THE FOUR FLOOD MYTH TRADITIONS OF CLASSICAL CHINA

BY

ANNE BIRRELL
University of Cambridge, Clare Hall

Abbreviations

HJAS *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*
BMFEA *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*
HNT *Huai-nan Tzu*
KSP *Ku shih pien*
SHC *Shan hai ching*
TP *T'oung Pao*

1. Introduction

The most enduring and widespread of the catastrophe myths—plague, drought, famine, flood, insects, and fire—is the flood myth.[1] Its geographical incidence and prevalence indicate that the theme of world destruction by water preoccupied people in the prehistorical period, especially riparian settlers, and is still a major concern for modern societies. It is a worldwide mythic theme which belongs to cultures of varying stages of development, the primitive, the preindustrial, and the postindustrial.[2]

In China, it is recorded in the major socio-philosophical work, the *Kuan Tzu* (*ca.* third century B.C.), that Kuan Chung made this assessment of catastrophes which affect human society:

> Floods are one; droughts another; wind, fog, hail, and frost are another; pestilence is one, and insects another.... Of the five types of harmful influences, floods are the most serious.[3]

---

[1] Listed as myth motifs "A1000-A1099 World Calamities," and "A1000. World Catastrophe," sub-section "A1010. Deluge. Inundation of whole world or section," in Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature, A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*, 6 vols., 1932-36, 2nd ed. rev., Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1955-58, Vol. 1, [29], 182, 184.

[2] Alan Dundes, ed., *The Flood Myth*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988, "Introduction," 1. My paper is indebted to the great range of research data and perspectives Professor Dundes has brought together in his book.

[3] W. Allyn Rickett, trans., *Kuan-tzu: A Repository of Early Chinese Thought; A*

The theme of flood control and myths of a great deluge constitute a fundamental and recurring topic in classical Chinese writings. This mythic theme forms an instructive point of contrast and comparison with mythologies worldwide at the literal and symbolic levels.

The existence and potency of flood myths are evidenced by a plurality of flood myth narratives in classical Chinese writings and in modern folkloric traditions, especially among the minority peoples of South China.[4] Yet, despite the fact that both these written or oral traditions have long been known to Chinese and Japanese scholars and to Western Sinologists, it is true to say that the phenomenon of "benign neglect" is generally manifest in the study of Chinese flood myths.[5] That is to say, while the classical accounts are known to Sinologists, they have yet to be properly identified, compiled, and researched. As a consequence, flood myth narratives in classical writings are not available or familiar to scholars of other disciplines, least of all to specialists in world mythology or comparative mythology.[6] On the other hand, a sizeable modern

Translation and Study of Twelve Chapters, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1965, 75-6 (*Kuan Tzu*, SPPY 18/57.6a; translation slightly amended).

[4] For a compilation of modern narratives from southwest China and Southeast Asia, see Leopold Walk, "Das Flut-Geschwisterpaar als Ur- und Stammelternpaar des Menschheit. Ein Beitrag zur Mythengeschichte Süd- und Südostasiens," *Mitteilungen der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Prähistorie* 78-9 (1949): 60-115; also see Li Hwei, "The Deluge Legend of the Sibling-mating Type in Aboriginal Formosa and Southeast Asia," *Bulletin of the Ethnological Society of China* 1 (1955): 171-206; Nghiem Van Dang, "The Flood Myth and the Origin of Ethnic Groups in Southeast Asia," *Journal of American Folklore* 106/421 (1993): 304-37 (includes Vietnamese and South Asian accounts); Wen I-to, "*Fu Hsi k'ao*" (A study of Fu Hsi), in *Wen I-to ch'üan chi*, 4 vols, ed. Chu Tzu-ch'ing, *et al.*, Shanghai: K'ai-ming, 1948, Vol. 1, Pt. 1, "*Shen-hua yü shih*" (Myth and poetry, 1942), 3-68 (62-8 gives a résumé of plots of 49 flood stories with two charts). For a discussion of possible links between classical Chinese flood myths and modern Thai and Yüeh cultures in Chinese minority groups, see Wolfram Eberhard, *The Local Cultures of South and East Asia*, rev. ed. of Vol. 2 of *Lokalkulturen in alten China* (1942, 2 vols.), translated from the German by Alide Eberhard, Leiden: Brill, 1968, 206, 210-11, 349-55 (documentation from classical texts is minimal).

[5] The term, "benign neglect," has been borrowed from Norman J. Girardot, who used it to characterize the trend among Sinologists not to admit the presence of cosmogonic myth in classical Chinese texts; Girardot, "The Problem of Creation Mythology in the Study of Chinese Religion," *History of Religions* 15.4 (1976): 298-304, 315. Two recent studies on the classical Chinese flood myth by S. F. Teiser and William G. Boltz are discussed below.

[6] The unavailability of classical Chinese flood myth texts and research is highlighted by the absence of any article on the subject among the 25 articles on

repertoire of the flood myths and legends of Southeast Asia and South China has been widely available to non-Sinologists for half a century, and to a limited extent since the late eighteenth century.[7]

The classical repertoire differs fundamentally from the modern repertoire of flood myths in terms of theme, plot, motif, and underlying concern.[8] Moreover, as the classical repertoire is historiographically and mythographically associated with northern Chinese culture, while the modern folkloric traditions are identified primarily with southern Chinese culture, in particular, minority cultures, it is methodologically viable to study the two repertoires separately.

The main purpose of this paper, therefore, will be to focus specifically on the classical repertoire of flood myth. I shall identify and analyze a plurality of classical flood myths, categorizing them into four main traditions. I shall argue that one tradition became predominant, and give reasons for this supremacy. I shall conclude with a discussion of the underlying concerns of the mythic narratives beyond their surface or literal significance. Nineteen narratives, mostly fragments, from eight classical texts will be newly translated, and their contextual relevance explained, with supporting textual documentation. Reference will be made to the findings of Comparative Mythology at key points in my paper. My aim is to present an introductory exploration of this important mytheme, in order to counterbalance its "benign neglect" in Sinology and to provide an interdisciplinary debating ground for further research and discussion.

---

the flood myth worldwide in Dundes, ed., *The Flood Myth*, although there are bibliographic references, mainly to collations of the modern minority traditions.

[7] For surveys of modern collections, see Li, Dang, and Wen, n. 4 above. For 18th- and 19th-Century compilations of flood myths worldwide, including references to China, see Alexander Catcott, *A Treatise on the Deluge* (1761), 2nd ed., London: E. Allen, 1768, Pt. 2, "A Collection of the principal Heathen Accounts of the Flood," 99-164, Chinese section, 114-17; and Richard Andree, *Die Flutsagen: Ethnographisch betrachtet*, Braunschweig: Friedrich Vieweg, 1891, 13-39, Chinese section, 35-8. Catcott's Chinese section may be evaluated by his statement: "Besides, many reasons may be given to prove that their first king, Fohi [Fu Hsi], was no other than the scripture Noah," 155.

[8] Modern accounts of the flood share a common plot: a brother and sister elope; a flood devastates the world; they alone escape in a gourd (or drum); when the flood subsides, the rest of humankind has perished; the surviving sibling pair mate and ensure the continuation of the human race. Apart from the event of the flood, none of these themes or motifs occurs in the classical accounts of the flood.

Throughout my paper I have used the terms "flood," "inundation," and "deluge" interchangeably. The latter term has, it is true, at least in the English language, the connotation of a vast amount of water from continual rainfall, a sense that derives from its biblical association with Noah's flood. The basic meaning of "deluge," however, is derived from the Latin, "diluvium," a term related to "lavare", to wash. Removed from its strictly biblical context, therefore, the term "deluge" is, like "flood" and "inundation," a neutral term for a vast amount of fluid. What is not specified is the cause of the excess flow, nor its content. Since the classical Chinese texts themselves, for the most part, do not indicate the cause of the flow, but do indicate that the substance is water, without specifying whether it is from rain, rivers, or underground sources, all three terms are readily interchangeable.

It will become apparent from the texts presented here that flooding generally may be subsumed into two major categories: flooding from natural or supernatural or unknown events, and flooding from the ineptitude of humans, be it technological or hydraulic failure, moral debility, or political misjudgement. This categorization is in marked contrast with the multiplicity of flood myths in other cultures, in which the flood may be from the fluids of the body, tears, urine, blood, vomit, or the contents of the belly, besides rain or rising rivers (Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index*, A 1012, A 1013.1, 185). The power of the classical Chinese myths of the flood, however, resides not so much in unusual, unnatural substances flowing to excess but in the cosmic drama of how the flood is to be controlled, and the heroic qualities of the protagonists who attempt this trial by ordeal.

2. Some Reasons for the "Benign Neglect" of Classical Flood Myth Narratives

One reason for the unfamiliarity of classical flood narratives (in contrast to modern folkloric traditions) among non-Sinologists may be said to derive in part from the influential statement of Sir James Frazer in 1918, that the ancient Chinese had no flood myth:

> It is particularly remarkable that neither of the great civilized peoples of Eastern Asia, the Chinese and the Japanese, should, so far as I know, have preserved in their voluminous and ancient literatures any native legends of a great flood...[9]

[9] Sir James George Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, 3 vols., London: Macmillan, 1918, Vol. 1, Ch. 4, "The Great Flood," 332-33; Frazer's collation of other flood myths is truly international and comprehensive; see 104-361.

The extent to which Frazer's uninformed opinion has influenced generations of comparativists in anthropology and mythology may be measured by the fact that in the important collation of articles on the flood myth worldwide, published in 1988, *The Flood Myth*, none of the twenty-five articles is devoted to classical or modern Chinese flood myths.[10]

A second reason is the methodology utilized by modern Chinese scholars between 1925 and 1942 in addressing their indigenous flood myths. The extreme difficulty they encountered in devising a workable methodology stemmed in part from the fact that theirs was the first serious study of mythic narratives which had been preserved over two and a half millennia. It also stems from the fact that they faced a multiplicity of intellectual challenges: to demarcate the disciplinary boundaries between history and mythology; to discriminate between authentic and spurious historical sources; to debunk fallacies and misconceptions; and to identify the pseudohistorical texts among verifiable historiographic material. With such fundamental scholarly strategies in mind, it is not surprising that eminent Chinese historians, such as Ku Chieh-kang, Yang K'uan, T'ung Shu-yeh, Lü Ssu-mien, and others writing in the seven-volume research series, *Critiques of Ancient [Chinese] History* (*Ku shih pien*), chose in their initial research to concentrate on major mythical figures and all the textual fragments associated with them, rather than focus on mythemes such as the flood. Their pioneering research has, however, had the unfortunate effect of producing a mythological methodology characterized by a plethora of themes, figures, and motifs being buried under a mass of related figures, minor themes, and sub-themes.[11]

Even when these authors ostensibly discussed the flood themes

---

[10] Dundes, ed., *op. cit.*, see n. 2.

[11] Ku Chieh-kang, *et al.* eds., *Ku shih pien* (Critiques of ancient [Chinese] history, henceforth KSP), 7 vols., 1926-41, rpr. Shanghai: Shanghai ku-chi, 1982. The themes of the volumes are: Vol. 1, mythology, Vol. 2, mythology and ancient history, Vol. 3, the classics, Vol. 4, philosophy, Vol. 5, historical and other texts, Vol. 6, philosophy and miscellaneous philosophical schools, Vol. 7, mythology. My citations in this paper refer to the 1926-41 ed. In his article, "A Letter Discussing the Old Account of Yü Controlling the Flood," KSP, Vol. 1, Pt. 3, 209-10, Ku Chieh-kang is mainly concerned with authenticating the mythical account of Yü on the basis of numerous placenames associated with the Yü flood myth, without considering the problem of fallacious geographical or geophysical "proofs" for the flood myth.

associated with one or more mythical figures, their methodology was one of presenting data rather than providing argumentation. Thus these early research papers of the period 1926-1941 are valuable more for their identification of mythical figures and for their abundant textual data, than for their contributions to topics and approaches in myth studies worldwide.[12] It is a significant feature of their research that, although they were modernist in many respects, they were singularly out of touch with scholarship published outside China.

As with Chinese research in the early twentieth century, Western Sinologists have studied this mytheme without making it a central part of their research. Instead, they have treated it as but one element among others in the mythological account of major figures, one link in the chain of their heroic exploits. This is especially true of the research on myth by Wolfram Eberhard, *The Local Cultures of South and East China* (1942), Henri Maspero, "Légendes mythologiques dans le *Chou king*" [Shu ching] (1924), and Marcel Granet, *Danses et légendes de la Chine ancienne* (1926, rev. ed. 1994). In Granet's work, for example, the flood myth is discussed in a piecemeal way under the rubric of the myths of Yü, and the main section of this discussion is devoted to the relationship between Yü and the cult of the Yellow River. Much of the relevant mythic textual discussion, however, is relegated to lengthy, but, for myth specialists, significantly interesting footnotes. A similar approach has been adopted in a recent study of Yü and the flood myth by Rémi Mathieu, in which the mythical exploits of Yü are recounted within the framework of a reconstructed "biography" of the mythical figure, with a special focus on the flood myth.[13]

Other Chinese authors, who approached the study of myth from a literary, rather than a scholarly or academic standpoint,

---

[12] The contributions of KSP authors to classical flood myth research are mainly to be found in Vols. 1 and 7, passim.

[13] Wolfram Eberhard, *The Local Cultures of South and East China.* 1942. Rev. ed. of Vol. 2 of *Lokalkulturen in alten China,* 2 vols., trans. Alide Eberhard. Leiden: Brill, 1968; Henri Maspero, "Légendes mythologiques dans le *Chou king*" [*Shu ching*]. *Journal Asiatique* 204 (1924): 1-100; Marcel Granet, *Danses et légendes de la China ancienne.* 2 vols. Annales du Musée Guimet, Bibliothèque d'Etudes, 64. 1926. Rpt. 2 vols. in 1, 1959. New rev. edn. edited by Rémi Mathieu. Orientales. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994; see Part 3, Chapter 3, 466-85. Rémi Mathieu, "Yu Le Grand et le mythe du Déluge dans la Chine ancienne," *T'oung Pao* 78 (1992): 162-90.

and who were progressive in their knowledge and utilisation of comparative mythology research, still pursued the exploration of mythical figures rather than single mythical themes, although some studied general mythic subjects.[14]

A third cause resides in the fragmentary nature of the textual data.[15] The narrative fragments were, in general, preserved by writers in antiquity, especially philosophers, in the form of citation, reference, and, more rarely, reconstructed mythical episodes, in order to reinforce their argument or illustrate their point of view. As such, the fragments are necessarily brief, while extended narrative is a rare phenomenon.[15] Used as substantive material in argument, dialogue, or debate, the mythic matter expresses different coloration and wording. Thus, the mythic narratives which have survived share similar features: there is a con-

---

[14] See, for example, Hsüan Chu, *Chung-kuo shen-hua yen-chiu* (Research on Chinese mythology), 2 vols. (*Folklore and Literature*, 48-49), 1928, rpt. (2 vols. in one), Taipei: Orient Cultural Service, 1971, Vol. 1, 84-5, Vol. 2, 92; Shen Yen-ping (alias Mao Tun), *Shen-hua yen-chiu* (Research on mythology), 1927, photolith. rpt., Tientsin: Pai-hua wen-i, 1981, 220-22 (discusses the flood, but not as a major theme); Yuan K'o, *Chung-kuo ku-tai shen-hua* (Mythology of ancient China), 1951, rev. ed., Shanghai: Shang-wu, 1957, 207-40. More recently, the approach has been ethnographic, as in Hsiao Ping, *Ch'u Tz'u yü shen-hua* (The *Songs of Ch'u* and myth), Nanking: Kiangsu ku-chi, 1986; for example, Hsiao presents a modern version of the Nü Kua flood myth from the Tibetan-speaking Tsang minority group of Yunnan, alongside the classical account, 329-30; and also in Wong Shek [Huang Shih], *Shen-hua yen-chiu* (Research on mythology), Shanghai: Shanghai wen-i, 1988, 119-28 (contains ancient flood myths worldwide, but not the classical Chinese texts). For the myth specialist Chang Chen-li the flood myth theme is mainly represented by the figure of Yü, although Chang discusses the Nü Kua flood myth under the mythic theme of cosmogony, in *Chung-yuan ku-tien shen-hua liu-pien lun-k'ao* (A discussion of the evolution of myths in the classical texts of Central China), (*Chung-kuo min-su wen-hua yen-chiu ts'ung-shu*), Shanghai: Shanghai wen-i, 1991, 45, 63-88, 209-36.

[15] This aspect has been discussed in Birrell's review article, "Studies on Chinese Myth since 1970: An Appraisal," Pt. 1, *History of Religions* 33.4 (1994): 382, and Pt. 2, 34.1 (1994): 71-2.

No systematized corpus of extended mythic narratives exists in classical literature. Yet, it is clear that classical authors drew on some form of substantive tradition of mythical accounts, which may have been orally transmitted through expert tellers of tales, or in written versions which have not survived. Two significant texts constitute the only surviving examples of a corpus of mythic *fragments* in classical literature: "Questions of Heaven," Chapter Three of *Songs of Ch'u* (*T'ien wen*, *Ch'u Tz'u*, *ca.* 4th cent. B.C.), and the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shan hai ching*, henceforth SHC, *ca.* 2nd cent. B.C.-1st cent. A.D.), in eighteen chapters.

siderable textual variation; they are often contextually tied to, and influenced by their "host" text; and they are, in the main, residually concise.[16] To comparative mythologists who are accustomed to much more extensive narratives, such as the earliest known account of the flood myth preserved in stone *Tablet XI* of the Nineveh fragments of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the laconic Chinese accounts must appear exiguous to the point of non-existence.[17]

A fourth cause is that unlike the traditions of ancient Assyria and Judaism, which adhered to one dominant, or orthodox version of the flood myth, the mythological record of ancient China reveals a plurality of major flood myths.[18] To borrow the phraseology of G.E.R. Lloyd, there is no such thing as *the* flood myth of the Chinese.[19] China's plurality in this case, however, is orthodoxy's loss. For, as we will see in our review of the texts, classical writings have preserved a rich corpus of indigenous mythic narratives.

Finally, the terminology employed by Chinese academics and authors when discussing aspects of the theme of the flood has tended to obscure the subject. The authors of *Critiques of Ancient History,* for example, were reluctant to shift from their notion of recognizably mythical topics as a "story" (*ku-shih*), "traditional account" (*ch'uan-shuo*), or "anecdote" (*shuo*). Moreover, their term for the "flood" or "deluge" was not fixed, and usually was designated by metaphorical phrases drawn from the texts themselves, such as "vast waters" (*hung shui*), or the operative phrase, "control-

---

[16] The most important classical texts from the B.C. era which preserved valuable fragments of mythological material are: *Shih ching* (Classic of Poetry), *Mo Tzu, Meng Tzu* (Mencius), *Shih Tzu, Kuan Tzu, Chuang Tzu, Ch'u Tz'u, Tso chuan* (Chronicle of Tso), *Hsün Tzu, Lü-shih ch'un-ch'iu* (Spring and Autumn [annals] of Mr. Lü), *Huai-nan Tzu, Shan hai ching,* and *Han Fei Tzu.* Texts which preserved mythic fragments but seriously distorted them in terms of the function of mythical figures are: *Shang shu* (Ancient History, also entitled *Shu ching,* Classic of Documents), and *Kuo yü* (Discourses of the States). All these texts recorded the flood myth to a greater or lesser degree.

[17] See George Smith, "The Chaldean Account of the Deluge" (1872), in Dundes, ed., *The Flood Myth,* 29-48.

[18] For the account in *Genesis* 6-9 and critical Bible scholarship, see "The Flood (Genesis 6-9)," and Norman C. Habel, "The Two Flood Stories in Genesis," in Dundes, ed., *id.*, 7-28.

[19] G.E.R. Lloyd, "Greek Cosmologies," in *Ancient Cosmologies,* Carmen Blacker and Michael Loewe, eds., London: Allen & Unwin, 1975, 205.

ling the waters" (*chih shui*).[20] Literary authors, on the other hand, immediately adopted the internationally accepted term, "myth," or "mythology," translating it as *shen-hua*, "sacred narrative."[21] For them, too, however, flood terminology was for a long time either not fixed, or was limited to the mythologically misleading phrase, "controlling the flood."[22] That this chosen term is misleading is apparent from some of the major myth texts themselves, which feature protagonists who cause, or fail to control the world deluge.

The five factors explain some of the reasons why classical Chinese flood myth narratives have not received the attention they deserve.

3. Four Major Traditions of Classical Chinese Flood Myth Narratives

When the narrative texts of the classical flood myth are collated and classified, they reveal fundamental differences in terms of mythical figure, plot, motif, and function. The textual data gravitate toward four separate mythic clusters, each of which is associated with a central figure. These clusters form four distinct, basically discrete mythological traditions. As is often the case with mythic material, these categories tend to overlap. In my view, however, it is essential to maintain these distinctions in order to learn more about the unique character of the themes, motifs, and central concern of each. Moreover, the flood theme itself will be more manageable overall by means of this organizational methodology.

3a. The Nü Kua Flood Myth Tradition

Only one classical text records the myth of Nü Kua who saved the world from a catastrophic deluge. The text is from the *Huainan Tzu*; it is anonymous and dates from *ca.* 139 B.C. (I designate

---

[20] See for example, Ting Wen-chiang, KSP, Vol. 1, Pt. 2, 207; Ku Chieh-kang, *ibid.*, 209; Yang K'uan, Vol. 7, Pt. 1, 65-156, 207; Meng Wen-t'ung and Mu Feng-lin, Vol. 7, Pt. 2, 314; Lü Ssu-mien, *ibid.*, 337; Ku and T'ung Shu-yeh, Vol. 3, Pt. 3, 159; Lü, *ibid.*, 275. T'ung was the first mythologist in KSP (1941) to use the term, *shen-hua*, for "mythology" in the titles of his articles on myth, thus removing it from the classification of fiction and folk-tale, or even history, to its own discipline of mythology, Vol. 7, Pt. 1, 393, 401. The generally accepted term for the great deluge today is *ta shui*, "great waters."

[21] See n. 14.

[22] See for example, Yuan K'o, *op. cit.*, 207.

this period as the latter part of the First Mythographic Phase.)[23] In textual terms, this myth narrative is relatively late. Yet, since some important other texts record major myths of Nü Kua as a primeval cosmogonic deity, I have placed the Nü Kua flood myth first.[24]

---

[23] In the absence of any formal model for the periodization of the classical Chinese mythographic record, apart from Bernhard Karlgren's informal proposal, the following four-part scheme is suggested: 1) the First Mythographic Phase, *ca.* 600-*ca.* 100 B.C., includes literary anthologies, chronicles, philosophical texts, and other writings; 2) the Second Mythographic Phase, *ca.* 100 B.C.-*ca.* A.D. 100, includes the first imperial histories, philosophical texts, eclectic essays, treatises, and miscellaneous texts; 3) the Third Mythographic Phase, *ca.* A.D. 100-*ca.* 600, includes encyclopedias, anthologies, commentaries on classical texts, early fiction, travel notes, regional history, geographical treatises, and miscellanies of prose works; 4) the Fourth Mythographic Phase, *ca.* 600-11th century, includes imperial encyclopedias, commentaries on the classics, prototype novels, essays, travel diaries, and antiquarian writings. The first phase constitutes the earliest mythic texts; the second, mythopoeic writings and the preservation of some fugitive mythic versions; and the third and fourth phases may be termed the conservationist era. In 1946, Bernhard Karlgren made an important collation of mythic texts; his organizing principles were as follows. He made a two-part distinction between classical sources of myth (which he termed "legend"): 1) chronological, and 2) substantive. His chronological principle is none too clearly stated, but it may be summarized as the following periodization: i) the Chou era, up to 250 B.C., when writers were witness to customs and beliefs as a "living reality," ii) from 250 B.C. to 100 B.C., when writers' accounts were based on "recent memories" of "ancient beliefs," iii) *ca.* 100 B.C.-A.D. 200, "the age of the great scholiasts," whose accounts were "the lore of ancient times." His substantive principle (2), distinguished between i) early texts of the pre-Han era, Karlgren's so-called "free texts," and ii) "sources of fundamentally different purport," Karlgren's so-called "systematising texts," by scholars whose "goal was to create a system." Although most Sinologists would accept Karlgren's periodization, as reconstituted above (1), there is not general acceptance of his "free" and "systematized" distinctions, mainly due to the terminology; for it could be readily argued that his so-called "free" texts of *Kuo yü*, *Shang shu*, and so forth, reveal considerable distortion and reorganization of mythic material. Karlgren, "Legends and Cults in Ancient China," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 18 (1946): 199-201. Chang Kwang-chih's classification is a five-part typology of mythic themes and motifs of the ancient era, rather than a mythographic periodization; Chang, *Early Chinese Civilization: Anthropological Perspectives* (*Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series*, 23), Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976, 149-73.

[24] For a survey of the cosmogonic and other myths of Nü Kua, see Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction*, Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, 33-5, 69-72, 163-65. There is some uncertainty whether the goddess's name should be pronounced Nü Kua or Nü Wa. I follow the earliest authority, *Shuo-wen chieh-tzu* (An explanation of script, an explication of graphs, Hsü Shen, comp. *ca.* A.D. 100) which gives a guttural initial, *ku+wa>kua* 古+蛙>媧.

It should be made clear at the outset that by no means all scholars, whether traditional or modern, recognize the existence of a flood myth associated with the figure of Nü Kua.[25] Whether or not it is due to an increasing awareness of the role of women in cultural history is not clear, but the function of this female deity as a flood myth protagonist has been acknowledged by a minority of scholars, and is now gaining acceptance.[26] Apart from gender prejudice, the text itself confuses the issue with its incorporation of a world conflagration myth with the world flood myth.

The *Huai-nan Tzu* text (henceforth HNT) was compiled *ca.* 139 B.C. by Liu An, King of Huai-nan, a region of south central China in the early Han dynasty, which had been part of the old state of Ch'u, and which had as its capital the last Ch'u capital, Shou-ch'un.[27] It is a syncretizing text, written by various anonymous authors, in twenty-one chapters, on cosmological, philosophical, and historical subjects. Its intellectual viewpoint is mainly, but not exclusively, Taoist.[28] The Nü Kua flood myth occurs in Chapter Six, "Instruction on an Examination into the Obscure" (*Lan ming hsün*), which follows on from opening chapters on the creation of the world, the celestial motion, and the physical forms of the earth.

In the time of the remote past, the four limits [of the cosmos] collapsed.[29]

The *Shuo-wen* defines Nü Kua as "A sage goddess in antiquity who metamorphosed the universe."

[25] For example, the only KSP author to properly recognize the existence and significance of the Nü Kua flood myth is Lü Ssu-mien, KSP, Vol. 7, Pt. 2, 352-55. Hsüan Chu, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, 84-5, suggested that the Nü Kua flood myth narrative in HNT represents only a fragment of a larger flood myth narrative.

[26] See Chang Chen-li, *op. cit.*, 45.

[27] The most recent research on HNT is Charles Le Blanc and Rémi Mathieu, eds., *Mythe et philosophie à l'aube de la Chine impériale: Études sur le Huainan Zi*, Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, and Paris: de Boccard, 1992. For a discussion of the textual scholarship of HNT, see Le Blanc and Mathieu, "Préface" to *Mythe et philosophie,* xvi-xx, and Le Blanc, "Histoire du texte et philologie," 169-79.

[28] For a discussion of syncretist concepts in HNT, see Anne Cheng, "Taoïsme, confucianisme et légisme," in Le Blanc and Mathieu, eds., *Mythe et philosophie*, 127-42; and Le Blanc, *Huai-nan Tzu: Philosophical Synthesis in Early Han Thought*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1985.

[29] "four limits" (*ssu chi*): the HNT commentator, Kao Yu (*fl. ca.* 205-215) provides the gloss for a similar reference elsewhere in HNT: "[The two gods] then split into Yin and Yang, and divided to become the eight limits (*pa chi*)," Kao Yu: "eight limits: the limits of the eight directions" (HNT, *Ching shen hsün*

The Nine Regions split up. Heaven could not cover all things uniformly, and earth could not carry everything at once. Fires raged fiercely and could not be extinguished. Water surged and spread without abating. Savage beasts devoured the people of Chuan [Hsü].[30] Violent birds seized the old and weak in their talons. Therefore, Nü Kua smelted five-colour stone to restore the blue sky. She severed the feet of a giant sea-turtle to support the four limits and killed a black dragon to save the region of Chi.[31] And she piled up the ashes from burned reeds to dam the uncontrolled waters.[32] The blue sky was restored. The four limits were set right. The uncontrolled waters dried up. The region of Chi was in order. Savage reptiles died and the people of Chuan [Hsü] lived. They were carried on the back of the square [earth] and embraced by the round sky.[33] [Passage omitted.]

From that time on, there were no birds or beasts, no insects or reptiles that did not sheathe their claws and fangs and conceal their poisonous venom, and they no longer had rapacious hearts.

When one ponders her [Nü Kua's] achievement, it knows only the bounds of Ninth Heaven above and the nadir of Yellow Clod below.[34] She was acclaimed by later generations, and her brilliant glory sweetly suffused the living world. She rides in a thunder-carriage, driving Responding Dragon, and her

---

[Instruction on the numinous essence], SPPY 7.1a). When the phrase, "four limits" is repeated in our mythic passage, Kao Yu implies that they are pillar supports of the sky, probably mindful of another cosmogonic passage in HNT: "The pillar (*chu*) of the sky broke" (HNT, *T'ien wen hsün* [Instruction on the design of the Heavens], SPPY 3.1b). Thus, there is some confusion about the precise meaning of *ssu chi;* but since both *chi* and *chu* (pillar) occur in several cosmogonic passages, I have kept the distinction between the two terms. Note the cosmic numbers 4, 9, 5, in the Nü Kua passage.

[30] "people of Chuan [Hsü]" (*Chuan min*): Kao Yu glosses *Chuan* as *chuan> shan*, "good," but in mythological texts the phrase occurs, "the people of T'ang" (T'ang=T'ao T'ang=Yao), so I have read the phrase as *Chuan min*. "the people of Chuan [Hsü];" Chuan Hsü was the sky god. For myths of this figure, see Birrell, *Chinese Mythology*, 91-8.

[31] Note the colour symbolism of this passage: "five-colour" denotes the perfect cosmic spectrum; "black" is the symbolic colour of the north, water, and darkness; "blue" and "yellow" denote the sky and earth (yellow became the symbolic colour of Taoism). "region of Chi": one of the Nine Regions (also known as provinces) of antiquity, equivalent to modern Shansi and Honan.

[32] "reeds" (*lu*): the motif suggests that this myth might derive from an ancient riparian community, which had learned how to dam flooded rivers with the ashes of burned reeds.

[33] In HNT, *T'ien wen hsün*, it says: "The *Tao* of the sky is said to be round, the *Tao* of the earth is said to be square" (HNT, SPPY 3.1b).

[34] "Ninth Heaven": the furthest limit of aerial space, the purest part of the ether; its correlative here is "Yellow Clod" (*Huang lu*), the dark, stiff soil said to be beneath the Yellow Springs (*Huang ch'üan)* of the underworld. For an early reference to Yellow Springs as the underworld, see *Meng Tzu, T'eng Wen-kung*, SPPY 13.14b; for the "Great Clod" (*Ta k'uai*), another phrase for Yellow Clod, see *Chuang Tzu, Ta tsung shih* (The great and revered Master), SPPY 3.4b-5a.

> outer steed is the Green Dragon.[35] She bears the Jade Tablet Insignia of Death. Her seat is the Chart of the Mortuary Artemisia.[36] Of yellow cloud is her steeds' halter. In the front is a white calf-dragon, in the rear a rushing snake. Floating, drifting, free and easy, she guides ghostly spirits as she ascends to Ninth Heaven.[37] She has audience with God (*Ti*) within the holy gates. Silently, solemnly, she comes to rest below the Supreme Ancestor.[38] However, she never displays her achievements, nor spreads her fame. She lives in seclusion[39] in the Way of the True Person[40] and so she complies with the eternal nature of Heaven and earth.[41]

The narrative consists of two parts. The first half relates the cause (but not the ultimate cause) and effect of a world catastrophe which generates fire and flood, and the saving action of the creatrix, Nü Kua, who restores the damaged cosmos. The flood is emphasized, rather than the conflagration in this account. The second half narrates how in the postdiluvian world the goddess is assumed into heaven to take her place in a new order of the divine pantheon.

To understand the meaning of the cosmic catastrophe, it is necessary to visualize the world picture implicit in the mythic nar-

---

[35] "Responding Dragon" (*Ying lung*): a divine creature featured in several myths, with the power to remove vast amounts of water or to bring it down to earth.

[36] "Jade Tablet Insignia of Death" (*chüeh jui*): for the association of an ancient Chinese goddess with destruction, see Riccardo Fracasso, "Holy Mothers of Ancient China," *T'oung Pao* 74.1-3 (1988): 1-46, especially 15, 32; "Chart of the Mortuary Artemisia" (*lo t'u*): *lo* is defined in the *Erh ya* dictionary as the *o>lo*, a variety of artemisia, and glossed as *o-hao*, artemisia; the plant, *hao*, features in the Han burial song, *Hao li* (Artemisia Village, or cemetery), recorded in Ts'ui Pao (*fl.* A.D. 290-306), *Ku chin chu* (Record of things ancient and modern), SPTK 2a-3a. If this interpretation of the phrase, *lo t'u*, is correct, it would appear to parallel the phrase, *chüeh jui*, and both phrases would denote the goddess's symbols of power over death in this passage.

[37] "Floating, drifting..." (*fou-yu hsiao-yao*): compare the title of the first chapter of *Chuang tzu, Hsiao yao yu p'ien*, SPPY 1.1a.

[38] "Supreme Ancestor" (*T'ai Tsu*): glossed in the HNT commentary as the ultimate ancestor of the *Tao*; the prefix, *T'ai*, begins to appear in cosmogonic terminology in HNT, and later in Taoist nomenclature.

[39] "She lives in seclusion" (*yin*): may also be translated as "secret" or "mysterious," but the tenor of the passage points to the concept of isolation.

[40] "Way of the True Person" (*Chen-jen chih Tao*): another echo from a passage in *Chuang Tzu, Ta tsung shih*, SPPY 3.1a-4a, translated by Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1968, 77-80.

[41] HNT, *Lan ming hsün*, SPPY 6.7a-8a. The term, *hsün*, in the title also occurs in traditional chapter titles of the *Shang shu* (Ancient History), to mean a minister's advice, or instruction, for a king.

rative: at the beginning of creation, primordial matter separated; the light elements rose to become the sky, the heavy elements sank to become the earth; the sky formed a round canopy covering the square earth, and the universe was bounded in four directions by limits which supported the cosmos.[42] In this Nü Kua flood myth, the limits are said to number four, and they collapse, thus terminating the separation of sky and earth, and signalling a regression to primordial chaos.

The narrative goes on to relate that through her divine knowledge of metallurgy, when she smelted stone, and through her power to control and use supernatural creatures, such as Responding Dragon (which ruled water, creating floods or droughts), the goddess brought about a second creation, or a new beginning of the world.[43] This regenerative act is consistent with separate myth narratives which relate Nü Kua's creative metamorphoses, her creation of humankind, and her procreative intent in inaugurating the institution of marriage.[44]

The last section of the myth narrative diverges from these other mythic accounts of the goddess, and it departs from the mythological context of the opening section, turning instead to themes of philosophical and quasi-religious Taoism. This rhetorical shift marks a dichotomy in the text between the prediluvial and the postdiluvial world. The regenerative, cosmogonic deity becomes transmuted into a divine heroine, but she is also deposed to the status of a lesser deity under the control of God and under the

---

[42] The earliest representation of the mythological world picture occurs in *Ch'u Tz'u, T'ien wen*, SPTK 3.1b-4a, discussed in Birrell, *op. cit.*, 26-8.

[43] "smelted five-colour stone": this fragment may be interpreted as a vestigial myth of Nü Kua, the divine smith; for the motif, see *Motif-Index*, Vol. 1, 86, "A142.0.1. God as blacksmith" (derived from Indian myth).

[44] The main textual references for the mythological functions of Nü Kua are: *Ch'u Tz'u, T'ien wen*, SPTK 3.10b-11a ("Nü Kua had a body. But who fashioned it?"); HNT, *Shuo lin hsün*, SPPY 17.4a ("It was with these [Yin, Yang, ears, eyes, arms, hands] that Nü Kua made her seventy transformations"); *Shuo-wen chieh-tzu*, see n. 24 above; *Feng su t'ung-i* (2nd cent. A.D.), Centre Franco-Chinois d'Études Sinologiques (1943), 1.83 (Nü Kua creates humankind, see Birrell, *op. cit.*, 35); *Tu i chih* (9th cent. A.D.), TSCC 3.51 (Nü Kua's sibling marriage and the propagation of the human race, see Birrell, *loc. cit.*). The last myth has motifs similar to modern flood myth versions, but it lacks the flood motif. The last two myths belong to the Third and Fourth Mythographic Phases, see n. 23 above. For a survey of the Nü Kua mythic texts, see T'ung Shu-yeh, KSP, Vol. 7, Pt. 2, 123-58.

male figure of the Supreme Ancestor, a late mythopoeic manipulative invention of Taoism.[45]

In addition to this divorce between the Old World and the New World, the author interfaces his text with a subtly crafted evolutionary structure. Having related the restorative act of the goddess "In the time of the remote past," he describes the utopian aftermath "From that time on," and then the fame and glory bestowed on her by "later generations." The author moves the sequence a stage further, nearer to his own day, and posits the concept of a goddess who does not broadcast her feat of restoring the cosmos and who is silent about her effective management of the world catastrophe: "she never displays her achievements." Moreover, the goddess abides by the ideal of femininity in ancient and traditional society: "She lives in seclusion." Modesty, silence, and isolation are, however, male-authored manipulative ploys to degrade her mythic potency.

For the author of "Instruction on an Examination into the Obscure," the Nü Kua cosmogonic flood myth poses a problem of gender role. Living as he did in the early Han, he was informed by the values of a hierarchical, patristic social system, and he sought to mirror those values by rewriting a potent ancient myth.[46] The incipient Confucianization of Han China, which pre-

---

[45] The goddess became further marginalized when Wang Ch'ung (A.D. 27-100) produced a fallacious link between the cosmogonic-flood myth of Nü Kua (recorded in HNT, SPPY 6.7a-8a) and the marplot myth of Kung Kung (recorded in HNT, SPPY 3.1a-b), in two chapters of his *Lun heng* (Disquisitions), namely, *T'an t'ien* (Discussions on Heaven), SPTK 11.1a, and *Shun ku* (Concordant drums), SPTK 15.18b-19a. Wang presented the two narratives consecutively, without a break, with the inference that the goddess repaired the marplot's cosmic damage. This fallacy was taken up by Ssu-ma Cheng (*fl.* 713-742) and preserved in his *San Huang pen-chi*, translated as *Annales Principales des Trois Souverains, Se-ma Tcheng*, by Edouard Chavannes, *Les Mémoires historiques de Se-ma Ts'ien* [*Shih chi*], 6 vols., 1895-1905, rpt., Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1967-69, Vol. 1, 11. Wen Yi-to accepted the Wang/Ssu-ma fallacy, and reproduced it in "*Fu Hsi k'ao*," Pt. 3, 46-8. Both T'ung Shu-yeh (KSP, Vol. 7, Pt. 2, 158) and Lü Ssu-mien (KSP, Vol. 7, Pt. 2, 352-53) note the fallacy in Wang Ch'ung and Ssu-ma Cheng, and its diminishing effect on the goddess's status in the ancient pantheon. Nü Kua's status as a primary deity was also devalued in the Han dynasty by her linkage with Fu Hsi. For the Fu Hsi/Nü Kua connection, see Michael Loewe, *Ways to Paradise: The Chinese Quest for Immortality*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979, 57-8.

[46] As early as the 4th cent. B.C., a predominantly male scale of social values was enunciated in the five ethico-social relationships of the *Mencius:* father: son, ruler:minister, husband:wife, the elderly:the young, and friend:friend (*Meng Tzu, T'eng Wen-kung*, SPPY 11.11b). Of these five, only the third specifies a biologically

scribed male-gendered authority roles, was reflected to some extent by the patriarchal authority structure of the Taoist pantheon. The author in turn mirrored these role models by neutralizing the independent authority of the goddess and by subordinating her gendered divinity. Utilizing the postdiluvian construct and the evolutionary time structure, he developed his three-part strategy of silencing woman in antiquity, of isolating her, and marginalizing the female figure of a primeval deity.

3b. The Kung Kung Flood Myth Tradition

In contrast to the unique Nü Kua flood myth narrative, three major Kung Kung narratives emerge from the classical texts. Because they differ so widely, it is pertinent to pose several questions: 1) Do they represent regional variations of the same myth? 2) Did several separate flood myth narratives which originally had been identified with other, shadowy deities become attached to the well-known mythical figure of Kung Kung? or 3) Are their basic differences due to the shaping hand of the authors of the disparate texts which preserved them? Although questions 1) and 2) may not allow of conclusive answers, due to the absence of corroborative data, the last question may be answered by close analysis of the texts themselves.

The name, or title, "Kung Kung," may be rendered literally as "communal worker" or "public work," and this literal meaning links this mythical figure to similar figures in world mythology.[47]

---

female gender. This scale was reformulated in the Han with the "Three Bonds" (*San kang*) system articulated in *Ch'un-ch'iu fan lu* (Luxuriant dew of the Spring and Autumn [annals]), attrib. Tung Chung-shu (?179-?104 B.C.); see Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, 2 vols., Vol. 2, translated from the Chinese, with a commentary by Derk Bodde, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953, 42-4.

[47] In classical texts of a historicizing nature, Kung Kung is both the title of an office and a name. For example, it occurs as the title of another mythical figure, Yu Ch'ui, a divine craftsman, in *Shang shu, Shun tien*, SPPY 3.14b: "Oh, [Yu] Ch'ui! You will be my Master of Works [*kung-kung*]," and as the name in *Tso chuan, Chao kung* 17th Year, SPPY 17.8a: "Kung Kung used water as his official emblem; that is why he had water officers and the waters for official titles." *Shang shu* commentators, such as Cheng Hsüan (A.D. 127-200), take it to be an official title: "*Kung-kung shui kuan ming*" (*Kung-kung* is the title of a water official); see Sun Hsing-yen (1753-1818), *Shang shu chin-ku-wen chu-shu*, SPPY 1.12a. The *Shuo-wen* defines the name: "*Kung*: the same, in unison" (SPPY 3A.17a); and "*Kung*: decorative art, symbolic of someone holding a compass and square" (SPPY 5A.8a),

In his *Motif-Index*, Stith Thompson lists the mythic motif, "Gods as workmen" under motif type "A140 Class of Worker Gods."[48] One of the earliest representations of worker gods occurs in the *Atrahasis Epic,* one of three extant Babylonian accounts of a universal flood. It relates that before humans were created, the universe was divided among three great gods of the sky, earth, and water, and seven gods who presided as a ruling class, while other lesser gods became their workers. The worker gods did hydraulic work on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, but they rebelled because it was too difficult a task. So humans were created to relieve them and perform their tasks. The gods later punished humans with a flood.[49] The Atrahasian themes of the worker god, hydraulic work on great rivers, rebellion, and a flood find striking parallels with versions of the Kung Kung myths, in terms of name, designation, function, water motif, and flood theme.

In his 1981 article on the Kung Kung flood myth, William G. Boltz offered a different interpretation, suggesting that the god's name corresponds to his function, and that Kung Kung is a "personification of the flood itself."[50]

The two myth narratives that follow occur in the HNT, the same text which recorded the Nü Kua flood myth, but they appear in separate chapters and were probably written by different authors. The first is from Chapter Three, "Instruction on the Design of the Heavens" (*T'ien wen hsün*), which provides a cosmological context for the Kung Kung flood myth. Note that although this famous passage implies a cosmic disaster involving a vast mass of water, it does not specify a deluge. Rather, it functions here as an etiological myth to explain the obliquity of the ecliptic.

> Long ago, Kung Kung struggled against Chuan Hsü to become God.[51] In his fury he horn-butted Not-Round Mountain.[52] The pillar of the sky broke and

---

[48] *Motif-Index,* Vol. 1, 86.

[49] From Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "The Atrahasis Epic and Its Significance for Our Understanding of Genesis 1-9" (1978), in Dundes, ed., *The Flood Myth,* 63-4.

[50] Boltz, "Kung Kung and the Flood: Reverse Euhemerism in the *Yao tien*," *T'oung Pao* 67.3-5 (1981): 144-45.

[51] See n. 30.

[52] "horn-butted" (*ch'u*): the divine attribute of horns signifies the bestial aspect and warrior function of a god; the motif also occurs in the myth of Ch'ih Yu, the god of war (see Birrell, *id.*, 50-3, 132-34). Elsewhere in HNT, the text refers explicitly to Kung Kung's warrior function, in its discussion of the origin of warfare, and the god's use of water as a weapon: "Kung Kung made the waters cause damage; that is why Chuan Hsü executed him" (HNT, *Ping lüeh hsün*

> the cord of the earth snapped.[53] The sky tilted toward the northwest, and that is why the sun, moon, and stars move in that direction. Earth had a gap missing in the southeast, and that is why the rivers overflowed and silt and soil came to rest there.[54]

The second narrative is from Chapter Eight of HNT, "Instruction on the Ordering of [All] Origins" (*Pen ching hsün*), and this time its author specifies that Kung Kung was the prime cause of the world flood.

> In the era of Shun, Kung Kung stirred the waters into a rushing flood so that they pounded against Hollow Mulberry.[55]

The first narrative begins *in illo tempore*, Eliade's conceptual phrase for "a decisive cosmic moment."[56] It relates the dramatic struggle for supremacy between two gods, Chuan Hsü, the sky god, and Kung Kung, our putative subordinate worker god, to decide who

---

(Instruction on strategies of war), SPPY 15.la-b). Besides the motif of horns, Kung Kung and Ch'ih Yu are linked by being gods propitiated for rain (spring and summer, respectively) in *Ch'un-ch'iu fan lu, Ch'iu yü* (Prayers for rain), SPPY 16/74.3a, and 16/74.4a. "Not-Round Mountain" (*Pu-chou chih shan*): this complex motif carries associations of the round canopy of the sky, the earthly support between sky and earth, and a terrestrial flaw; it is unclear whether the defective shape gave rise to the myth, or whether the obliquity of the ecliptic prompted the etiological myth.

[53] See n. 42; the world picture alluded to here was of a square earth covered by a round sky, the two being linked but separated by pillars and cords (the pillar motif is sometimes the mountain motif).

[54] HNT, *T'ien wen hsün*, SPPY 3.1a-b. A shorter version of this narrative occurs in HNT, *Yuan Tao hsün* (Instruction on the primordial *Tao*), SPPY 1.7a, where the sky god, Chuan Hsü, is replaced by Kao Hsin (also named Ti K'u), who was the consort of the ancestress deities of the Shang and Chou dynasties, namely, Chien Ti and Chiang Yuan, respectively.

[55] HNT, *Pen ching hsün*, SPPY 8.6a. Shun is the second semi-divine ruler of the Golden Age, in the pseudohistorical succession of Yao, Shun, and Yü. "Hollow Mulberry" (*K'ung-sang*): glossed by Kao Yü as a place in Lu; but here it denotes the sky; also it was the literal object, a hollow or dead mulberry tree trunk, in which the mythological figure of the Chou era, I Yin, was miraculously born (*Lü-shih ch'un-ch'iu*, SPTK 14.3b-4a). For other myths of Kung Kung, see Yuan K'o, *Chung-kuo shen-hua ch'uan-shuo tzu-tien* (A dictionary of Chinese myth and legend), Shanghai: Shanghai tzu-shu, 1985, 144-45.

[56] Most mythic narratives in classical texts begin with temporal phrases, such as *Hsi*, or *Hsi-che*, "Long ago," *Wang-ku chih shih*, "In the time of the remote past," *Tang X chih shih*, "In the era of X." Eliade uses the nominative, *illud tempus*, and the ablative, *in illo tempore*, forms of the temporal phrase to denote the myth of primordial paradise; Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or, Cosmos and History* (1949), translated from the French by Willard R. Trask (*Bollingen Series*, 46), 1954, rpt., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, 27-34, 121.

will be the supreme god. One of Chuan Hsü's functions was to maintain the separation of sky and earth, and so prevent a return to primordial chaos. As the sky god, he has a prestige mythological role. Kung Kung's challenge, therefore, may be viewed as an archetypal act of rebellion. Traditional commentators, and modern scholars, such as Bernhard Karlgren, have interpreted Kung Kung's act in the first HNT passage above as usurpation.[57]

The motifs of the god's fury, horn-butting, damage to the sky-earth support, and the cosmic fault define Kung Kung's mythic role as that of the marplot. That is, one who destroys the order of the cosmos and threatens a return to chaos. In this role, he is the antithesis of the benign, eufunctional sky god, Chuan Hsü, and the opposite of the restorative creatrix, Nü Kua. His negative function appears in one of the earliest mythological texts, "Questions of Heaven," Chapter Three of *Songs of Ch'u,* dating around the fourth century B.C., where he is named K'ang Hui.[58] If a symbolic meaning were to be attached to this name, it might be read as "Tranquillity-Corrupter," which would accord with his mythical function.

It will be clear that none of the texts cited thus far (and no text of the B.C. era) links the Kung Kung flood myth to that of Nü Kua. Yet some two centuries after the HNT text, the Latter Han author, Wang Ch'ung (A.D. 27-100) mythopoeically grafted the myth of Nü Kua's repair of the cosmos to the myth of the marplot Kung Kung's cosmic blunder, thus providing a speculative cause and effect in a conjoined narrative. Wang's mythopoeic speculation became accepted as a mythic datum when Ssu-ma Cheng (*fl.* 713-742) incorporated it into the T'ang mythographic canon.[59]

A very different version of the Kung Kung flood myth occurs in the *Kuan Tzu.* This text is traditionally ascribed to the historical Kuan Chung (d. 645 B.C.), but is now accepted as a later compilation dating *ca.* 250 B.C., written by different authors. The context of the myth narrative is a discourse on land economy presented in a pseudohistorical encounter between Kuan Tzu, prime minister of Ch'i state, and Duke Huan of Ch'i (r. 685-643 B.C.),

---

[57] Karlgren, "Legends and Cults," 233.

[58] *Ch'u Tz'u, T'ien wen,* SPTK 3.7b: "When K'ang Hui became furiously angry, why did the (*ti,* archaic>)earth incline toward the southeast?" In his commentary, Wang I (A.D. 89-158) states that K'ang Hui is Kung Kung's name. It is possible, however, that in the same way as the name of a shadowy god of light, T'ai Hao, became attached to Fu Hsi, so with K'ang Hui and Kung Kung.

[59] See n. 45.

the first of the hegemon rulers.[60] Kuan Tzu explains to the duke the traditional methods of land economy, and he supports his argument by appealing to the authority of the primordial gods who first instituted them. These methods, known as the *ch'ing-chung* system (lit. "light-heavy"), had been practised and handed down since Sui-jen, the fire god (lit. Driller Man). Following Sui-jen there was Kung Kung, then the Yellow Emperor, and later Yao and Shun.[61] The narrative appears in Chapter 23, "Calculations" (*K'uei tu*).

> Duke Huan of Ch'i questioned Kuan Tzu saying, "May I hear about the 'Major Calculation' since the time of Sui-jen?" Kuan Tzu replied, "Since Sui-jen there was never a case when the *Ch'ing-chung* [system] was not used to manage the world. When Kung Kung ruled (*wang*), water occupied seven-tenths of its area and land occupied three-tenths of it. He took advantage of the natural strengths of the world and so he controlled it within those narrow confines.[62]

The anonymous author is unusual in the manner of his exposition of the myth and his representation of the figure of Kung Kung. He does not attribute a cause for the flood to the latter, unlike the HNT author(s) (p. 229-30 above), but implies in an impartial way that the land mass of the world was disproportionately less than the mass of water (a geophysical fact that is true today). The author is also careful to employ neutral wording for this mass of water, using the term, "occupy the area of" (*ch'u*), in contrast to the hyperbolic expressions of other classical authors writing on

---

[60] *Kuan Tzu* was arranged *ca.* 26 B.C. from an existing text by the bibliographer, Liu Hsiang (79-8 B.C.), a native of the region of ancient Ch'u. It is a syncretizing text, and was classed as Legalist because of its advocacy of government monopolies and price control policies. Chapter 18, "A Consideration of Land" (*Tu ti*), is one of the oldest surviving works on water control, and dates *ca.* 3rd cent. B.C.; Rickett, *Kuan-tzu*, 74-82. For a definitive study of the composition and dating of the text, see Piet van der Loon, "On the Transmission of the *Kuan-tzŭ*," *T'oung Pao* 41 (1952): 357-93.

[61] W. Allyn Rickett defines the economic theory of "light and heavy" as "a policy of manipulating the amount of coinage in circulation in order to insure an adequate supply of grain and commodities," Rickett, *op. cit.*, 2. It is clear, however, that in this opening mythological passage coinage is not a factor; the topic is land management. "Sui-jen": note that there was no fixed pantheon; other Sui-jen chronologies have Sui-jen, Fu Hsi, and Shen Nung (the Farmer God).

[62] *Kuan Tzu, K'uei tu,* SPPY 23.4b. The earliest commentator, Fang Hsüan-ling (A.D. 578-648) merely comments that Kung Kung followed on from the goddess, Nü Kua, in possessing the world, alluding to a different pantheon from that of the *Kuan Tzu* itself.

the flood. Although the last part of the *Kuan Tzu* passage might be construed negatively as: "He usurped the powers of Heaven and thereby assumed control of the world," this negative reading should be rejected for this reason. The author's progressive sequence of deities in a primeval pantheon, the tradition of the economic system, the use of neutral rhetoric, and the lack of any critical stance toward Kung Kung all point to the positive reading of the passage. Nevertheless, there is in the text a residual ambiguity toward the figure of Kung Kung on the part of the author. It is possible to hypothesize that the *Kuan Tzu* author wrote a eufunctional role for Kung Kung in order to provide a convincing argument in favour of his politico-economic policy.

Although the Kung Kung flood myth is not related in the *Ancient History*, a problematic text which dates from the same late Chou period as the *Kuan Tzu,* it echoes through the text of the first document in the form of symbolic rhetoric. In the "Canon of Yao" (*Yao tien*), Kung Kung is first introduced at the court of Yao, the supreme ruler, as a meritorious officer: "Kung Kung has in every respect accumulated and shown a great deal of merit." Here his name in the reconstructed Archaic pronunciation **Kiung *Kung*, puns the key word, "merit," **kung*, in the passage. But then Yao disagrees with this assessment and characterizes him as follows: "In appearance he is respectful (**kung*, or **kiung*), but he swells up (**t'ôg*) to the skies." Later in this document, Yao complains to his minister that a great deluge is causing havoc among the people, and he uses a word which again puns Kung Kung's name, though he is not mentioned: "Gushing, rushing flood (**kiung*) waters are causing damage everywhere." By a cunning use of rhetoric, the anonymous author of the "Canon of Yao" links Kung Kung to the idea of political insubordination, and, by guilty association, to the flood itself.[63]

A third narrative of the Kung Kung flood myth appears in the "Discourses of Chou" (*Chou yü*) chapter of *Discourses of the States* (*Kuo yü*), which also dates from the late Chou. It relates his hydraulic work in the context of a discussion of moral and political

[63] *Shang shu, Yao tien,* SPPY 2.11b. I have followed the Archaic reconstructions of Bernhard Karlgren, *Grammata Serica Recensa,* 1957, rpt., Stockholm: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 1972. For a perceptive phonetic analysis of the *Yao tien* Kung Kung myth, see Boltz, *op. cit.* I have used Karlgren's preferred traditional glosses in Karlgren, "Glosses on the Book of Documents," BMFEA 20 (1948): 61-157.

philosophy. The format of the text is a dialogue between King Ling of the Chou (r. 571-545 B.C.) and the crown prince, Chin. Their specific discussion on the best way to deal with flood water from the Ku and Lo rivers which threatened the palace leads into a monologue by Prince Chin on the advisability of adhering to principles of water control that have operated since the beginning of creation. The prince projects a primordial paradise at the time of creation, when the geological formation of the earth was ideal and perfect, so that the forces of nature worked in harmony. In the Golden Age, sage rulers maintained this optimum environmental balance, and consequently there existed a primordial utopia of plenty, health, and prosperity: "Therefore, the misery of premature death, senility, plague, or epidemics did not occur, nor was there the scourge of famine, freezing, penury, or destitution."[64] The prince goes on to cite the action of the marplot, Kung Kung, who interrupted "this Way," that is, the primordial paradise.

> Long ago, Kung Kung abandoned this Way. He took delight in lustful [*chan* 湛] pleasures and lost himself in sexual excess [*yin* 淫]. He desired to obstruct with dams the hundred rivers, to lower the level of high ground and fill in the low-lying ground, and as a result he caused damage to the world. But August Heaven (*Huang T'ien*) refused to grant him good fortune, and the common folk refused to give him their help. Catastrophe and disorder arose everywhere, and Kung Kung was destroyed.[65]

In this discourse, the prince brings two charges against Kung Kung, sexual license and the abandonment, or destruction of the primordial paradise. His crime against nature is on a cosmic scale: "he caused damage to the world." The crime of uncontrolled sexual libido, absent in the more mythological text of HNT, is described in the "Discourses" with words which carry the metaphor of saturating water (*chan, yin*).

At the close of the discourse, the anonymous author relates that the king of the Chou went against his son's advice and adopted untraditional methods of flood control that were not sanctioned by divine authority. He observes that the royal house of Chou began to weaken and went into an irreversible decline.[66] In his orchestration of the negative aspects of the Kung Kung flood myth, the author links the motif of unbridled libido to that of

---

[64] *Kuo yü, Chou yü,* SPTK 3.6b.
[65] *Kuo yü, Chou yü,* SPTK 3.6b-7a.
[66] *Kuo yü, Chou yü,* SPTK 3.11a.

uncontrollable flood water, and makes Kung Kung's rejection of, and ultimate destruction of paradisial perfection serve as a historical parallel for the decline of the Chou dynasty. Moreover, by making the Chou prince serve as his mouthpiece, the author empowers the younger generation, and rewrites a powerful myth to validate his own concept of political and ethical theory and practice.

3c. The Kun Flood Myth Tradition

The Kun myth poses several methodological problems. In traditional Chinese historiography and in modern mythography it has been inextricably connected to the Yü flood myth.[67] To evaluate it on its independent merits, however, it must be prised away from its traditional association with Yü. The Kun flood myth, moreover, has been preserved within two distinct mythographic traditions. One may be termed the recognizably mythological tradition, represented by such texts as "Questions of Heaven," in which Kun performs typically mythic acts. The other is the pseudohistorical tradition which reconstructs mythic figures as quasi-historical personages enacting scenes exemplifying principles of political and moral philosophy. This tradition is represented by the *Ancient History* and *Discourses of the States.*

A third methodological problem lies in the nature of the texts relating the Kun myth. In the case of the flood narrative in "Questions of Heaven," the text of the passage is corrupt.[68] In the case of the pseudohistorical texts, it is a matter of the way their recon-

[67] For an example of the coalescence of the Kun and Yü myths, see Ku Chieh-kang and T'ung Shu-yeh, "The Primary and Evolved Legends of Kun and Yü Controlling the Flood," KSP, Vol. 7, Pt. 3, 159-72. For discussions of the independent Kun myth, see Yang K'uan, KSP, Vol. 7, Pt. 1, 216-17, and T'ung, KSP, Vol. 7, Pt. 1, 328-45. On the name, Kun, the consensus, derived from *Shuo-wen,* is that it signifies a large fish.

[68] For a translation, annotation, and discussion of the whole of this important mythological text, see David Hawkes, *The Songs of the South: An Anthology of Ancient Chinese Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets* (*Penguin Classics*), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985, 122-51. For a discussion of its mythographic significance, see Birrell, *op. cit.*, 26-7. In 1941, T'ang Lan (KSP, Vol. 7, Pt. 3, 316-19) attempted a reconstruction of this corrupt text of the Kun flood myth by rearranging and amalgamating separate passages in the "Questions of Heaven" text. While this resolved some textual and substantive problems, it generated others, and so I have left the original intact, unsatisfactory though its corrupt condition may be.

structed mythical figures and episodes alter the mythological content.

"Questions of Heaven" has preserved the earliest Kun flood myth, and dates from around the fourth century B.C. Significantly in terms of comparative mythology, the flood myth occurs immediately after the opening cosmogonic passages. This prestige placement implies that, for the author, the figure of Kun represented a potent heroic concept. The Kun flood myth narrative in this opening section is interrupted by several passages relating myths of the wonders of the world, the land of immortality, a solar myth, and the Yü mating myth. The two narratives appear below, stripped of the intervening passages.

> If Kun could not be entrusted with controlling the flood, why did they all recommend him? They all said, "Why be anxious about it? Why not try him out and let him perform [the task]?" When the owl carried [it] in its beak, and the giant turtle dragged its tail, why did Kun obey them? If he completed his task according to His wishes, why did God punish him for this? For a long while he was exposed on Feather Mountain. Why did he not decompose for three years? Lord Yü issued from Kun's belly. How did he [Kun] metamorphose?
>
> He [Kun] turned into a yellow bear. How did the shamans restore him to life?[69]

---

[69] *Ch'u Tz'u, T'ien wen*, SPTK 3.5b-6b, 3.17a. "They all said ...": *cf.* this section with *Shang shu, Yao tien*, SPPY 2.11b-12a, see below, p. 238-39. "owl," "turtle": these motifs of divine aid through supernatural creatures suggest that they assisted by the bird carrying beakfuls of mud (or magic soil), and by the turtle marking a passage through the flood with its tail. "decompose" (*shih>fu*): following the gloss of Kuo P'u (A.D. 276-324) on a parallel passage in SHC, *Hai nei ching* (Classic of Within-the-Seas), SPPY 18.9a, citing *K'ai hsien* to read *shih* as *fu*, "decompose." "issued from Kun's belly" (*Po Yü pi>fu Kun*): the original wording does not make sense: "Lord Yü was perverse (*pi*) with Kun." Wang I explicates the line as "He [Kun] gave birth to Yü." A parallel myth narrative in SHC, *loc. cit.*, has "Kun again (or, in turn) gave birth to Yü" (*Kun fu sheng Yü*). In his commentary on the SHC passage, Hao I-hsing (1757-1825) cites our *T'ien wen* passage, but amends the line to: "Lord Yü was bellied by Kun" (*Po Yü fu Kun*). I have amended the line following Wang and Hao. "Yellow bear" *(huang hsiung)*: the variant motif, *nai*, occurs in a reference to the Kun metamorphosis myth in *Tso chuan, Chao kung* 7th Year, SPPY 16.6a, for which Hung Liang-chi (1746-1809) provides the pronunciation, *nu+lai>nai*, and the gloss, "like a three-legged giant turtle;" *nai* also occurs in the account of the same Kun myth in *Kuo yü, Chin yü,* Pt. 8, SPTK 14.14b, which the earliest commentator, Wei Chao (204-273) glosses as: "the *nai* is like a bear (*hsiung*);" (the identification of the *hsiung* is complicated by Wang Yi's gloss of it as a beast, and Hung Hsing-tsu's (1070-1135) as: "shaped like a large hog," in *Ch'u Tz'u, T'ien wen*, SPTK 3.10b-11a); a third variant, "yellow dragon," occurs in Kuo P'u's commentary to the aforementioned

If the interrogative formulae of these passages are converted into statements, the skeleton of a narrative emerges: a flood threatens human society; a group of lesser gods or semi-divine humans urges God to depute Kun, as the best among them, to control the deluge; God so commands Kun, but expresses anxiety about the popular choice; creatures with divine knowledge of the sky (owl) and water (turtle) aid the hero Kun in his labours; Kun acquires the means of controlling the flood, but it involves the crime of theft from God;[70] for this sacrilege, God condemns Kun to death by ritual exposure;[71] though Kun died, his body was miraculously incorrupt; Yü was born by parthenogenesis from Kun's belly; Kun metamorphosed into an animal after shamans resurrected him.[72]

Since the interrogative format of the text poses problems of substantive content, it might be useful to note two texts which appear to suggest parallel myths. The first occurs in the "Canon of Yao," and it forms an intertextual reference to the opening section of the narrative from "Questions of Heaven" cited above. The second occurs in the "Classic of Within-the-Seas," Chapter Eighteen of the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, and it concerns the method Kun used to control the flood.

> They all said, "Oh, Kun is the one!".... The [Four] Peaks said, "He is extraordinary! Try him out and, if he is fit for [the task], then let it be him."[73]

> Floodwater swelled up to the sky. Kun stole God's breathing-soil so as to stop up the flooding waters. But he did not wait for God's official permission. God ordered Chu Yung to kill Kun on the approaches to Feather Mountain.[74]

SHC passage (SPPY 18.9a), citing the *K'ai hsien* again. For parallels of parthenogenesis and metamorphosis, see Birrell, *id.*, 248, 189-200.

[70] There are several versions of Kun's crimes; he is said to have reacted like a maddened animal and raised rebellion against Yao when the latter failed to reward him with the title, *San kung* (Three Dukes), recorded in *Lü-shih ch'un-ch'iu*, SPPY 20/6.12b-13a; he is also said to have stolen God's magic soil, SHC, *Hai nei ching*, SPPY 18.8b, and HNT, *Ti hsing hsün* (Instruction on earthly formations), SPPY 4.2b.

[71] The cases of ritual exposure cited by Edward H. Schafer in "Ritual Exposure in Ancient China," HJAS 14 (1951): 130-84, refer to the rainmaking ritual during a drought, that is, sympathetic magic, rather than ritual punishment; moreover, Schafer does not mention the Kun myth. For a unique fragment on Kun's divinity, see *Mo Tzu, Shang hsien* (Honouring the worthy), SPPY 2.8a: "Such was Lord Kun, the first-born son of God."

[72] See n. 69 above.

[73] *Shang shu chu shu, Yao tien*, SPPY 2.11b-12a.

[74] SHC, *Hai nei ching*, SPPY 18.8b-9a. "breathing-soil" (*hsi-jang*): Kuo P'u glosses this as: "Soil which grows spontaneously and goes on breathing for infin-

These mythological accounts of the Kun flood myth are firmly placed in the context of divine beings and the suprahuman hero. Kun's roles are polyfunctional. He is the leader chosen by his peers to deal with a world catastrophe. He is the saviour figure who seeks to benefit humankind and rescue the world. He is also a trickster figure who steals God's magic soil. He is a hero who in the end falls from grace when he fails in his divine mission. He is, moreover, a victim who sacrifices his life in an act of divine retribution. The functions of Kun as saviour and sacrificial victim are central elements in his sympathetic portrayal in "Questions of Heaven." Thus his role in this text, which relates the history of Ch'u from its divine origin in primordial creation to the acts of the historical Ch'u kings of the late sixth century B.C., is that of a primary god with a privileged place in a sacred narrative.

These accounts contrast with the versions in pseudohistorical texts. It has been noted earlier that such texts reconstructed mythology as a quasi-history of humankind. Thus God in the mythological texts becomes reconstructed as Yao or Shun, while Kun is subverted from the status of a failed victim and dying god to the degraded mythological status of a failed government official and a treacherous enemy of the state.

The first example of the degraded Kun flood myth occurs in the "Canon of Yao." Its mode of presentation is not so much narrative as dramatic, with several dramatis personae, dialogue, and monologue. The context is a royal court, presided over by Yao, and attended by his minister, Four Peaks, besides Kun, Huan Tou, Tan Chu (Yao's own disinherited son), Kung Kung, and unidentified attendants or officials. The dramatic mode conveys the following plot: a flood threatens the world, and Kun is chosen to quell it. Yao has misgivings, and charges Kun with three crimes against the state: subversion, bad conduct, and unfiliality.

> The Sovereign Lord [*Ti*=Yao] said, "Oh, Four Peaks! Gushing, rushing flood waters are causing damage everywhere. In a sweeping sway they ring the mountains and overtop the hills; surging, surging they swell up to the sky. Down here below the people groan from it. Is there someone whom I could command to control it? They all said, "Oh, Kun is the one!" The Sovereign Lord said, "Oh no! He is subversive. He goes against my orders, and he is de-

---

ity" (SHC, SPPY 18.8b). For a summary of the Chinese terms for this motif, see Ku and T'ung, "The Primary and Evolved Legends," 160. For translations of these terms, see Birrell, *op. cit.*, 80. The motif is listed as "D935. Magic earth (soil)," in *Motif-Index*, Vol. 2, 110. "Chu Yung": a fire god.

> stroying his own clan." The [Four] Peaks said, "He is extraordinary! Try him out and, if he is fit for [the task], then let it be him." The Sovereign Lord said [to Kun], "Go forth! Attend to your duty." But nine years passed and he did not complete his great work.[75]

Yao's accusations link Kun with Kung Kung in this text, and in the document which follows this, the "Canon of Shun," it is related that both are punished.

The second example is from "The Glorious Plan," another document in the *Ancient History*, dating from around the third century B.C. In this text Kun is again accused, but this time the charge is a crime against nature: "he disturbed the orderly system of the Five Elements." Thus Kun is linked again to Kung Kung, who is accused of the same crime in "Discourses of Chou." The context of our second example is a pseudohistorical dialogue between King Wu of the Chou and the Prince of Chi on the mystery of Heaven's unchanging order. King Wu was the recent conqueror of the tyrannical last ruler of the Shang, and the prince was a premier Shang nobleman who had opposed the tyrant's policies and was rewarded by the Chou conqueror.

> The Prince of Chi then spoke, saying, "I have heard that in former times Kun banked up the flooding waters, and so he disturbed the orderly system of the Five Elements. Then God (*Ti*) thundered with rage and refused to bestow upon him the 'Glorious Plan' in its nine fields [of knowledge]. The normal relationships were destroyed. As for Kun, he was executed and he died.[76]

---

[75] *Shang shu, Yao tien*, SPPY 2.11b-12a. Note that the vague linkage of Kung Kung with the Kun flood account in the *Yao tien* is developed in the *Shun tien* with their punishment by Shun (*Shang shu*, SPPY 3.8b). For a discussion of the link between these two mythical figures, see T'ung Shu-yeh, KSP, Vol. 7, Pt. 1, 329-45. "Sovereign Lord" (*Ti*): in the historicizing texts, the demythologized rulers, Yao and Shun, are given the title, *Ti*, signifying an idealized earthly ruler; on the other hand, in the same classic, God is also referred to as *Ti* (and also as *T'ien*, Heaven), for example, in the *Hung fan* chapter, *Shang shu*, SPPY 12.2a. In the late Chou (*ca.* 300 B.C.), the sacred titles, *Ti* and *Huang*, had not yet been fully desacralized; but by the Ch'in-Han era (*ca.* 200 B.C.), human rulers acquired these as imperial titles. Since the *Shang shu* text dates from the late Chou and also contains conscious archaizing rhetoric, I have translated *Ti* in respect of Yao and Shun as "Sovereign Lord."

[76] *Shang shu, Hung fan*, SPPY 12.2a. King Wu of the Chou was the recent conqueror (trad. 1122 B.C.) of the Shang dynasty. The Prince of Chi was a premier nobleman of the Shang. In the reign of the last Shang ruler, King Chou, the prince had opposed King Chou's policies, and so, after the Chou conquest, the prince was rewarded by King Wu. According to tradition, the prince gave the "Glorious Plan" of the universe to King Wu; see James Legge, trans., *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Confucianism*, Pt. 1, *The Shû king* (*Sacred Books of the*

A dual role reversal is apparent here. Yao of the "Canon of Yao" text becomes "God," while Kun, the dying god, is desacralized and transposed to the role of a common criminal.

The third example occurs in the "Discourses of Chou." Here the link between Kun and Kung Kung is unequivocal. Both are charged with giving free rein to their unnatural libido and of obstructing the natural courses of water. Note that in this version, Kun is executed not by God but by Yao.

> In the era of Yü [=Shun], Kun, the Lord of Ch'ung, gave free rein to his libido and took it upon himself to continue in the errors of Kung Kung. Therefore, Yao executed him on Feather Mountain.[77]

Thus it becomes clear from these three examples from pseudo-historical texts that in the humanizing, historicizing reconstructions, Kun's role is consistently presented as that of an enemy of the state, a sexual pervert, and someone who damages the orderly system of nature. When this mode of presentation is compared with the mythological texts, it would appear that a deliberate strategy operates in the *Ancient History* and the *Discourses of the State* to discredit Kun by criminalizing, smearing, and defaming him, in order to destroy his potent image as a hero and to degrade his mythic status.

Implicit in the mythological tradition of the Kun flood account is a motif common to other mythologies worldwide. That is, a supreme deity is able to envisage the total destruction of the world, rather than permit a divine substance to be used to restore

---

East, 3), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879, 137-38. As Peter Bol has noted, the *Hung fan* follows the format of "outline over argumentation," evidenced by its series of numbered lists, Bol, *Review, T'oung Pao* 80.1-3 (1994): 173.

[77] *Kuo yü, Chou yü*, SPTK 3.7a. Shun's title, Yu Yü, literally means "in possession of Yü," a mythological region. Kun's title, Lord of Ch'ung, only occurs in this text; but the placename appears in the earlier text, *Classic of Poetry*, poem no. 244, and is later identified as a place in the region of modern Shensi. "Feather Mountain" (*Yü-shan*): a mythological place variously sited by traditional writers; it may have been so named from a perennial moulting-place of flocks of birds, and thus became a symbol of regeneration. "executed" (*chi*): André d'Hormon and Rémi Mathieu have erroneously translated *chi* as perpetual exile, although in their textual note they refer to the basic meaning of *chi* as "put to death"; d'Hormon and Mathieu, *Guoyu, Propos sur les Principautés*, Vol. 1, *Zhouyu* (*Mémoires de l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises*, 25.1), Paris: Collège de France, 1985, 284, 293-94, n. 20; Karlgren also rejects *chi*=exile here, for "killed," "Legends and Cults," 249, and n. 1.

it.[78] Kun's mythic role may also be seen as an attempt to mediate between god and humankind in order to ensure the continuation of the world and the human race.

3d. The Yü Flood Myth Tradition

It should be stated at the outset that the abundance of textual data on the Yü flood myth would provide ample material for a two-volume monograph of collated texts, their analysis, and annotation.[79] Suffice it to present here a selection of the most representative narratives from five texts.

Of all the mythical figures associated with a world deluge Yü is the earliest in the textual tradition.[80] As Ku Chieh-kang and others have shown, the *Classic of Poetry*, datable no later than *ca.* 600 B.C., cites six references to Yü in as many poems.[81] In this early text, the polyfunctionality of the mythical figure of Yü is already evident. He is most frequently referred to as an agricultural deity, a function he shares with the grain god, Hou Chi, but he is mentioned only once as a deity who controlled the flood. Yü is more exactly described in this text as the god who demarcated all the earth's land, the god of tilling, and the god who regulated water courses and so ended the world deluge.

The classical texts in general not only relate the major Yü flood myth in fairly consistent narratives, but they also contain numer-

---

[78] For parallel examples of the mythologem of a deity who wills the total destruction of the world, see Frymer-Kensky, "The Atrahasis Epic," 64, and Fernando Horcasitas, "An Analysis of the Deluge Myth in Mesoamerica," 183, in Dundes, ed., *The Flood Myth*.

[79] For a survey of the Yü myth narratives, see Ku Chieh-kang, KSP, Vol. 1, Pt. 1, 106-34; T'ung Shu-yeh, KSP, Vol. 7, Pt. 1, 353-65; Ku and T'ung, KSP, Vol. 7, Pt. 3, 142-95; Chang Chen-li, *Chung-yuan ku-tien shen-hua*, 209-36: Karlgren, "Legends and Cults," 207-311, passim; Mathieu, "Yu Le Grand et le mythe du Déluge," 162-90; and Birrell, *id.*, 146-59. On the meaning of the graph, Yü, there is a consensus, deriving from *Shuo-wen*, that it denotes a reptile (*ch'ung*); the radical, *jou*, of the graph for Yü means an animal's paw-print.

[80] Ku, KSP, Vol. 1, Pt. 1, 106.

[81] Ku, *loc. cit.*, cites the poem nos. 210, 261, and 300 (which refer to Yü's function as an agricultural deity), nos. 244 and 305 (which allude to the mythical traces of Yü), and no. 304 (Yü's demarcation of the earth). For annotated texts of these poems, see Ch'eng Chün-ying and Chiang Chien-yuan, eds., *Shih ching chu hsi* (An annotated explication of the *Classic of Poetry*), Peking: Chung-hua, 1991, 664, 902, 1010, 797, 1042, and 1034. See also Bernhard Karlgren, trans., *The Book of Odes*, Stockholm: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 1974 (same poem nos.).

ous versions. Moreover, several sub-plots emerge, such as the length of time Yü took to control the flood, the distances he travelled, and his sense of mission, which overrode family obligations and domestic pleasures. These all form what may be termed a cycle of narratives on the labours of Yü.

In such a wealth of textual mythological data it is usual to find discrepancies which create ambiguities in the representation of a mythical figure. Such ambiguities are to be found in the mythic accounts of Kun, as we have seen, and also with Yi, who saved humankind from a world conflagration. It is a unique phenomenon of the Yü flood myths, however, that a uniformity of presentation is evident. Yü's role is consistently that of the exemplary and successful hero. It might be hypothesized in this connection that the elaboration of the Kun/Yü nexus of flood myth narratives serves as a rationale to confirm their binary opposition as the failure and the successful hero. It might be further hypothesized that the process of degrading the myth of the popular Ch'u hero, Kun, was a prerequisite to establishing the orthodoxy of the figure of Yü in ancient Chinese culture.

"Questions of Heaven" is one of the earliest texts to relate the Yü flood myth narrative. Whereas the *Classic of Poetry* projected Yü alone, or with the grain god, Hou Chi, the Ch'u text is one of the first to link the Kun flood myth to that of Yü. In fact, the Yü narrative follows on directly from the Kun myth, and emerges organically from the latter.

> Lord Yü issued from Kun's belly. How did he [Kun] metamorphose? Yü inherited his predecessor's great task and he went on to complete his late father's achievements. How did he continue the task that had earlier been in progress, and in what way was his project different? The flooding springs at their lowest deeps—how did he fill them in? The corners of the earth nine fathoms deep—how did he bank them up? Responding Dragon of the rivers and seas, what limits did he [?Yü] reach and where did he pass? What plan did Kun devise, and how did Yü succeed?[82]

[82] *Ch'u Tz'u, T'ien wen,* SPTK 3.6b-7b. "Kun's belly": see n. 69 above. "metamorphose": for textual variants, see n. 69 above. "nine fathoms deep" (*chiu tse*): in his supplementary commentary, Hung Hsing-tsu cites different sources to indicate that this phrase should be taken to mean the nine *tse* measurements between high and low land, or, three classes of land; if, however, the text is reexamined, it will be seen that the previous line about water volume parallels this line about land area, thus I have inclined toward Hung's first option, even though Wang Yi takes *chiu tse* to mean the nine grades of the Nine Provinces (*Ch'u Tz'u,* SPTK 3.7a). "Responding Dragon": see n. 35 above.

Yü's parthenogenesis marks him at the start of this narrative as a figure set apart by miraculous birth. As Lord Raglan has shown, this motif is one of the traits of the hero.[83] This passage also confirms Yü as the chosen one, whom a divine creature, Responding Dragon, aids in his heroic labours. Whereas Kun was assisted by the divine creatures, the owl and the turtle, their powers were inferior to Responding Dragon's, since the latter could draw off the inundating waters and so bring the flood to an end.

The fundamental question raised in this passage, to which the anonymous author returns, is the problem of the method of flood control. As Ku Chieh-kang and T'ung Shu-yeh have pointed out, there are contradictions here between the idea that Kun did complete the flood control work (his "achievements") and Yü's need to "continue the task," and between the idea that Yü followed his father's method (he "inherited his predecessor's great task"), yet had a different method ("why was Yü's project different?").[84] Due to the literary format of its riddling questions, the text does not resolve these questions. Yet the clumsiness and corrupt state of the text suggest that the author himself, or a redactor, was puzzled by the verbal inconsistencies. What the text does make clear is that Yü was the successful flood control hero.

Authors of other texts have attempted to resolve some of these textual inconsistencies. Both HNT and *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, for example, which postdate "Questions of Heaven" by two and three centuries, respectively, agree that Yü succeeded through divine agency, by using God's divine cosmos-restoring soil, and by receiving God's blessing, thus becoming the chosen one of God. The first passage is from HNT and follows on from the myth of Yü measuring the world.

> Yü then stopped up the flooding waters with breathing-soil and these [infills] became famous mountains.[85]

The second passage is from the last section of the *Classic of Moun-*

---

[83] See the 22 motifs in the "pattern of the traditional hero" in Fitzroy Richard Somerset, Lord Raglan, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama*, London: Methuen, 1936, "Myth," Chapters 16-18, "The Hero," 178-208, especially 179-80.

[84] Ku and T'ung, KSP, Vol. 7, Pt. 3, 161.

[85] HNT, *Ti hsing hsün*, SPPY 4.2b. *Ti*: Le Blanc notes that, according to *Shuo-wen*, this was an archaizing form of *ti*=earth, and that the term was traditionally invented by Shih Chou (*fl. ca.* 827 B.C.); Le Blanc and Mathieu, eds., *Mythe et philosophie*, 171, n. 1. The term, archaic *ti*, also occurs in *Ch'u Tz'u, T'ien wen*, SPTK 3.7b (see n. 58 above).

tains and Seas and follows on from Yü's miraculous birth.

> Floodwater swelled up to the sky. Kun stole God's breathing-soil so as to stop up the flooding waters. But he did not wait for God's official permission. God ordered Chu Yung to kill Kun on the approaches to Feather Mountain. Then God commanded Yü in the end to spread out the [breathing-] soil so as to restore order to the Nine Provinces.[86]

The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* draws to a close with these words. Both texts, therefore, may be seen to resolve the problem of the contradiction in the "Questions of Heaven" text, and they also give a special emphasis to the fact that Yü saved the world through the magic soil. All three texts belong to a recognizably mythological tradition, in the sense that they narrate the acts of the gods, and they all reiterate that the method Yü used to solve the problem of the flood was divine agency.

There is another tradition, however, which argues that Yü achieved this feat through his own resourcefulness, heroic endeavour, and devoted commitment, relying on human qualities rather than divine agency. An early expression of this tradition occurs in the *Mencius,* dating from around the fourth century B.C., in the form of two parallel passages relating the world deluge. One such passage appears in a long debate between Mencius and a disciple, Kung-tu Tzu. Mencius is defending the philosophical position that civilization has been in a state of decline since the Golden Age of Yü, the Duke of Chou, and on down to Confucius. In the course of his argument, he narrates the following flood myth.

> "The world has existed for such a long time, sometimes in a state of order, sometimes in disorder. In the time of Yao, the waters reversed their courses and flooded the central region. Snakes and dragons lived there, and the people had nowhere to settle. Those in the lowlands made nests; those in the high ground made cave-dwellings. The [*Ancient*] *History* says: 'The deluge of water is a warning to me!' By a 'deluge of water' it means 'flood water.' He ordered Yü to control it. Yü excavated the ground and channelled out to sea. He drove out the snakes and dragons and expelled them into the swamps. The water that passed through the land is what is now the Yangtze, Huai, Yellow, and Han rivers. Dangerous obstructions were removed. The birds and beasts that had harmed humans were eliminated. So in the end humans gained control of the plainland and inhabited it.[87]

---

[86] SHC, *Hai nei ching,* SPPY 18.8b-9a; this chapter dates *ca.* 1st cent. A.D. This mythic narrative forms the concluding part of the classic, and belongs to a section devoted to divine genealogies, hence the myth of Yü's birth from Kun. For an annotated translation of the classic, see Rémi Mathieu, *Étude sur la mythologie et l'ethnologie de la Chine ancienne,* 2 vols. (*Mémoires de l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises,* 22.1-2), Paris: Collège de France, 1983, Vol. 1, 645-53.

[87] *Meng Tzu cheng yi, T'eng Wen-kung* (Duke Wen of T'eng), SPPY 13.4a-5a. The

This Mencian narrative contains several key motifs which are common to many flood myths worldwide. First, the World Catastrophe of the flood is stated. Second, the motif of the Return to Primeval Chaos, in which human society is displaced by the animal kingdom. Third, the motif of the Regression of Human Society to Primitive Forms of Life. With the command to Yü there occurs the mytheme of a break between the prediluvial and postdiluvial eras, the quest to restore order out of chaos. Fourth, the motif of the Labours of the Hero, and the mytheme of the Second Beginning, or Re-creation of the World. Fifth, the postdiluvial themes of Human Survival, the Habitation and Cultivation of the Land, the Expulsion of Predatory Beasts, the Restoration of Human Society to its Dominant, Prediluvial Position.[88]

In contrast to the previous mythological texts, Yü's flood control method is said to be the hydraulic system. Yet the hydraulic method is not posited as the sole reason for Yü's success. It is based on Yü's innate knowledge and understanding of the principles of nature, which Mencius goes on to explore in another passage. Its context is a dialogue between Mencius and a reputed expert on water control, Po Kuei. Its theme is the unnatural versus "the natural", which Mencius terms the *Tao*.

> Po Kuei said, "Tan's [My] method of water control is superior to Yü's." Mencius said, "You are mistaken! Yü's method of water control constituted the *Tao* [natural way] of water. That is why Yü used the Four Seas for drainage. Now you use neighbouring states for your drainage. When water reverses its course it is called a 'deluge of water.' A 'deluge of water' is flood water, which is what the humane person detests. You are mistaken, sir!"[89]

In arguing for the efficacy of Yü's hydraulic method, Mencius rests his case on three points: 1) that Yü understood the principle of the nature of water by conducting it out to sea; 2) that Yü's aim was to rescue humankind from the flood; and 3) that Yü was a moral exemplar. The central motif in both these dialogues from *Mencius* is that of reversal; "the waters reversed their courses," and "When water reverses its courses." The concept of reversal is re-

---

citation from the *Ancient History* is from a non-extant passage. For a translation of the parallel flood myth passage, see D.C. Lau, *Mencius* (*Penguin Classics*), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970, 102. For a perceptive study of both Mencian passages, see S.F. Teiser, "Engulfing the Bounds of Order: The Myth of the Great Flood in *Mencius*," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 13-14 (1985/86), *Symposium Issue: Myth and Symbol in Chinese Tradition*, 15-43.

[88] For similar motifs in the parallel Mencian passage, see Teiser, *op. cit.*, 20-4.

[89] *Meng Tzu, Kao Tzu*, SPPY 25.12a.

lated to the idea of the unnatural; its polarity is the concept of the natural ordained in primordial creation, or the *Tao*.

The motif of Yü's sense of moral mission is elaborated in the second of the two parallel passages on the flood myth in *Mencius*, the context of which is a long dialogue between Mencius and a follower of the Primitive Agronomists about the division of labour. Mencius relates that Yü was occupied in flood control work for eight years, and although he passed by the gates of his home, he did not enter because he had not completed his task. A similar episode is related by Shih Tzu (*ca.* fourth cent. B.C.), who adds the graphic detail of Yü's physical deterioration during his labours:

> For ten years he did not visit his home, and no nails grew on his hands, no hair grew on his shanks. He caught an illness that made his body shrivel in half, so that when he walked he could not [lift one leg] past the other, and people called it "the Yü walk."[90]

Colourful though this vignette may be, neither it, nor the Mencian reference should be allowed to obscure its implicit motif of sexual restraint, which the euphemism of passing by one's gates or not visiting home almost disguises. This motif resonates with that of uncontrolled sexual libido attached to the mythical figures of Kun and Kung Kung in the pseudohistorical texts.

The idealized theme of Yü's natural method of flood control is developed with utopian rhetoric in "The Tribute of Yü" chapter of *Ancient History*. This is a long and complex document, which combines a reconstructed account of an ancient tribute system, a descriptive report on the peoples living in the frontier regions of China, and an historicized version of Yü's flood control work. What follows are a few excerpts which underscore the utopian aspects of the text.

> Yü *settled* the high mountains and the great rivers.
>
> The Nine Ho branches were *conducted.*
>
> The Nine Chiang [rivers] were greatly *regulated.*
>
> The Ch'i and Tsu [riversl were *made to follow* their courses.
>
> The Nine Provinces were *equalized* ... and the Four Seas were *contained in equal measure.*[91]

Two antithetical, yet complementary rhetorical systems are ex-

[90] *Shih Tzu*, SPPY 1.16b. The citation from *Mencius* is: *Meng Tzu, T'eng Wen-kung*, SPPY 11.7a.

[91] *Shang shu, Yü kung*, SPPY 6.1b, 4b, 8b, 11b, 16b.

pressed in these excerpts. One centres on the principle of coercion, the other on uniformity. Against the image of Yü compelling the flood waters to flow in their proper courses is that of Yü shaping the natural world into a uniform and unified system. The rhetoric of control and compulsion occurs in such words as "regulated;" the rhetoric of harmony occurs in words like "equalized" and "in equal measure."[92] The utopian ideal can only be achieved by force and by uniformity.

Similar themes occur in "The Glorious Plan" chapter of the *Ancient History*. The principle of the natural method of water management is posited through the polarization of the figures of Kun and Yü, where Kun is projected as one who violates the preordained system of nature. In the passage that follows this is defined as *ch'en ch'i wu hsing*, "the system of the Five Elements," that is, the natural elements of water, fire, wood, metal, and earth, which in their seasonal calibrations make the universe operate eufunctionally.[93] The calibrations are termed *i lun*, the "normal relationships." In this text God rewards Yü with the secret of ordering the world of nature and humankind. The Prince of Chi is speaking:

> "The normal relationships were destroyed. As for Kun, he was executed and he died. Then Yü succeeded him and he prospered. Then Heaven (*T'ien*) granted Yü 'The Glorious Plan' in its nine fields [of knowledge], and the normal relationships were set in order."[94]

The sub-text argues that whereas Kun committed a crime against nature, Yü respected nature and worked with the grain of the primordial design.

---

[92] Wolfgang Bauer was the first to identify utopian rhetoric in classical Chinese texts, when he examined such terms as *ch'i*, "make equal," *ho*, "harmony," *t'ung*, "equal," and *chün*, "level," denoting different utopian concepts of uniformity and a lack of distinctions. Although he did not cite these excerpts from *Shang shu, Yü kung*, among his examples, they clearly fit his model; Bauer, *China and the Search for Happiness: Recurring Themes in Four Thousand Years of Chinese Cultural History*, translated from the German by Michael Shaw (Continuum Books), 1971, New York: Seabury, 1976, 21-34.

[93] This is the sequence presented in "The Glorious Plan," but the sequence and correlations of the elements vary among classical authors. For a discussion of the *Wu hsing* (Five Elements) system, see Fung, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 7-30, especially 13-5. Tung Chung-shu formulated these naturalistic concepts into an elaborate system of natural, moral, and political philsophy in the early Han; see Fung, *id.*, 16-87.

[94] *Shang shu, Hung fan,* SPPY 12.2a. For the context to this passage, see n. 76 above.

The last text which narrates the Yü flood myth has already been examined in connection with its accounts of the Kung Kung and Kun flood myths. It is noteworthy that the anonymous author of the text, "Discourses of Chou," relates the three flood myths sequentially in the context of one and the same world deluge. The first two mythic narratives were brief, but the Yü flood myth is an extended narrative.

The sophisticated narrative of the Yü flood myth in the "Discourses" introduces complex themes in a new and subtle way. It opens with the statement that Yü learned from the errors of his predecessors, Kung Kung and Kun. In particular, Yü did not abandon himself to lustful desire. His method of flood control was based on the archetype of Heaven and earth; consequently, it is related, the creative principles of the universe were in harmony and malign spirits did not destroy Yü's work. Moreover, he devised a method which took into consideration the necessary balance between human society and the animal kingdom. By adhering to the archetype of Heaven and earth, Yü was able to restore the cosmos. He maintained the line of communication between Heaven, earth, and humankind, thus ensuring the survival of the natural world and the propagation of the species. In the text, a clear distinction is drawn between natural procreation and "unnatural" libido. The eufunctional procreative act is presented as analogous to the regeneration of the cosmos, while the dysfunctional sexual act is made analogous to the unnatural occurrence of the deluge. Yü is rewarded by God, called August Heaven, for bringing the daemon under control, which had manifested itself in geophysical malformations, sexual deviance, and malign spiritual emanations. The crown prince of the Chou, Prince Chin, is speaking:

> After them [Kung Kung and Kun] there was Lord Yü. He pondered in his heart the erroneous methods of his predecessors, and set up a reform of their measures and their system. He took Heaven as his model and earth as his form. He made a judicious survey of every type of operating principle. He made the people serve as his standard for them, and also considered their effect on living animals. The descendants of Kung [Kung] and the Four Peaks assisted him. He left the high ground high and the low ground low. He let the rivers flow and made a passage through barriers. He concentrated water masses together so as to make all creatures grow luxuriant. He earthed up high the nine mountains and cut openings for the nine rivers. He banked up the nine marshes and gave the nine fecund marshlands over to rich cultivation. He made wider openings for the nine water sources. He settled the nine hinterlands and made them habitable. He made interconnecting ducts out to

> the Four Seas. Therefore, in the skies there were no hidden remnants of Yin, while on earth there were no scattered remnants of Yang. Water contained no heavy primal matter (*ch'i*); fire contained no ethereal blaze. The deities worked no mischief, and none of the people had lustful desires. The seasons did not reverse their due sequence. No creature harmed growing things.
>
> August Heaven (*Huang T'ien*) was pleased with this, and gave him the whole world as a reward. He conferred on him the name Ssu, with the clan title "Possessor of the Hsia," which means that through his singular good fortune he had been able to make all living things fruitful and multiply.[95]

In the final section of this "Discourse," the crown prince voices a warning that if King Ling of the Chou were to persist in contravening the way of Heaven and going against the grain of nature by adopting the wrong policy of flood control—that is, setting up flood barriers—it would lead to ruin. The author duly notes that the king ignored the arguments of the crown prince and ordered that the flood was to be dealt with by the construction of flood barriers. The author concludes with the dour observation that the Royal House of Chou went into an irreversible decline, which he demonstrates through the analogue of gross sexual misconduct at the Chou court and the raging flood.[96]

At this juncture, it is pertinent to refer briefly to the concept of

---

[95] *Kuo yü, Chou yü*, SPTK 3.7a-8a. Wei Chao explicates obscure parts of this passage by referring to other mythic narratives; for example, "He ... made a passage through barriers" is explained through the Yü myth of Dragon Gate (see Birrell, *op. cit.*, 147-48). "Kung [Kung] and the Four Peaks": the "Discourses of Chou" author creates a neo-myth here, by making later descendants of the figures mentioned in *Shang shu, Yao tien*, serve as Yü's assistants (allowing a time-span between Yao and Yü). "nine": the nonary symbolism reflects the divine model of heaven, with its nine layers or fields. "All creatures": one of the utopian motifs is the transformation of wild animals and birds into tame creatures that stop attacking humans; the motif occurs in the Nü Kua flood myth (recorded in HNT, SPPY 6.7b; see p. 224). "Water", "fire": this dualism occurs in a cosmogonic passage in HNT, *T'ien wen*, SPPY 3.1a; the "Discourses" text suggests that after Yü's hydraulic work, the elements returned to their creational state of perfection. "deities worked no mischief": for a similar passage in the *Discourses of the States*, "Discourses of Ch'u," which narrates the relationship between spirits and humans, see *Kuo yü, Ch'u yü*, SPTK 18.1a-3a, trans. Birrell, *op. cit.*, 94-5.

[96] *Kuo yü, Chou yü*, SPTK 3.11a. For a translation and discussion (from a cosmological perspective) of this section of the *Discourses*, see James A. Hart, "The Speech of Prince Chin: A Study of Early Chinese Cosmology," in Henry Rosemont, Jr., ed., *Explorations in Early Chinese Cosmology* (*Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Thematic Studies*, 50.2), Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1984, 35-65.

"laws of nature" and examine its connection to the paradigm of the natural versus the unnatural and the motif of the paradisial archetype. When this concept was discussed by Joseph Needham in 1956, he argued that it was alien to classical Chinese thought.[97] Derk Bodde debated the issue with Needham then, and more recently has developed his position, arguing that the concept existed as "a minority viewpoint."[98] Central to their conflicting conclusions was the argument that such a concept necessitated the idea of "a divine celestial lawgiver imposing ordinances on non-human Nature."[99]

In the "Discourses of Chou" text presented above, significant elements are present which may be said to fulfill Needham's stated requirement for the existence of the concept of "laws of nature" in classical writings. First, there is a personalized God, who punishes and rewards those He is displeased with and those He is pleased with. Second, although this deity does not appear to be "imposing ordinances on non-human Nature," Yü may be said to perform this function by mediating between God and the world. Thirdly, the concept of primordial creation is implicit in the archetypal model of Heaven and earth presented in this and other texts. It will be recalled that the cosmogonic moment in classical Chinese thought is expressed through the myth of the separation of sky and earth. These two entities, sky and earth, or Heaven and earth, it is understood, remain endowed with the sacral potency of the act of creation at the beginning of the world. It is this sacral creational authority that Yü turns to when he seeks divine sanction and a sacred archetype as he labours to save the world from the flood.

Thus, although Needham's criteria are not fulfilled insofar as the classical Chinese concepts and terms do not conform to Western theological or philosophical norms, they are met within the contextual and terminological parameters of such classical texts as the "Discourses" and "The Glorious Plan." The existence of an

---

[97] Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. 2, *History of Scientific Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956, Pt. 18, "Human Law and the Laws of Nature in China and the West," 518-83.

[98] Derk Bodde, *Chinese Thought, Society, and Science: The Intellectual and Social Background of Science and Technology in Pre-modern China*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991, 332-45 (a revised version of articles in HJAS 39.1, 1979: 139-55, and HJAS 20, 1957: 709-27); Bodde cites eight classical passages which express "the embryonic beginning of 'laws of nature,'" *Chinese Thought*, 344.

[99] Needham, *op. cit.*, 583.

embryonic concept of "laws of nature" in these and other texts serves to reinforce Bodde's conclusion that "a minority viewpoint also exists," in conjunction with Needham's "dominant viewpoint."

To conclude this discussion of the Yü flood myth, when the more recognizably mythological texts are compared with the pseudohistorical texts in their treatment of this mythic tradition, it will be seen that while the former propose that Yü was successful through divine agency and the latter through human endeavour, both sets of texts promote him as the all-conquering hero. While the mythological texts do not interject moral issues into the narrative, the pseudohistorical texts make the ethical element the *sine qua non* of Yü's ultimate success. Overarching the themes dealt with by the latter texts is the recurring argument that his adherence to the sacral archetype enabled Yü to halt the threat of a return to chaos.

4. Contributory Factors in the Ascendancy of the Yü Flood Myth Tradition

At first, the four flood myth traditions reviewed here were more or less of equal value and significance during the period from the fourth to the second century B.C., with the Yü myth, perhaps for reasons of its antiquity, occupying a position of *primus inter pares*. By the first century B.C., however, the Yü tradition gained in ascendancy over the Nü Kua, Kung Kung, and Kun traditions, to the extent that, for various reasons, their role and function in flood mythology gradually became submerged. The primary reasons for this phenomenon, which are partly implicit in the foregoing discussion, will now be proposed.

Taking the Nü Kua tradition first, it has been shown that only one textual version of this flood myth was preserved. Moreover, its mythic value was severely compromised by its appropriation by an author of the Taoist persuasion, who subverted the authority and significance of the female deity in her cosmogonic function. In the process, her soteriological role in restoring the cosmos and rescuing humankind from both a world conflagration and a world flood was undermined. This diminution of her role and the degrading of her mythic function continued during the period up to A.D. 220 with her mythopoeic pairing with the male deity, Fu Hsi, and with her fallacious linkage with the Kung Kung flood myth.[100]

---

[100] For the connection of Nü Kua with Fu Hsi, see Loewe, *Ways to Paradise,* 57-9; for the linkage of Nü Kua with Kung Kung, see n. 45 above.

The three main Kung Kung versions uniformly cast him in the role of the marplot. The *Kuan Tzu* is the only text to project this figure impartially and neutrally. In HNT he is censured for his demonic fury and for challenging the sky god. In the "Discourses" he is condemned for moral depravity and for contravening the primordial cosmic design. In the *Ancient History*, he is branded as a subversive at the court of Yao. Moreover, other texts associated with Kung Kung relate how his assistant, Hsiang Liu, killed all living things with his poisonous touch.[101] Thus Kung Kung's function as the marplot may be viewed in terms of the sky, the soil, and humankind, from his mythic identification with Chuan Hsü, Hsiang Liu, and the cause of the flood itself. This was a consistent mythic representation which became fixed in the textual and cultural tradition. Consequently, his mythic potential ossified.

Although the mythic figure of Kun is portrayed in numerous versions as a failure, he was treated sympathetically by the upholders of the cultural tradition of Ch'u, as this was presented in "Questions of Heaven," and also by the transmitters of the mythological tradition. This was for two reasons. First, he was identified with an altruistic desire to save humans from the world catastrophe of the flood; and second, because he expiated his selfless act by being put to death as a criminal on a mountain in the wilderness. In the moralizing versions of the pseudohistorical texts, Kun's myth was degraded to a paradigm of sexual depravity, and of rebellion against the state. It is mainly because he failed to control the world flood, however, that his myth was further degraded to the status of an offence against nature. Finally, he became eclipsed by the figure of Yü and was eliminated as a key player in deluge mythology.

By contrast, numerous factors in the narratives of the Yü flood myth contributed to its eventual supremacy. First, it was the earliest version in the textual, and later, the canonical tradition. Moreover, in the earliest text, the *Classic of Poetry*, which became a prestige canonical work, Yü was presented as a polyfunctional figure who was an agricultural deity, a demarcator of land into habitable and cultivated regions, and as a flood-queller.

In addition, Yü's eufunctional mythic role was unambiguous and consistent, compared with that of Kung Kung and Kun. Unlike the mythical figure, I, who saved the world from a conflagra-

[101] For the Hsiang Liu myth, see Birrell, *id.*, 148-51.

tion, Yü's soteriological function was not diminished by narratives of negative acts.[102]

Thus Yü was established as a benign, semi-divine saviour-figure in the primeval pantheon some two centuries prior to Nü Kua and Kun, in terms of the mythographic tradition, giving his soteriological role a greater ancestry than that of the latter.

Apart from the authority of antiquity, numerous traits mark Yü out as the stereotypical hero: miraculous birth, a father wrongfully killed, mission sanctioned (in some versions) by God, heroic labours involving extreme physical hardship, a public sense of duty greater than private concerns, bravery, virtuous conduct, and selfless endeavour on behalf of humankind.[103] Moreover, in some versions he was aided by divine creatures, or a secret plan. He worked with the design of sacral creation in his hydraulic labours. Above all, he was a success. The only comparable figure in respect of the latter trait is Nü Kua, but, as it was shown, her myth was degraded in favour of a Taoistic male-gendered hierarchy. Finally, the narratives reveal that Yü epitomizes the concept of a break between the prediluvial and the postdiluvial worlds. He is presented as a figure chosen by God to preside over a new creation, and a new order of society, inaugurating innovative concepts of government and politics.

Besides these factors inherent in the Yü flood myth narratives, there are more aspects of his role and function related in other myths which contribute to his ascendancy over the three figures of Nü Kua, Kung Kung, and Kun. These myths include the following major themes: Yü, the World-Measurer; Yü, the Maker of the Nine Cauldrons; Yü the Warrior, ridding the world of monsters; Yü's First Assembly of the Gods; Yü's Inauguration of the House of Hsia; and Yü's founding of the Hsia dynasty, the cornerstone of which was hereditary succession.[104]

---

[102] Birrell, *id.*, 138-43.

[103] Stith Thompson lists several of these heroic traits under "W0-W99 Favorable traits of character," *Motif-Index*, Vol. 5, [481].

[104] For the polyfunctionality of the mythical figure of Yü, see Birrell, *id.*, 146-58. For an insightful interpretation of the political symbolism of the myth of Yü and the Nine Cauldrons, see Chang Kwang-chih, *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983, 95-7. For an ingenious suggestion on the meaning of the title, *Hsia-hou* (Lord of the Hsia), as *Hsia-hou* (Lord of [the world] Down Below), see Yang K'uan, KSP, Vol. 7, Pt. 1, 295. For an illuminating discussion of Yü and the theme

Thus this mythical figure is seen to dominate the macrocosm, in terms of the world flood, and also the microcosm, in terms of human society. He occupies a privileged position as the protagonist of major myths at the apex of culture and civilization. Therefore, taking the Yü flood myth tradition in conjunction with all the major myths of Yü in the classical repertoire, it is evident that the Yü flood myth gradually superseded the other three traditions and evolved into the dominant, orthodox version of the deluge myth.

5. Major Concerns of the Classical Flood Myths

In the preceding sections I have presented nineteen main narratives (besides some supporting narratives) from eight pre-Han and early Han texts, which relate the flood myths of Nü Kua (1), Kung Kung (4), Kun (6), and Yü (8). The Nü Kua flood myth has been shown to be a little known account. The Kung Kung myth has been shown to have some interesting parallels with other world mythologies, and to have a version which is neutral in presentation compared with most negative versions of his myth. The Kun flood myth, examined in isolation from that of Yü, has revealed its uniquely independent motifs and themes. Having surveyed the motifs and themes integral to each flood myth tradition, I have suggested reasons why Yü's came to predominate. In this concluding section, I shall summarize the major concerns underlying the flood myth narratives.

During the past century of research on mythology worldwide, several types of interpretation have emerged. They are the literal, symbolic, anthropological, psychological, historical, and political. To these may be added the approaches of moral and natural philosophy, which may be applied to several classical Chinese texts. The most influential approach in recent times has been the anthropological, identified primarily with the concept of binary opposites elaborated by Lévi-Strauss.[105] This concept has prompted interpretations of the flood as the resurgence of chaos, the destruction of the cosmos, the supremacy of disorder over order,

---

of dynastic succession, see Sarah Allan, *The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legend in Early China*, San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1981, 55-76.

[105] Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Story of Asdiwal," translated from the French by Nicholas Mann, in Edmund Leach, ed., *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, 1967, London: Tavistock, 1968, 1-47.

and a lack of control versus control. While these polarities are valuable for explicating myth, other modes of interpretation and perception yield significant results.

Clearly, in a flood-prone culture such as that of the regions of the Yellow river and the Yangtze river, the literal interpretation need hardly be emphasized, and the literal success of flood control had and has a constant pragmatic value. Linked to the literal approach is the problem of judging whether the great deluge of which classical Chinese narratives speak was global or local. It is an issue which has emerged from Western theological debate on the historicity and literalness of the account of the flood in *Genesis* 6-9. Against this tradition, however, there exists the alternative definition proposed by Stith Thompson in his listing of the flood myth under the mythic motif, "World Catastrophe" as: "A1010. Deluge. Inundation of whole world or section." This definition implicitly accepts the possibility of either a global or a local flood as a major mythic motif or mytheme. In one sense, the issue may be anachronistic, and fallacious, since twentieth-century humans view "the world" from an entirely different perspective from those of several thousand years ago. Unaware of other continents and civilizations, the tellers of myth no doubt viewed their world as *the* world.

Insofar as the flood myth was a perennial topic for classical Chinese writers of all schools of thought, it may be interpreted as a strategy for debating other concerns, such as the lessons of history, the decline of civilization, standards of moral behaviour, social control, and political order. Thus, although the surface meaning of a philosophical text centred on the theme of a great primeval deluge, other underlying concerns are perceptible. So, some mythic accounts have as their underlying concern the method of flood control: was it by divine agency or human endeavour? Some accounts focus on the moral dimension of the person chosen to control the flood, thereby projecting him as a saviour and a leader; others ignore the moral aspects completely as irrelevant to such a practical problem. Besides the question of whether the chosen person should be a moral exemplar, some accounts implicitly suggest that leadership qualities of heroism and political subservience are prerequisites for flood control work. These underlying concerns are expressed through polarities such as divine:human, moral turpitude:moral exemplariness, unbridled libido:sexual restraint, subversion:loyalty, success:failure.

Most of the mythological texts gravitate toward a god-centred world, while the pseudohistorical texts relate the deluge myth from the standpoint of the humanistic ideal.

Another underlying concern of the flood myth narratives is a demonstrable divorce between the Old World and the New World. This is particularly apparent in the Nü Kua flood myth, where the dialectic between the prediluvial and the postdiluvial worlds generates a gender displacement. It is also apparent in the Kun myth, in the sense that the emergence of Yü serves to displace the potent local myth of Ch'u and ushers in a new world order. The theme of a break between the old world and the new is most apparent in the Yü flood myth, especially those texts written from a consciously historical standpoint, such as the *Mencius*, "The Glorious Plan," and the "Discourses of Chou." After Yü has successfully brought the flood under control, he presides over a new world order: he is given the first family name, a new clan name, and a pristine dynasty, the Hsia, which was perceived to constitute the fountainhead of the history of the Chinese people.

In contrast to this underlying concern with a desire for a new world order, some mythic narratives have as their underlying concern the simple restoration of the prediluvial condition, which is viewed as a primordial paradise.[106] In such narratives, several motifs interact with the dialectic of the flood: a sacral primordial world, the sacred endowment of all living things and geophysical forms, and the celestial-terrestrial archetype of sky and earth, or Heaven and Earth, embodying the potency of creationism. As Eliade put it: "...for archaic man, reality is a function of a celestial archetype."[107] Given the Chinese concept of creationism, the archetype must be both celestial and terrestrial. Thus the brave new world lies not in the future, but in the primordial past.

From the foregoing discussion, it will have been noted that many flood themes and motifs which are central to mythologies worldwide are absent from classical Chinese myth narratives of the flood. For example, there is little interest in causation, and no interest in the flood as divine retribution for human evil. That does not mean to say that there is no concept of guilt, crime, or punishment in the Chinese narratives. The myth of Kun shows that it is present. In general, however, the interventionist role of

[106] See n. 56.

[107] Eliade, *op. cit.*, 5.

a God-the-Creator is not of paramount importance, demonstrating that the Chinese narratives lack the concept of a close, personal relationship with a paternalistic God, such as is evident in the Hebraic and Greek traditions. Nor do the Chinese flood myths contain the drama of escape and survival which so colours the account of the Noachian deluge and the earlier Atrahasian deluge. These dramatic motifs are, however, conspicuously present in the accounts of a great flood among minority groups of modern China. When the classical Chinese narratives contain these motifs, such as in the two accounts in the *Mencius,* they are conveyed prosaically and so briefly as to be almost imperceptible.

In contrast, a motif which dominates the classical Chinese accounts is that of control of the flood water. In fact, as we have seen, the traditional term for the deluge myth is "Controlling the Flood," and it refers primarily, as it has been shown, to the Yü flood myth. Integral to this mythic motif is the ameliorative urge for order and control in a multiplicity of socio-cultural aspects, and the motif is usually expressed through polarities, such as cosmos:chaos, male:female, cultivation:wilderness, success:failure, and civilization:savagery. This mythic polarity indicates a mentalité in classical writings that privileges extremes. Thus the choices are posited as the extreme of chaos or the extreme of total control. The middle position of compromise, ambiguity, balance, or moderation is rarely sought or expressed. Thus it may be seen that the catastrophic event of a world deluge serves as an analogue for many diverse concepts at the social, moral, and political level in classical Chinese writings.

Glossary

Selected Terms and Mythic Names

chan 湛
Chen-jen chih Tao 眞人之道
ch'en ch'i wu hsing 陳其五行
chi (limit) 極
chi (kill) 殛
ch'i (equalize) 齊
ch'i (primal matter) 氣
chih shui 治水
Ch'ih Yu 蚩尤
ch'ing-chung 輕重
chiu tse 九則
chu (pillar) 柱
ch'u (butt) 觸
ch'u (occupy) 處
Chu Yung 祝融
chuan>shan 顓、善
Chuan Hsü 顓頊
Chuan min 顓民
ch'uan-shuo 傳說
chüeh jui 絕瑞
chün (level) 均
ch'ung 蟲
fou-yu hsiao-yao 浮游消搖
Fu Hsi 伏羲

Hao li 蒿里
ho 和
Hou Chi 后稷
Hsi, Hsi-che 昔、昔者
hsi-jang, hsi-t'u 息壤、息土
Hsia-hou (Lord of Down Below) 下后
Hsia-hou (Lord of the Hsia) 夏后
Hsiang Liu 相柳
hsün 訓
Huang (divinity) 皇
Huang ch'üan 黃泉
huang hsiung 黃熊
Huang lu 黃壚
huang lung (yellow dragon) 黃龍
Huang T'ien 皇天
Hung fan 洪範
hung shui 洪水
i lun 彝倫
jou 內
K'ang Hui 康回
Kao Hsin 高辛
*Kiung *Kung 共工
ku-shih 故事
Kun 鯀、鰥
Kun fu sheng Yü 鰥復生禹
**kung* (merit) 功
**kung*, **kiung* (respectful) 恭
Kung Kung 共工
Kung-kung shui kuan ming 共工水官名
K'ung-sang 空桑
lo t'u 雒圖
lu 蘆
nai 能
nu+lai>nai 奴、來、能
Nü Kua 女媧
o-hao 莪蒿
o>lo 莪、雒
pi 愎
Po Yü fu Kun 伯禹腹鯀
Po Yü pi>fu Kun 伯禹愎、腹鯀
Pu-chou chih shan 不周之山
San kang 三綱
San kung 三公
shan 善
shen-hua 神話
shih>fu 施、腐
Shun 舜
shuo 說
ssu chi 四極
Ta k'uai 大塊
ta shui 大水
T'ai Hao 太皞
T'ai Tsu 太祖
Tang X chih shih 當×之時
Tao 道
Ti 帝
ti (archaic) 墜 (for *ti* 地)
Ti K'u 帝嚳
T'ien 天
t'ien chu 天柱
**t'ôg* 滔 (t'ao)
Tsang 藏
tse 則
t'ung 同
wa 蛙
wang 王
Wang ku chih shih 往古之時
Wu hsing 五行
Yao 堯
Yi 羿
yin (excess) 淫
yin (seclusion) 隱
Ying lung 應龍
Yu Ch'ui 有倕
Yu Hsia 有夏
Yu Yü 有虞
Yü 禹
Yü-shan 羽山

Texts
Chin yü 晉語
Ching shen hsün 精神訓
Ch'iu yü 求雨
Chou yü 周語
Ch'u Tz'u 楚辭
Ch'u yü 楚語
Chuang Tzu 莊子
Ch'un-ch'iu fan lu 春秋繁露
Feng su t'ung-yi 風俗通義
Hai nei ching 海內經
Huai-nan Tzu 淮南子
Hung fan 洪範
K'ai hsien 開筮
Ku shih pien 古史辨
Kuan Tzu 管子
K'uei tu 揆度
Kuo yü 國語
Lan ming hsün 覽冥訓
Lü-shih ch'un-ch'iu 呂氏春秋
Lun heng 論衡

Meng Tzu 孟子
Mo Tzu 墨子
Pen ching hsün 本經訓
Shan hai ching 山海經
Shang shu 尙書
Shih ching 詩經
Shih Tzu 尸子
Shun tien 舜典
Shun ku 順鼓
Shuo-wen chieh-tzu 說文解字
San Huang pen-chi 三皇本記
T'an t'ien 談天
Ti hsing hsün 墜形訓
T'ien wen 天問
T'ien wen hsün 天文訓
Tu i chih 獨異志
Tu ti 度地
Yao tien 堯典
Yü kung 禹貢

Commentators, Critics
Cheng Hsüan 鄭玄
Fang Hsüan-ling 房玄齡
Hao I-hsing 郝懿行
Hsüan Chu 玄珠
Hung Hsing-tsu 洪興祖
Hung Liang-chi 洪亮吉
Kao Yu 高誘
Ku Chieh-kang 顧頡剛
Kuo P'u 郭璞
Lü Ssu-mien 呂思勉
Shen Yen-ping 沈雁冰 (Mao Tun 茅盾)
Ssu-ma Cheng 司馬貞
T'ang Lan 唐蘭
Tung Chung-shu 董仲舒
T'ung Shu-yeh 童書業
Wang Ch'ung 王充
Wang I 王逸
Wei Chao 韋昭
Wen I-to 聞一多
Yang K'uan 楊寬
Yuan K'o 袁珂