

Historical Background— Chinese Myth & Culture

Scholars believe that many of the Chinese myths that have come down to us are not as old and authentic as the myths from other ancient cultures. The problem began in 213 B.C., when the first emperor of China burned all books that were not about medicine, prophecy, or farming. Then, during the great Han dynasty (202 B.C.-A.D. 220), the emperors instituted the teachings of Confucius as the state religion and banned religions that involved nature worship. Many of the old myths that had been passed down orally were recorded anew during this period. However, Han scholars revised them to reflect their own attitudes and the political and religious climate of their time.

Fortunately, the Han scholars were also great collectors, and unlike earlier scholars, who were more aristocratic in their focus, Han scholars collected oral myths, legends, and folktales from the common people. Therefore, some myths that appear for the first time during the Han dynasty are actually from an earlier period.

The Chinese have three basic creation myths, involving Yin and Yang, Nu Kua, and P'an Ku. Yin and Yang, who are two gods, appear in the *Huai-nan Tzu* (Master Huai-nan), compiled early in the Han period (c. 139 B.C.) by Liu An, the king of Huai-nan (c. 170-122 B.C.). In these myths, Yin ("shaded") and Yang ("sunlit") arise out of chaos and represent complementary essences in the universe that, taken together, comprise the whole. Yin is the female principle in nature—heavy, dark, earthy, passive, submissive, and cool. Yang is the male principle—light, bright, celestial, active, aggressive, and warm. Just as male and female unite among humans, so the sun, a god representing the qualities of yang, marries the moon, a goddess representing the qualities of yin. Even earth (yin) and heaven (yang) represent complementary aspects of the whole.

In her earliest form, Nu Kua is a Great Goddess or Mother Goddess who functions as an independent divinity. In the *Feng su t'ung-yi* (Explanations of Social Customs), compiled later in the Han period by Ying Shao (c. A.O. t 40-c. 206), Nu Kua creates human beings. The fact that, in this Nu Kua myth, the other forms of life have already emerged from P'an Ku's corpse reveals that the myth of P'an Ku already existed, at least in an oral form.

In Liu An's *Huai-nan Tzu*, Nu Kua appears as the Great Goddess or Mother Goddess, who is also Goddess of Fertility. In this myth, the second of China's four flood myths, Nu Kua repairs all the damage caused by Kung Kung, a primeval warrior-god. She puts an end to the great flood by building dams. She also restores the damaged universe by repairing the sky and its supporting columns. Moreover, like the Great Goddess in other matriarchal cultures, she rides in a dragon-drawn chariot. Kung Kung is the principal character in the first of China's flood myths. However, in the myth of Nu Kua that appears in the *Huai-nan Tzu*, his role in causing the flood forms the setting for Nu Kua's drama.

P'an Ku ("Coiled Antiquity"), a semidivine giant, is the principal character in the two most detailed of the existing Chinese creation myths. Both myths were originally compiled by Hsu Cheng, who lived in southwestern China in the period of the Three Kingdoms (third century A.D.). These male-dominated myths soon became the authoritative Chinese versions of creation. In Hsu Cheng's *San Wu li chi* (Historical Records of the Three Sovereign Divinities and the Five Gods), P'an Ku creates order out of chaos by separating the sky from the earth. Given Hsu Cheng's location, this myth may have reached China by way of Central Asia and then Tibet.

The second part of the P'an Ku myth appears in Hsu Cheng's *Wu yun li-nien chi* (A Chronicle of the Five Cycles of Time). Here, P'an Ku's death preserves and increases the order that he earlier established. His corpse provides additional structure by differentiating the surface of the earth into a variety of natural forms, such as mountains, oceans, and forests, and by differentiating the heavens as well. The resemblance of this myth to many Indo-European creation myths leads scholars to conclude that it is probably Indo-European in origin. Hsu Cheng may have collected it from Central Asian sources. However, it is also similar to the ancient Near Eastern (Akkadian/Babylonian) myth of Apsu and Tiamat.