

George Owen

12 December, 2018

[gowin@g.ucla.edu](mailto:gowin@g.ucla.edu)

### The Advent of Civilization in Chinese Mythology

Myths are multifaceted stories that can convey a great deal of information, but the information conveyed varies greatly depending on the method through which the myth is analyzed. Different interpretations of the same myth can lead to vastly differing conclusions, and tell us many aspects of both the myth's origin culture and humanity in general. One such method by which a myth can be interpreted is viewing it in a historical context. This involves viewing the actual content of the myth and looking for parallels within it to the culture and historical period in which it is set. In his academic paper "The Problem of Defining Myth," Lauri Honko says that when conducting a historical analysis of a myth, "Stress is laid on the reconstruction of those events which were most decisive in the formation of the myths" (14). This method allows scholars to determine both how an event in history affects the formation of a myth and how that myth reflects that event through its narrative. This process provides more context for both the myth and the historical event it mirrors, and reveals formative moments in societies. One myth for which this method of analysis is extremely productive is "The Great Flood of Gun-Yu", a foundational flood myth in Chinese culture. When interpreted in a historical context, it is clear the the Gun-Yu myth's theme of the acquisition of a bronze-age civilization through social reform and technological revolutions stems from the actual social and technological revolutions that took place both when the myth was written and when it is set. This is made evident through how the myth contrasts Gun with his son Yu, describes the establishment of the Xia dynasty's

new societal structure, and recounts technological advancements made by Yu when stopping the deluge.

The Gun-Yu myth is set in a period widely known as the beginning of Chinese civilization. While the primary document containing the story was composed between 550-480 BCE, during the Warring States period, the story itself is set much earlier, at a time shortly before the founding of the Xia dynasty. While there are no concrete historical records to corroborate the existence of this dynasty, archaeological investigations have yielded relics from several cultures, namely the Erlitou, that could have been the Xia people. Li Feng, a professor of Early Chinese History at Columbia University, says in her book “Early China” that “the evidence places the Erlitou culture into the same time period and space in which the Xia Dynasty described by the received tradition is supposed to have been the rule” (52). Thus, while we cannot confirm the existence of the Xia dynasty, this means that the Gun-Yu myth is likely set near the beginning of the Erlitou culture, which existed from around 1900 to 1600 BCE. This time period for the myth is supported by historical evidence for a flood of enormous magnitude around the same time, which could have been its inspiration. Writing in *Science Magazine*, Qinglong Wu states that geologists have used sediment deposits to find evidence for “an earthquake-induced landslide dam outburst flood on the Yellow River about 1920 BCE that ranks as one of the largest freshwater floods of the Holocene” (579). This period of time is almost universally regarded as the period in which China transitioned to a civilized bronze-age society. The Erlitou culture is regarded as the first nation-state of China, in contrast to the less complex chiefdoms that previously inhabited the land, and is also the first society in China to acquire the use of bronze. These societal developments made the Erlitou state incredibly

important in China, and in the words of Li “opened a new era that was marked by royal authority, urban civilization, larger political organization, and a strong coercive military presence” (41). The Gun-Yu myth reflects this societal transition through its plot and characters.

The Gun-Yu myth depicts a societal transition in the ways it contrasts Gun and his son Yu, who are symbolic of China’s varying stages of societal progress. In this view, Gun represents China’s chiefdoms which were still at an early stage of development, such as the Taosi and Longshan, which had not yet learned to work bronze or developed a centralized state. Yu represents China after these acquisitions, presumably symbolic of the Erlitou culture. In the myth, Yu emerged from Gun’s dead body, which could be seen as representative of how the Erlitou civilization developed from previous chiefdoms and tribes. This symbolism is also present in the way Gun and Yu deal with the great flood. The flood in this story halts the progress of Chinese civilization, forcing Gun and Yu to invent new ways to deal with the problem or face extinction in a classic “adapt or die” scenario. Gun, representing the old chiefdoms and tribes, is unable to solve the problem and shortly perishes, while the innovative Yu applies methods of diverting waters that eventually quell the deluge. This dichotomy is best summarized by Qu Yuan’s description in the *Heavenly Questions* section of the “ChuCi”: “What did Kun [Gun] labour on, and what did Yu accomplish?” (48). While they both laboured on the same thing, Yu actually accomplished something. He overcomes the flood by making great leaps in technology and society, representative of the Erlitou culture’s technological revolution.

The technological advancements made during the Erlitou period of history are present in the Gun-Yu myth, but manifest themselves as an agricultural revolution due to the period in which the story was written. Even though the period in which the myth is set is known for the

acquisition of bronze, not agricultural innovations, the story places quite a bit of emphasis on the refining of agricultural techniques. This is a consequence of the time period in which the myth was composed, the Warring States period. Yunhua Zhang in her book “Fascinating History of Agriculture” says that “In the Spring/Autumn and Warring States periods, the emergence of iron plows and the use of animal power to pull them were two of the most important technical advancements in the history of agriculture” (xl). The Gun-Yu myth is a story about societal progress popularized during an era where great societal progress was being made. While the original historical progress was the acquisition of bronze-age technology, the progress being made in the story is more akin to the agricultural revolution taking place in the era it was written. In Book IV of “The Books of Yu” in *The Book of Documents*, Yu describes how he revolutionized agriculture, saying “I deepened moreover the channels and canals, and conducted them to the streams, at the same time along with Tseih sowing grain, and showing the multitudes how to procure the food of toil in addition to flesh meat” (77-78). Yu taught the general population proper methods of farming and irrigation, concepts which were not extant before his advent. Even though the type of progress described is different from the historical truth, the myth still conveys the idea that great leaps forward are being made during this time period.

In addition to its description of a technological revolution, the Gun-Yu myth reflects the acquisition of civilization in the way it describes the founding of the Xia dynasty and its administration methods. Historically, the Erlitou culture formed the center of culture and technology during this time period. Li describes this in “Early China,” saying “The Central Plain constantly generated and radiated new cultural elements to other regions while taking in stimuli from the latter peripheral regions” (22). The Erlitou capitals was located in China’s Central

Plain, and that is consequently where their state's administration was most developed. In the Gun-Yu myth, After Yu founds the Xia dynasty, he begins the process of codifying his domains, centralizing his rule on the capital with his domains radiating outwards. The Book of Documents describes this, saying "Five-Hundred *li* constituted The Imperial Domain [...] Five-Hundred *li* still beyond formed The Peace-Securing Domain [...] Five-Hundred *li* remoter still constituted The Domain of Restraint [...] Five-Hundred *li*, the most remote, constituted The Wild Domain" (142-47). The system of government described here establishes a strong basis of power centered on the capital, and slowly decreasing levels of influence until "The Wild Domain" and beyond, where the administration holds almost no influence. This mirrors the method by which culture and technology historically spread, with innovations originating in the developed "The Imperial Domain" and slowly spreading outwards, until they reach far from the Erlitou civilization.

With all of these points in mind, it becomes clear the the Gun-Yu myth's theme of acquiring civilization originated in actual events that happened both when the myth is set and when it was written. The way the story contrasts Gun and Yu establishes a dichotomy like the one between China's chiefdoms and developed states in the period when the story is set, the technological revolution it describes stems from technological revolutions occurring both when the story was composed and set, and the system of government established in it promotes a diffusion of culture and technology exactly like the one that historically occurred. Even though this myth is by no means a historically accurate recount of China's transition to a bronze-age society, it is profoundly influenced by that idea and may offer historians greater knowledge of the process of that transition.

#### Works Cited

Feng, Li. *Early China: A Social and Cultural History*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Hawkes, David. *Ch'u Tz'ü: the Songs of the South, an Ancient Chinese Anthology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, pp. 45-58.

Honko, Lauri. "The Problem of Defining Myth." Finnish Society for the Study of Comparative Religion, 1972, pp. 1-11.

Legge, James D.D.. "The Books of Yu." *The Chinese Classics, Vol. III: The Shoo King, or The Book of Historical Documents*. London, Trubner and Co., 1865. *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/chineseclasics07leggoog/page/n240>, Accessed 11 December 2018.

Zhang, Yunhua. "Fascinating History of Agriculture." *Insights into Chinese Agriculture*, Springer, Singapore, 2018, pp. xxxv-xlvi, doi: 10.1007/978-981-13-1050-8.

Wu, Qinglong, *et al.* "Outburst flood at 1920 BCE supports historicity of China's Great Flood and the Xia dynasty." *Science*, Vol. 353, Issue 6299, 2016, pp. 579-582, doi: 10.1126/science.aaf0842.