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Constructing Myth in Modern China

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This study presents an overview of attempts by Chinese literati during the twentieth century to articulate a coherent Chinese mythology, primarily based on ancient texts but eventually to some extent drawing from ethnographic materials and folklore as well, and all much beholden to Western examples such as Greek and Norse mythology. This examination of text-based activities sets the stage for an inquiry into a wave of monument building during the Reform Era, much of which has celebrated China's ancient myth, history, and legend. A recent park in Wuhan dedicated to the legendary sage ruler and conqueror of floods, Yu the Great, serves as a case study of how, over the last three decades, old Chinese myths have been inscribed on the new Chinese landscape, and allows exploration of this phenomenon in relation to deeper issues concerning the role of myth in Chinese society, particularly its unexpected marriage with modernity.

Creating a Chinese Mythology

Students and scholars of Chinese myth, both Eastern and Western, are beholden to Gu Jiegang 顾颉刚 (1893–1980), the influential historian who founded the journal *Gushi bian* 古史辨 and led the famous "Doubters of Antiquity" movement in the Republican era. Gu's greatest accomplishment was his detailed demonstration of the mythic nature of much of the early Chinese historical tradition, accompanied by a sophisticated elucidation of the ideological character of such myths. Gu's methodological rigor is much celebrated in the West, and among an influential group of scholars in China today who were trained by Gu or one of Gu's protégées. His work is now generally treated as a model of modern, critical scholarship on early China, and for good reason: over roughly two generations, he and a small group of like-minded scholars transformed the role of the historian in China from a figure complicit in the creation and maintenance of tradition to that of a critic intent on unmasking the ideologies behind the received historical narrative.

While it is common, and certainly not entirely mistaken, to think of Gu as intent on the deconstruction of tradition—the dismantling of the metanarrative of early Chinese history, the exposure of the myths behind the revered founders of Chinese civilization, the wholesale denial of the validity and historicity of much of the canon—it is also commonly acknowledged that he was a creative force. His

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body of work stands as the most sophisticated attempt to create a modern history of the Chinese nation that would meet the critical standards of the outside world.

In his effort to modernize the discipline of history in China, Gu ended up needing to create something else, and this act of creation has, in spite of its enormously important role in so much of his work, remained largely unexplored. As much as he needed to expose and thereby excise the myths that comprised so much of early Chinese history, he needed also to *create* a viable Chinese mythology, one that could stand side-by-side with the great mythic traditions of the Greeks and Romans on the stage of world history. He needed to do this at least in part because the very notion of modernity, wherever it is to be found, has always been forged in opposition to a certain configuration of what modernity stands opposed *to*, the past. Defining the past in a way that can be broken off from the present means formulating dichotomies: rational vs. irrational, scientific vs. superstitious, historical vs. mythic. This need for a demonstrable break from the past is crucial to the project of modernity (see Detienne 1986, 2007; Von Hendy 2002). Gu's endeavor to separate empirical history out from myth, and thereby forge a Chinese counterpart to the mythic traditions of the West, remains, in some ways, unfulfilled to this day, in spite of the efforts of many who have in one way or another taken up this task.

Gu Jiegang was far from the only scholar who stepped in to create for China the (perceived) missing body of myth, or at least propose ways to navigate the problem that the category of myth seemed to present. In fact, many of China's best known intellectuals of the early twentieth century were concerned with precisely this sort of problem. Alongside of historians such as Gu, literary figures, including the great poet and literary critic Wen Yiduo, the author Mao Dun, and even the author and social critic Lu Xun, all made important contributions to introducing the concepts of myth and mythology to China.

The term for myth in Chinese, *shenhua* 神话, appeared near the turn of the century among a group of Chinese scholars studying and publishing in Japan. Prior to this, there was no comparable term in Chinese, nor any concept that separated out what we now recognize as myth from other sorts of traditions about the past in anything like the way this new term would. Among these early scholars, Liang Qichao may have used the term *shenhua* first, but a colleague and fellow contributor to the cutting edge *Xinmin congbao* 新民丛报, Jiang Guanyun 蒋观云 (1866–1929), was the first to make a systematic call for the introduction of mythology as a category of literary and anthropological analysis. In 1902, Jiang travelled to Japan to study, and in 1903 he published "Shenhua lishi yangcheng zhi renwu" 神话历史养成之人物 [Those people cultivated through the reading of myth and history], a brief piece in which he argued that the imaginative power of myth could mobilize and transform the sentiments of the Chinese citizenry (G. Jiang 1903).[1] Jiang links

[1]Jiang notes the influence of the popular epics of the late imperial era, such as *Shuihu zhuan* and *Fengshen yanyi*, and links this to the militarization of the general populace in this period, claiming "the Boxers of recent years were a product of (the influence of such works of fiction as) the *Journey*

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the character of modern nationalities with the quality of their myths, singling out the beauty of Greek myth. From the moment of their introduction to China, the terms "myth" and "mythology" (*shenhua xue* 神话学) carried within them cultural assumptions and a long history of meaning rooted in the West. Greek mythology, that is, the myths themselves and the various uses that analysis of these myths had been put to by historians, literary critics, and comparative anthropologists, became particularly influential. Scholars such as Jiang Guanyun, Liang Qichao, and later Lu Xun and others were aware of different analytic approaches to myth and intentionally employed the foreign categories of myth and mythology as ideological tools. It has never been possible, at any moment in Chinese history, to invoke these terms without at the same time invoking a rich range of comparisons with the West.

Alongside of historians such as Gu, the great literary figures and critics Lu Xun and Mao Dun were both fascinated with the category of myth, and in the 1920s each developed and published explanations of the origins of Chinese literature that began with myth. Lu Xun, on the one hand, drew on mythic motifs in his own fiction.[2] On the other hand, he deplored the unscientific thinking he associated with the literal acceptance of myth as history. The treatment of myth in his *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe* [General history of Chinese fiction] offers his solution to this tension, the excising of myth from the history of the nation and removal of the category to the history of literature (Lu 1990). In granting myth a foundational role in the history of literary developments, Lu Xun was of course heavily influenced by the ways myth had been appropriated and explained by literary critics and sociocultural anthropologists in the West. James George Frazer's multivolume study *The Golden Bough*, which appeared between 1905 and 1915, was widely influential among literary figures and scholars the world over, and works such as Edward Burnett Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871) had long since brought discussions of cultural evolution (all the rage in early twentieth century China) and myth into dialogue with one another. Many of these ideas probably first made their way to Chinese intellectuals via Japan, and the specific notion that the origins of Chinese literature could be found in myth had in fact already been made, for example, by the Japanese sinologist On Shionoya 鹽谷温 (1878–1962) in his 1918 work *Chūgoku bungaku gairon kōwa* 中国文学概论讲话 [General introduction to Chinese literature].[3] This evolutionary approach to

to the West and the *Investiture of the Gods*" (G. Jiang 1903, 88). One must follow Jiang's publications in *Xinmin congbao* over the next several years and examine his *Zhongguo renzhong kao* 中国人种考 [Examination into the Chinese race] (1929), to get a full sense of his contribution to the history of Chinese myth studies. See, *inter alia,* Tian and You (2007).

[2]See, for example, the stories "Li shui" 理水 and "Bu tian" 补天 in *Gushi xinbian* 故事新编.

[3]A Chinese translation of this work did not appear until 1929, but Lu Xun was familiar with the work in Japanese. See, *inter alia*, Bao (2008) on the long-standing assumption that Lu plagiarized On's work.

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myth, informed equally by the emerging disciplines of modern anthropology and literary criticism, became the norm among New Culture Movement thinkers.

A notable example is the author Mao Dun, whose fascination with myth is evident in his early publications. In 1925 he published his first focused study of Chinese myth, "Zhongguo shenhua yanjiu" 中国神话研究 [Research on Chinese myths]. Over the next few years, he penned four more detailed studies of Chinese myth, this period notably overlapping with a year spent studying in Japan. Mao produced some interesting and original research on Chinese myth, but it is abundantly clear that his entire intellectual framework for identifying and analyzing Chinese myths was shaped by the expectations he developed by first studying Greek and other Western mythologies. His work reveals a working knowledge of Norse myths and includes citations to secondary scholarship on myth and religion in Western languages. The bulk of his work, however, is spent presenting and analyzing Chinese myths, and he draws widely on classical Chinese sources, some well known and many others relatively obscure.

The tension in his work between assumptions based on his knowledge of Western myth and insights arising from his wide familiarity with early Chinese texts is exemplified in a section of his "Zhongguo shenhua yanjiu ABC" 中国神话研究 ABC [The ABCs of research on Chinese myth], preface dated 1928, Tokyo, examining the figure Di Jun 帝俊 in the *Shan hai jing* 山海经. On the one hand, he is certainly right to draw attention to this figure, who is largely missing from canonical works but appears from evidence in this text to have in fact been quite important in early Chinese myth. On the other hand, Mao Dun's interest in Di Jun grows first and foremost out of an attempt to identify a "supreme deity" in early Chinese myth, and he makes very clear his assumption that there ought to be a figure who occupied a position comparable to Zeus in Greek myth. After briefly considering Fu Xi 伏羲 and Huang Di 黄帝, the Yellow Emperor, he offers Di Jun as preferable, citing the tradition in the *Shan hai jing* that makes Di Jun the father of the goddesses of the sun and moon, seeing in this a parallel to the Greek myth of Zeus and Leto's twin children, Apollo and Artemis, who are associated with the sun and the moon (Ma 1999, 99).[4] In passages such as this one, woven through his work on myth, one can see that for Mao Dun the construction of Chinese mythology proceeded by first identifying in the Greek or Norse mythic traditions what he assumes ought to be the defining features of a comprehensive mythology, and then scouring the early Chinese sources to find corresponding figures, themes, and narratives.

Late in his career, poet and scholar Wen Yiduo also devoted considerable attention to the study of myth. His most important work in this regard is a long and complex piece titled "Fu Xi kao" 伏羲考 [A study of the figure Fu Xi],

[4]It must have been intriguing to Mao that Apollo was named the charioteer of the sun, since Di Jun's wife, Xi He, is sometimes specified as the charioteer of the sun.

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appearing in 1948 as the first chapter of the posthumously published *Shenhua yu shi* 神话与诗 [Myth and poetry] but apparently written mostly in 1942. While the works of Lu Xun and Mao Dun have the feel of early explorations at a time when the idea of myth was still new and the range of interpretive possibilities still seemed bewilderingly varied and promising, Wen's work is in some ways methodologically more mature. He is able to work across several disciplines now already established in China, such as archaeology, anthropology, folklore studies, and philology, and employ the results of scholars from these fields. His debt to Gu Jiegang's work is apparent in both his critical approach to texts and his willingness to take seriously studies of oral traditions conducted among the Yao and Miao ethnic groups in southwestern China. Ethnologists recording the oral traditions in this region had discovered that there were rich narratives related to the figure Fu Xi, some details of which could be compared fruitfully with stories found in fragmentary form in a few canonical texts. By the middle of the Han dynasty, Fu Xi was sometimes portrayed as the earliest of the great sage heroes, the first of the San Huang, or Three August Ones. In 1936, Gu Jiegang's "San Huang kao" [Examination into the Three August Ones] had of course addressed Fu Xi, but Gu treated Fu Xi as a late and relatively unimportant figure. While Wen likely modeled the title of his piece on Gu's "San Huang kao," the real goal of Wen's study was a radical departure from Gu's work.

For all its interdisciplinary and methodological sophistication, Wen's "Fu Xi kao" is not primarily a scholarly work, but rather an ideological one. He focuses on Fu Xi, who is often portrayed in early visual and textual sources as dragon-bodied, in order to introduce the notion that the dragon was a totem, a symbol of the Chinese people. He does so under the guise of anthropological theory and comparative ethnographic data, but his use of the totem concept is uncharacteristically misinformed, perhaps willfully so. Wen argues that the dragon has long been the symbol of the Chinese empire, but came to be so only as an amalgamation of the totemic animals of various tribes and ethnic groups (from an anthropological perspective, this is a highly unusual and unlikely proposal). The dragon, then, is a symbol of the Chinese nation as it was imagined in the mid-twentieth century, as a multiethnic conglomeration. Wen further argues that while in the past the dragon was a symbol of the empire and its ruling elite, in the postimperial era, the dragon now belongs to all Chinese people as a powerful symbol of unity and common origins. In an inspired critique drawing on Wen's work in the 1940s as well as correspondence and other materials, the young scholar Zhong Lin 仲林 shows how Wen was consciously drawing on and reconfiguring a widely employed international image of China as a sleeping dragon to "invent" the tradition of the dragon as totem of the Chinese as a call to national unity (Zhong 2006).

So while Gu devoted his energies to unmasking early myth and history as ideology, Wen was consciously using myth as an ideological tool. In his study, Zhong analyzes an outline prepared by Wen, perhaps for a lecture delivered in

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Kunming in 1942, wherein Wen makes clear his sense of mission: to turn his scholarly powers to the analysis of myth in order to identify potent symbols of national unity that can be used to mobilize the Chinese citizenry (Zhong 2006, 40–41). In Wen Yiduo's "Fu Xi kao," then, we have come full circle from our starting point of Jiang Guanyun, who also dreamed of mobilizing national sentiments through the study of myth. For all of these scholars, in one way or another, discovering and analyzing China's own body of early myth was a crucial task for the modern intellectual. Jiang Guanyun, Lu Xun, Mao Dun, and Gu Jiegang all hoped to establish myth as a separate category of analysis from empirical history, at once removing superstitious and irrational elements from the historical narrative and also creating a coherent body of Chinese myth subject to scholarly analysis through the modern disciplines of literary criticism, folklore studies, and anthropology. Success in such an endeavor would mean making a contribution not only to the empirical history of China as a modern nation-state, but also to the establishment of Chinese literature as one of the world's great traditions, with its own long history that began, as was assumed of European literature, with myth. And yet the creation of a coherent Chinese mythology, replete with all the expected features of Greek myth that scholars had come to imagine were universal, was not an easy task. Wen's "Fu Xi kao" marks not a turning point away from critical scholarship, but rather simply one way of understanding and pursuing the relationship between myth and modernity. Wen likely conceived of his work as part of the broader achievement of a truly critical, interdisciplinary, comparative approach to the study of Chinese myth.[5] By the premature end of his life in 1946, the methodological groundwork had been laid for future scholars who would combine anthropological and text-critical approaches to the study of myth, and China now awaited its first great mythographer to bring the previous half century of research to culmination through the creation of China's own mythology.

The man who rose to this task is neither a well-known literary figure nor a celebrated historian, and never achieved nearly the reputation in or outside of China that such figures as Lu Xun, Mao Dun, Gu Jiegang, or Wen Yiduo did. Nevertheless, Yuan Ke 袁珂 (1916–2001) has been enormously influential. In a series of books and articles published beginning in the 1950s, Yuan collected myths, legends, and folklore widely from classical and ethnographic sources, including material belonging to the "ethnic minorities" in modern China. His works often sorted or classified this material under various rubrics, for example, stories about heroic figures or passages exemplifying a certain theme

[5]This is certainly how his work has been received by most scholars, *pace* Zhong Lin's analysis. See, e. g., Zhao (2009), where Wen's identification of the dragon as totem is hailed as his single greatest achievement. Wen's "Fu Xi kao" has consistently been one of the most influential works on Chinese myth, attracting many commentaries and studies of its own. See the annotated study by Nakajima (1989) and the similar "guided reading" of Tian (2006). For a more critical appraisal, see Wang (1987).

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or motif (e.g., flood myths), and of course many of these motifs are formulated comparatively, with the models of Greek myth or the Bible in mind.[6] Across his long and prolific career, he never moved very far from this basic task—the continual collecting and cataloguing of Chinese myths. In effect, he did what the great anthologizers of the West—from the earliest compilers, such as Apollodorus and Pausanius, to such recent figures as Edith Hamilton and Thomas Bulfinch—had done for Greek myth, turning individual Chinese myths or narrative fragments into a comprehensive Chinese mythology. It is not surprising, then, that in his hands Chinese myth begins to resemble Greek myth in its broad contours.[7] Moreover, in many cases, to make his mythic narratives read smoothly and coherently, Yuan Ke had to ignore discrepancies among texts, to combine sources separated by centuries, and to draw from modern ethnography and folklore studies to supplement textual research. Scholars in the West have called such practices into question, decrying but also insisting on the fragmentary nature of Chinese myth, often with little realization that, e.g., Greek mythology was pieced together in the same fashion from disparate, contradictory sources (see Karlgren 1946).

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, as scholarship in China experienced a sudden renaissance under the new political, social, and economic conditions of the Reform Era, Yuan Ke's work had paved the way for a new generation of scholars to turn their attention to myth, now without having to labor endlessly over the problems of fragmentation. Academic books and articles on the subject multiplied quickly, as did more popular works for a general audience. Sustaining this explosion of interest in myth were surely several factors. In part, the intellectual mood in China during the 1980s was in some ways parallel to that of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, filled with optimism, curiosity, and a willingness to look more deeply into cultural questions in and outside of China. Just as had happened a century earlier, the fundamental challenge of identifying what China's heritage meant in the modern world gripped intellectuals and educated citizens alike. The old debate over *ti* and *yong*, national essence (which was to be searched out and nurtured within) versus practical knowledge (which could be imported from outside) reemerged as a seemingly viable

[6]One of his most frequently updated and reprinted books was *Zhongguo gudai shenhua* 中国古代神话, originally published in 1950 and reprinted over half a dozen times until a substantially expanded version appeared in 1957. This work was reissued in 1960, 1971, 1981, 1985, 1992, 2004, and 2006 in the mainland alone, as well as several times in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

[7]The temptation to use Western models, such as Greek myth or the Bible, as a map upon which the Chinese data can be overlaid is apparently almost irresistible. The Chinese scholar of myth Chang Jincang 常金仓, who has written a scathing and at times emotional critique of Wen's "Fu Xi kao," which accurately analyzes many of the problems with Wen's use of the term "totem" and also repeatedly calls for an outright rejection of Western theories to explain Chinese myth, finds himself compelled in the same article to compare the appearance of Nü Wa (variously Fu Xi's sister or wife) as described in the *Shan hai jing* with that of Eve's creation from a rib of Adam in the Bible. See Chang (2003, 52).

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theoretical dichotomy to guide modern Chinese thinkers as they grappled with the question of how to create Chinese modernity. For some scholars, mythology now took the form of a magical mirror offering insights into China's long history, an archaic set of symbols and stories that captured the pure essence of the Chinese race from millennia gone by. This romantic fascination with myth is nowhere more obvious than in the works of Xie Xuanjun 谢选骏 (b. 1954), one of the contributing screenwriters of the controversial television documentary *River Elegy* 河殇.

In 1986 Xie published *Shenhua yu minzu jingshen: jige wenhua quan de bijiao* 神话与民族精神: 几个文化圈的比较 [Myth and national essence: A comparison of several cultural groups], in which he argues that myth emerges during the Neolithic period, but encapsulates the oral heritage, acquired wisdom, and emerging collective consciousness of a group across a sweeping period of several millennia.[8] The continuity of such a group over this staggeringly long period is never called into question. Neither is the means whereby we might even hope to reconstruct an intellectual history of the origins of myth in prehistoric times. Myth's ability to communicate to us the essence of our ancient ancestors' deepest thoughts is treated as a natural truth. The study of myth, he argues, allows insights into the primitive mind, insights that he finds both useful to such modern fields of study as archaeology, history, and anthropology, and also aesthetically pleasing in their purity and simplicity (Xie 1986, 5).

Studies of myth continued to proliferate during the 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century, and the diversity of interpretive positions on myth now current within China makes it difficult to summarize the most recent history of thinking on myth in a short space. Still, the romantic notion so prominent in Xie's work that the modern Chinese nation-state and its citizens can almost effortlessly find the essence of Chineseness in Chinese myth remains a powerful force even today.

In my attempt to better understand the role that myth has played in how many intellectuals in China have tried to imagine and create a modern identity for China, I have focused on scholars of myth working primarily through the publication of books and articles. Again and again, once the notion of myth is taken up in China, either implicitly or explicitly, comparisons with the West follow. And even the best scholar can easily move from productive comparison to the sort that makes comparison a game of finding a match in the Chinese record for everything found in, for example, Greek myth. For the remainder of this study, I turn my attention now to more recent efforts by some very different social agents to create a Chinese mythology, this time not a textual mythology, but a tangible, monumental one.

[8]On the Neolithic, Xie cites H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History* (1920), an attempt to present world history in evolutionary terms (Xie 1986, 2). Works such as this, heavily indebted to social Darwinism, remain popular in China down to the present.

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Monumentalizing Myth

Temples or shrines dedicated to Yu the Great (trad. late third millennium BCE), celebrated in ancient texts as the conqueror of a great flood that threatened to render the world uninhabitable, are found all over China today, and are a very old phenomenon. Tradition holds that Yu travelled throughout the realm, dredging channels and creating riverways in order to drain away the floodwaters. In so doing, his travels delimited the known, civilized world, which he organized into the Nine Provinces. It is possible to find some local lore surrounding Yu in almost every corner of China proper today, and to find some monument to him there as well.

One of the best known of these is the great temple and mausoleum complex dedicated to Yu in the Kuaiji mountain range outside of Shaoxing, in Zhejiang province. Already in the Warring States era, there was a tradition that Yu had stopped in this area while taming the floods. He was said to have called a meeting here of all the regional rulers, but there is a prominent mythic version of this story, in which in fact Yu called a meeting of demons and gods. The *Guo yu* portrays Confucius discussing having seen the bone of a giant from this region, killed by Yu for insubordination when he arrived late to the meeting.[9] These and other stories are linked to the region through the Spring and Autumn era state of Yue, based in the Shaoxing region. It seems that rulers from Yue, an outsider state that began participating in the Zhou cultural and political realm in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, may have written themselves into the myth of Yu as a way of gaining legitimacy: the neighboring state of Wu had done a similar thing when it argued that its founder was an elder brother of a predynastic Zhou ruler. Elaborate claims emerged concerning Yu's stay in the region, and how he transformed the local populace. Yue kings used the clan name Si, claiming descent from an early Xia king, Shao Kang, thus making themselves descendants of Yu, perhaps a form of one-upsmanship in response to Wu's claim to be descendants of the Zhou.[10]

An early and widespread textual tradition says Yu died and was buried here at Mt. Kuaiji.[11] There have been temple complexes and a mausoleum here for centuries—the current temple is purported to date from the sixth century CE

[9]See *Guo yu* "Lu yu" 国语°鲁语 *Sibu congkan* ed., 5.13b-14a. The passage includes a classic example of the rationalizing, historicizing bias of the imperial commentarial tradition: Wei Zhao 韦昭, 201–73, explains the expression "Yu assembled the spirits at Mount Kuaiji" to mean he summoned "those (human) rulers over the regions of mountains and rivers who thereby act as masters of (these local) spirits."

[10]On the genealogy of Wu, which makes the founder of the state of Wu the elder brother of the Zhou King Wen's grandfather, Gugong Danfu, see *Shiji* 史记 [Records of the historian] 31.1445 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1959). On Yu's ties to the state of Yue, see *Shiji* 41.1739 and *Wu Yue chunqiu* "Yue wang Wu Yu waizhuan" 吴越春秋° 越王无余外专 6 (Zhou 1997, 101–12).

[11]*Mozi* 6.25, "Jiesang *xia*" 墨子°节丧下 (*Sibu congkan* ed., 6.13a) is likely the earliest mention of his burial, but the tradition is found repeatedly in late Warring States and Han texts.

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(Southern Liang), and has been repeatedly rebuilt and expanded. Most recently, the complex was refurbished in the early years of this century, leading up to a nationally televised ritual offering to Yu made here in 2005.[12] In 2001, on a peak that overlooks the city of Shaoxing to the north and the temple complex to Yu to the southwest, a massive bronze statue of Yu was erected (see figure 1). The statue is over sixty-five feet tall. The scale is of course intentionally overpowering, its demeanor ferocious and stern. Yu's beard and muscular stature, along with his *musi* 木耜, his trademark tool of flood control, have become ubiquitous across the contemporary Chinese landscape over the last fifteen years or so. The basic imagery is taken from one of the few early portrayals of Yu we have, the stone relief carving at the Wu Liang shrine in Shandong, a tomb of an Eastern Han aristocrat. There, Yu is visually distinguished from the other early sage rulers precisely by the presence of his *musi*. Given the paucity of pictorial portrayals of early culture heroes in the art historical record of China, the Wu Liang shrine image has been one of the few touchstones for modern artists. Statues of Yu that began to appear in the 1980s are particularly beholden to this image, right down to Yu's posture, generic facial expression, and relatively static, robed silhouette. By the late 1990s, however, monumental portrayals of Yu had undergone substantial changes. His beard, hardly visible in the earliest statues, is now a requisite feature and sometimes becomes unruly, while his once shapeless robes have given way to a more tight-fitting wardrobe, presumably in order to better reveal all the body-building Yu has done over the last two decades. As we will see below, the newest statues often forego clothes almost altogether.

At this stage, with the appearance of statues of Yu on the rise across China, one might protest that this new phenomenon has everything to do with monumentality but nothing to do with myth. After all, many of these monuments seem intent on celebrating Yu as a completely historical figure, a sort of founding father of the Chinese race or nation. The sheer size of these monuments, however, suggests the superhuman status of their subjects. In fact, the tension between the mythical attributes of such figures as Yu and the attempt to

[12]Leibold (2008) includes a summary of the events surrounding the televised rituals in Shaoxing. He addresses some of the same phenomena discussed here, but our interpretations differ in important ways. Leibold views the events in Shaoxing as primarily of national proportions, whereas I would argue for a strong provincial role in these and other similar events. Moreover, in spite of briefly mentioning similar rites to the Yellow Emperor and other figures, Leibold considers the rites to Yu an isolated phenomenon, where Yu is singled out as "a focal point for a vision of national identity in the 1990s" from other figures such as Yao or Shun (Leibold 2008, 364). In fact, very similar rituals were being conducted and monuments erected to these exact figures in other cities and provinces throughout China in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century. Finally, Leibold sees the rites in Shaoxing as part of a larger cultural trend in the 1990s centered on the resurrection of traditional values and the rise of "new Confucianism." While this may be accurate in broad terms, such cultural trends, and the relationships between them as overarching phenomena and more discrete instantiations of them, require considerable analysis if they are to carry explanatory power.

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Figure 1. Statue of Yu the Great overlooking Shaoxing.

portray them in historical contexts is a very old and productive one. While it is often argued that Confucians and other literati in early China tried to strip mythic figures of their superhuman traits and recast them as purely historical people, this line of analysis vastly oversimplifies the way compilers of sacred histories, such as the *Shang shu* and *Shiji*, approached their work. The fact that many mythical qualities of these figures have not been completely effaced from the sacred histories suggests that the fantastic traits of the Yellow Emperor, Yu the Great, and others provided powerful, authoritative imagery to early Chinese thinkers and statesmen, just as they still do to sculptors and city planners today.

Still, in most cases, it would be difficult to demonstrate that the city officials who conceived and commissioned this new crop of statues necessarily had the substantiation of early myth as a conscious goal. A single, very dramatic case study, however, reveals an enormous amount about how these new public monuments are being conjured up.

At the juncture of the Han and Yangzi rivers, at the center of Hubei's largest city, Wuhan, the Qing Chuan Ge, a temple commemorating Yu's work controlling the flood, was constructed in the Ming dynasty. Below the old temple, stretching along the northern bank of the Yangzi, a new park was constructed in the opening years of this century, called the "Yu the Great Mythology Park" 大禹神话园. The main entrance to the park is west of the old temple, just under the Number One Bridge across the Yangzi. A massive bronze statue of Yu, accompanied by

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Figure 2. Yu the Great with helpers at the entrance to the Wuhan park.

his helpers, a dragon and turtle (see figure 2), marks the beginning of a long series of sculptures, in stone or bronze, that punctuate the long, narrow park as it stretches along the bank of the Yangzi eastward, reaching the rocky cliff bottom underneath the old temple to Yu. The first section of the park begins by portraying, in a half-dozen stone sculptures, the story of Gun, Yu's ill-fated father, who labored in vain against the floodwaters for years before being punished by the high god for his failure. This short prelude opens on to the edge of a large stone and concrete circular plaza at the center of the park, on either side of which the sculptures, now in bronze, are suddenly larger than life. The subject matter and the execution are quite striking, fully embracing the mythic elements of the many stories of Yu.

The park is to be experienced as a visual narrative in three dimensions. The transition from the first stage of the park, focusing briefly on the story of Gun, to the main narrative theme of Yu is marked by two remarkable bronze statues. The first is a writhing, sixteen-foot-tall portrayal of the birth of Yu from the belly of his father, whose aged but still muscular body is shown merging with the ground around him as a demon crouches over him and slices open his belly with a massive knife. Out of the opening, a long, twisting dragon body erupts, but in place of its head we find the torso and cherub face of the infant Yu (see figure 3). The story is very old, but as far as I am aware, pictorial representation of it is unprecedented, certainly in this dramatic fashion.[13] Moving eastward, the next statue is

[13]Translations of the sources of most of the stories represented in the park can be found in Chapter 8 of Birrell (1993), a work deeply indebted to Yuan Ke.

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Figure 3. Yu emerges from his father's belly.

over twelve feet tall and depicts the story of Yu doing battle with Xiang Liu, a nine-headed dragon that, head by head, was devouring the nine provinces Yu had created when ordering the world and draining the floodwaters away to the sea. Yu's muscular frame is drawn back, readying an axe blow to the mighty dragon's heads, and below, the serpentine tail of the beast entwines Yu's legs in a manner that suggests a direct visual reference to the famous Laocoön, although the tone of the scene is obviously celebratory, not tragic (see figure 4).



Figure 4. Yu doing battle with Xiang Liu, the nine-headed dragon.

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At the far edge of the plaza, two more statues match these in size and general appearance. The first, standing thirteen feet tall, depicts the first meeting of Yu and his wife, the girl from Tushan, her breast conspicuously bared, the fabled nine-tailed fox standing at their feet (see figure 5). A bit further on, a statue of Yu in bronze is merged with a stone carving portraying the famous story of Yu thrice passing by the gate of his home during his labors, never pausing to visit his family in spite of the audible cries of his son coming from within (see figure 6). The predominance of stone here marks a transition to the remaining sculptures, rendered in granite, as in the opening section of the park devoted to Gun, but now mostly in low relief. The scenes are now less visually dramatic, sometimes not linked to specific narrative episodes but rather generic portrayals of Yu leading masses of people in the work of flood control. This last section of the park is the only portion that does not look indebted to foreign imagery, except perhaps in the marginal nod to Soviet (and Maoist) era depictions of masses of people working together toward a common goal (see figure 7). Almost everything else about the visual portrayals of Yu's story seems more indebted to Greco-Roman sculpture than to Chinese aesthetics. This impression is confirmed by the centerpiece of the park.

The massive, round plaza that joins the two long, rectangular walkways decorated with the statues described above is edged along the bank of the river by a semicircle of nine stone animals, each bearing a *ding* cauldron on its back, representing the famous "nine tripods" that were supposedly cast during the reign of Yu the Great to symbolize his sovereignty over the Nine Provinces. The nine tripods of course became a stock metaphor for legitimate control over the empire. Overlooking the nine tripods is a massive bronze statue of Yu riding a winged horse flanked by dragons as he carves out the channels that allow the floodwaters to drain away and make the realm habitable (see figure 8). Below



Figure 5. Yu meets his wife, the girl from Tu shan.

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Figure 6. Yu passing by his gate three times.

his gaze, the nine tripods are the most modest in the long series of bronze and stone monuments that are arrayed over an area roughly three football fields long.

The statue of Yu riding the mythical beasts stands twenty feet tall and looks out over the plaza, the tripods, and the Yangzi below. Behind it is a massive wall of golden marble, eighteen feet tall and almost three hundred feet long, carved with more vivid scenes from the various stories of Yu's work quelling the floodwaters (see figure 9). Such narrative frieze work is certainly not unheard of in China, but again, there is nothing among indigenous traditions that is anything like this. Swirling clouds and flames in the background are recognizable from traditional Chinese imagery, and a few scenes of Yu doing battle with water demons are suggestive of some Buddhist portrayals of the horrors of the Mahayana hells, but the



Figure 7. Yu leads the masses in quelling the floods.

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Figure 8. Yu the Great overlooking the Wuhan park.

dynamic, muscular, often strained figures engaged in battle, the emotional depiction of the toils, courage, and violence of the stories—these are all decidedly uncharacteristic of Chinese art.

A striking example comes in the third major narrative presentation of the frieze, where Yu fights with Gong Gong, variously portrayed in texts as either the Minister of Works originally in charge of flood control or a mythical demon. Here, Gong Gong is a writhing, winged water beast. Crashing waves and searing flames surround the two, and Yu's muscular body nearly springs forth from the sculpture as he readies his sword for a forceful blow to Gong Gong's serpentine figure (see figure 10). It is not possible to find such a powerful textual description of this scene, much less a visual one, in known traditions about Yu. Before it come an image of Yu as a child, riding on the back of a tiger, and then a dramatic portrayal of Yu receiving his mandate from the Emperor of



Figure 9. Marble wall and bronze statue at center of the Wuhan park.

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Figure 10. Yu battles Gong Gong.

Heaven to do battle with the demons of the flood (see figure 11). After the image of Gong Gong come two distinct scenes of Yu as recipient of revealed talismans, the magic square offered up from the river and then an inscribed tablet handed down from none other than Fu Xi (see figures 12 and 13). As with the composite narratives of Yuan Ke's works, the sculptors here are cobbling together pieces of stories from many different texts ranging across centuries to arrive at a single mythic narrative, one rich and full enough to compare with those familiar from Greek myth, and now, finally, one as visually impressive as well.



Figure 11. Yu receives the mandate to quell the floodwaters.

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Figure 12. Yu receives a talisman from the river.

Here the frieze is interrupted briefly by the bronze statue of Yu at the center of the plaza, which backs up against the marble wall. On the other side, it continues with four more scenes: Yu and his assistants (including the tiger he befriended as a child) defeating several water monsters, notably Wu Zhiqi, whom he chained up under a nearby mountain; the well-known story of Yu splitting Yi mountain to create a great waterfall called Dragon's Gate; a stylized depiction of Yu's wife coming upon Yu when he had transformed himself into a bear; and finally, Emperor Shun yielding the throne to Yu out of recognition of his merits in taming the floods (see figures 14, 15, and 16). This last image brings closure to the frieze, echoing the image of Yu receiving the mandate to



Figure 13. Yu receives a sacred writing from Fu Xi.

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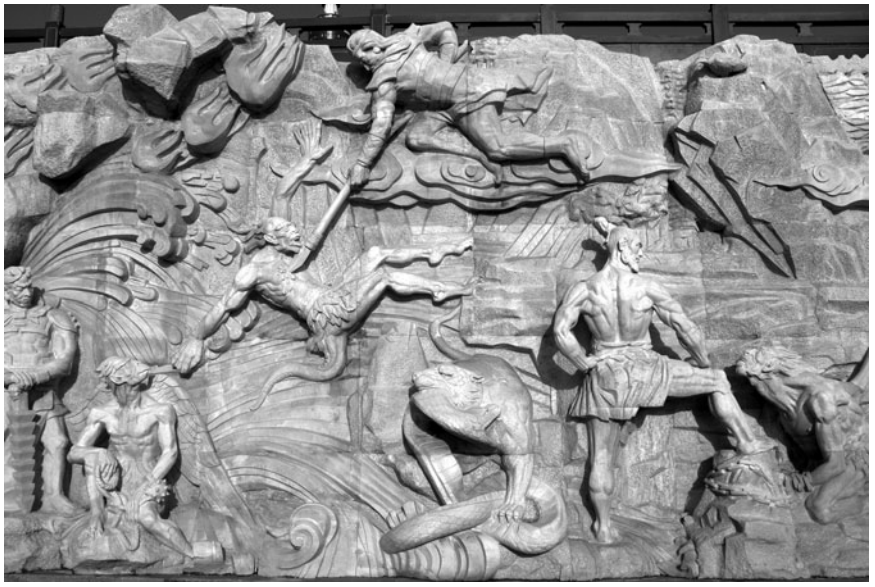


Figure 14. Yu and his allies fight the water demons.

control the floods at the far western end of the wall. Past the two freestanding statues of Yu meeting his wife and then repeatedly passing by her gate at the eastern end of the wall, the foliage of the park becomes dense, and the carved granite artwork takes up some minor themes before culminating in a stone column over nineteen feet tall that concludes the park's narrative through reference to a local story from the Qing dynasty. As the story goes, the high Qing official



Figure 15. Yu's wife turns to stone.

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Figure 16. Shun passes the throne to Yu.

Zhang Zhidong, who served in this region late in the nineteenth century, discovered a fisherman selling a bracelet used by Yu to bind the water demon Wu Zhiqi, depicted earlier in the frieze. He instructed the fisherman to return the bracelet to its spot underwater, and then had a massive "river-stabilizing" column erected over the demon to ensure its continued imprisonment (see figure 17). This final sculpture depicts that column, its surface carved with scenes illustrating the story. Around the bottom of the four faces of the column, the demon's face, chained hands, and the soles of his feet are imaginatively made visible through the mud and stone at the bottom of the Yangzi (see figure 18). This final installment is a clever narrative device, serving to collapse the great historical distance between antiquity and the present.

Linking the otherwise palpably mythical narrative of the park to a historical time and place is important in rendering the park and its contents meaningful. While the final sculpture brings stories and legends about Yu to the brink of the modern age through the figure of Zhang Zhidong, one of the great scholar-statesmen and early modernizers of the late Qing era, a massive marble slab at the entrance, back at the far western end of the park, serves a similar purpose. Entering the main gate, one first sees the park's name inscribed on the front of the long slab. On the reverse side, a long inscription, in Chinese and English, puts the entire monument into spatial and historical context for the contemporary visitor, linking the park to events narrated in the canonical *Shang shu*, or *Classic of Documents*, to the old temple to Yu, and finally to the two most devastating inundations along the Yangzi in the modern era, disastrous floods in 1954 and again in 1998. The inscription memorializes the determination of the local populace in facing this adversity by invoking the spirit of Yu the Great.[14] In an

[14]The link between the park's mythic motifs and the hard work of the masses is also emphasized by the opening ceremonies of the park, made to coincide with the national Labor Day celebrations of May 1, 2006.

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Figure 17. Zhang Zhidong and the river stabilizing column (note the water demon's feet at the bottom).

essay entitled "Myth and Ideology," the scholar Christopher Flood notes that "myths purport to prove the validity of values by showing that they can be enacted. Mythmaking is therefore indispensible to ideology" (Flood 2002, 189). This new park in Wuhan is a striking instance of mythmaking writ large: the creation of a visual Chinese mythology. As the inscription at the entrance to the park suggests, while we may seek a deeper understanding of the desire to forge a Chinese mythology in the 150 years of China's struggles to create itself as a modern nation-state with a long and hallowed history, the moment of this park's conception came as a response to very recent events, which turn out to be well worth our investigation.

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Figure 18. Water demon Wu Zhiqi chained below Turtle Mountain.

That the entire park in Wuhan is an overt attempt to create for China a monument to myth that can stand up visually and narratively to the Greco-Roman traditions of both sculpture and myth is given final verification in the story of its conceptualization and realization over the last decade. As noted at the park's entrance, in 1998, massive flooding along the Yangzi caused extensive damage in several provinces, and in response, in the Wuhan area between 2000 and 2004, major repairs to levees along the Yangzi shoreline were undertaken. With the improvement of the shoreline came beautification—new riverside parks were created. By 2004, the mayor of Wuhan had announced a new component to these projects: to add cultural elements to the construction along the banks of the Yangzi. In so doing, he was of course merely taking part in a much broader phenomenon that had begun almost the moment the Reform Era began, in the early 1980s, but which reached a fevered peak in the late 90s: the promotion of cultural tourism and the investment of large amounts of local money into building the infrastructure to foster it—from roads and hotels to museums and other cultural sites. The new construction at the temple to Yu in Shaoxing was of course an example of this. In most places, the task was to find and promote local links to well-known literary or historical figures or events, or in some cases to celebrate

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recent archaeological discoveries. What is most striking about the statues and sculptures in Wuhan is the extent to which the many stories about Yu conquering the floods are openly treated as mythical, not historical.

This turns out to have been a conscious decision. Following the directives of the mayor of Wuhan in 2004 to build new cultural features into the riverside construction, the city's Water Resource Bureau official Cheng Taoping 程涛平 was put in charge of the cultural element of the work being done along the banks of the Yangzi in the Hanyang area. In an article discussing the inspiration for the park, he describes walking along the banks of the river and discovering the old temple to Yu there (Cheng 2006). He went on to learn about the history of the temple, noting that in the *Classic of Documents* Yu is credited with having forged the confluence of the Han and Yangzi rivers here as part of his flood control efforts. This seemed a suitable precedent for erecting a monument related to flood control, and Cheng began formulating his plan to expand on the temple to Yu. However, looking beyond the *Shang shu*, he notes, he found plenty of material to suggest that Yu was a mythic figure, not a historical one. As it turns out, he was able to turn for further inspiration to the work of an old friend, a historian and scholar of myth in Wuhan named Feng Tianyu 冯天瑜. In the early 1980s, while Feng was working on a book about Chinese myth, the two had travelled together to a conference in Sichuan, where Feng met with Yuan Ke (who went on to write the preface to Feng's book). During this trip, Feng impressed upon Cheng the notion that "Chinese myths are in no way inferior to western myths" (Cheng 2006, 6). His book, *Shanggu shenhua zongheng tan* 上古神话纵横谈 [Historical and comparative discussion of ancient myth], makes the same point.

Feng Tianyu's study of Chinese myth follows the comparative approach found in Mao Dun, Yuan Ke, and others, and in fact surpasses all the works surveyed here so far in its detailed comparative analysis. Feng's point is often to elucidate how Chinese myths express or embody the values and spirit of the Chinese people, and this end is repeatedly served by juxtaposition to Greek myths. Cheng specifically cites Feng's chapter on the myths of Gun and Yu conquering the flood as his inspiration in designing the riverside park in Wuhan, and indeed, almost every narrative scene from the park can be found in Feng's composite retelling of the Gun and Yu myths. Feng refers to Gun as "China's Prometheus," and says that Yu "reflects the will and ideals of the (Chinese) people" (Feng 1983, 167, 181). He continues, "through the image of Yu, we can see many shining virtues of our ancestors" (Feng 1983, 181–82). He notes that myths of a great flood are found all over the world, and argues that China's flood myth is in fact superior to most other flood stories. He returns to his earlier proposed parallel between Gun and Prometheus to illustrate his point. While Gun's son, Yu, worked tirelessly to quell the floods and make the world safe for humanity, Prometheus's son, Deucalion, simply survived the flood by building an ark. Feng focuses on the Greek flood myth in part because he sees other fruitful

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comparisons between Gun, who stole the swelling soil from Heaven to fight the floods, and Prometheus, who of course stole fire from the gods. But he is also clearly presenting a veiled critique of the biblical flood story as well, and thereby of all of Western civilization, when he argues that in the Chinese flood myth, Gun and Yu "do not attempt to hide away in some 'ark' and avoid the calamity, but rather lead the masses to rise up and struggle against the flood" (Feng 1983, 183). He pursues his analysis further, saying that in the story of Gun and Yu, the traditional Chinese celebration of the father-son relationship over all other familial ties is evident. Finally, he juxtaposes the theme of yielding the throne, perhaps the central motif of the larger narrative of Yao, Shun, and Yu as told in the *Classic of Documents*, with the violence of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, implying a major distinction between Chinese values (with an emphasis on harmony and cooperation) and Western values (with an emphasis on violence and struggle).

Taken together, these three motifs of the story of Yu and Gun fighting the flood are in fact quite contradictory. Does the story emphasize the father-son relationship, or the yielding of the throne to someone outside the family? Does it illustrate the Chinese people's spirit of determination to struggle against nature, or their non-combative preference for harmony? In his final contrast between a peace-loving China and the always-competitive West, he prefigures a mode of armchair analysis that would go on to dominate the popular press in China in the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, culminating somewhat ironically in Jiang Rong's 姜戎 (aka Lü Jiamin 吕嘉民) 2004 bestseller, *Lang tuteng* 狼图腾 [Wolf totem], which makes basically the same juxtaposition, albeit through different analogies and to different ends.[15]

In the design of the new park in Wuhan, which began that same year, Cheng set himself a goal similar to that of his friend, Feng: to make the grandeur of China's great flood myth visible to the world. To this end, he opted to portray Yu not as a historical figure, but in his full mythic glory. Yet in visualizing this great myth, Cheng found himself paying tribute not to Chinese aesthetics, but rather to Western sensibilities. In his article on the park, Cheng describes his inspiration as a combination of a long admiration for Greek myth and recollections from a recent tour of Europe he had made, during which the muscular,

[15]The reemergence of the notion of totemism in defining the Chinese race is striking here. Jiang characterizes the Chinese as "sheep" and the nomadic cultures of the steppe, along with Western civilization, as "wolves." In an appendix to his novel, Jiang offers a revisionist but still mythistorical evaluation of Chinese history from the time of the Yellow Emperor on, written to illustrate his view that the Chinese have historically been preyed upon. The sort of tension evident in Feng's work, between celebrating the purported peace-loving nature of the Chinese people and taking pride in the spirit of struggle reflected in the story of Yu conquering the floods, is largely absent from Jiang's work, which fervently advocates appropriating the ways of the wolf. In many ways Jiang is considered a social critic, yet the simplistic East-West dichotomy so ubiquitous elsewhere in the Chinese popular media remains unquestioned in his work.

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heroic style of Greco-Roman sculpture had made a deep impression on him. Monuments such as the Wuhan park are pitched at a range of audiences, designed to attract tourism and global capital from overseas Chinese and foreign visitors as well as to cater to the national tourist market. Visual references to motifs thought to be internationally recognized, or attempts to render Chinese cultural themes readable to a global audience, are simultaneously aimed to make China look modern to insiders while still remaining recognizably Chinese, *and* look approachable to outsiders while still remaining sufficiently exotic to satisfy a hunger for the Oriental.[16] Cheng set out to give China a monument to rival what he had grown up reading about and gone on to see while in Europe (Cheng 2006, 6). The creation of a Chinese mythology seems inevitably to occur in the shadow of the Greek gods.

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[16]Some of these same issues are explored in Oakes (2006).

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