

Myths of the Creation of Chinese

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Preface

During the National Day holiday of 2016, Shanghai Library launched a lecture series called “The Creation Myths of China”. Before that, I was entrusted to invite scholars and decide the topics. The series was to consist of six sessions lectured by three speakers. Then Mr. Shuxian Ye, the expert in mythology and Mr. Hang Qian, the expert in social history both joined me; we co-conducted the entire series.

Initiated by the Shanghai Library, publicized and promoted by the local media, we sparked an interest in creation mythology among the public: the lectures were so well received that none of us had expected. Therefore, Shanghai Library decided to put these lectures together into a book. Through the hard work of the forum organizers and the editors of Shanghai Jiao tong University Press, the book is published. What a hard-earned yet rewarding accomplishment!

Being one of the most modernized cities in China, Shanghai seems to have little inheritance of creation myths. Why people here have such a passion for studying and discussing China’s creation myths? I would like to say a few words.

Firstly, Shanghai’s social and economic development brings the demand for culture. This is the background. Shanghai has become one of the most affluent cities, and its demand for cultural consumption has increased significantly. Citizens won’t be satisfied with simply enjoying imported goods but need more “shanghai-made”. For example, the Shanghai National Musical Instrument Factory was in bleak operation more than a decade ago, because at that time, learning music equaled to learning the piano and the violin. Traditional Chinese instruments were difficult to sell. In recent years, the demand for national musical instruments such as Pipa and Guzheng (Chinese zither) has been strong. This trend boosted the performance of Shanghai National Musical Instrument Factory and the manufacturing technology of traditional musical instruments was also improved. Economics development brings cultural confidence. Simple and primary cultural products no longer meet the citizen’s needs for upgrading cultural consumption. Therefore, the creation myth, as a somewhat unfamiliar and unique form with rich cultural connotation, naturally becomes the chosen form of cultural consumption.

Secondly, Shanghai needs its own cultural identity. Throughout history, what has embarked in Shanghai is not only colonial culture; in fact, there are as long as 6,000 years of civilization accumulated in the reign. As the Zhangze culture, the Fuquanshan culture, the Guangfulin culture, and the Maqiao culture were gradually discovered, people found that Shanghai used to be a splendid sky. Such a small land had bred such many ancient civilizations; it is truly worth being proud of and makes Shanghai qualify to declare: it is the important birthplace of the dragon culture, and also the region once governed by the Confucius' only southerner disciple Yan Yan (Ziyou). Only a culture rooted in its country can have a strong vitality. Carrying forward creation myths contributes to stabilize the cultural roots and form a great Shanghai with the strong cultural identity.

Lastly, Shanghai is one of the birthplaces of China's modern mythology studies. The first book on mythology studies in China *Mythology ABC* (1928) 神话学 ABC was written by Mr. Liuyi Xie of The Great China University (which was later combined with Kwang Hua University to form East China Normal University) and published in Shanghai. Mr. Mao Dun's *Chinese Mythology Research ABC* (1929) 中国神话研究 ABC was also written and published in Shanghai. The works of Mr. Lü Simian and Mr. Yang Kuan when they were at Kwang Hua University have contributed greatly to the study of mythology. Therefore, Shanghai has been home to mythological studies.

Therefore, Shanghai being at the right place at the right time with the right people has its advantages in cultivating interests in mythology studies. As a result, we can find that academia pays attention to creation myths study, the government supports it, and the public loves the stories of creation myths.

What are creation myths? Most scholars agree that they are myths about the creation of the world and mankind. It is correct but not sufficient. Our past understanding of the creation myth was one-sided. Why? The world and man were created. But if humans do not have the ability to create the material, spiritual and institutional world, what would differentiate them from animals? Those semi-god creator stories about the inventions of fire, clothing, house, pottery, boat, and wheeled-vehicle, as well as the marriage system, rites, and music system, nine-continent system, let alone those myths of creations of the music culture, filial piety culture, and belief systems; they all belong to creation myths.

Without the creation of heaven and earth, lives will have nowhere to grow; without the birth of humans, there will be nothing; without the invention of objects, mankind would not progress; without the establishment of institutions, the society would have been scattered; without the cultivation of culture and spirit, man will have no soul. So we believe that creation myths should contain the following five categories:

The myths of the creation of heaven and earth
 The myths of the birth of humans
 The myths of the invention of objects
 The myths of institutional establishment
 The myths of spiritual cultivation.

Therefore, the creation myth is a sacred narrative when human thinking reaches a higher level and the social development moves to a higher stage with the significance of connecting the past and future for civilization development. The creation myth embodies the unity of a nation's culture, the integration of society, the systematicness of thinking, and the standardization of ethical norm. The creation myth has the significance of laying the foundation of civilization and is the core cultural symbol of national self-identity. Meanwhile, the creation myth can help spread a culture; it is the core field of cultural exchanges and competitions.

After defining the types of creation myths, let us look at what constitutes the creator gods. We believe that myths about the creation of heaven, earth, the sun, and the moon are the very core of creation myths. Heaven and earth produced the entire world. All things originated from heaven. The greatest virtue of heaven and earth is to bring survival and life reproduction. When we return to common sense, we will realize that all things and humans cannot live without heaven and earth. As the gods of reproduction, the sun and the moon played an important role in the creation of man. There have been rich descriptions about the origin of man and all things in ancient narratives. Among them, the great god *Shangdi* 上帝 (the Chinese god), who was derived from heaven, has been an active worship figure on the altar from ancient times to the late Qing Dynasty. Just as the name *Yuandan* 元旦 (literally means *the day of the beginning*, it also used to refer to *the New Year's Day in Chinese Lunar Calendar*) was yielded to the New Year's Day in the western calendar, the name *Shangdi* is generally identified as "God" from abroad. *Shangdi* is an extremely important Chinese cultural heritage that we need to study and inherit. The totem gods such as animal gods and plant gods: the Azure Dragon (*Qinglong*), the White Tiger (*Baihu*), the Black Tortoise (*Xuanwu*) and the Vermilion Bird (*Zhuque*), all belong to the second category of the great creator god. The third category is the ancestor heroes who had served people, such as Fuxi, Nüwa, the Yan Emperor, the Yellow Emperor, Yao, Shun, Gun and Yu the Great. Thus, the creator gods can be put in the following three major categories:

The nature creator god of heaven, earth, the sun, and the moon

The totem creator god of animals and plants

The ancestor creator god of moral heroes.

The three categories above have some overlaps but they are three distinctive categories in Chinese creation myths. That is a special feature of the Chinese creation myths. In order to express more clearly and reflect our thinking, we have made such a distinction between creation myth and creation deities according to the two different standards of creation function and creation god.

The creation mythology is a sacred narrative, which cannot be separated from the three narrative forms: language, ritual behavior, and landscape. Unlike some myths that only have written records left, the Chinese creation mythology is breathing and developing. To a great extent, it is dependent on the folk traditions to be carried down till today. In the narrative of Chinese creation myth, there usually have a magnificent sacred palace, thousands of millions of pilgrims, related festivals

and celebrations, which formed the grand folk traditions from generation to generation.

At this time, it reminds me of Mr. Xie Liuyi's conclusion: mythology is folklore, folklore is mythology. Therefore, the study of creation myth must include three methodologies: language exegesis, field investigation of folk behaviors and archaeological analysis of artifacts. In the digital age, the study of the creation myth also needs attention to multi-media and cultural creative industries. Today's academic research needs both traditional skills and modern visions.

Our efforts were just like throwing a brick to attract jade. We hope more and more scholars would be encouraged to join us in studying and passing on Chinese creation myths, because its study has been far less successful than that of the Greek and Roman mythology. We hope that through our efforts, Chinese creation mythology will be accepted by the public and loved by people all over the world.

March 2018
Shanghai, China

Zhaoyuan Tian

The original version of the book was inadvertently published with a few errors. The correction to the book is available at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5928-0_7

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