

# Chinese Mythology in the Context of Hydraulic Society

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The student of Chinese myth quickly learns the importance of water gods. They are large in number and diverse in origin; they have anthropomorphic traits; and they belong to a mythological hierarchy which parallels the terrestrial hierarchy of "hydraulic despotism" in imperial China. In Chinese high culture, water as a hydraulic necessity is often idealized as an abstract force. In Taoism, water, as the emblem of the unassertive and the "low ground," appears as extremely favorite images. Lao Tzu 老子 (604?—531? B.C.) offers this ebullient comment on water in *Daode Jing* 道德經: "The highest good is like that of water. The goodness of water is that it benefits all creatures on earth. Itself does not scramble, but is content with the places that all men disdain. It is this that makes water so near to the Way" (*Zhuzi Jicheng* 1986, vol. 3, 78.45.)

Principle of what is formless and potential, basis of every cosmic manifestation, container of all seeds, water symbolizes for Chinese philosophers the primal substance: from it all forms come; to it they will return by their own regression or in a cataclysm. In every cosmic or historic cycle, water exists at the beginning and returns at the end. In cosmogony, folklore, myth, ritual, and iconography, water fills the same function, whatever the type of cultural pattern. Indeed, it does benefit all creatures on earth, real or imaginary. Numerous Chinese gods, heroes, and mythological creatures, especially Yu 禹 and the dragon, are associated with water.

The creation of water gods and heroes, however, should be attributed more to Chinese hydraulic culture than to water's metaphorical significance in Chinese philosophy. The term "hydraulic," as Karl

Wittfogel defines it, draws attention to the agromanagerial and agrobureaucratic character of Chinese civilization. For several decades, Wittfogel studied the institutional settings of Oriental despotism; and for a considerable part of this time he was content to designate it "Oriental society." But as his study progressed, he felt the need for a new term. He distinguishes between a farming economy that involves small-scale irrigation (hydroagriculture) and one that involves large-scale, government-managed works of irrigation and flood control (hydraulic agriculture). Hence he came to believe the epithet "hydraulic" was more appropriate than the traditional terms to express the peculiarities of Oriental society and civilization (WITTFOGEL 1957, 3).

#### THE MYTH OF YU AND HYDRAULIC DESPOTISM

The myth of Yu reflects the process by which hydraulic despotism began to grow from hydraulic management in remote antiquity. The prominent position of Yu as a controller of water in Chinese mythology should be attributed to the early integration of water control with national leadership, beginning in the Xia Dynasty (c.21—17 B.C.). Deluge is a concept found in almost every mythology. Deluge stories are only occasional in Japan, Egypt, and most African countries. The Chinese have a deluge myth resembling that in Genesis vi—ix or that of international folk narrative motif A1021.<sup>1</sup>

In folk narratives of many countries, animals saved men from the deluge (Motif A2145.2). For example, the snake on board Noah's ark stops a leak with his tail, while the dog uses his nose; hence dogs' noses would forever be cold and wet. In China, it is Yu who has done this and has been greatly revered by the people. Yu, a figure half historical and half mythical, is best known for establishing the Xia Dynasty (21st century—16th century B.C.) and controlling flood. He often manifests himself as a leader of hydraulic activities.

According to Chinese mythology, there was a great drought; ten suns shone simultaneously in the sky. Then, just as the land was recovering, a disastrous flood almost destroyed it again. Gun 鯀, Yu's father, stole from God a handful *xirang* 息壤, or "cease clay"; a small quantity of this could quell any flood. To a certain extent, God here is the spiritual Heavenly God, different from a sky-god, such as the dragon. God ordered Zhu Yong 祝融, god of fire, to execute Gun. He was killed and became an animal. Yu jumped out from Gun's body in the shape of a mighty dragon, then became a human, and assigned himself the job of controlling the flood. He fought and defeated the flood god, Gonggong 共公. Then Yu gave all the people pieces of the cease clay to build a great dam and hold the waters back. He knew,

however, that this was not a permanent solution; and he set the people to work digging a path for the water so that it could flow off harmlessly into the sea. A *Yinglong* dragon 應龍 went ahead of them and marked the direction for the channel with its tail.<sup>2</sup>

The story of Gun's transformation into an animal raises a problem. In its *Zhou* version (see *Zuo Zhuan* under the year 535 B.C.) the animal is a bear, whereas other versions variously describe it as a fish, a turtle, or a dragon. The close association of Gun and Yu with hydraulic management makes any one of these latter interpretations much more plausible. The fact that the bear is associated with Gun, and in some versions also with Yu, may be adduced as evidence for a bear cult in China. The bear, however, accords very poorly with the overwhelmingly aquatic associations of Gun and Yu alike. This contradiction suggests that the Gun-Yu myth is an amalgam of several cultural components, with the Gun-Yu-dragon myth originating from the arid Yellow River valley, the cradle of ancient Chinese hydraulic culture, and the Gun-Yu-bear myth from areas which were culturally, ethnically, or geographically different. Because of their different hydraulic situations, some people said Yu was a bear, but other people believed that he was a dragon. Yu represents a three-in-one combination—the dragon (also the son of the dragon and the dragon driver), the emperor, and the water controller. It is no accident that Yu should simultaneously play the role of Chinese monarch and water controller. According to Wittfogel's theory about Oriental despotism, in an arid and highly civilized Oriental society like China, emperorship must be closely integrated with hydraulic activities and water resource management.

The flood motif is widely found among other peoples. In the Chinese version, unlike the Biblical or other Near Eastern accounts, the flood is not divine retribution for human sin, but a harsh condition of human existence (“Without Yu we would be fish and shrimps”—Mencius) or a hydraulic task that requires sagacious leadership. Wittfogel has written:

“Evidently the masters of hydraulic society, whether they ruled in the Near East, India, China, or pre-Conquest America, were great builders. The formula is usually invoked for both the aesthetic and the technical aspect of the matter; and these two aspects are indeed closely interrelated.”

Then he briefly discusses both of them with regard to the following types of hydraulic and nonhydraulic construction works:

#### I. Hydraulic works

- A. Productive installations (Canals, aqueducts, reservoirs, sluices, and dikes for the purpose of irrigation)
  - B. Protective installations (Drainage canals and dikes for flood control)
  - C. Aqueducts providing drinking water
  - D. Navigation canals
- II. Nonhydraulic works . . . (WITTFOGEL 1957, 42)

Yu worked single-heartedly for thirteen years, fighting the Great Flood that had long devastated the land. To channel the waters, he dug great "drainage canals." Yu was the master of hydraulic society or the great builder of hydraulic works. His job included both "productive and protective installations." When he died, the people did not accept his designated successor but turned to his son. Thereby they began the practice of hereditary succession and created the first Chinese dynasty, the Xia. Many Xia emperors, especially Jie 桀, the last ruler of the Xia dynasty, were notorious tyrants. The "Oriental despotism" was thus formed by the great "hydraulic builder." The ancient *shanrang* 禪讓 system (abdicating and handing over the crown to another person) was gone, never to return. As we mentioned, a *Ying-long* dragon went ahead of the people and marked the direction for the channel with its tail. In Wittfogel's terms, it took part in Yu's hydraulic works of "protective installation," by building "drainage canals for flood control." Yu gave all the people pieces of "cease clay" to build a great dam and hold the waters back. This magic clay may similarly be understood as a tool for "protective installation" when building "dikes for flood control." Wittfogel's new nomenclature permits us to include in our study of mythological or historical Yu an element of institutional and historical reasoning. We can reveal now inner connections between water and the implications of the dragon, such as spiritual nobility, good omen, Chinese nationality, and emperorship. The term "hydraulic," as Wittfogel defines it, draws attention to the agromanerial and agrobureaucratic character of the Chinese dragon.

#### THE CHINESE DRAGON OF THE WATERS

Like legendary Yu, the dragon is a product of the hydraulic system. The royal position of the Chinese mythological dragon should be attributed to the early integration of water control and national leadership, started in Xia Dynasty with Yu as its founding father. The dragon's behavior is that of a water god. It is believed "to descend into the waters at the autumnal equinoxes. At the vernal equinoxes, it rises from them and ascends into the sky" (XU 1972, Vol. 3, 30). It

rides on the wind and clouds; its very breadth, condensed, forms the rain—not only the gentle rains of spring and summer, but the fierce storms that make rivers overflow their banks. The dragon's spiral paths to the highest heavens form tornadoes, whirlwinds, and water-spouts. The Chinese word for tornado is *longjuanfeng* 龍卷風, "the wind whirled by the dragon." In his philosophical treatise *Guan Zi-Xingshijie* 管子·形勢解, Guan Zhong 管仲 therefore observes that "while it ride on the water, the dragon is a god; separated from water, it is no longer a god" (*Zhuzi Jicheng* 1986, Vol. 5, 1.12).

The notion embodied in dragon goes back to the beginning of recorded human thought. The dragon is connected with the earliest gods, and like them is vague, changeable, and contradictory in its attributes; but it maintains from first to last a definable characteristic—association with and control of water. For the ancient Chinese, water has a nature manifested in marvelous powers. It possesses the power to change shapes; hence the ease with which it can contain such changeable spirits as the dragon. Unmistakeably associated with the dragon's birthplaces, water is the most important thing to human existence—the essential requisite, indeed, for life and happiness in a hydraulic community. The valleys of the Nile, the Euphrates, and the Yellow River are precisely the regions in which mankind began to establish a settled existence, laying the foundation of civilization in agriculture. Along those rivers, in timely showers to the right amount, in living streams and their seasonal overflows that leave new soil, the rainfall is a blessing; but when it takes the form of lightning-darting storm or excessive floods, water may become a curse. It is easy to see why early men in those valleys attributed the power of giving and taking life to water, the prime need of all living things, and why they conceived of a water-dragon as representing that dual power. Symbol of creation, harbor of all seeds, water becomes the supreme magic and medicinal substance; it heals, it restores youth. For the ancient Chinese with the Yellow River as their birthplace, the dragon and water are inseparable. According to Xun Zi, "when much earth makes a hill, there will be a wind and a rain. When much water makes a river, there will be a dragon" (*Zhuzi Jicheng* 1986, Vol. 2, 1.4).

Unlike European rival principalities, who tore their continent apart, the three-thousand-year-old Chinese centralized monarchy, or "hydraulic despotism," needed a unified and continuous image to insure its absolute authority. For two thousand years, Confucianism was the official ideology of China. In contrast to the Western and Eastern dialectical theories, Confucianism was concerned mainly with social stability, and it taught an order which enabled people to live in

harmony with each other under a “sagacious ruler.” As a concept, the dragon of Chinese mythology stemmed from such a social and ideological structure. It was diffused from the literati and officialdom to the common people, not the reverse. On the other hand, dragons in folk religion (the Dragon King) and folktales (*Nielong* 孽龍 or *Xionglong* 兇龍) appealed more to ordinary people than to the intelligentsia.

In old China, the dragon was revered and feared especially because it manipulated the weather—and the ancient Chinese, like farming people everywhere in those days, lived and died at the will of rain and flood. In southern China along the valleys of the great rivers, the Yangtze and the Pearl, was the so-called “land of fish and rice” where every hill was terraced with jade green rice if there was enough rain. As a result, dragons in southern China were less likely to be worshiped as rain gods. In the north, through spring and summer, peasants watched the sky, praying that a timely rain would bring a bumper harvest and life itself. They stared reverently at the black dragonlike clouds gathering on the horizon. To their disappointment, they often found arid winds covering their towns in a blinding yellow haze, sifting under every door and into every window. This meant the fields of wheat and millet would wither again, the cows and oxen that grazed the pastures would die of hunger, and once again the people would starve. On the other hand, a torrential rain would flood the Yellow River, “the curse of China,” destroying crops and killing millions of people. Indeed, for the disaster-ridden Northern Chinese, there was nothing more esoteric than the element called water. It is natural that the Northern Chinese should transform their original sky-god into a water dragon and give it an alternative name, *Yushi* 雨師 (rain master) (Li 1971, Vol. 2, 38.1670). In *Yijing* 易經, one of the earliest books in which the dragon is mentioned, the dragon is mainly a flying sky-god. And in later materials, it has become more and more like a water-god.

Chinese mythological dragons do not always stay in the deep. At the autumnal equinoxes, they are believed to descend into the waters; the vernal equinoxes see them arise from the waters and ascend into the sky. While the Dragon King of folk religion is a pure god of the waters, the Chinese mythological dragon is a water god with an intense coloring of a sky-god. When visiting the earth, a dragon takes as its temporary residence a particular sea, pool, lake, or especially a river as its temporary residence. The names of forty Chinese rivers contain the word dragon:

Heilongjian 黑龍江: Heilong Jian 黑龍江 (Black Dragon River);

Shandong 山東: Wulonghe 五龍河 (Five Dragons River); Shanghai 上海: Longquangang He 龍泉港河 (Dragon Spring Port River), Bailonggang He 白龍港河 (White Dragon Port River); Zhejiang 浙江: Beilong Jiang 北龍江 (North Dragon River), Longquan Xi 龍泉溪 (Dragon Spring Brook), Long Xi 龍溪 (Dragon Brook); Guizhou 貴州: Longtou Jiang 龍頭江 (Dragon Head River); Fujian 福建: Long Jiang 龍江 (Dragon River), Ergelong Xi 二個龍溪 (Two Dragon River), Wulong Jiang 烏龍江 (Dark Dragon River), Jiulong Jian 九龍江 (Nine Dragon River), Jiulong Xi 九龍溪 (Nine Dragon Brook); Guangxi 廣西: Long Shui 龍水 (Dragon River), Longxu He 龍鬚河 (Dragon Beard River), Longjiang 龍江 (Dragon River); Xizang (Tibet) 西藏: Bolong Zangbu 泊龍藏布 (Floating Dragon River), Dulong Jiang 獨龍江 (Single Dragon River), Duilong Qu 堆龍曲 (Coiling Dragon River), Wolong Qu 臥龍曲 (Lying Dragon River); Hebei 河北: Long He 龍河 (Dragon River), Qinglong He 青龍河 (Blue Dragon River), Chilong He 赤龍河 (Red Dragon River); Jiangsu 江蘇: Longyou He 龍游河 (Swimming Dragon River); Tianjin 天津: Qinglongwan He 青龍灣河 (Blue Dragon Bay River), Heilonggang He 黑龍港河 (Black Dragon Port River); Guangdong 廣東: Long Xi 龍溪 (Dragon Brook), Long Jiang 龍江 (Dragon River); Gansu 甘肅: Bailong Jiang 白龍江 (White Dragon River); Sichuan 四川: Ergelong Xi 二個龍溪 (Two Dragons Brook), Lonxi He 龍溪河 (Dragon River), Wolong He 臥龍河 (Lying Dragon River), Huanglong He 黃龍河 (Yellow Dragon River), Wulong He 烏龍河 (Dark Dragon River), Panlong Jiang 蟠龍江 (Spiral Dragon River), Dulong Jiang 獨龍江 (Single Dragon River); Yunnan 雲南: Longchuan Jiang 龍川江 (Dragong Valley River), Longchuan He 龍川河 (Dragong Valley Brook), Malong He 馬龍河 (Horse Dragon River), Dulong He 獨龍河 (Single Dragon River).

#### FUNCTIONS OF THE DRAGON AND THE DRAGON KING IN THE HYDRAULIC SOCIETY

For Chinese peasants, those dragons who occupy local rivers hardly possess the abstract implications of mythological dragons. Instead of symbolizing sky, emperorship, or good omen, they are merely local water-gods or Dragon Kings. And the influence of Nagas (a group of dragonlike beings in Hindu mythology, usually with human heads and serpent bodies) from India after the Jin Dynasty (264—420) reinforced the localization and specialization of the original Chinese dragon of waters. Coexisting with mythological dragons, the Dragon King attracted numerous worshippers for hundreds of years. Almost every Chinese village would have a temple in his honor.

It is in Chinese myth and high culture that the dragon becomes a symbol of imperial authority. Yet the Chinese dragon's connection with the ideas of the common people and the Hindus is never lost, for in folk religion the Chinese dragon has become the Dragon King, an ambivalent rain-god. In Chinese folktales a dragon can also be slain like its Western counterparts. The Chinese mythological dragon expresses the notion of nature, nationality, and royalty in the hydraulic despotism. As a means of interpreting social and natural events, the Chinese mythological dragon, or the original Chinese dragon, exists for its own dignity, not for its slayer's courage which dominates Western dragon myths and Chinese dragon folktales (A 300). While Chinese dragons look analogous, they suggest different meanings in different contexts. The mythological dragon is authoritative, the folktale dragon often mischievous, and the folk religious dragon (Dragon King) between the two. The Chinese mythological dragon differs from the Dragon King of folk religion: the former has less weather credibility for local hydroagriculture but more symbolic significance for the whole hydraulic nation. The mythological dragon differs from the folktale dragon in that it is not an obstacle to an individual hero's errand but an object of collective worship.

There are at least five distinctions between the Chinese mythological dragon and the Dragon King: First, the mythological dragon is associated with hydraulic despotism, while the Dragon King is connected with hydraulic agriculture. Water manifests itself as only one component part of the mythological dragon's multiple implications. It is, however, the only implication of the Dragon King, who does not suggest sky, nationality, emperorship, spiritual nobility, or cultural continuity. Second, the mythological dragon is symbolic and abstract, while the Dragon King is concrete and supposedly credible. Third, the mythological dragon is associated with Taoist and Confucian visions of the world which originated in China. The Dragon King is influenced by Buddhism and Hindu folk beliefs disseminated from India. Fourth, the mythological dragon belongs to the classic Chinese mythology, the Dragon King to folk religion and local legends. Finally, and importantly, the mythological dragon is a celestial supreme being; while the Dragon King is both a constructive rain-god and a destructive flood-devil. That is to say, the mythological dragon shows only positive implications; the Dragon King displays both positive and negative factors. We must bear in mind that the Chinese mythological dragon and the Dragon King are the same in appearance. The way to distinguish them is to find their different meanings through context. Of course, a more obvious distinction lies in their different names, i.e. *long*



龍 (dragon), and *longwang* 龍王 (Dragon King).

The Chinese mythological dragon originates from a sky-god and plays the abstract role of multiple symbolizations. According to Mircea Eliade, sky-gods tend "to give place to other hierophanies that are more concrete, more clearly personal, more directly involved in the daily life of man" (ELIADE 1968, 82). This should partly explain the specialization of the mythological *long* whereby a sky-dragon becomes the Dragon King of hurricane and of rain. The process resulted largely from the transcendence of the sky and as a consequence of ordinary people's ever-increasing thirst for the concrete; and for the Chinese peasants in the hydraulic society, nothing is more concrete than a timely rain. In old China, people treated the Dragon King as if he were a hydraulic magistrate, who might do his duty or abuse his power over water. When an area was afflicted with severe drought, provincial prefects would hold intercessory services lasting several days, during which the people often fasted till a rain came. The figure of the Dragon King was taken out to be exposed to the burning sun and to look at the parched countryside. Here we see the intrinsic humor of Chinese folk religion. Nowadays Chinese dragon processions are held at various times, especially during the Chinese New Year Festival and the Lantern Festival. In ancient times, they were held in the fifth moon, when the soil of the field and even the mud bricks of the farm-houses were split and cracked with the dry heat. The processions occurred again towards the end of the sixth moon, when the rains had been satisfactory, and people gave thanks for benefits received since the Dragon King had been faithful to his aquatic duty.

In *Xiyouji* 西游記 (A Journey to the West), we read that Heaven punished a slovenly Dragon King who lost control of the rain (WU 1967, 57-66). It might be said that in China, the mythological dragon behaves like the dignified Hebrew God, whereas the Dragon King has a fine sense of humor like a Greek god. Often friendly, the Dragon King may be very mean or mischievous. Hence it follows that the Chinese would call themselves a "dragon seed" but never a descendant of the Dragon King. During a historical period of considerable length, the Dragon King was more popular than the original Chinese dragon. In China there used to be thousands of temples in the Dragon King's honor. Here as elsewhere, climate had an effect on men's views of life. The Dragon King of northern and central China, at least, was a "full-time" rain-flood god, as the Naga was in the valley of the Indus, where droughts were dreaded. In Japan, on the contrary, rain was rarely lacking, so that prayers for it were seldom necessary—often, rather, there were petitions that its excess should cease.

Identical in appearance with the Chinese mythological dragon, the Dragon King sometimes takes human shape. The European dragon also takes human shape occasionally, becoming a giant or ogre: in Greece today *dhvakos* means ogre; likewise *sdrago* in Calabria, where the ancient dragon is a monkey of his former self. The Dragon King acts as the bringer of rain, controller of water, and arch-criminal of flood and drought. Associated only with water, the Dragon King has lost the paramount, mysterious spiritual nature of the original Chinese dragon in myth. He has, however, obtained credibility with the common people, especially the peasants. Because of this localization and credibility in folk religion, we may call the Dragon King legendary dragon, or the dragon of folk religion, to differentiate it from the dragon of myth and folktale.

The popularity of the Dragon King is closely bound up with the spread of Buddhism throughout China. Until modern times, the only equally advanced civilization with which the Chinese came into direct contact was that of India. Although the two civilizations met peacefully through cultural and trade connections, the encounter had a great effect on China, particularly since the Indians brought with them a new religion—Buddhism. Once the Buddhist texts had come to China, the Indic dragon/naga myths became current in Chinese belief, either naturalized with the participants given Chinese names, or influencing native folk religion. Chapter 49 of *Guang buowu zhi* reveals numerous Buddhist dragons naturalized under Chinese names or influencing Chinese folk religion (DONG 1972, Vol. 7, 49.4317–4375).

We must bear in mind that, unlike the flawless Chinese mythological dragon, the rain-dragon of India takes not only the role of the regulator of water, but also that of the abominable withholder of the rains. Indra, the sun god, has to strike the dragon Vritra, so that the rain-fountain may play in the skies. The serpent-dragon is, in the Vedic phrase, “the harvest spoiler.” In Chinese folklore, the negative image of the Indian dragon is naturalized under the name *nielong* 孽龍 (evil dragon); it becomes a common villain in Chinese folktales. The Dragon King, the Chinese Naga or Vritra, occupies a position between the mythological dragon and the folktale dragon, having lost the mythological dragon’s spiritual superiority but obtained the credibility with peasants. The Dragon King is respected less than the mythological dragon but more than the folktale dragon. Chinese peasants take an ambivalent attitude towards the Dragon King, who may be a great helper, a hopeless spoiler, or at times, a lovable clown. It all depends on how he exercises his power over water. If the mythological dragon represents the dignity of the supreme ruler of hydraulic despotism, the

Dragon King indicates the attitude of the Chinese peasant in hydro-agricultural society.

*Longwang* 龍王 (Dragon King) is not the *wang* 王 (king) of dragons but a mutation of the original Chinese dragon which has been influenced by Chinese folk religion and Indic gods. Since 221 B.C., the time when Qin Shihuang 秦始皇 first styled himself *Huangdi* 皇帝 (emperor), the term *wang* has denoted merely the local ruler. Having achieved its greatest degree of transfiguration, the Chinese mythological dragon emblemizes imperial power. An alternative title of the Chinese emperor is *shenlong tianzi* 真龍天子 (True Dragon and Son of Heaven). As an incarnation of the mythological "true dragon," the emperor is definitely superior to the "less true" dragons, such as the legendary and the local Dragon King. The following is an encounter between a "true dragon" and a "less true dragon."

Chapter 10 of *Journey to the West* has the lengthy title, "With a Stupid Plan the Dragon King Breaks the Laws of Heaven; Minister Wei Sends a Letter to an Official of Hell." Here the author, Wu Cheng'en, gives a very lively description of the difference between the emperor (the "true dragon") and the Dragon King of folk religion. In Wu's story we can detect the authority of the hydraulic state, represented by the emperor, over folk religion, represented by the Dragon King, who found himself in a tight corner because of his malfeasance as the rain god.

At the beginning of the story, the Dragon King disguised himself as a student and laid a wager with a hostile soothsayer about a forthcoming rain. When the Dragon King told his watery tribe about the wager, the tribe laughed and said, "Your Majesty is the General Superintendent of the Eight Rivers and the Great Dragon God of the Rain, so only you can know whether there will be rain." But just as the fish ministers and crab soldiers (who prided themselves on their Dragon King's authority over water) were laughing and talking about this, a shout was heard from the sky: "Dragon King of the Jing River, prepare to receive an Imperial Decree from Heaven." The decree said: "We order the Superintendent of the Eight Rivers to travel with thunder and lightning and succor the city of Chang'an with rain." And the time and the amount of the rain were exactly the same as as those foretold by the soothsayer.

Now, the Dragon King, like most officials in old China, decided to use public office for private gain. He did spread the clouds, unleash the thunder, start the rain, and stop it, but all at the wrong time, and he reduced the amount of rain by 3.08 inches. Then the Dragon King rushed to the soothsayer and bawled: "You lying quack, you impos-

tor! Your prediction was false.” But the soothsayer looked up with a mocking smile, saying, “You may deceive others, but you can’t deceive me. I know quite well that you are not a student; you are the Dragon King of the Jing River in disguise. You flouted a decree of Heaven by changing the time of the rain and cutting down the amount, which is a crime against the laws of Heaven. I’m afraid that you’re for the executioner’s blade on the Dragon-slicing Scaffold.” The Dragon King begged the soothsayer to save him. The soothsayer told him to report at once to the present Tang Emperor, as his minister Wei Zheng was assigned by Heaven to carry out the execution. So the Dragon King went to the Tang Emperor, the “true dragon,” and begged for mercy. The two dragons had a most interesting conversation, which indicated their differing positions in the stratified hydraulic society:

Our Dragon King of the River Jing did not return to his watery palace but stayed in the sky until before the dawn, when he put away his cloud and mist, and went straight to the gate of the Imperial Palace. At this very moment the Tang Emperor dreamt that he went out of the palace gate to walk under the blossoming trees by moonlight. The Dragon King suddenly took human form, went up to him and knelt before him, crying: ‘Save me, save me, Your Majesty.’

‘Who are you, that we should save you?’ asked Taizong, the Emperor. ‘Your majesty is a true dragon,’ replied the Dragon King, ‘and I am a wicked dragon. As I have disobeyed Heaven’s instructions, I am due to be beheaded by your Majesty’s worthy official Wei Zheng, the Minister of Personnel Department, so I have come to beg you to save me.’ ‘If Wei Zheng is to be the executioner, we can certainly put things right. You can rest assured that everything will be all right and go along now,’ said the Tang emperor. The Dragon King, who was extremely happy, thanked him profusely and went off (Wu 1967, 62–63).

The dialogue between the “true dragon” and the Dragon King reflects the hierarchy of Chinese dragons. The “true dragon” (the mythological dragon) personifies, or animalizes to be more exact, the emperorship, or the national authority of the hydraulic state; the Dragon King represents the guardian angel of small-scale irrigation. “The hydraulic state,” as Wittfogel has observed, “which permitted neither relevant independent military nor proprietary leadership, did not favor the rise of independent religious power either. Nowhere in hydraulic

society did the dominant religion place itself outside the authority of the state as a nationally (or internationally) integrated autonomous church" (WITTFOGEL 1957, 87). This is especially true in China, where the hydraulic despotism always placed itself above all religions, native or foreign. The emperor's association with the dragon is ensured by authoritative mythology and Confucian ideology; the Dragon King belongs to the category of folk religion. Even though they both have a hydraulic significance, the emperor and the Dragon King are extremely unequal in cultural status. The emperor's authority can be traced back to the time in remote antiquity when Yu, the master of hydraulic works, controlled the deluge. The Dragon King's credibility is based only on ordinary people's beliefs and a foreign doctrine, Buddhism. As a result, the "true dragon" (the Chinese emperor) gets the upper hand in his encounter with the dragon of folk religion (Dragon King). As the highest ruler in hydraulic despotism, with authority going back to Yu, the emperor is involved with large-scale, governmentally managed works of irrigation and flood control—or "hydraulic agriculture," in Wittfogel's terminology. The Dragon King, as the local authority of the hydraulic hierarchy, plays the role of county or province magistrate; he is limited to small-scale irrigation—"hydroagriculture," as Wittfogel calls it.

Our comparison of the Chinese mythological dragon and the Dragon King has shown that Chinese dragons suggest different ideas in different contexts; also that they occupy differing positions in the mythological hierarchy, the distinctions being based on the stratified hydraulic system. On the other hand, the Dragon King is "physically" a dragon, sharing the "nine classic resemblances" described by Luo Yua in *Er'yayi* 爾雅翼 as the head of a camel, the horns of a deer, the ears of a cow, the neck of a snake, the abdomen of a clam, the scales of a fish, the claws of an eagle, the eyes of a demon, and the paws of a tiger. Even though the Dragon King often takes the human form, his true shape abides by the nine resemblances. Accordingly, the Chinese mythological dragon and the Dragon King look alike although they suggest different symbolic meanings.

#### THE WESTERN DRAGON OF THE WATERS

The Western dragon has had an indissoluble bond with water.<sup>3</sup> From Egypt to Rome, the dragon is the personification of the monsters that dwell in the waters as well as the powerful forces of the flood itself (SMITH 1919, 77-78; DAVIS 1953, 33-38). As the Western dragon's ancestor, the Egyptian water god displays both constructive and destructive forces, mingling the qualities associated with Egyptian mythical

archetypes. Later Western dragons, however, have lost the positive implications of the Egyptian water-god. It is the negative side of water which receives emphasis. With a great variety of forms, Western water-dragons only symbolize water's destructive aspects. Of the Western occupants of the deep, none is more renowned than Leviathan. He lurks in the depths of dungeon-dark waters; he obeys no laws but his own, defying both God and man; and if angered, he lashes the waters into a destructive frenzy. The Western water-dragon is often alienated from water, becoming an obstacle between man and beneficial water. A telling variant of the St. George legend has the martyr opposing a dragon-serpent that is blocking a well-head and causing drought in the land. When St. George kills the dragon, the water-supply restores the land to health (NEWMAN 1979, 205). In those examples, the Western dragon symbolizes dryness.

It is a Greco-Roman tradition to associate the watery dragon-snake with fire. Among the tremendous images of destruction in Vergil's *Aeneid* there is one which by its emphatic recurrence comes to dominate all the rest, including ravaging wolves, storms at sea, and the fall of an ancient tree. This is the image of the serpent-dragon, which is compatible with the Greek Typhon. He is the dragon-like son of Gaia and Tartarus. Zeus attacked him with a thunderbolt. In Book Two of *Aeneid*, the savagery of the attackers, their deceit, and the flames which crown their work are repeatedly compared to the action of the serpent. And Vergil's sea-snakes, which possess many characteristics of typical Western dragons, proceed side by side to the shore. "Their bloody crests tower over the waves; their length behind wreathes their huge backs in voluminous folds" (VERGIL 1952, 35-59). The blaze of their eyes can be found in Book Five, and they lick their hissing mouths with flickering or fiery tongues. In another example, the serpent thrown at Amata produces a flame in her breast (VERGIL 1952, 103-129).

In Europe, where hydraulic despotism has seldom dominated any country, rain-gods are often overshadowed by other gods. There, the dragon has never been a bringer of rain but rather a spitter of fire, a destroyer who uses water as a weapon or as an obstacle to beneficial water. The Chinese hydraulic state, however, enjoyed absolute authority for three thousand years. As a result, Chinese hydraulic heroes or gods, represented by Yu and the dragon, tend to be associated with the emperorship or the highest authority of the hydraulic society; often they further embody the Chinese sense of national identification. The Dragon King, a mutation of the original dragon in Chinese folk religion, represents the peasants' yearning for rain in an arid continent that has

survived for thousands of years, thanks to the ancient but effective system of hydroagriculture. Water, the source of life, fully deserves to be a source of Chinese mythology.

## NOTES

1. Numbers of motifs refer to Thompson's index (THOMPSON 1932-1936).
2. The Chinese classics referring to the myth of Yu include *Shiji: Wudibenji* 史記·五帝本記, *Shu: Yaodia* 書·堯典, *Mengzi: Tengwengongxia* 孟子·滕文公下, *Zuozhuan: Zhaogongqinian* 左傳·昭公七年, *Wuyue Chunqiu: Yuewang Wuyu Waizhuan* 吳越春秋·越王無餘外傳, and *Shanhai Jing: Hainei Jing* 山海經·海內經.
3. While the Eastern dragon is a water god, the Western dragon is a fire fiend. The one ability all Western dragons have in common is their ability to breathe out smoke and fire. Their eyes, too, are usually red and fiery. Because of its unnatural union with fire the dragon is associated with death and the underground world, a connection that has persisted through the centuries. In "The Subterranean World," a curious geological treatise published in 17th Century in Amsterdam, Father Athanasius Kircher explains the nature of the earth's interior: "All the world's volcanoes are fed by one great main fire situated in the very bowels of the earth. Down this area is a labyrinth of passageways, all running into each other, and most filled with lava, liquid fire, and water. Some of these caves and passageways, however, are empty, and it is here you will find dragons, the king of the underground beasts (NEWMAN 1979, 40)."

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