HUMANISM AS A PARADIGM OF CREATION MYTHS

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Abstract

This essay begins with the Shang oracle bone inscriptions, surveys the records of creation myths in the ancient books from Qin through Han dynasties, and concludes with three archetypes of creation myths originating from agricultural ancient China, followed by a detailed analysis of three types of narratives which I will situate in the living creation myth traditions of ethnic groups other than Han. I am going to explore the social context, the psychological drive that compels people to create these archetypes, and the humanism manifested in these paradigms. Through narrative, Chinese creation myths put forward the traditional Chinese concept of “harmony between man and nature” as a characteristic of Chinese people.

Keywords: Huaxia, archetype, humanism

In ancient literatures, ancestors of the Chinese people, like in other cultures around the world, showed a strong interest in the making of the “universe” and its structure. Over two thousand years ago, poet Qu Yuan (c. 340–278 BC) posed the following questions in his poem “Tian Wen” (Asking the Universe): “Who devised yuan (the round universe) and divided it into nine circles? And who undertook such a marvelous project?” In Chinese classics, yuan refers to the celestial body, that is, the “round heaven” in the Chinese phrase “tian yuan di fang” (round heaven and square earth), which can be seen in the entry this character has in an early 2nd century Chinese dictionary Shuowen Jiezi (Explaining Simple and Analyzing Compound Characters).

Ancient Chinese people’s interest in the origin and creation of the universe revealed in classics leads to my assumption that creation myths might have flourished during the cradle time of the civilization of China. I am now going to trace the origin of Chinese creation myths.

1 This long poem consists of 173 questions about the universe, the earth, nature, society, history and life.
I. A Survey of Possible Creation Myths in Chinese Classics

Chinese creation myths, in terms of their contents, can be dated back to times immemorial. However, only the relics and ancient books can be used to outline the first written versions of Chinese creation myths. I will start with the Shang Oracle bone inscriptions, the oldest Chinese written characters ever discovered.

Shang oracle bone inscriptions are the written characters carved or written into tortoise shells or animal bones, used by the royal families of the Shang dynasty to document their divination. The divination directed towards Di (Divinity) or Shangdi (Heavenly God) involves a wide range of issues such as weather, fishing and hunting, farming, punitive expedition, sacrifice, and so on. Questions asked could be: “Will Di command that it rain?”, “Will Di command no wind?” or “If I prompt a crusade against Qiong Fang, will Di consent to it and bless me?” In terms of mythology, the presence of the supreme deity “Di” or “Emperor” in the text is what Shang oracle bone inscriptions pay most attention to. Judging from the various contents of divination, it can be seen that God not only dominates nature, in command of weather and climate, but also is preoccupied with all sorts of societal services and is endowed with the diversified characteristics of a supreme deity. Nevertheless, among the unearthed oracle bones, there is no account of Di’s creation of the world.

One may wonder: where did Di originate from? Or, what was the prototype of Di? In order to answer those questions, let us return to divination activities. There are records about the late ancestors of Yin (or Shang) people, who were guests inhabiting the place where Di resided, which indicates that Di was directly related to the ancestors of the Shang dynasty. Moreover, divination is always directly addressed to Di, and only occasionally to Forefather Qun, e.g., “prayer for help from Forefather Qun” or “prayer for crops to Forefather Qun,” which shows that Di and Shang ancestors are interrelated. For the moment we will leave the question as to whether Di and Forefather Qun are the same person. The prayers suggest at least that both Forefather Qun and Di, has the power to dominate the world.

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2 According to the funeral customs of southern ethnic groups and Song Hun Jing (The Book of Sending Souls), the place where souls are sent for rest is exactly the place where the ancestors lived.