PERSPECTIVES ON THE ENVIRONMENT IN MIAO AND YI CREATION NARRATIVES

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Abstract

In recent decades the idea of a “green” view of written and oral literature has developed as new questions of humankind’s relation to the increasingly less “natural” environment have come to the fore as nations and peoples relentlessly pressure traditionally exploited sources of sustenance, water, and energy (Snyder, Garrard). As the natural world continues to undergo massive anthropogenic modifications and degradation, the effects have been widely felt among traditional indigenous human communities, especially those living in non-urban environments that hold energy and material resources needed by dominant urban-based societies. Both environmentally focused literary scholars and folklorists—especially in the “ethnopoetics” movement—have looked to native literatures for alternative views on relations between humans and local ecology in hopes of constructively re-discovering knowledge of the traditional “old ways” that can provide sensitive, intimate, and non-adversarial perspectives on nature in response to the onslaught of rapidly environmental change on a global scale (Snyder). In line with the rising interest in the “eco” and “ethno” dimensions of oral literature this paper presents an initial comparative look at versions of creation epics documented in local communities of the Miao and Yi—two large and diverse ethnic groups with long histories in Southwest China. It is hoped that issues raised in the paper will contribute to discussions of similar questions about other traditions of creation epics in China and elsewhere.

Keywords: creation epics, Chinese myth, Miao, Yi, people and environment, folk taxonomies

Introduction

Both Miao and Yi ethnic groups have significant traditions of oral and/or oral-connected epic poems that narrate the creation of heaven and earth and contain rich and detailed accounts of aspects of the

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natural world and human interaction with the local environments. Moreover, in many ways these epics parallel aspect of creation narratives from many other ethnic groups in China.

The paper begins with an examination of folk categories, taxonomies, and eco-systems that are recognized in terms the cosmos, landforms and geology, water resources, flora, fauna, human populations, and supernatural beings are placed. Focus is then shifted to a discussion of the perspectives on the place of humans and other sentient beings within the narrative worlds of the poems, which reflect different lifestyles adapted to two distinct, though in some ways similar, upland environments. In a general sense the way the relations of humans, animals, plants, and the environment in both poems are characterized is similar to the kind of “perspectivism” that Arhem has described in his discussion of South American Indian cultures. De Castro calls this understanding a sort of “multi-naturalist” one, in which humans and other sentient beings share a basic oneness, though are plural in outward form. This is in contrast to familiar Western notions of so-called “multiculturist cosmologies,” that pit the human and natural world in opposition to each other. This paper suggests that in the Yi and Miao traditions of creation epic elements of both the multi-naturalist and multiculturist perspectives are at play—though are evinced differently in each tradition’s unique vision of the interactions between the multiple beings inhabiting the realms of the respective story worlds. Thus, while in some ways offering alternate “traditional” possibilities for viewing human relationships to the environment, both accounts suggest that these relations are complex, nuanced, and multi-faceted.

In recent years the idea of a “green” or “eco” view of written and oral literature has developed as new questions of humankind’s relation to the increasingly less “natural” environment have come to the fore as nations and peoples relentlessly pressure traditionally exploited sources of sustenance, water, and energy. As the natural world continues to undergo massive anthropogenic modifications and degradation, the effects have been widely felt among traditional indigenous human communities, especially those living in non-urban environments that hold energy and material resources needed by dominant urban-based societies. Extreme examples of the impact of rapid and severe environmental change on traditional cultures include the Native American peoples of the Great Plains in the United States, whose lifestyles were dependent on herds of wild bison and horse husbandry as recently as the 1880s, societies of indigenous peoples in South America and Southeast Asia whose economies mix hunting and gathering and swidden agriculture in rainforests