PART III

ORAL TRADITION AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY
CHINESE CREATION MYTHS:
A GREAT DISCOVERY

Wu Bing’an
Liaoning University

Abstract

There is a large variety of artistic genres in the oral traditions of China’s minority cultures. Northern peoples, such as Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur, Kazakh and Kirgiz, are well known for their long heroic epics, whereas southern peoples, such as Dai, Yi, Nakhi, Hani, Miao, Zhuang, are distinguished for their performance of ancient creation epic songs, of medium or short length. Creation epics depict the origins of heaven and earth, nature, animals, humans, the beginnings of culture and society. This genre, also referred to as “mythical epic” has mainly been found in southern China. Such creation and origin myths have been and still being transmitted orally among ethnic groups such as Yi, Hani, Nakhi, Bai, Lahu, Lisu, Qiang, Pumi, Jingpo, Achang, De’ang, Dai, Buyei, Shui, Miao, Yao, Dong, Tujia, Zhuang. The narrative structure of creation epics reflects the specific views of ancestors of the respective ethnic groups in a specific historical period. Their migration songs reflect the eventful social life and fate of migrating ethnic groups in magnificent pictures.

Most of China’s ethnic minority creation epics have not been discovered before the 1950s, and only since the last three decades a spectacular academic movement has opened up the field of collecting, recording, translating, sorting out, and printing oral traditions. And it took until the mid-1980s before Chinese ethnic minority creation epics were studied more systematically, thanks to anthropologists who emphasized the social and cultural significance of creation epics. Since the mid-1990s, researchers have introduced and applied the idea of “living tradition” to ethnic minority creation epics in song form as a special category of oral performance.

Keywords: creation epic, ethnic minority, Chinese mythology, living tradition

In China’s oral traditions the countless thriving myths and legends of farmers, foresters and fisherwomen have too long been ignored. This is the more astonishing since the myths and legends recorded in voluminous ancient Chinese documents happen to be fragmentary,