MINORITY CREATION MYTHS: 
AN APPROACH TO CLASSIFICATION

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Abstract

Creation myths of Chinese ethnic minorities are rich in content and types, and urgently need to be classified.

Firstly, according to their different creators, the creation myths of Chinese minorities can be divided into nine types: A1) creation without creator; A2) creation by gods; A3) creation by divine figures; A4) creation by religious figures; A5) creation by cultural heroes; A6) creation by ordinary people; A7) creation by animals; A8) creation by plants; A9) creation by lifeless subjects, etc.

Secondly, according to the different ways of creation, creation myths can be divided into eight types, namely B1) natural birth; B2) huasheng (metamorphosis); B3) transformation; B4) egg-birth; B5) production; B6) marriage; B7) pregnant birth; B8) gansheng (induction), etc. These types can be further divided as well; such as “transformation” can be further divided into “complete transformation” and “part transformation,” “body transformation” and “corpse transformation,” etc.

Thirdly, creation myths can be divided into four types according to different creation results: C1) the creation of Heaven and Earth; C2) the creation of all things; C3) the creation of human beings; C4) other.

This paper discusses and proposes a practical classification of China’s minority cultures’ creation and origin myths.

Keywords: minority myths, type, motif

I. Types of Creation Myths

The origin and development of myths is a product of collective ancient wisdom and long-term social activities, and it is also an outcome of human thinking of certain phases of development. Theoretically, in parallel with the history of human development, a timeline of the

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1 Editor’s note: Cf. zisheng (abiogenesis) in Jung Jaesoo’s paper in this book.
occurrence and evolution of creation myths can be drawn accordingly. Before analyzing the types of creation myths, it is necessary to first answer some questions about “myth,” “type,” and so on.

*The Contents of “Creation Myth”*

Undoubtedly, “creation myth” is mainly defined by its content, e.g., the “world” created in various myths. In Chinese, the “world” is *shi jie*. And in classics, *shi* means “from ancient times till now,” and *jie* represents “all sides including above and below.” Then afterward, *shi jie* became a generic term for time and space, space especially meaning Earth on which human beings are living. There are some controversies existing in the definition of creation myth. Here are some different points of view. 1) Creation myth refers to the creation of the universe, as the great background for human’s living. 2) Creation myth contains the origin of the sun, the moon, the stars and the origin of everything else. 3) Creation myth is concerned with the origin of human beings. In the words of the Russian scholar Boris Riftin: “Myths about human origin are one part of creation myth, and probably the most ancient part. Since the cosmic vision is a product of an advanced consciousness, archaic ethnic groups usually did not produce myths to create or explain the structure of the cosmos, but only the myths of human origin” (Riftin, 69). Quite a few Chinese scholars have similar opinions; some believe that along with the myths of universe creation, the myths of human origin occupy an important place in creation myths, and usually stand as the center of series of creation myth (Tao & Mou, 156–7). 4) Creation myth contains the origins of seed, customs, the social order and some other cultural origins. 5) Creation myth just explain nature or natural phenomena, and like some researchers have stated: “The myth of Pangu was still very popular among the She, Yao, Dong and Miao ethnic groups in the southwest of China, and taken as the myth of their own ethnic origin. Then as the myth evolved, it became the nature myth of the creation of the universe” (Yuan 436).

In this paper, I will analyze various mythical narrative contents, and explore to what extent creation myth is mainly a narrative about the origin of universe and all the things, and to what extent the myth of human and cultural origins complement it.