PART I

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES
Today extensive collections of myths exist in all continents, and creation mythologies are being studied in various disciplines, from comparative religion studies to comparative literature. So far the number of translated Chinese myths available is very limited, and especially the rich legacy of oral stories told in minority cultures has hardly been taken into account by cross-cultural studies.¹

One of the tasks of comparative literature is to look for formal and thematic similarities and differences in historically related and historically unrelated cultural traditions. Cross-cultural approaches to literature allow researchers to find out what we do or do not share as human beings, by focusing on a specific unit in oral narratives or written texts originating from different cultures, belonging to a specific genre or theme, or a combination of both, as I intend to do here. The uniting threads of the paper will be a common genre, stories all set “at the beginning,” and a common topic—the origin of the first humans, with examples from Chinese and other cultural traditions. Why and how creation and origin myths set the stage, and why and how the first people began their eventful life on planet earth, will be the central question, a puzzling question asked and answered in origin myths from around the world.

Keywords: intercultural comparison, distant reading, oral traditions, thematics

Comparing Myths from Around the World

The word “myth” originates from the Greek muthos which has many meanings, such as 1) spoken word; 2) message; 3) rumour or story; 4) proposal; 5) request, order, threat; 6) thought, plan, design (as against doing the work). Here I define myths simply as “stories of the

¹ There is of course Yuan Ke’s introduction to Chinese mythology: Dragons and Dynasties (1993), and more recently Yang Lihui and An Deming’s Handbook of Chinese Mythology (2005), but the number of translated stories is still limited.