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The Foundational Flood Myth of Chinese Culture

Although the term ‘myth’ is frequently used when referring to old stories, it is surprisingly difficult to properly define. Lauri Honko posits that a myth is “a story of the gods, a religious account of the beginning of the world, the creation, fundamental events, the exemplary deeds of the gods as a result of which the world, nature and culture were created together with all the parts thereof and given their order, which still obtains.” (15) She explains that for a story to qualify as a myth, it must take a narrative form, have content that is cosmogonic in nature, function as an ontological explanation of the world, and be used in a ritual context. One such myth that fits the definition well is the Chinese story of the Great Flood of Gun-Yu. Even though a single complete source that recounts the story of the Great Flood of Gun-Yu no longer exists, the story is still a myth according to Honko’s definition because scholars have reconstructed its narrative, which offers a cosmogonic explanation for the origin of China, functions as a model for Chinese society, and has frequently been interpreted in a ritualistic context.

The story of the Gun-Yu flood is a foundational narrative in Chinese culture, and goes as follows: long ago, China suffered from a terrible flood. The area affected by the flood was at the time ruled by King Yao, who appointed a man named Gun to combat the waters. In order to do so, Gun took some of the Supreme Deity’s magic self-expanding soil, called *xirang*. Sadly, the *xirang* proved to be inadequate, and after nine years of attempting to stop the deluge, Gun was killed by the Supreme Deity for his thievery. Nonetheless, his determination stayed within him through death, and from his body, Yu emerged. Yu inherited the work of his father, and through

persistence and the aid of the dragon Yinglong was finally able to drain the flood. However, this task took him over thirteen years to complete, and he was unable to return home for the duration. He passed by his house three times without entering or seeing his wife. Upon completion of his work, the people and emperor of China were so impressed by his dedication and achievement that they made him emperor, founding the first dynasty of China.

A major difficulty in properly analyzing the Gun-Yu story is that even though it is well-known in Chinese society, there is no canonical, codified source for it. The earliest extant transcribed version of this story can be found in the “Book of Documents”, one of the five classics of Chinese literature supposedly written by Confucius. The text was purportedly written in ~500 BC, but other authors composed many sections of the book at later dates. The Gun-Yu story is found across the Book of Yun, which is believed to have been composed during the Warring States Period (453-221 BCE). Because of the large window in which the text may have been written, it is possible that the oldest version of the story is found in the “Verses of Chu”, an anthology of classical Chinese poetry composed by Qu Yuan around the same time. The Gun-Yu story was so ubiquitous in ancient Chinese culture that many of the details of the story were considered common knowledge. This can be seen through the frequent allusions to it in classical poetry; in the “Verses of Chu” alone, the tale is referenced over thirty times, yet never described in detail. In a similar style to the Rig Veda, the author presupposes the reader’s knowledge of the plot and uses that as a basis for artistic embellishment. As a result, neither of these sources contain a complete account of the Gun-Yu tale, but when cross-referenced with each other, scholars can extrapolate a full version.

One of the biggest indicators of the Gun-Yu story's status as a myth is its inherently cosmogonic nature. Within the story, Yu controls the flood by utilizing *xirang* and divine assistance to fill in and reroute the water, and in the process creates the very landscape of China. David Hawkes, the translator of the first English version of "Verses of Chu" and a prominent figure in the field of Chinese mythology, attests to this belief, saying "Yü was the great demiurge who, by shifting mountains and opening valleys for rivers, made the earth as we know it today" (48). Qu Yuan also discusses this concept in the "Heavenly Questions" section of "Verses of Chu", asking "How did he fill the flood waters up where they were most deep? How did he set bounds to the Nine Lands of the earth? What did the winged dragon trace on the ground? Where did the seas and rivers flow?" (48). From Qu Yuan's esoteric commentary on the tale, we are able to deduce that Yu fills in flood waters with *xirang* to define the land that comprises China. Additionally, his dragon helper Yinglong creates channels for the water to flow to the sea, which would become the rivers of China.

The other principal factor that allows the Gun-Yu tale to be considered a myth is the way it acts as a model for Chinese society by laying the foundation for many enduring concepts in Chinese culture. The story emphasizes concepts such as filial piety, humility, and dedication to your work which manifest themselves in Chinese society to this day. Yu was tasked with continuing the work of his father and did so loyally and diligently, resulting in his eventual success and glorification as a hero. This example shows that loyalty to a higher authority, whether your parents or the emperor, pays off, and the story thereby encourages the loyalty of the general population. The Gun-Yu story's recounting of Yu's ascent to the imperial throne, which can be regarded as an etiological explanation of the dynastic system, is also framed in

light of these values. When offered the emperorship, Yu first declines several times, showing his humility. In the “Canon of Yu” within the “Book of Documents”, the emperor exalts Yu for these virtues, saying “Without any prideful presumption, there is no one in the empire to contest with you the palm of ability; without any boasting, there is no one in the empire to contest with you the claim of merit. I see how great is your virtue” (286). This clearly portrays humility as an important enough characteristic to, at least partly, cause Yu to be deserving of the emperorship, and subsequently both establishes and reinforces that as a social norm in Chinese culture.

The final method by which we may evaluate this story’s validity as a myth is examining its use in a broader ritualistic context. Sadly, documented evidence of anything from before 212 BCE is nonexistent, as Qin Shi Huang’s systematic burning of books and murder of scholars during the founding of the Qin Dynasty destroyed the majority of records. However, the character of Yu the Great is so pervasive in Chinese society that many traditions survived even to this day, including a ritual dance called the Yu Pace. Traditionally, Yu’s many years of nonstop work caused him to contract rheumatism and become lame. The Yu Pace imitates his manner of walking in an attempt to honor him and is a key step in many important Taoist dances, especially the *Bugang*. Poul Anderson corroborates this in his 1989 article “The Practice of Bugang”, saying that “the legends of Yu have continued to play an important part as basic formulations of the myths underlying the performance” (16). The Yu Pace is just one example of the story’s interpretation in a ritual context; there is evidence for many more, including countless temples and monuments dedicated to him throughout China.

With all of these points in mind, it is evident that the Great Flood of Gun-Yu’s narrative is the epitome of a myth, even if that narrative is not initially easy to find. It fulfills every

criterion that Honko sets forth in her definition of myth, as it is narrative in form, deals with cosmological content, functions as a model of society, and both has been and continues to be used in a ritualistic context. This myth both establishes and reinforces many of the important social values in China, and as such is truly critical to understand if one hopes to attain greater knowledge of the people and culture of this fascinating country.

Works Cited

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