REVIEW ARTICLE

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An Anthology of Sources on Chinese Mythology

BIRRELL, ANNE. *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994. xix + 322 pages. Figures, concordance of English and Chinese book titles, indexes of Chinese names, terms, and concepts. Hardcover US$42.00; ISBN 0-8018-4595-5.

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CHINESE MYTHOLOGY HAS recently been receiving increased attention, as reflected in the growing number of books on the subject. This is true even in the PRC, where, after decades of ideological neglect, the scholar Yuan K'o (who contributes a foreword to the present book) has almost single-handedly revived interest in the subject. Anne Birrell, in the book under review and in a two-part review article in *History of Religions* (1994), has provided us with a detailed survey of the state of the field. Her work signals a new page in the critical study of Chinese myth and folklore. We should all be grateful for her painstaking efforts.

The introduction to *Chinese Mythology* (1–22) is short but extremely dense. It covers the definition of myth; methodological approaches; modern Chinese and Japanese scholarship; the nature of Chinese mythic narratives; the polyfunctionality of myth; and a prospective on future research. Anyone who checks the references and bibliography will realize the phenomenal amount of information that has been condensed here. The two pages (7–8) on the most recent Western Sinological scholarship, for example, is a real eye-opener, being far more comprehensive than the introduction to *Myth and Symbol in Chinese Tradition* (GIRARDOT and MAJOR 1986).

The rest of Birrell's book assumes the form, not so much of a systematic introduction to the study of Chinese myth as of an anthology of source materials, all carefully selected, categorized, arranged, and translated. Some of the materials are well known; others will be new to most readers. However, unlike Yuan K'o, who tends to retell myths in a traditional, unilinear chronology with frequently free editorialization, Birrell chooses a thematic and hands-off approach. The titles of the chapters say much about the content: 1) "Origin," 2) "Culture Bearers," 3) "Saviors," 4) "Destroyers," 5) "Miraculous Birth," 6) "The Yellow Emperor," 7) "Archer Yi," 8) "The Great Yu," 9) "Goddesses," 10) "Immortality," 11) "Metamorphosis," 12) "Love," 13) "Heroes," 14) "Flora and Fauna," 15) "Strange Lands and People," and 16) "Founding Myths." Every chapter begins with a discussion of the overall theme, followed by subsections that summarize, introduce, cite in brief,

or translate in full the relevant materials.

This book is invaluable for its critical presentation of the textual materials and its assessment of major scholarly opinions and interpretations to date. Comparativists will appreciate Birrell's arrangement by types and subtypes. The indexes by Chinese names/terms and by concepts, with cross-references, are very useful. I will cite just one example. Under Ching Wei (296) we find: "Daughter of the god, Flame Emperor; named Flu Wa; drowned; metamorphoses as the Ching Wei, Guardian Spirit, bird; eternal fate is to dam the Eastern Sea with twigs and pebbles. Motif: antithetical elements, death, eternal impossible task, failed hero, fire and water, goddess, metamorphose.... *See also* Flame Emperor." A careful textualist, Birrell trusts and stays as much as possible with pre-Han and Han materials, though she does include some later recalls. On principle she shuns popular, local folklore of uncertain ancestry, as well as recent ethnographic findings.

As Victor Mair notes on the book jacket, "Birrell has single-handedly saved the scholarly world at least a decade in its attempts to come to grips with this fragmented, refractory body of narratives" in a "marvelous work of humanistic scholarship." While acknowledging all this, I must still register some personal frustration. Perhaps there is simply no way in the near future to resolve the problem of the fragmentary nature of the materials, and perhaps an introductory overview or anthology should not attempt a systematic integration. Birrell is right to be critical of such extreme measures. Nevertheless there are certain scholars, like Shirakawa Shizuka, who perceive the fragmentary nature of the narratives to be not necessarily a handicap, and who believe that the postulation of an overall theory can turn this characteristic into an investigative advantage. Admittedly Shirakawa's theory is, in less capable hands, risky and prone to abuse. But although it avoids such dangers, Birrell's more schematic approach is not without its own share of shortcomings and implicit prejudices.

Though acknowledging the thought of Lévi-Strauss, Birrell disagrees with some of the structuralist inferences made by Sarah Allan, another scholar of Chinese mythology working in England. For example, in disputing Allan's inference that the Shang rulers were solar kings descended from ten totemic sun-birds, Birrell finds Allan's definition of "totemism" as a "system of classification rather than a social institution" (255) to be too vague, and notes: "It should be made clear that nowhere in the classical or postclassical texts are the ten crows in the ten suns ever specified or implied" (255). It is "not justifiable to merge several myths and to inject a totally new motif (ten birds) to create a neomyth to suit one's theory" (256).

Stucturalism, however, would accept using more than just datable early texts. If a structure persists over time, myths recorded at a later date may still

be used to help decode an earlier set of myths when the diachronic shifts and substitutes are duly noted. This is what ALLAN did in *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China* (1991). Even if one disputes Allan's inference that there were ten sun-birds to go with the ten suns, this would not much change the identification of the Shang rulers as solar kings. Although the Koreans shared the Eastern Yi people's myth of a founding hero impregnated by the sun, neither they nor the Japanese spoke of ten sun-birds, so that Allan's inference of these beings may actually draw out the culturally unique element in Shang culture. The Shang named their kings after a ten-day week (one day equalling one sun), which neither the Koreans nor the Japanese did. Allan's "neomyth" may therefore be structurally more faithful to China.

It is Birrell's displeasure with Allen's vague use of the term totemism, however, that truly shows up her methodological differences. Calling the search for "nature myths" a nineteenth-century fixation, Birrell stresses the "social charter" function of myths. This allows her to move the discussion from what is perennial (culture) to what is specific (culture). She is understandably dissatisfied with Allan's use of "totemism" to refer to a classificatory system instead of a social institution. The later Shang kings were not explicitly named after the sun-birds, there was no yearly killing off of the totem, and so forth. But in stressing classification, Allan follows the structuralist critique of the "myth and ritual" school, which since Tylor has always given ritual precedence over myth. Following Durkheim and Mauss's work on totemic classifications, Lévi-Strauss accorded myth a greater linguistic-semantic autonomy. Language and symbols help us to predefine social reality. Poststructuralists, by uncovering the unresolved tensions within mythic narratives, have since gone behind myth (thus unmasking ideological "social charters") to sometimes reveal an unexpected reversal of it. I mention this because in her review article Birrell mentioned an essay of mine unmasking Ho Po the River God (LAI 1990; part of a series of such deconstructionist exercises), and misconstrued that I was indifferent to the function of myth as "social charter." A simple example drawing on a case in her present book may illustrate how she, Allan, and I operate differently.

On pages 194–95 Birrell has collected the early materials on Tan Chu, "Cinnabar Crimson," the evil son of Sage-King Yao. She does not include the legend familiar to all *wei* (Jap. *go*) players—on account of its dubious quality no doubt—that the frivolous Tan Chu wasted too much time playing this chess-like game he had created, which involved the use of black and white pieces each seeking to encircle the other's position. We will see why this legend is not irrelevant later. One of the curious things that Tan Chu did was "go boating even when there is no water." Previously left unexplained,

this incident is freely interpreted by Yuan K'o as Tan Chu ordering his subjects to pull his pleasure barge over a dried-out river bed. His is a definitely late embellishment that Birrell would throw out, but curiously, as we will see, it actually keeps alive an archaic memory.

ALLAN has the "idealist" reading. In *The Heir and the Sage* (1981) she theorizes that the material points to a very real problem in early Chinese politics, namely, whether succession should go to an heir in the royal lineage or whether the man of virtue, the sage, should assume rule. Yao's disowning of his son and passing the rule to the next sage-king, Shun, was in accordance with the Confucian moral imperative. Allan sees this option as deeply rooted in early Chinese memory. Birrell takes a more "realistic" approach, seeing in the legendary "voluntary abdication" a likely "sociological charter" relating to an archaic society that transmitted succession outside the lines of kinship. Virtue was not yet at issue here. Only later, after succession by blood-line had become the dynastic norm (and moral kingship a Chou ideal) was there felt a need to explain away the prior "anomaly." Only then was a moral judgment made that declared this son of Yao to be evil and therefore unworthy to be king (194).

Allan presents this succession by virtue as an actual event. Birrell doubts this, but leaves unexplained what the "predynastic" society was like. In a recent article (LAI 1995), I follow Shirakawa in seeing it as involving the classic Yi-Hsia tension. Shun was the eastern barbarian (Yi) allegedly invited to go west to succeed Yao and rule over what would be Hsia (Hua Hsia, or China proper). In my reading, the myth of voluntary abdication is a variant of the central myth that inspired James FRAZER to compile his *Golden Bough* (1981): namely the stories that kings were once chosen to rule for a year or so and then killed off when the term was up. Frazer did not give a sociological reason for this, saying only that it was clearly tied to the year and therefore the seasons.

The practice is still kept up in Japan, where during the Naked Festival the chosen *hitogami* (man-god) is wined and dined then ritually roughed up (or thrown into the river) when his year's term as god (or king) is up. In order to go beyond "seasonal drama" (nature myth) and come up with a "social charter" explaining this pattern of temporary kingship one may follow Evans Pritchard or Radcliffe-Brown, who see alternating kingships of this type between two tribes as rooted in the simple fact that neither group is strong enough to totally dominate the other. If one looks closely at the legends of Yao and Shun as well as of Archer Yi, one will indeed notice the dipolar tension that once existed between Eastern Yi (where Shun and the Archer came from) and Western Hsia (headed supposedly by the son of Sage-King Yu). Hsia is the prehistoric dynasty with which Allan would

associate the earlier chthonic totem of "snakes, dragons, and turtles" as opposed to the historic Shang dynasty that overtook it and used the sun-birds as totems for its solar kings.

Allan, however, has accepted Shun as a human figure; so has Birrell. Both exemplify "humanistic" scholarship. But such anthropocentricism came out of what to me is a late, historic Chinese attempt at rewriting these myths. This is the "reverse euhemerization" widely accepted by Sinologists as intrinsic to early Chinese mythology, but which I believe has not been sufficiently critiqued and deconstructed. In my reading, the myth of Shun was originally a solar myth before it became a solar-king myth and then a human-sage myth. This is indicated by the trial of Shun, in which Shun was sent to the roof of the barn by his evil father, the Blind Man, who then set the barn aflame. Shun would have been killed had he not flown to safety using his bamboo hat as wings. Next Shun's evil brother Hsiang tricked Shun into going down the well. Stones were then rolled down to block his exit. Shun again would have died had he not somehow found a secret passage that led him back to the surface. At its core, this story of the trial of Shun maps the career of the sun. The Blind Man represents the night that preceded the break of day by Shun the sun. Shun being roasted alive on top of the barn is the sun incinerating itself at high noon. Shun flying down to safety with wings is the sun-bird descending to the west. Shun going down the well is the sun going underground to the subterranean ocean. Shun finding his way home is the sun riding his boat across that body of water to emerge the next day on land as the morning sun in the east.

I mention these elements (not included in my published essay) to indicate that the story of Tan Chu can be read in a similar fashion. Tan Chu, which means "Red Disk," is the sun. Born in the east, he is banished to the Cinnabar Gulf, the western valley where the glowing sun sets. Like Shun, Tan Chu dies in the south after defeating the southern Man barbarians, in the land of the Rousing Crimson inhabited by men with bird beaks and wings (solar bird-men). Tan Chu, who frolicked "irrespective of night and day" and "coerced people to pull his boat over dry land" is part of a story of a long drought, a variant of the ten suns baking the earth dry at the time of Archer Yi. The myth of the sun riding a chariot westward across the sky during the day and riding a boat eastward underground at night is apparently corrupted or rather rewritten into (in Yuan K'o's model) the story of Tan Chu forcing his poor subjects to pull his pleasure barge (sun-chariot/sun-boat) over the parched river bed.

In unmasking Tan Chu as the Red Disc in the sky I am not attempting to peel off a cultural myth in a "nineteenth-century fixation" with retrieving a nature myth. My point is that no nature myth is ever wholly "natural"—

nature myth is continually being reinscribed to serve cultural ends. The succession of night by day (Blind Man by the beautiful shining Shun) would help to mark the rise of the solar kings of the Shang dynasty; the Chinese character for "dynasty" and "royal court" is still the same as that for "morning."

As "nature myth" became "cultural myth" and seasonal drama became the model of and model for political drama and dynastic succession, so too could the conflict of day/night (black/white) or water/land (in the flood narrative) become the design for the "encircling" game of *wei*. Once we see how myths can be recycled and rewritten in such a way that their basic categories do not remain constant we can no longer accept any one classification system as *the* system, whether that of Allan or Birrell. Anytime we classify we divide and conquer. We define what is real and we privilege one worldview over another. Birrell's thematic division of her chapters is "humanistic," but it is a humanism influenced by her acceptance of "reverse euhemerism." She shows a concern for the "social charters" that came out of the myth and ritual school. Although truthful, they are truthful to only one level of the myth-creating process that postmodernists should now learn to question.

In the humanized, heroicized, and historicized recall of the career of the bird Ching Wei, for example, are hidden multiple layers of fragmented recollections. To classify it Birrell has to draw cross-references to heroes, goddesses, metamorphosis, and more. But there is a way to uncover the original integrity and its derivative development of her core myth. BIRRELL writes:

> Another two hundred leagues to the north is a mountain called Fa-chiu, and on its summit are numerous *che*-thorn trees. There is a bird in them. Its appearance is like a crow, and it has a colorful head, a white beak and scarlet feet. Its name is Ching Wei; its name is from its call. It is the Flame Emperor's younger daughter, Nu Wa. Nu Wa was playing in the east sea when she sank and failed to resurface. So she became the Ching Wei [Spirit Guardian]. She is forever carrying in her beak wood and stone from the western hills to dam up the east sea. (215)

Birrell reads the name Ching Wei as "Spirit Guardian" and interprets the bird's grudge against the sea as consequent to her violating the "territorial prerogative" of the sea god. But before Ching Wei was a "Spirit Guardian"—the role of a crow (the bird of night) serving as the psychopomp of souls—she was "Skillful (*ching*) in Defense (*wei*)" of the land against the sea in a variant of the Flood and the Earth Diver myth. In a further opposition of red fire (the Flaming Emperor) and dark water, the myth tells of a conflict between the sky above and the water below (sky gods and

earth deities) or between south and north (political conflicts). Like the myth of Kua Fu chasing the sun, the story of Ching Wei filling the sea—a tale of fools and heroes—comes under the lunar myth-form depicting defiance and/or futility. Albert Camus has in our time reclaimed a similar myth: Sisyphus as a modern myth of humans laboring against the absurdity of the universe. This shows how primal "nature myths" can always serve higher, even modern, cultural ends.

Ching Wei also turns out to be a sun-bird, since the Fa-chiu hill where she dwelt carries a name that pictorially shows the "starting (flight) of nine (solar) birds." And Nu Wa, as it turns out, did not exactly drown in the eastern sea. She is, to wit, the Frog (Wa) Princess (Nu) who just changed residence. In her full metamorphosis, she dived into the waters in the sea (as the dragon in the east), swam underground as the turtle of the north, only to reappear in the western hills as the tiger so as to leap into the air as the bird of the south. And as to those *che*-thorn trees, it transpires that the character for *che* is made up of the elements for "tree" and "rock," precisely the items Ching Wei carried in her beak to dam the waves of the sea. Ching Wei is, in short, a persona of the Phoenix, the fire-bird reborn, and one that in this text is colored red, white, and black—the colors of the four cardinal directions except for green, the color of her enemy, the eastern sea. A full analysis of this myth (under preparation) will show how this myth of the seasons is as much a conflict of the elements (eventually the five phases in succession/conquest) as well as a conflict of peoples (China against her four neighbors). At the same time, this lunar myth of metamorphosis was translated into a metaphor of heroic defiance, prior to Ching Wei's spiritualization into a psychopomp and her politicization for territorial imperatives.

This particular case represents perhaps only a hundredth of what Birrell covers in her book. My disagreements with her and my interest in reintegrating the mythic fragments do not in any way detract from the overall value of *Chinese Mythology*, a pioneering overview and critical digest with a great wealth of information that is certain to provide an unsurpassed source of edification and inspiration for students of Chinese culture.

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