go to school, the heaven collapsed and the earth sank and they no more existed. Then there came a turtle. Oh, there it was! It disappeared when it ate up the steam buns then. The brother and his sister made the turtle carry them, carry them on its back. The turtle carried them and ferried them. After they were ferried, people said [...] it was said

¹ “Yang” for short in the following passages.

that [...] and I heard it from other people that this turtle swallowed these steam buns into its stomach, and isn't it impossible? (Bursts into laughter) It swallowed these steam buns into its stomach and anyway, the two students would not feel hungry. This turtle spit out one steam bun on the first day and another on the second day; it spit them out slowly and let them [the brother and his sister] eat. Oh, so that is it.

There were no humans and what to do now? Several years had passed... and anyway, the heaven had gone; the earth had sunk; there was water [everywhere]; nothing existed. What to do with it? Nothing could be done. He said. People said that [...] until sometime [...] I heard that [...] this—heaven [...] was completely closed; there were some grass on the land, some clods on the land, and they two came [out of] the turtle's belly. This turtle's belly—They stayed there for three years... how long was not sure... it is not detailed. The heaven, this heaven—it was said that its northeastern corner was not completely closed, (Yang: The northeastern corner.) the northeastern corner. It was so cold—. Anyway, it could be called results, ah. (Chen and Yang: Laughed) The Northeast China, people said, the Northeast China is cold, and it is held by icicles. Nüwa, she used icicles to hold it and so the Northeast China is cold.

Chen: Nüwa used icicles to hold it?

Wang: Yes.

//Zhang Yuzhi (another female in the audience, 82 years old at that time): When the northeastern wind is blowing, it is cold; when the northeastern wind isn't blowing, it is not cold.

//Audience C (an old lady): The northeastern wind is blowing—

//Audience D (an old lady): You don't utter a word, he is taking videos=sound records.

//Audience C: Why can't I utter a word?

//Zhang Yuzhi: He is recording.

//Wang: (spoke to Zhang Yuzhi) Can you tell them the story instead?
[Chen and Yang: Laugh] OK?

//Audience D: She tells it more detailed than you.

Yang: Please finish your story first.

Wang: Perhaps. She—She—could.

Zhang and Yang: You speak first, please.

Wang: I'm talking nonsense.

Zhang: It is just fine.

Yang: (Reminded her) Nüwa, er—

Wang: Er—Well—It is cold when the northeastern wind is blowing, and why is it cold when the wind isn't blowing, right?

Yang: Nüwa was one of the two students?

Wang: Well—, yes.

//Audiences: —She and her brother.

Yang: You mean Renzuye and Renzu Nainai?

Wang: Well, you should call her Renzu Gu'niang (“the maiden ancestress of human beings”), not Renzu Nainai. The human ancestors never got married.

//Zhang Yuzhi: They did never get married.

Wu Xiaoqun (Wu for short in the following passage): Then how did humans emerge if they were not married?

Wang: You listen to me. Yes. They [the brother and his sister] came to a mountain, and people said [...] there was nothing left, so what to do? The brother and his sister can't get married, how can a brother and his sister get married, right? People said there was a millstone on top of the mountain, there was a millstone and they stuck a few grasses into the earth at the foot of the mountain. Yes. This millstone, well, the two [...] the brother and his sister can't get married. If they two did the wedding rite [...] they had to stick grasses.....

//Audience E (a middle-aged man): —Sticking grasses as incense.

Wang: Well—, yes, sticking grasses as incense. Now, in the wedding, we don't require something else. But in the past, we needed incense, the yellow incense, when we kowtowed in the wedding, well, their marriage lasted for a lifetime. Here, it is the same meaning [...] They pushed the millstone down the mountain, if the millstone still joined together [then they would get married]; if the millstone was divided to the opposite directions, then it showed the heaven's will, the brother and his sister were still just brother and sister; if the millstone still remained as one after they were pushed down, the brother and his sister would marry each other. How could the millstone remain as one after it was pushed down? But the millstone really remained as one. (Yang: It remained as one?) Yes.

//Zhang Yuzhi: —No, the millstone fell apart, and they didn't get married.

Wang: Fell apart? Not fall apart. A millstone was pushed down and it didn't fall apart. You can't tell it like that, can you?

Yang: You finish your story first, please. We will record this old lady's story. She has her own opinion.

Wang: Why was it so? There was a tree down the hill, and (the millstone was stuck) in the tree, that was why it didn't fall apart.

//Audience C: Who knows that time of Renzuye, and the time when the heaven collapsed and the earth sank?

Yang: It didn't fall apart?

Wang: No.

Yang: So what happened since it didn't fall apart? They got married?

Wang: Yes, they got married. People said [...] this—do you know mud dogs? In the past, people said that [...] what did the brother and his sister say? They said: “let's make humans by mud.” They made human by mud and then put them in the sunshine, in the sunshine all day long. The blind—the cripples—and alike, when it rained and the mud figures got wet and their legs were broken, right? That's why as a human, though you often take a bath and wash yourself, you still have dust on your body, haven't you? (Yang: Yes, you are right!) Audience laughs.) Slowly, all the things were made like this. (Laughter I also heard it from others, I'm just retelling it.

Yang: Oh, it is interesting. And the two got married at last?

Wang: Yes, they got married.

//Chen: —They made human by mud together?

Wang: Yes—. You see, when you are sweaty and you rub yourself, there must be dust, dust ball.

Chen: And why is she called Renzu Gu'niang?

Wang: What?

Chen: Why do you call her Renzu Gu'niang?

Wang: You see, both the brother and the sister were too shameful to be called grandparents of humanity. (Yang: Too shameful?) Were they shameful or not? (Yang: They were shameful.) So she is still Renzu Guniang even after one million years, right?

Apparently, Wang was very willing to show her grasp of traditional knowledge to us, the “apparent intellectuals from outside.” She answered our questions and requirements quite positively. The brother-sister marriage myth became the central in our conversation. This formed the main reason why she “re-contextualized” the traditional knowledge of brother-sister marriage myth. On the whole the myth she narrated was a complete version. Its plot structure accords with the common brother-sister marriage narrative pattern as it popularly spread among Han people in central China. The primary plots of this type are, for instance, the heaven collapsed, the earth sank, and thus the world was destroyed; a brother and his sister survived; they divined by throwing two pieces of a millstone down a mountain to see whether their marriage was permitted by heaven; the incredible thing happened, therefore the brother and his sister married each other and reproduced human beings, all those elements were included in her story. Comparing with the common narrative pattern of this type of myth, however, we can find some obvious differences. Firstly, the motif of “patching up the broken sky” is added. Secondly, the way of reproducing humans turns into molding mud, which is relatively common in central China (Zhang and Cheng 1987), instead of giving birth to normal children or abnormal fetus.

When discussing brother-sister marriage myth, Chinese scholars particularly focus on the ways in which the sibling ancestors reproduced humans after they got married. As mentioned above, the most common way of reproduction is the couple giving birth to normal or abnormal fetus (such as a spherical piece of flesh, a gourd, a knife stone, and so on), and reproduced new human beings (opens the abnormal fetus or cuts it into pieces, humans walks out of them or the pieces changed into humans). Nevertheless, in some Han versions, especially

in the Central Plains, their offspring is sometimes the result of their molding mud figures after the blood marriage has been consummated, which is somewhat contradictory to the logic of the story itself. In these narratives, a brother and his sister committed incest because they had to reproduce humans anew after a catastrophe without other survivors. But in many versions, this motivation was seemingly forgotten after the brother married his sister, and the way of reproducing humans by molding mud is directly presented instead, with no necessary explanations and transitions—an obvious contradiction in the narrative logic of the story (Yang 1997:102). This contradiction, some scholars maintain, is attributed to the long-lasting and powerful influence of the Nüwa myth in the northern part of China. As a result, when she was adopted later as a heroine in the brother-sister marriage myth, her huge contribution of “making humans by mud” could not be ignored by storytellers and was “naturally” woven into this myth. This somehow changes the original plot structure of the story. Hence a narration in which Nüwa molded the mud to create humans after she married her brother; or even sometimes the strange combination of Nüwa giving birth to humans as well as making clay figures (Yang 102, Lu 1996:465). The myth Wang narrated about brother-sister marriage was adhered to the motif of “Nüwa patching up the sky”, which further proves the combination of the Nüwa myth and the brother-sister marriage myth, and additionally, the considerable impact of this combination on the conventional narrative tradition of brother-sister marriage myth. Besides, the brother and sister’s anxieties about blood marriage reflected in divination and in their initial avoidance of sexual intercourse, even after they were married, may well have introduced the idea of making humans by molding mud instead, thus expressing “a fierce opposition to the blood marriage” (Zong 1994:229–30). Apparently, there is a strong opposition to blood marriage under the influence of moral ethics and marriage systems in later ages. Judging from Wang Donglian’s attitude towards the blood marriage in the myth, this argument seems to be confirmed. In her telling of the myth, especially in the first half of the story in which “the heaven collapsed, the earth sank”, the brother and his sister survived from the disaster, and Nüwa patched up the sky, and the storyteller expressed strong opposition against the incest between the siblings. She as well as several other people in the audience firmly insisted that Nüwa should be called Renzu Gu’niang rather than Renzu Nainai, unequivocally believed that the human ancestors never got married. Even in the

latter half of the story, when the brother-sister got married, molded mud and reproduced humans, she still insisted on calling Nüwa Renzu Gu'niang, regardless of the paradox in the narrative. Her own explanation was that, though Nüwa were married with her brother, she felt embarrassed and "shamed." In the next myth-telling of Zhang Yuzhi, the brother-sister marriage myth still remained associated with the myth about "making humans by mud," once again expressing a strong opposition against incest. However, the ways in which the two myth-tellers dealt with the paradox in their stories were different. We will examine Zhang's narration below.

Wang Donglian can be classified as a "creative bearer of myth tradition" (Yang 2008:61), for she had a rich knowledge and was willing to listen to and tell myths. Her good memory and keen interest in story-telling made her an adequate absorber of various sources. In her own words, "I love listening to stories, local operas, for example, I can memorize them easily after I heard them"; "I keep listening wherever I go and whatever I hear. And I remember what I hear"; "if you want me to tell you stories, I can keep telling day and night for more than three days."

Obviously, this myth-telling event was full of interactions and negotiations between the narrators, researchers and audiences. The myth-teller's traditional knowledge of brother-sister marriage myth was crystallized in the dynamic and interactive process of communication, finally forming a "specific" oral "text" of the brother-sister marriage myth.

Wang Donglian began to tell the myth about Fuxi and Nüwa's brother-sister marriage at the researchers' request; however, halfway through her storytelling, several elder and more authoritative listeners (e.g., Zhang Yuzhi, whose myth-telling was evaluated as "more detailed than yours" by other members of the audience. Zhang's later narrative proved that she was a more competent narrator indeed) expressed their opposition ("when the northeastern wind is blowing, it is cold; when the northeastern wind isn't blowing, it is not cold") against her explanation for "Nüwa patched up the sky with icicles, so it gets cold when northeastern wind is blowing", interrupting her train of thought and steering the topic away, hence her performance of the story seemed to stop right there. Then, not until pressed by researchers (who grasped a large amount of mythological recourses and hence were aware of the general pattern of this type of myth) purposefully, did she continue to finish the other half of story which contained important plots, such as Nüwa and Fuxi practicing divination by rolling millstones to before

they got married. Zhang Yuzhi made frequent use of an “appeal to tradition” (Bauman 21–1) (“people said in the past,” “I also heard it from others”). When her traditional view that “the millstone didn’t fall apart, so the brother and sister got married” met some opposition from the audience, she added one special explanation to her narrative to rationalize why the millstone did not fall apart: the millstone was stuck in a tree down the hill, so it did not fall apart. Apparently, Zhang Yuzhi aptly included this explanation in the story, right on the spot, to make her narration proceed satisfactorily in a “socially appropriate way” (Ibid 11). Confronted with the paradox in her own narrative about whether the brother and his sister got married or not, and encouraged by the researchers’ further questions, she sought help from everyday knowledge, and figured out a farfetched explanation, trying to justify herself: though Nüwa was married, she felt ashamed and as a result, she was still called Renzu Gu’niang instead of Renzu Nainai. In this specific performance event, then, myth-tellers, audience and researchers all participated in the narrative process with different purposes, knowledge and abilities, and positively interacted, negotiated and created, not only together shaping the moment when the myths was performed, but also jointly reconstructing a specific and new text of brother-sister marriage myth.

What should be especially noted, though, is Wang Donglian’s paradoxical narrative explanation as to whether the brother married his sister in the myth. In the first half of her story, she claimed that, according to a locally prevailing view, Nüwa did not get married (some listeners also took part in the narration, asserting that Nüwa and Fuxi were not married), hence she could only be named as Renzu Gu’niang rather than Renzu Nainai; in the latter half of her story, however, she said the millstones fitted together when they were rolled for divination, so finally the brother and sister got married. Although her narration was doubted by Zhang Yuzhi, there is actually nothing wrong with her narrative, for the plot is consistent with the narrative tradition of this story. But her competence was not sufficient to provide appropriate explanations for the manifest contradictions between the blood incest reflected in the myth and the later moral ethics and marriage systems; between the brother-sister marriage and molding mud to reproduce humans. As a result, a paradoxical situation arose. The brother-sister marriage myth and the myth about making humans out of mud, which belong to two myth types in early times, were forced into one story.

Zhang Yuzhi handled these contradictions differently, she made use of interactive communication during the performing process, demonstrating how a creative individual negotiates and interplays with the conventional narration of myth, with ethics and “science” popular in modern society.

Zhang Yuzhi was the second myth-teller that we interviewed afterward. A few interpositions of hers during Wang’s narration had amply demonstrated that she was an active and experienced storyteller. Therefore, we overtook her after Wang Donglian finished her story (she was preparing to leave the temple complex with a few companions of hers before Wang Donglian’s story was finished). We asked her to tell us the story about human ancestors according to her knowledge, and she told us a new version:

Why didn’t a brother get married to his sister? Why didn’t they get married? It came from [the two of] them. She (Yang: “she” here refers to Wang Donglian) didn’t tell you a detailed story. Well, a brother can’t marry his sister because the sibling human ancestors first made it a custom. (Yang: Really—?) The married couple why? The old turtle sank into [. . .] She said it just now, the students brought steamed buns, and these buns were in the turtle’s stomach. This old turtle said, it said: “when the heaven is about to collapse and the earth is about to sink, you come to me.” It said, your steamed buns are all stored here; it said three or four days later, if you find the sky looks strange, you come to me immediately. She said the sky had collapsed. If the sky had collapsed then, the brother and his sister would have been buried inside. Actually the sky had not collapsed then. (Yang: I see.) The sky was changing, and some people shouted:” The sky is changing, hurry up!” So the brother and his sister ran out and headed to that old turtle. Then they found the turtle, and it opened its mouth—, opened its mouth as wide as a winnowing pan, just like a winnowing pan, its mouth was opened wide, so wide. I also heard it from others. Old people always heard stories from others. (Yang: [Laughs] Yes.) Its mouth was very big, but no one saw it. Who saw it, hum? (Yang: Right.) That is it. The old turtle said: “Hurry up, go to hide in my belly soon, hurry, hurry, hurry!” They hid in its belly and found all these steamed buns were laid there. (//Yang: Not be eaten.) You see, a long period had passed—, right? (Yang: Yes.) When the time came and they saw that the sky was rising, and they hurried to hide,

//An acquaintance of Zhang: Aren’t you leaving now?

Zhang (gave a laugh): He is calling me. I’m telling—telling old superstitions.

Yang: Not superstitions. It is interesting.

Zhang: The turtle said that [. . .] it said that you two should come out; it said you have eaten up all the steamed buns, you eat steamed buns

every day and this is tortured, buns are too dry without soup or something alike. Give them some water; don't give them... finally, it is time to come out, for the sky is formed. "Hurry up, hurry to come out, the sky is about to form." The sky grew a lot in a moment but the northeastern corner was not fully formed, and it was patched up by big icicles. What about them two?..... Their clothes had been totally retted when they were in the turtle's belly—they had no clothes. They came out when the weather was getting hot, they were naked, both of them. What to do with it? Those leaves, they fetched leaves and threaded them together with something. Oh, they wore leaves all over their body. And the main parts of their bodies were covered. (When she saw Wang Donglian was also here to listen, she said) After listening to your story, they record mine, too.

Yang: Please finish this story.

Zhang: When they were in the turtle's belly, the sky was about to form.

The sky was forming, and what should they do? What should they two do? Naked? (Yang: Yes.) They wore leaves because he had to think about his manner, and she had to think about her manner, too. They couldn't be naked all day long, so they wore clothes made of weeds. Well, it was all like that. Finally, the brother said, what should we do? He said, let's deal with it like this: it was not easy. (Yang: Yes.) He complained to the heaven and complained to the earth. After complaining, he said: if we two can marry each other, well, this millstone, there was a millstone halfway up the hill, he said, if we two are allowed to marry each other, well, to tell the truth, there will be humans in the world again; if we are not allowed to marry each other, then let this millstone [...] be divided into two parts. He said: OK, the two of us, OK. He said, OK. The millstone was pushed down the hill, and it was divided into two parts. Because of this, from then on, people can't marry their siblings, and this originates from him. Brothers and sisters can't get married and it comes from the two of them. And how is it going since then? Since then, these [...] two people [...], there was a temple on the mountain; the temple was built; the mountain was big and high, no flood can sweep there. There was a temple.

(A few acquaintances of hers came over and asked what she was doing.) [Laughed] I'm telling stories for fun. I'm telling superstitions.

Yang: [Laughed] It is not superstition. It is interesting.

Zhang: He said, there were no humans left except for us two, and what should we do? He (said) that let's reproduce human by molding mud. So, he molded mud figures and she made them, too. And they put these mud figures outside, in the sunshine. Well, it began to rain a little and these mud figures were about to get wet; they had no time to take them back. "Look, if you could walk, it will be much better." So they held a broom to sweep these mud figures. They swept them inside one by one. The blind and the cripples were all made by the sweep—, and this was from him. (Yang: [Laughed] I see.) [Laughed] Then, all the clay figures grew into humans. Monkeys (Yang: Monkeys?), monkeys. They were not like humans and they looked (like) monkeys. You

know, it is (said) in books that monkeys become . . . [become humans]. Where did they live? They lived in the woods in the mountain. And they changed very very slowly, and finally they became humans like us. The monkeys became humans and their furs were gone. The babies they born became more and more beautiful. The blind and the cripples were all caused by the ancestors; they swept the mud figures and made them blind; they swept and made them cripples. That is it. And finally, in the end, when two people cannot get married without a rule; they have to obey a rule, well, when they take wives; when they get married, and so on. These things all originate from him.

Zhang Yuzhi was apparently more creative than Wang Donglian. Her description was more detailed and vivid, the myth-telling is more fluent with abundant communicative means. Comparing with the common narrative pattern of the myth and the version narrated by Wang, there are at least two considerable transformations in her story. One change is that in her version, the brother and sister rolled millstones to practice divination, but the millstones fell apart; as a result, the brother and sister did not get married. Because of this, Nüwa was called Renzu Gu'niang and the sibling had to reproduce humans by molding mud. Although this transformation is not identical with the conventional narrative pattern (the divinations usually all turn out positive), it has remarkable significance to the logic of the story itself and the adaptation of ancient myth to modern society. First, it successfully resolves the contradiction between the ancestors' blood incest and the moral ethics as well as marriage systems of later ages; therefore, Nüwa can naturally be a virgin; Second, the brother-sister ancestors did not get married at all, so they had to reproduce human beings by making clay figures. Thanks to that change, the combination of the brother-sister marriage myth and the myth of creating humans by mud seems totally reasonable in the logic of the story.

The other striking change emerges in the explanatory ending of the myth. According to Zhang Yuzhi, the clay figures that the ancestors made in the beginning looked like monkeys, "And they changed very, very slowly, and finally they became humans like us. The monkeys became humans and their furs were gone. The babies they gave birth to became more and more beautiful." Although Zhang Yuzhi claimed that she was illiterate, that she connected human origin with "monkeys" was almost certainly affected by evolutionism. The argument is clearly supported by a "metanarrative" in her narration: "you know, it is (said) in books that monkeys become . . . [become humans]." "Metanarrative" is a term used "to refer specifically to narrative performance and discourse and to those devices which comment upon

the narrator, the narrating, and the narrative both as message and as code" (Babcock 67). In Zhang's narration the metanarrative plays an important role: it not only announces the source of her explanation, but also connects the myth-teller with her audience (especially our scholars who are familiar with books). Moreover, her connecting human origin with "monkeys" resolves once again the contradiction between the conception that "humans were made by mud" in the myth, and that "humans evolved from apes" in "science" developed in later ages. Thus she adapted the archaic myth about brother-sister marriage to "scientific" ideas about human origin. Therefore, Zhang Yuzhi not only utilized the brother-sister marriage myth as a cultural resource to communicate with researchers and other listeners who wanted to hear it; during the performance she also showed her highly skilled narrative ability (as compared with Wang Donglian's), and her more authoritative grasp of mythological knowledge and cultural tradition, while in the meantime expressing her own belief in the origin of her first human ancestors.

IV *Conclusions*

The above ethnographic investigations on two performance events telling the brother-sister marriage myth, lead to the following observations:

1) The text of a myth is neither a self-sufficient or super-organic cultural item nor a solid formal system; instead, it is formed during a dynamic process of performance, in which the myth-teller practices and embodies the relevant knowledge of myth tradition that he/she grasps. This process is, however, often influenced by various complex factors, producing, in the process, different narrative texts with their own characters. The two performance events of brother-sister marriage myth in the Renzu temple festival in Huaiyang County constitute dynamic processes affected by numerous factors. Among these are the effects of some institutional elements, such as, for instance, the socialist ideology and its powerful suppression of folk belief in the past, implicitly referred to (e.g. in Zhang's "I am telling superstitions"). Other factors, such as the belief of human ancestors, the ethics against blood incest, and the so-called "scientific" evolutionism, are more explicit. In addition, there are communications, interactions and negotiations among different participants involved in the performance

events, for example, between myth-tellers and researchers, between the myth-tellers and other people in the audience, between the first myth-teller and the second myth-teller, to name just a few. Explicitly or implicitly, these social and cultural factors are woven together to exert impacts on the myth-telling and shape the performances in each specific context. As a result, two specific versions of the brother-sister marriage myth are finally being created.

2) Through a case study of myth-telling events, we can find how and why myths are narrated again and again in different contexts, and how creative individuals reconstruct myths while they transmit them, so as to make myths serve their current social lives. To both myth-tellers the brother-sister marriage myths were apparently significant cultural resources to be shared with researchers from outside as well as with “insiders”.

Through their performance of the myths, the two narrators not only showed their talent and grasp of traditional knowledge in interaction with a mixed audience, but also expressed their own beliefs and their insight in ethics, sciences, human origins and nature (for example, the reason why it is cold when the northeastern wind is blowing).

Performing myths thus becomes an important means of self-expression, constructs social relationships, and contributes to a coherent social life. The meanings of myths, therefore, are not confined to the forms and contents they have in mythical texts; as an organic combination of forms, functions and connotations, their meanings are also embodied in the many ways society makes use of myths.

In the meantime, we have discovered discrepancies in myth-tellers' creativity; and we have seen that the level of a narrator's creativity largely determines the resulting version. Confronted with the contradiction between the narrative traditions of this type of myth and the moral ethics as well as marriage systems in later ages, our first myth-teller did not possess enough competence to resolve the contradiction, and added a tortuous explanation to the myth. The second myth-teller's performance, however, was apparently more flexible and creative. Her narration was not only a transmission of the ancient knowledge passed down for generations, but also included a creative modification of the narrative tradition of the ancient brother-sister marriage myth. Her transformations resolved the “unscientific” problems contained in the archaic myth, thus adapting her version to modern society's ethics, marriage system and “scientific” ideas about human origins.

3) The oral performance of myths in contemporary China is a complicated and dynamic process, as we have seen, interacting and negotiating between traditions and individual creativity. Taking the perspective of performance theory into account is inspiring for researchers and gives insight into the narrative process in a specific context; into how these myths are vividly presented by a specific myth-teller and why they are varied; into the constructing and shaping of communication in performance; and into the meaning of myths in people's current social lives.

Nevertheless, performance theory has also some insufficiencies: **it lays too much stress on newly created versions and may be inclined to despise or neglect historical traditions.** Therefore, we need to foster a more "synthetic approach," which combines diachronic research with the perspective of studying the very moment of transmission and creation in a specific context; an approach that combines historical-geographical perspectives with ethnographic research in specific communities; combines the static textual analysis with researches on the dynamic process of textualization; that combines the study of narrative traditions **with individual storytellers individual talents.** When we manage to approach myth from this synthetic perspective, we may be able to better comprehend the essence of myth (Yang 2006; 2005). This paper is only a modest initial experiment of this synthetic approach.

In the near future, this approach needs to be further developed, and more comprehensive investigations of various communities are necessary. Besides, a continual and long-term ethnographic researches on myth-tellers' life histories, characters, world views, and repertoires are also crucial for the understanding of their competences and characteristics in performances.

As we can see from the case study above, although details and the combinations of motifs may vary more or less in every performance of brother-sister marriage myths, the basic plot structure and the central motifs are quite stable (Cf. Siikala 1990). This indicates that, to some degree, texts do have their own super-organic meanings. Accordingly, how to combine the studies on texts themselves with studies on performances of texts also remains a primary question for further exploration.