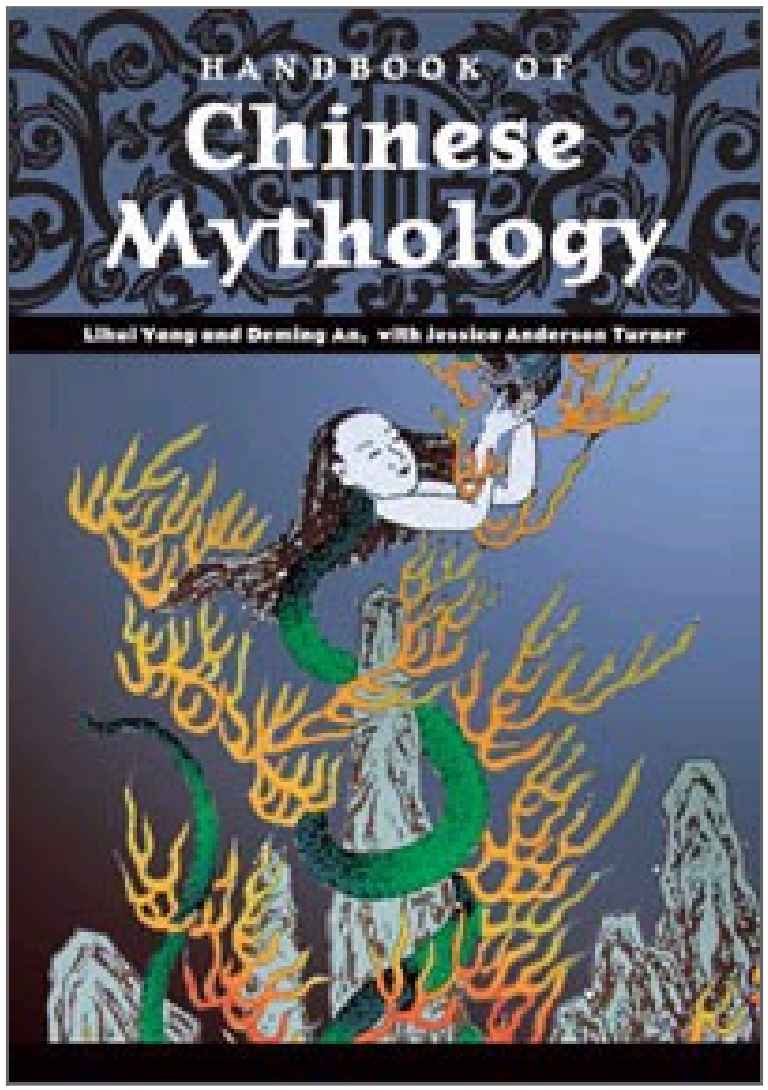
HANDBOOK OF
Chinese
Mythology
Lihui Yang and Deming An, with Jessica Anderson Turner

Handbook of Chinese Mythology

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HANDBOOKS OF WORLD MYTHOLOGY

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Lihui Yang and Deming An, with Jessica Anderson Turner

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

On October 30, 2000, I received an e-mail from William Hansen, a mythologist in classical studies at Indiana University. At the time my husband, Deming, and I were visiting research fellows in the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology at Indiana University in Bloomington. Professor Hansen told me that an editor at ABC-CLIO was looking for someone to write a handbook on Chinese mythology as part of its World Mythology series. He wondered if I could write this volume. I was pleased to hear the news of this opportunity. I responded to him swiftly: "Yes, I want to try." In fact, I had long hoped that someday I could introduce Chinese mythology to the West. I was encouraged to accept this great challenge.

I have studied Chinese myths for more than ten years. My PhD dissertation and my postdoctoral research focused on Nüwa myths. I have been conducting fieldwork on myths and relevant folk religion in Henan, Hebei, Gansu, and Shaanxi provinces since 1992, and I currently direct three research projects on mythology. For these reasons, I am familiar with ancient Chinese myths recorded in written accounts and living myths transmitted orally in China today. Additionally, I have learned how most Chinese mythologists think of myths and what they have accomplished in the field.

Since 1996 I have been teaching mythology to undergraduate and graduate students at Beijing Normal University. In this setting I have discussed mythology with students and addressed their questions about Chinese myths. I also frequently discussed Chinese mythology with American scholars and students in classroom and colloquium settings while a research fellow at Indiana University. These experiences have given me an understanding of what nonspecialists are interested in, and what might be the common misunderstandings of and biases toward Chinese myths.

To my knowledge, there are no Chinese mythology books written in English by Chinese mythologists. Although I am aware of several Chinese mythology texts that were originally written in Chinese and then translated into English, these books are quite limited. Among them, perhaps the most notable is *Dragons and Dynasties: An Introduction to Chinese Mythology* (Penguin Books, 1993), which was written in the 1960s by Chinese mythologist Yuan Ke (1916–2001). Because this book and others like it were written many years ago,

they do not reflect new achievements in Chinese mythology, especially those occurring in the past twenty years.

Western scholars have made great contributions to the field of Chinese mythology from as early as the middle of the nineteenth century. Among numerous eminent books and papers, there are some that are exemplary, and thus cited in this book. Derk Bodde's article "Myths of Ancient China," a short but serious article, discusses many important issues pertaining to ancient Chinese myth studies. Anne Birrell's studies of Chinese mythology have been published in several books and are cited within this volume. Her *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction* is a valuable book that provides concise and insightful interpretations and reliable accounts that are translated from primary sources in ancient Chinese writings into English. Anthony Christie's book, *Chinese Mythology,* presents many primary classical Chinese myths and numerous beautiful illustrations. Many of the illustrations are rarely seen in mainland China.

In spite of the important contributions that Western scholars have offered, however, I have found problems with many of the English books on Chinese mythology written by Western researchers. First, the Chinese myths discussed in many of these books are usually limited to the ones recorded in ancient Chinese writings. They seldom, if at all, mention the myths that are spread orally among Han people (the majority of the country's population) and other ethnic groups in contemporary China.

Second, these books usually view Chinese myths from Western values and cultural tradition by nature of being written within Western scholarly circles. For example, these scholars often compare Chinese myths with the classical mythology of Greece and Rome, using the latter as the criterion for comparison and analysis. They sometimes ignore how myths are transmitted and function within Chinese society and culture. Additionally, these scholars often overlook how native Chinese mythologists view myth and what has been accomplished in current research and collection.

Third, their entries and sources are less selective, often including legends, folktales, historical anecdotes, and mythical figures of classical novels. Frequently the sources used in these books are an indiscriminate mix of different (and often historicized) classical documents. Two popular books about Chinese myths, for instance, *Myths and Legends of China* and *A Dictionary of Chinese Mythology,* both written by the English sinologist E. T. C. Werner (1864–1954), found their sources by mixing heterogeneous texts from ancient classics, mythical novels written by novelists in sixteenth-century Buddhist sutras, and classical Taoist texts. Unfortunately, though these two books have been sharply criticized by Chinese mythologists and other sinologists, they continue to be reprinted.

Fourth, an additional problem with many texts written by Westerners simply

has to do with the difficulty of translating Chinese myths into English. Sometimes the original meanings of myths are misunderstood or are translated too literally by Western scholars. For example, in one case, the water god Gonggong's name is translated simply and literally as "Common Work." A similar literal translation might be to interpret Confucius's name ("Kongzi" in Chinese) as "Hole Son," which clearly does not make sense.

For these reasons, it is reasonable to believe that these books provide readers more or less with noncomprehensive, confusing, or even misleading knowledge about Chinese mythology.

This book is a contribution to the many books written by Western scholars on Chinese mythology. It has some special characteristics among English-language books, which include:

1. **Native mythologists' standpoint.** This book makes the most of Western scholars' achievements in Chinese mythology, but it also pays attention to how Chinese people and Chinese mythologists perceive Chinese myths, and what they have done, or are doing, in the field of Chinese myth study, especially in the past twenty years. For example, this book introduces the enormous national project San Tao Jicheng, or the Three Collections of Folk Literature, which formally started in 1984 and is nearly completed. This book, and current Chinese scholarship on mythology, greatly benefit from this project. We also try to represent in this book the recent interpretations some Chinese mythologists and historians make about "the historicizing of Chinese myths."
2. **A more comprehensive picture of Chinese mythology.** This book not only presents the myths from ancient Chinese documents but also introduces living myths that are orally transmitted in contemporary China. Additionally, though this book focuses on the myths of Han Chinese people, it also details many myths of various ethnic groups living in China to illustrate the diversity of myths and people within China. The purpose of this is to give readers an idea of the whole picture of Chinese mythology, and to explain Han myths in a more interrelated background of Chinese mythology and culture.
3. **Emphasis on the relationship between Chinese myths and their social and cultural contexts.** This book not only illustrates myth as texts, it also pays much attention to the relationship between Chinese myths and the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which myths are created, transmitted, and reshaped. Special consideration is paid to questions that have rarely been discussed before: How are myths' existence and transmission influenced by their social and cultural contexts? How were myths thought about, recorded, and changed in different periods of Chinese history? How were myths used and reconstructed as an important cultural resource to

serve people's current needs? And how have myths influenced Chinese culture and society? Thus, this book does not take myths as isolated ancient "dead" stories but tries to show their living forces and interconnections with social and cultural contexts in many ways.

4. **More selected entries and sources.** This book exhibits myths that are often discussed by Chinese scholars and known by Han Chinese people. The types of entries include gods, goddesses, spirits, demigods, places of importance in mythology (e.g., Kunlun Mountain), important mythical animals and plants (e.g., Crow of the Sun; Fusang tree), mythological accessories (e.g., Xirang, the self-growing soil; the elixir of immortality), and mythical themes (e.g., the Flood). Entries refer to that which most Chinese mythologists think of as "myths," excluding legends and tales about some mythical characters such as the Cowboy and Weaving Maiden or the Horse-headed Lady; anecdotes about real historical heroes, and figures of Taoism and Buddhism such as Laozi, Confucius, Guan Yu, Guanyin, and the Eight Immortals; and the like. The sources of this book mainly come from ancient written documents, archeological findings, the national sources collected from the San Tao Jicheng project (some are not published yet and only can be accessed by Chinese scholars), and also from contemporary research including the authors' field research and the research of other Chinese mythologists.

When dynasties in ancient Chinese history are mentioned, their specific time period in the text is not indicated except when necessary for understanding. In the middle of the Introduction is a chronology of Chinese history that details different eras and dynasties in Chinese history. Additionally, to save space and avoid unnecessary repetition, information about the author, the commentator, the time an ancient Chinese text was written, and so on is usually provided only at a particular writing's first mention. Many of these texts are discussed in the Introduction or are listed in the Glossary. Furthermore, all translations in this book are mine or those of my contributors. Regarding sources we cite that are written by Chinese scholars, we follow the traditional Chinese practice of placing the person's family name first, followed by the given name. For example, my family name is Yang, and my given name is Lihui. In China this would appear as Yang Lihui. This tradition is followed throughout the book, though our names appear on the cover in the Western order.

To write this book I organized a team of authors. An Deming is an associate professor of Chinese folklore who works at the Institute of Literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. His research interest is Chinese folk religion, which are closely connected to Chinese myths. He has conducted fieldwork on living myths in villages in northwest China. In this book, about one-fourth

of the entries are written by him. Jessica Anderson Turner is a PhD candidate of the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology of Indiana University. She has visited China multiple times and continues to focus her research there. As a 2003–2004 Fulbright Fellow she did field research in southern China. Her current research focuses on revivals of tradition and music in China's developing tourism industry. In this book, her work has been to organize and edit our writing.

Writing this book has been a great challenge for Deming and me. Though both of us have published several books, this is our first written in English. Chinese myths and the ancient classics are familiar to us, but it is hard to translate them properly into a foreign language. Sometimes I spent half a day looking for a suitable English word in various dictionaries! From time to time we had to abandon complicated and delicate ideas and tried instead to express ourselves simply but clearly.

We want to sincerely thank many people for helping us to finish this book. William Hansen not only recommended us to become involved in this myth series but also gave many helpful suggestions for the basic structure of this book and the Introduction. Our colleagues and friends, Ma Changyi, Liu Xicheng, Song Zhaolin, Lü Wei, Liu Zongdi, Bamo Qubumo, Chen Ganglong, Zhang Xia, and many others, generously provided many supportive ideas or precious photographs they took in their fieldwork. The editors at ABC-CLIO, Todd Hallman, Bob Neville, Simon Mason, Vicky Speck, Peter Westwick, Carla Roberts, Michelle Asakawa, Craig Hunt, and many others have helped us greatly with their inspiring suggestions, encouragement, and patience. Deming and I especially show gratitude to Jessica. What she has done for this book goes far beyond what we asked. She not only polished our English but also gave us many bright ideas and useful tips to produce a better English book of Chinese mythology. We also thank her husband, Steve Turner, who worked with an ancient black-and-white drawing of Nüwa and digitally added color, as it is brilliantly shown on the cover of this book. We are also grateful to Lihui's mother and Deming's sister Mingzhu. They helped us immensely by taking care of our daughter, which enabled us to spend time to write this book.

Last but not least, we want to especially thank our daughter, An Xin, for her love and understanding. An Xin came into this world just two months before we began to write this book. She grows along with our writing. During the past two years, she often patiently waited until we finished our writing for the day to play with her. We feel extremely pleased that, at last, we have finished this book and can now play with her lightheartedly!

Yang Lihui
November 15, 2004, Beijing

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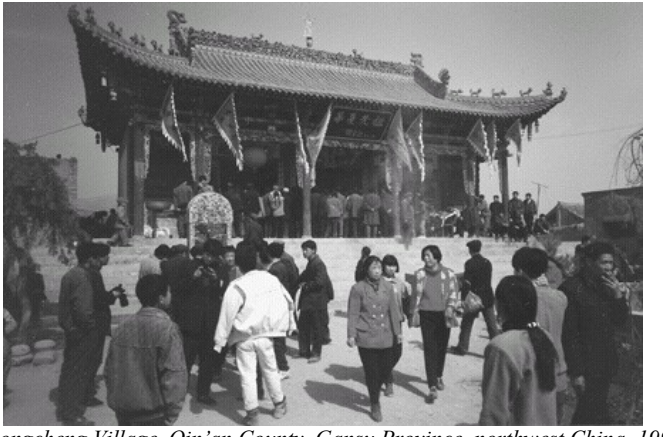
1
INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS A MYTH?

When the word *myth* is used in everyday conversations, many people think of those things or phenomena that are untrue, unimaginable, or mysterious. For example, many people feel that tales of UFO sightings or personal accounts of UFOs are contemporary myths. Others might say "there are many myths in Hong Kong cinema. One of them is that audiences only like to see martial arts films." Some Chinese people believe that China is creating a myth, a marvelous story, through its incredible progress in the development of a market-oriented economy in today's world. These popular uses of the word *myth* are quite different from the definitions of *myth* used by scholars who study mythology.

In mythology, there are also different definitions of *myth.* In fact, scholars have been arguing about the definition for more than 2,000 years. Among the most common arguments are the ones that myths are stories about gods or remote ancestors, myths are sacred stories, myths are stories that explain how the world and humans came to be in their present forms, and myths encapsulate important information about human thought, feeling, history, and social life.

In China, scholars also have conflicting ideas about the definition of *myth.* For example, Yuan Ke (1916–2001), one of the most distinguished modern mythologists, views the scope of myth in the broadest sense. According to Yuan, fables such as "A Clam Fights with a Snipe" (wherein a clam that is basking in the sunlight is pecked at by a snipe; the clam nips the snipe's bill with its shells, and they both refuse to give in, at which point a fisherman comes by and catches them both), "Fox Borrows the Tiger's Fierceness by Walking in the Latter's Company," mysterious legends of historical emperors and officials, the legend of the White Snake Lady (a white snake transforms into a beautiful lady and marries a young man but is imprisoned under a magic tower by an officious monk), stories of Guanyin (known as Avalokitesvara in Buddhism), and mythic novels like *Journey to the West* (stories about a great, powerful monkey king named Sun



A Nüwa temple fair in Longcheng Village, Qin'an County, Gansu Province, northwest China, 1996. (Courtesy of Yang Lihui)

Wukong) all belong to myth.[1] Though his argument is quite well-known, most Chinese mythologists still concentrate their work on studying myth in a more narrow sense. For instance, Lü Wei, one of the pioneering mythologists in contemporary China, insists that myths are sacred stories that are told in the form of narrative and employ symbols, such as images of gods, and try to understand the cosmos through explaining the origins of the world, humans, and culture. Myths provide sacred evidence to testify to the validity, rationality, and legitimacy of cultural and social institutions.[2] When examining these arguments about myth while looking at the actual situations in which Chinese myths are transmitted, two reminders might be necessary for understanding Chinese mythology.

The first reminder is that *a myth is not necessarily sacred.* Many scholars believe that a myth is a sacred narrative, and it is often told in rituals.[3] By contrast, other scholars argue, "it can be misleading to focus on this quality as primary," stating that myths can also be told for entertainment and have no known connections with solemn ritual.[4] When investigating classical Chinese myths recorded in ancient writings, one may find that it is often hard to discern whether the myth tellers believe their myths to be true. Similarly, the attitude a

myth teller in contemporary China has toward his myths can be very complicated, too. In her fieldwork on Nüwa myths and beliefs from 1993 to 2003, in the Henan, Hebei, and Gansu provinces of northern China, Yang Lihui found that though many people came to Nüwa temples to worship Nüwa, when they were asked whether they believed the myths about Nüwa, the answers were quite varied. Most said "yes," some directly said "no, that's impossible," and others half-believed these stories to be true.[5] They told these myths to express their views and beliefs about gods and ancestors, or to boastfully display their knowledge about remote history or local places, or just for fun. In those places that have no relevant temples, myth tellers are more likely to tell myths for entertainment or traditional education (many people believe that myths can provide knowledge about their past).

The second reminder about myths in China is that *a myth is not necessarily told in the form of prose.* It may also be chanted in the form of verse. Though it is well-known that Homer's epics, in verse form, are a treasure of Greek mythology, in many cultures myths are usually told in prose. Myth is thus often mentioned by scholars as one of the three major genres of "prose narratives," along with legends and folktales.[6] However, in China, some myths are told in the form of an epic or sung as a song. Among Han people in Sichuan, Hubei, Henan, and Shaanxi provinces, for example, a myth may be sung in a brief or a long narrative folk song. It may be sung in wedding ceremonies, funeral rituals, shamans' theurgist rites, or during the occasions of a temple fair. Sometimes several myths are combined together into a long narrative folk song. It may be sung continually in rituals for days. In some other ethnic groups of China, especially groups in the south such as Miao, Yao, Yi, Naxi, Bai, Zhuang, Achang, and Lahu, creation epics are common. Since they tell myths, they are sometimes called "mythic epics" by Chinese folklorists. A famed Miao creation epic, "Ancient Songs of the Miao People" (*Miaozu Guge*), found in the southeast of Guizhou Province and usually antiphonally sung by two or more singers (one asks questions, and the other answers) on traditional festival occasions and in special ceremonies such as weddings or funerals, describes in detail the processes of the creation of the sky and the earth, of making and fixing the huge pillars between sky and earth, the creation of the sun and the moon and the plants and animals, the marriage of the brother-sister human ancestors and their repropagation of humans in this world, and the process of the Miao people's moving around for a better life, finally finding the place where they live today.[7] The myths narrated in this epic are also orally transmitted in prose. Similar situations (a myth can be narrated both in prose and verse) can be found in many other ethnic groups.[8] Therefore, there is no absolute distinction between a myth told in prose form and one in verse.

For ordinary readers, the "minimum definition" of *myth* offered by Stith Thompson in 1955 may be useful. "Myth," he writes, "has to do with the gods and their actions, with creation, and with the general nature of the universe and of the earth."[9]

A GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO CHINESE MYTHOLOGY

By *Chinese mythology,* we mean the body of myths historically recorded and currently transmitted within the present geographic boundaries of China. It should include not only myths transmitted by people of the Han ethnic group but also those by the other fifty-five ethnic groups living in this broad area. Since almost every ethnic group has its own mythical gods and stories about their creative actions, there is not a systematic, integrated, and homogeneous "Chinese mythology" held and transmitted by all the Chinese people. Even among Han people, there is not an integrated system of myths.

Since it is impossible to include in this single volume all the myths transmitted in a total of fifty-six ethnic groups of China, this book will basically introduce those well-known myths that are recorded in ancient writings in the Chinese language and orally transmitted by the Han people (whose predecessor is historically called the "Huaxia Ethnic Group"), which now make up nearly 92 percent of the country's population. Some of these myths have been recorded in ancient writings, and some are still orally transmitted in contemporary China. At the same time, this book will also introduce some relevant myths or mythic motifs of other ethnic groups. In doing so, we aim to give readers a general idea of the whole picture of Chinese mythology with the hope that readers will understand Chinese myths in the broader context of Chinese culture.

Main Sources for the Myths of Ancient China

The earliest written records of ancient myths can be traced back to about 3,000 years ago, though other forms of designs and paintings on shells, bones, and bronzes probably relating to myth appeared earlier than this. Recently, researchers found a bronze vessel named "Suigongxu" (Suigong was a duke of the Sui State, now belonging to modern Shandong Province; "Xu" is an ancient bronze vessel that has a cover and two ears; it functions as a food container), which was dated to the ninth or eighth century BC, the middle of the Western

Map of China. (Digital Wisdom)

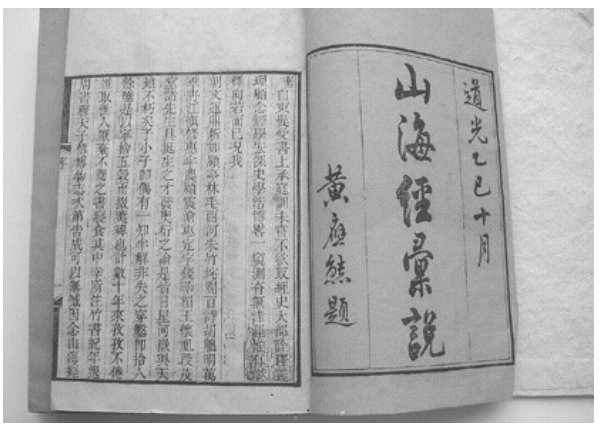
Zhou dynasty. The inscription on the inside bottom of the vessel consists of 98 Chinese characters, praising the achievements of the mythic hero Yu. It tells the story that heaven ordered Yu to scatter earth, so Yu went around all the mountains, cutting down the trees in the forests and deepening the seas and rivers to drain all the water on earth into the sea.[10] This inscription shows that the technique of recording myth in Chinese characters had become relatively mature nearly 3,000 years ago. Additionally, it illustrates that at least as late as the middle of the Western Zhou dynasty, the myth about Yu controlling the flood had already been spread, and it had been historicized into a legend about a great hero or a great king in the upper class of society.

But these inscriptions recorded myths very simply. Sometimes the mythological stories they illustrate are hard to understand. Therefore, Chinese scholars rely primarily on accounts of myths recorded in later ancient writings after the Western Zhou dynasty to study these myths.

In China, there is no sacred canon recording myths, beliefs, or sacred history like the Bible or the Koran, nor were there any literati, troubadours, or shamans (sorcerer or sorceress) who collected myths from oral tradition and compiled them into a systematic and integrated mythology, like the Greek collections attributed to Homer and Hesiod. Rather, myths in ancient China were usually spread in scattered and fragmented forms in various written material. These sources contain information about archaeology, literature, philosophy, geography, history, witchcraft, ethnography, religion, folklore, and so on. Many of them preserve only a few myths, but some of them hold a comparatively large number of myths and thus become treasures of ancient Chinese myths. Among them, *Shanhaijing* (*The Classic of Mountains and Seas*), *Chuci* (*The Songs of Chu*), and *Huainanzi* are thought to be the major repositories of Chinese ancient myth.

Shanhaijing

Shanhaijing is an important book in ancient Chinese mythology studies. It is even noted by some as an encyclopedia of ancient China. It describes various mountains and seas, products of the mountains such as plants or medicines, myths, witchcraft, and religion of ancient China. It also records the geography,



One version of Shanhaijing, printed in 1845. Preserved in the Library of Literature Institute, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. (Courtesy of An Deming)

history, medicine, customs, and ethnicities in ancient times. The book contains eighteen chapters and can be divided into two main parts: the Classic of Mountains, and the Classic of Seas. The Classic of Mountains has five chapters, and the Classic of Seas has the remaining thirteen.

There is no widely accepted conclusion as to who wrote *Shanhaijing* and when it was written.[11] But most scholars believe that *Shanhaijing* was written by many different authors in different times. As for dating *Shanhaijing,* most think this book was written in the period from the middle of the Warring States era to the beginning of the Western Han era (ca. fourth century BC to the early second century BC).[12]

The focus of *Shanhaijing* is also quite controversial. Some scholars think that it is a geographic book, because there are abundant descriptions of various mountains, seas, rivers, roads, mines, and local products. Other scholars argue that *Shanhaijing* is a book about witchcraft, noting numerous descriptions in the text about gods and shamans' activities, such as how they went up and down sky ladders and communicated between gods and humans, how they produced winds and rains, and how they rescued dead gods with the elixir of immortality. This book also describes many sacrificial products and rituals, and even many shamans' names. Some scholars think *Shanhaijing* illustrates how primitive Chinese people in the Central Plain imagined the outside world.[13] Some argue that *Shanhaijing,* especially the chapters of regions beyond the seas and chapters of the great wildness, is in fact a description and interpretation of the ancient calendar system and calendric rites.[14]

Shanhaijing is commonly referred to as one of the treasures of Chinese mythology. Many well-known myths can be found in this book in their early versions, such as myths of Nüwa, Xiwangmu (the Queen Mother of the West), Gun and Yu, Jingwei, Huang Di and Chiyou, and also myths about the sky ladders, the pillars holding up the sky, the three-legged crow carrying the suns, and many others. Most of the time the plots of these myths were recorded only skeletally and fragmentally. For example, chapter 16 describes, "There are ten gods who named Nüwa's gut. Nüwa's gut turned into spirits. They took different routes and settled into the wilderness Liguan." There is no further explanation about Nüwa, the gut spirits, and the mythological event.

But sometimes *Shanhaijing* contains whole stories, written in the concise and condensed style that is common in most ancient Chinese records. For instance, in chapter 17, a text describes the battle between Huang Di, or the Yellow Emperor, and Chiyou:

> Here is Xikun Mountain, where the Gonggong Terrace is located. Archers do not dare to face it in the north. Here there is a goddess dressed in green. Her name is

the Huang Di's Daughter Ba. Chiyou made weapons and attacked Huang Di. Thus, Huang Di commanded Yinglong (Responding Dragon) to launch an attack against him in the wilderness of the Central Plain. Yinglong began by storing all the water. Chiyou asked Feng Bo (the Wind God) and Yu Shi (the Rain Master) to release a cloudburst. Then Huang Di asked the goddess Ba to descend down from the heavens and the rain was stopped. This eventually killed Chiyou.

The story recorded in this text is quite concise but complete. Besides this myth, myths about the divine bird Jingwei filling up the sea, the hero Kuafu pursuing the sun, and the cultural heroes[15] Gun and Yu controlling the flood are also found in complete forms. For this reason, it is difficult to agree with the argument that the narratives in Chinese myths are weak and that there are only a few Chinese myths narrating full stories.[16]

Chuci

Chuci is an ancient poem collection from the end of the Warring States era and the early Western Han era. It was written mainly by Qu Yuan (ca. 340–278 BC), who was the earliest celebrated poet in ancient China, as well as several other poets. *Chuci* literally means "the Songs of Chu." Originally it was widely used to refer to the songs popular in the Chu area (now Hubei and Hunan provinces in southern China) and sung by the Chu people. Because of this collection, which was compiled by the Han scholar Liu Xiang, *Chuci* became a title for a specific new poem style in the Warring States era represented by Qu Yuan. Its style is characterized by strong local flavor. It used the Chu dialect, was sung in Chu rhythm, and recorded many Chu places and local products. Besides these, differing from the folk songs of the Central Plain at that time whose style followed an orderly four-character poem, the sentences in a song of Chu were of different lengths. A more obvious characteristic of the Chu song is that in the middle of every sentence (and sometimes at the end), a syllable is always used as the mood indicator pronounced as "Xi." Apart from the folk songs of Chu, *Chuci* was also deeply influenced by Chu customs. Chu people believed in witchcraft and liked to offer sacrifices to gods and ghosts. When they offered sacrifices they often composed music and songs to amuse the gods. Qu Yuan was born in the Chu area and deeply influenced by Chu culture. He not only wrote poems by learning from folk sacrificial songs but also adopted a lot of Chu myths and legends to compose his poems. Among his poems, "Tianwen" ("Questions of Heaven") contains the most myths.

"Tianwen" was said to have been written by Qu Yuan after he was unjustly exiled from the royal palace of Chu. When he saw paintings of gods and ancestors

Qu Yuan (Poems of Chu Yuan, 1638)

on the walls of the ancestral temple of Chu, he wrote this poem on the wall to express his anger and doubt about reality and the universe. The poem asks 172 questions related to popularly spread myths, legends, and pieces of history. Among them are many myths, including myths about Gun and Yu restraining the great flood, Yi shooting down the surplus suns, Gonggong destroying the mountain that supported the heavens, Kunlun Mountain, Zhulong (literally meaning "Torch Dragon"), the eight poles supporting the sky, and the toad on the moon. "Tianwen" sometimes provides rich details about some ancient myths, such as the Gun myth:

When the sparrow hawk and turtle joined together (and offered strategies),
Why did Gun accept their suggestions?
He obeyed everyone's plea to stop the flood,
Why did the Supreme Divinity kill him?
His corpse was abandoned at Yushan,
Why did it not rot for three years?
. . .
He was blocked at Yushan and was not allowed to go west,
How did he surmount those lofty and precipitous peaks?
He metamorphosed into a yellow bear after his death,
Why did those shamans revive him?
. . .

This text contains many details of the Gun myth; some of them cannot be found in other writings. For instance, it states that when Gun began to try to control the flood, there appeared the sparrow hawk and turtle and they joined together. Scholars infer that when Gun tried to control the flood, he might have adopted suggestions and strategies of the sparrow hawk and turtle.[17] Other plots of the Gun myth recorded in this poem also are unique, such as Gun being detained at Yushan, or Yu Mountain, after his death and not allowed to go west. Taking on the image of a yellow bear, he managed to surmount those steep peaks to find shamans to help him come back to life.

However, since this poem was written in the form of questions, stories in the poem usually appear in fragments. Therefore, it is almost impossible to understand a full myth from it. Sometimes the questions were written in such a vague and succinct way that it is difficult really to understand what questions Qu Yuan was actually asking.[18] This shortcoming limits the role that "Tianwen" plays in Chinese myth studies.

Huainanzi

Huainanzi (ca. 139 BC) is a book written and compiled at the beginning of the Western Han dynasty by Liu An, the king of Huainan, and many of his aides. Liu An is said to have enjoyed reading books and playing music. He wanted to accomplish something beneficial to others and become a legacy. So he gathered thousands of literary scholars and alchemists to write *Huainanzi,* which is attributed to the Eclectics, a school of thought that combined various philosophies and flourished during the pre-Qin period.

Huainanzi preserves many ancient myths, legends, and historical accounts. The myths that it contains include the following: Nüwa repairs the broken sky; Yi shoots down the extra nine suns; Chang'e steals the elixir of immortality and

flees to the moon; Yu controls the flood; Gongong butts into Mount Buzhou and destroys the sky pillar and the cords holding up the earth. Some of these myths are recorded only in *Huainanzi,* and some provide important contrasts to other ancient writings. Therefore, many of its records are often cited in studies of Chinese myths. Generally speaking, myths in *Huainanzi* are usually complete. Compared to myths recorded in *Shanhaijing* and "Tianwen," which are usually recorded fragmentally, myths in *Huainanzi* are often written in a more complete form, with detailed story plots. For example, the myth of the goddess Nüwa in *Huainanzi* states that

Nüwa was mending the sky. Originally drawn in the 17th century by Xiao Yuncong. (Yang Lihui, Rethinking on the Source Area of the Cult of Nüwa, Beijing Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 1999)

> in remote antiquity, the four poles supporting the sky collapsed, and the land of the nine divisions of ancient China broke up. The sky could not completely cover the earth, and the earth could not totally carry the world. Fires raged fiercely and did not go out. Floodwater ran everywhere and did not subside. The fierce beasts devoured kind people, and violent birds seized the old and the weak. Nüwa then melted stones of five different colors to patch the sky, cut the legs off of a huge tortoise and set them up to support the four extremities of the sky, slaughtered the Black Dragon to save the people, and collected ashes of reeds to stop the flood. After that the sky got renewed, the four sky pillars were set up again, the flood was stopped, and the nine divisions became peaceful.

This text narrates a complete event: the setting, the reasons of the goddess Nüwa's actions, the process of the solution, and the result. It presents a precious record of an ancient Nüwa myth and thus is often cited by researchers.

Three Features of the Written Records

When we examine the written records of ancient myths in the Chinese language, three features seem to be obvious and often are argued by scholars: that the myths are scattered and fragmented, that they are historicized, and that they have been rewritten as literature and philosophy.

Scattered and Fragmented. Myths in ancient China are preserved in various written accounts, usually in a fragmented form. They were not collected and organized into a single, systematic mythology of China. This phenomenon is usually taken as evidence of the scarcity and undevelopment of Chinese myths. Some scholars explain that this is because Chinese people pay more attention to real life than to the supernatural world. When criticizing the false impression that China has a deficiency of myths, Yuan Ke pointed out three major reasons that caused this characteristic. The first reason comes from the lack of gifted poets like Homer and Hesiod to collect various ancient Chinese myths from oral tradition and retell them in an eloquent style. The second reason is that in ancient times, Chinese writings were usually in "unwieldy and ideographic forms," not yet sophisticated enough to express the complexities of Chinese myths. And the third reason is the negative attitude of ancient Chinese scholars (especially the Confucians) toward the miraculous and marvelous elements in myths.[19] In contrast to the common idea that this characteristic is a disadvantage for the records of Chinese myths, Yuan Ke thinks it has some advantages. Chinese myths have not suffered what Yuan Ke describes as a complete reworking by literati and others, like Homer's and Hesiod's work, and thus remain in a more or less "pristine condition." Additionally, they are "more reliable documentary evidence of a primitive and archaic oral tradition in the world of myth."[20]

Historicized. That early myth records were historicized has been recognized by many scholars. Zhong Jingwen and Yang Lihui have examined the history of myth study in ancient China, pointing out that the historicizing, or rationalizing, of myths is prevalent during the 2,000 years of mythology research before the fall of the Qing dynasty. If a scholar found something strange or incredible in the ancient texts, these findings would be removed or rationalized. An anecdote about Confucius (named Kong Qiu in Chinese, but is popularly respected as Kongzi or Kongfuzi, 551 BC–479 BC) states that when he was asked whether Huang Di was really four-faced as it was popularly said ("face" is pronounced *mian* in Chinese), he replied that in fact this meant that Huang Di sent four officials in four directions to administrate (*mian* also means "direction"). Another example comes from Luo Mi, a scholar in the Southern Song dynasty. When he wrote a book of history, he interpreted the myth of Nüwa repairing the broken sky as a historical event in which the ancient empress Nüwa put down a

rebellion made by one of her dukes. After this rationalization, ancient scholars would then interpret these myths to be accounts of the history of China.[21]

However, recently some Chinese scholars have put forward different ideas. They think that the historicizing of ancient Chinese myths is a presumption or hypothesis made by Chinese scholars themselves. When Chinese scholars began to build a modern discipline of Chinese mythology at the beginning of the twentieth century, they were deeply influenced by Western scholarship and wanted to look for the subject of mythology in historical documents. Thus, there are arguments that these scholars changed history into myths. In the view of some scholars today, there is no such thing as the historicizing of myths. Instead, there was the mythologizing of history.[22]

Confucius (Bettman/Corbis)

Rewritten as Literature and Philosophy. Examples of myth being rewritten as literature and philosophy can be found in Taoist writings, especially in the book *Zhuangzi.* When the famous Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi (or Zhuang Zhou, ca. 369–286 BC; "Zi" is an ancient respectful address for a learned man) adopted ancient myths into his writings, he decorated them with many descriptions and filled them with his Taoist ideas. An example of this is the Hundun myth. Hundun is a god who has no openings on his body whatsoever. The gods Shu and Hu, hoping to pay a debt of gratitude to Hundun, tried to chisel openings into Hundun's body. They chiseled one hole each day. After seven days of their work, Hundun died. Like many other myths or legends appearing in *Zhuangzi,* the Hundun story has clearly been reshaped by Zhuangzi to illustrate his Taoist philosophy. The two meddling gods Shu and Hu are used to symbolize the artificial order (time and direction), while Hundun symbolizes the primeval chaos, which is a natural, unspecified, unified whole. In the story the artificial order destroyed the

natural and harmonic whole. In this example, Zhuangzi used a very simple story to express his idea that one should respect nature and should not insist on doing something that is not natural. He stressed that politicians should let events take their own course, and they should not intervene in this natural order without understanding it completely.

Myths Orally Transmitted among Contemporary Han People

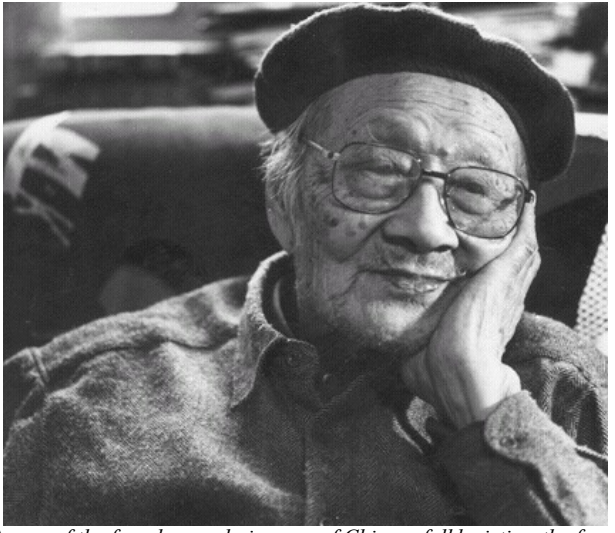
Textual analysis of ancient written recordings has long been the traditional method of Chinese mythologists. Though this method of literary text research is necessary and beneficial to Chinese mythology, it can be abused and cause misleading conclusions about Chinese mythology.[23] Today more and more Chinese mythologists consciously use a synthesis of methods by combining ancient written texts with material from archeological findings and oral tradition.

Concern for myths collected from oral tradition can be traced back to the early decades of the twentieth century.[24] The first large-scale collection of living myths in China occurred during the 1950s and 1960s.[25] But as noted previously, the largest collection of living myths from oral tradition in modern China is the national project San Tao Jicheng, or the Three Collections of Folk Literature.

The San Tao Jicheng Project

Formally begun in 1984 and near completion, San Tao Jicheng aims to be a general investigation of Chinese oral tradition. Managed by the Ministry of Culture, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, and the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, the project was carried out by the Society for the Study of Folk Literature and Art, which is now called the Chinese Folk Literature and Art Society. The project does not aim to collect only myths, though. Rather, it consists of three collections: stories (including myths, legends, fairy tales, jokes, and other prose narrative forms), folk songs and rhymes, and proverbs. The participants of this project first collected these stories, folk songs, and proverbs in villages, then chose part of the material and compiled it into a county collection. These county collections were then compiled into volumes for each province. As of 1990, over 4 million proverbs, 3 million folk songs and rhymes, and nearly 2 million stories had been collected. More than 2 million people were involved in this collection project.[26]

In the process of conducting this research, many orally transmitted myths have been collected and published. These myths were mainly gathered from the Han people, but some also spread in the vast areas inhabited by other ethnic



Zhong Jingwen (1903–2002), one of the founders and pioneers of Chinese folkloristics, the former executive deputy chief of the editing board of the San Tao Jicheng project, 1982. (An Deming, A Biography of Zhong Jingwen, Shandong Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2003)

groups living in China. For example, as a result of the project, in Huzhou District, Zhejiang Province, more than twenty myths, all from Han people, were selected for the district's volume of stories.[27] In Sichuan Province, a book titled *Selected Myths from Sichuan Province* was published in 1992. This book contains more than 120 living myths and various versions that are spread among ten ethnic groups in contemporary Sichuan Province. Among them, over ninety myths and versions are collected from the Han, and others are gathered from Tibetan, Yi, Lisu, Qiang, Tujia, Miao, Hui, Naxi, and Mongol peoples.[28]

Some Chinese mythologists pay much attention to these living myths collected from oral tradition, especially from San Tao Jicheng, to study Chinese myths. For example, Zhong Jingwen studied the brother-sister marriage myth using material collected for San Tao Jicheng.[29] Zhang Zhenli, using data that he and his research team collected from Han people in the Central Plain area[30] as well as myths from this area collected in San Tao Jicheng, compared these recently collected myths with ancient ones. He conducted this research to discover relationships between classical myths and modern ones in order to understand how classical myths in this area changed over time, and how they exist in contemporary Henan Province.[31] Yang Lihui used more than 500 myths about Nüwa and the brother-sister marriage, mainly from the San Tao Jicheng project and from her own fieldwork in Han communities in modern Hebei, Henan, and Gansu provinces, in her book, *The Cult of Nüwa: Myths and Beliefs in China.* Stressing a more synthetic approach and the significance of context, she not only discusses the transformation of Nüwa myths during the past 2,000 years but also examines the social and cultural contexts in which myths are told today. She further looks into the functions of Nüwa myths and beliefs and the reasons why they are of great vitality today. Yang indicates several characteristics of the transformation of myths in modern Chinese society, comparing them to their ancient versions. These characteristics mainly include adhesion and the combination of various myth types and motifs, localization, secularization, and the influence of religion.[32] These forms of transformation can be found in many myths that are told orally in contemporary China.

A Myth-telling Performance in Renzu Temple

In 1993, mythologist Yang Lihui did a field study in Huaiyang County, Henan Province, to investigate how myths continue to be told in situational contexts[33] in contemporary Han communities, how classical myths are transformed and in what ways, and how and why people reconstruct them in their social and cultural lives.[34] 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.[35] 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