REVIEW ARTICLE

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Recent PRC Scholarship on Chinese Myths*

* *Zhongguo shenhua* 中国神話, Yuan Ke 袁珂, ed., vol. I (1987). Zhongguo shenhua xuehui 中国神話学会 [Society for the Study of Chinese Myths]. Beijing: Xianhua. 366 pp.

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THE first volume of *Zhongguo shenhua*, a journal of research on the myths of China, was published in Beijing in 1987 under the editorship of Yuan Ke, the leading scholar on the subject in the People's Republic of China. The volume, which is actually more like a small book than a journal, contains a number of original articles (among them an excellent review of China's past scholarship on myths [14–30]) and Chinese translations of essays from Russian, English, French, and Japanese. Its appearance is all the more welcome since it ends a lapse of more than a decade in the publication of research on myths from the PRC. The table of contents (excluding preface and postscript) is as follows:

1) The Study of Primitive Religion and Myth for the Purpose of Developing the Culture of a People and Strengthening Their Cooperation (1–13).
2) The Influence of Anthropology upon the Study of Chinese Myths (14–30).*
3) Research into the Myths of the Manchus (1): The Layers of Heaven and Earth, the Fish That Causes Earthquakes, and the World Tree (31–44).
4) An Analysis of the Frog Myth of the Zhuang 壯 Tribe (45–51).*
5) A Precious Picture Scroll of the Age of Gods (52–60).
6) A Preliminary Investigation of the Totemic Myth of the Nüzhen 女真 People (71–86).
7) Toward a Discourse on the Unique Character and Significance of the Symbols in the Myths of Certain Minorities (87–98).
8) A Brief Study of the Character of Ancient Chinese Myths (99–142).
9) The Origin and Development of the Story of Erlang Shen (143–67).
10) On Chang'e's 嫦娥 Flight to the Moon (168–90).*
11) A New Interpretation of the Chang'e Myth (191–203).*

12) [Archer] Yi 羿 and Hou Yi 后羿 (204–21).*
13) The Place of the Myth of [Sage-King] Yu 禹 in the Chinese Cultural System (222–30).
14) The Sun God in Ancient China (231–42).*
15) Toward a Discourse on the Origin of the Pangu 盤古 [Chaos] Myths: How Xu Zheng 徐整 Reworked and Systematized Them (243–54).
16) Analyzing the Structure of the Chaos (Gourd and the Dog Totem) Myth of the Miao 苗 (255–63).
17) A New Look at the Myth of the Queen Mother of the West as Told outside China (264–73).*
18) The Place of *Bowuzhi* 博物志 [Compendium on various matters] in the History of Ancient Myths (274–87).
19) The Special Narrative Characteristics of Ancient Chinese Myths (288–95).
20) On the Idea That "Myth Is Born of Mankind's Childhood" Is Unscientific (296–305).
21–25) Translations of five foreign essays (306–64).
26) Report on Papers on Comparative Mythology Read at the First Conference on Comparative Literature (365).

Both the journal and the academic society that produced it look very promising. Unfortunately, there does not seem as yet to have been a second volume. We can only hope that it has been delayed—as other publications from the PRC have been—and that calling attention to it in this review will inspire the continuation of the series.

Zhongguo shenhua exemplifies the progress that has been made by PRC scholars in the field of mythological studies. The official Marxist line of interpretation is no longer in force, despite a few passing references to Marx and Lenin. There are many new departures, a quite creative use of social scientific tools, and much valuable data (ethnographers will be particularly interested in the collection of myths from China's ethnic minorities).

Since it would be beyond the scope of this review to summarize all of the essays above, I have organized my discussion around the Chinese lunar myth of Archer Yi and Chang'e, the theme of which relates to a number of the articles in the journal (marked with asterisks above). Elsewhere I have drawn upon the essay on Erlang and discussions relating to the frog myth for my own research (Lai, 1994).

The tale of Chang'e's flight to the moon is undoubtedly the best known of China's lunar myths. Chang'e's story is still told in pictures on boxes

of Chinese moon cakes prepared for the Mid-Autumn Festival (the lunar August full moon). Chang'e, the wife of Archer Yi from the Eastern Barbaric Region, supposedly stole and ingested the herb of immortality that her husband had procured from the Queen Mother of the West. For that, she found herself floating off to the moon, and is now regarded as the Moon Goddess. The story is an ancient one, already well circulated by the early Han in the popular form outlined above. The *Huainanzi* 淮南子 tells it in verse:

> Yi requested the herb of immortality from the Queen Mother of the West,
> But Chang'e stole it [from him] and fled to the moon.
> At a loss and in despair, [the Archer] had no way to follow! (168)

Leaving her husband and the warmth of the human world behind, Chang'e found her home in the lunar Palace of Pervasive Cold. The moon being the icon of the Great Yin, that coldness is only too literal. Tang poet Li Shangyin 李商隱 immortalized her folly by having her "pine nightly for the warmth of human contact."

The other player in the drama, Archer Yi, is a Chinese composite of Prometheus, Hercules, and Gilgamesh. He is the hero (or god) who taught men the art of hunting, saved mankind from ten scorching suns by shooting down nine of them, slew many harmful monsters, seduced a nymph, and shot the River God in the eye (for which he incurred the anger of the Lord on High) (204–21). Leader of the Eastern Barbarians, he was also made ruler of the Chinese Xia 夏 domain. Perhaps because of this, the Chinese have two opposing images of him: hero of the people, and tyrant. Indeed, some believe that it was Chang'e's fear that this hero-turned-tyrant would become immortal that caused her to eat the herb and take flight to the moon.

The popular image of Chang'e has long been questioned by skeptics, however, such as Mao Dun 矛盾 (an author with a special interest in Chinese myth; cited on page 169), who in 1928 already disputed the view of her as a moon-dwelling goddess. In the present volume articles 11 and 12 pursue Mao's idea, drawing on the distinction between animism and animatism to make the case that Chang'e is not a goddess residing on the moon (and thus distinct from the moon) but rather the moon spirit itself. Although her name seems to belie this—Chang'e's name was Heng'e 恒娥 until the word *heng* (eternal) became taboo after a Han emperor used it in his title (219)—in either case the words mean "Eternal Crescent." Thus, whether Chang'e or Heng'e, Chang'e is simply the personification of the moon.[1]

Other aspects of the popular folklore on Chang'e are also scrutinized in this collection. For example, upon arriving on the moon Chang'e is said to have encountered a white hare and a woodcutter. The white hare stood on its hind legs pounding medicine in a mortar. The woodcutter was cutting a *gui* 桂 (cinnamon tree), but every time he made a notch the tree healed itself, dooming him to failure. The symbolism of lunar fertility abounds in these stories. The hare is a fertile animal, fabled to live a thousand years; the color of its hair changes to a full white (as the waxing moon would) only after five hundred years (195). The *gui* tree is just as rare and fertile. A folk song (220) goes:

Chang'e flew off to the moon;
There she planted a *gui* tree.
Every thirty-six [six times six] years
It lets drop only two leaves
But wherever they fall, it is auspicious.
If they fall on a barren mountain,
It changes into a mountain of flower and fruit.
If they fall into the sea,
There is an endless harvest of shrimp and fish.
If they fall into a person's home,
The family enjoys good fortune without end.

However, such tales of fertility may be the additions of a later, itself fertile, imagination. It seems that before the moon spirit became Chang'e, a maiden fair, it was a simple moon toad, as depicted on a banner unearthed from a Han tomb at Mawangdui 馬王推 (and, according to a late Han commentary, the old edition of the *Huainanzi* mentions Chang'e turning into a toad [168]). Furthermore, modern poet and scholar Wen Yiduo 聞一多 (1899–1946; cited on page 22) demonstrates how in the pronunciation of the Jin 晉 period (317–420) the word for "toad" or "tadpole" shifted easily to the homophone for "hare." By the Jin period, apparently, the hare had begun to displace the toad as the lunar animal. Interestingly, the medicine the hare was pounding in its mortar was said to be an elixir of immortality called the toad pill (197).[2]

I find Yuan Ke's explanation of the myth's evolution the best to date. His account draws upon an archaeological find of two undated stone sarcophagi (described on page 170, but with no photograph or illustration). One shows a tablet of a snake with a human face (Fuxi 伏羲, Snake-Man) holding up the sun disk with the sun-bird inscribed therein. The other pictures the same Snake-Man holding up the moon

disk, within which are a toad standing on its hind legs (Chan Chu 蟾蜍, Toad-Man) with a stick in its hand, a man holding a withered branch, and, between them, another man holding up a stick. Yuan Ke hypothesizes that one man has chosen the Tree of Life while the other has chosen the Tree of Death (179).

To be more exact, the Snake-Man holding up both the sun and the moon represents chthonic humanity, like the primeval couple Fuxi (Snake-Man) and Nugua 女媧 (Snake-Woman) with their tails intertwined. The toad standing on its hind legs is a similar hybrid also symbolizing chthonic humanity. It can promise the power of rebirth, whereas the fully humanized man (Man-Man) knows only mortality. The man in the middle is dead, and has just arrived on the moon. As in the Vedic myth of Yama (the moon god), the deceased has a choice to make; the choice he should make is to identify himself with the chthonic Toad-Man and pick its living branch, avoiding the fully human, and mortal, Man-Man. See EBERHARD 1965, 127, which has a Promethean twist in that the man is further distracted from his decision by a silvery white cock (the sunbird) that keeps pecking at him.

From this we can infer that the hare pounding with his pestle is a corruption of the Toad-Man. The Man-Man holding up the dead twig may have been similarly redrawn as the woodcutter (popular folklore now considers him a Taoist adept, a "sorcerer's apprentice"). His tale is like that of Sisyphus, a lunar figure whose work, likewise, is never done. The same theme informs the original myth of the oxherd and the weaver, a pair of star-crossed lovers said to be kept apart for the whole year except on the night of the Star Festival because in their love for one another they neglected their appointed tasks. But that is not how the *Book of Song* puts it. From Arthur WALEY's translation:

> In Heaven there is a River Han
> Looking down upon us so bright.
> By it sits the Weaving Lady astride her stool,
> Seven times a day she rolls up her sleeves.
> But though seven times a day she rolls up her sleeves
> She never makes wrap or shirt.
> Bright shines the Draught Ox,
> But can't be used for yoking a cart. (1960, 112)

They are not so much lazy lovers as doomed workers, who, try as they might, are never able to finish their labors.

This brings us back to the story of the Archer and Chang'e. PRC scholars have discovered some interesting information showing how their

story evolved in time. The *Guitsang* 歸藏, a fifth-century B.C.E. text preserved only in incomplete citations (168), portrays Chang'e as having gotten the elixir of immortality by herself, not as having stolen it from the Archer. Nor is her theft mentioned in "Questions to Heaven" in *Songs of the South*, which keeps the queries on her separate from those on the Archer. Chang'e could well have gained access to the herb on her own—she was the deathless moon, and the Queen Mother herself was a lunar deity. Outside the borders of China, the cult of the Queen Mother probably blended into that of the Babylonian Ishtar and the Indic Uma (264–74). An archaeological find shows her as a divine queen offering a tree of life to a horse rider (266).

But if Chang'e is the moon goddess to the people of the western border area, the Archer could well be the sun god to the eastern border barbarians. The "feather" component to his name shows his ties to the sun-bird (204–208). The story of the Archer and Chang'e (or the Queen Mother) could thus be a story of the sun and the moon. Three local folklores show the possible variations:

1) In Henan 河南, the story is that Chang'e ingested the herb because she wanted to prevent it falling into the hands of a man who was plotting to kill the Archer.
2) In the southern part of Hubei 河北, the story is that she was a niece of the Lord on High, saved by the Archer from harm by a heavenly wolf (or dog).[3] But the Archer was banished from heaven for later shooting down nine of the ten suns, while Chang'e was banished to the moon.
3) Among the Yao 瑤 people in South China, the moon is said to have somehow showered fire (like the sun). An archer shot off a corner of it; his wife draped it with a shawl embroidered with the hare, the *gui* tree, and herself. Husband and wife lived happily ever after on the moon. (200–201).

The PRC scholars make an intriguing observation about this dialectic of sun and moon. It is suggested that the last line of the *Huainanzi* verse, which says "The Archer had no way to follow after her" may be read differently as "He never remarried" or "He had no descendants" (175). The point, however, is not that the Archer had no sons. On the contrary, he had sons *by himself*. This is related to myths of man-only kingdoms. Two such kingdoms were said to exist, one to the east and the other to the west. The eastern Kingdom of the Gentlemen was so genteel a place that there was no fear of robbers. People could leave their houses unlocked, and did not have to worry about leaving things

unattended on the street. There was only one problem: no one lived long (meaning that they were not immortal but that they could reproduce themselves before they died).

The western all-male kingdom was the result of an envoy being sent to seek the herb from the Queen Mother. Running out of provisions before he reached his destination, the envoy was forced to settle down, live on berries, and make clothes of tree bark. There being no women around, he gave birth to two sons from out of his ribs. The two sons in turn reproduced more sons until a Kingdom of Single Men rose. This is a variant of the tale of the Archer chasing after Chang'e or of the giant who pursued the sun and died in the hot desert to the west of China. The Archer, failing to catch up with Chang'e, might have fathered his own all-male race. This tense love-hate relationship between sun and moon is told in another story:

> During a hunt, the Archer caught a hare which he put into his sack, but it later escaped. That night he dreamed of a man telling him, "I am the Lord who Aids Birds. Why did you humiliate me so?" The next day the Archer met [his favorite archery disciple], who killed him. Henceforth, the hare is also known as Aids Birds. (219)

The moon is a hare; the sun is a bird. For abusing the hare, the Archer paid with his life.

Men, of course, are physiologically incapable of bearing children. It is also a fact of life that maternity is certain but paternity is not (who truly knows who the father of a child is?). The certainty of maternity led to the theory that matriarchy was the predominant social sytem until displaced by patriarchy. The two PRC authors of article 10 in the journal, eager critics of the ills of traditional patriarchal societies, accept this view of a matriarchal stage in the history of human social development, and propose that it is patriarchy that created the myth of the all-male kingdoms. What the myth signifies, however, is that every male child a mother bears is claimed by the father as his—he fathers the child, while she only helps by temporarily bearing his seed. The result is the illusion of an all-male society, since female offspring are eventually married off to another family and thereby disappear from the patrilinear line.

The PRC scholars' efforts to dig up myth and folklore critical of patriarchal abuse would be appreciated by feminists. A good example is a touching folk opera called "The Girl Who Hates Getting Married," because she can only foresee endless days of abuse.

Daughter: O father, O mother, please
Do not marry me off
I have no wish to go
Only just to stay by your side.
Parents: This house has not a share meant for you
Not even a wicker basket for your back
Even if you die, no coffin is readied here
And no pig will be slaughtered on your behalf.

This led the daughter to recall those ancient days when it was women, not men, who possessed the things of the world (180–81). The freedom that women once enjoyed is also told in a myth about women being born with the ability to fly, while faceless, earthbound males could only watch in envy. Then one day the men learned from an old woman the trick of tying women down with ropes, symbolized by the rope still in the headbands of prospective brides (183–89). It is in this feminist context that the PRC scholars would like to see Chang'e's flight from the Archer—traditionally criticized by moralists as the act of a disloyal wife—to be the flight of a liberated female from the dominance of a male society.

Having examined the background of the lunar (and solar) myth of Chang'e and the Archer, deconstructed it, and reduced it to its socio-economic factors, it might be well to reverse our gaze and look forward instead of backward. This is to remedy our desire to debunk tradition and read between the lines, forgetting in the process the beauty of the story. The accretion, even the distortion, of a primeval myth in the retelling of the story is not accidental. Many myths never evolved into as beautiful a human drama as Chang'e and the Archer's. That can only be because these myths never aspired after a higher literary, metaphoric, and even metaphysical form. We need only compare the narrative of the Archer and that of the giant who chased after the sun to see how much richer the former story is:

Archer Yi of the East	A Giant (of the West?)
chases Chang'e, the Moon.	chases the Sun.
Archer Yi was sent down.	Earth-born Titans down from Heaven, are
Archer Yi shot down Nine	Chthonians.
Suns (ravens).	The Giant was roasted
Archer Yi blinded the River	alive.
God [tamed a flood].	The Giant died of thirst.
Archer Yi seduced and wedded	In man-only kingdoms

a river nymph.
Chang'e stole the herb of
immortality from Archer Yi.
Chang'e successfully
reached the Moon (West).

there is no woman and
no marriage.
Men just reproduce
themselves
autochthonically.

The Archer was a hero, a demigod from heaven who killed monsters and tamed the forces of nature that had brought the giant down. He also defied heaven and was banished from high, to assume the more human qualities of love, hate, pride, and prejudice, and eventually to suffer the sting of death. The giant remained a monster, superhuman, or subhuman. The sun and the moon remained, in earlier myths, zoomorphic and with no free will of their own. Not so our hero and heroine. The Archer and Chang'e graduated—or fell—into the state of human beings like us. It is that human quality that qualifies them to be the equivalents of Adam and Eve in China's anthropogenic myth. It is their pathos that lends their story to literary re-creation and their social relevance that tempts social critics to search their drama for evidence of the exploitation of an underclass.

NOTES

1. The crescent moon is eternal because it is forever waxing and waning. In lunar myths, change is what guarantees eternity. In China as in the West, this lunar equation came to be reversed by the new perception that invariability is the essence of Tao or Being. This change generally accompanies a claim of supremacy for the sun because of its constancy. With that shift in perception, that which is mutable became synonymous with that which is impermanent Becoming. Hence the poem "Question to Heaven" in the shamanic *Songs of the South* asks, "What [permanent] virtue has the moon? / That as it waxes, it also wanes."

2. PRC scholars are apparently not familiar with Carl Hentze's work in German, or with that of his disciple Du Erwei 杜而未 in Taiwan, who has been tirelessly pushing Hentze's "panlunar" reading of myths by seeing the moon in all aspects of Chinese culture. There is a dissertation (ANTONI 1982) on the White Hare in Inaba that might be relevant here.

3. The Dog of Heaven is that which swallows the moon during its eclipse.

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