MAN AND BEAST

The Hybrid in Early Chinese Art and Literature

Our knowledge of Chinese religion and mythology rests on the evidence of art, archaeology and literature, which may be considered very generally in two types. There is the evidence of a natural, romantic and free tradition, sometimes associated with the south, and that of a formal, classical and inhibited tradition, sometimes associated with the north. Of these two major traditions, that of the north came in time to predominate over that of the south. For it was in the north that China's political and dynastic authorities emerged, and from whence that they extended their sphere of influence to the east, and then to the centre and the south. While this extension may be seen most clearly in political terms, it also affected cultural developments. The regimes of the north required intellectual conformity and support; there set in a tendency whereby the temporal masters and officials of the north were wont to mould and exploit the independent arts and mythology of the south so as to satisfy their own immediate political needs; and in the course of such treatment some elements of the southern tradition became subject to scorn and even suppression.

For students of Chinese mythology, this tendency has had the unfortunate result of overlaying some of the evidence of the natural urges of man with the purposeful creations of his intellect. From about the beginning of the Christian era, standardisation was affecting Chinese literature, both in the choice of the material that was sponsored for preservation and in the interpretations that were put on early writings in order to propagate orthodox beliefs. In studying early mythology, then, we must fasten on such evidence as preceded the move towards uniformity, and on that which survives from the live cultures of the

1 Of the many scholars who have written on this subject and associated topics, I am glad to single out three to whose writings I owe a special debt: Noel Barnard, of the Australian National University, Canberra; Chang Kwang-chih, of Cambridge, Massachusetts; and Hayashi Minao, of the Jōbun kagaku kenkyūjo, Kyoto. The account of hybrid forms which is presented here is intended as a summary only, from which all but the most important references have been excluded. References to Chinese texts are to the Ssu-pu pei-yao edition, unless stated otherwise. Chinese characters for select names and terms are given on p. 117.
south. We may consider the paintings made on neolithic potteries of perhaps the fourth millenium BC, and the far more elaborate patterns that adorn the bronzes of c. 1500 BC and later. The inscriptions made on bones and shells tell us something of the aspirations of early Chinese monarchs of the Shang-Yin period (traditionally 1766–1122 BC), and of the processes for consulting divine powers; but they carry little information that bears on the specific nature of those beliefs. Although some of China’s literature may date back to c. 1000 BC, the versions which we possess to-day must be carefully examined; for we must sift the grain from the chaff, rejecting the results of the subsequent editing that suited the needs of the imperial dynasties founded from 221 BC onwards.

Luckily, evidence of a less orthodox frame of mind survives elsewhere, despite the efforts of the officials of the north to deprecate its importance. It derives from the once thriving cultures of the south, and is seen in the art motifs and literature that emanated from the valley of the Yangtse River and beyond. These areas encompassed a terrain that was very different from that of the north, giving rise to the characteristic rice cultivation, and including large regions of swamp, forest and mountain. Such lairs lay beyond the reach of the Chinese official, who tended to regard them as the home of the untutored barbarian. It is from the artistic creations of such peoples, who were free of the northern mandarins’ discipline, that we may learn something of China’s early mythologies.

The Chinese believed in the existence and powers of a number of deities. Ti, or Shang Ti, or God on high, was venerated by the kings and possibly the peoples of Shang; he was conceived as a unity, probably in anthropomorphic terms; and he was thought to possess supreme powers over man and nature. The kings of Chou, who supplanted those of Shang from perhaps 1122 BC, believed in a different supreme deity, known as T’ien, or Heaven. T’ien may also have been conceived in human terms; and along with the institutions and moral examples ascribed to the kings of Chou, T’ien was adopted as an object of veneration by the imperial dynasties, who worshipped him right up to 1910. Both Ti and T’ien, it seems, existed on a higher plane than the Shen, or Holy Spirits. These were conceived in multiplicity, often being attached to specific sites on earth. The holy spirits would respond to prayer, invocation or, if the occasion de-