

Unit 1

Reading A

A General Introduction to Chinese Mythology 《中国神话通论》

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1 By Chinese mythology, we mean the body of myths historically recorded and currently transmitted within the present geographic boundaries of China. It should include not only myths transmitted by people of the Han ethnic group but also those by the other fifty-five ethnic groups living in this broad area. Since almost every ethnic group has its own mythical gods and stories about their creative actions, there is not a systematic, integrated, and homogeneous “Chinese mythology” held and transmitted by all the Chinese people. Even among Han people, there is not an integrated system of myths.

我们所说的中国神话，是指在现今中国地理范围内历史上记载的和当下流传的神话总体。它既应包括汉族人民传承的神话，也应包括生活在这片广袤大地上的其他五十五个民族的神话。由于几乎每个民族都有自己的神话神祇和关于他们创造活动的故事，所以并不存在一个被全体中国人所共同拥有并传承的、系统的、统一的、同质的“中国神话”。即使在汉族人群中，也不存在一个统一的神话体系。

2 The earliest written records of ancient myths can be traced back to about 3,000 years ago, though other forms of designs and paintings on shells, bones, and bronzes probably relating to myth appeared earlier than this. Recently, researchers found a bronze vessel named “Suigongxu” (Suigong was a duke of the Sui State, now belonging to modern Shandong Province; “Xu” is an ancient bronze vessel that has a cover and two ears; it functions as a food container), which can date back to the 9th or 8th century BC, the middle of the Western Zhou Dynasty. The inscription on the inside bottom of the vessel consists of 98 Chinese characters, praising the achievements of the mythic hero Yu. It tells the story that heaven ordered Yu to scatter earth, so Yu went around all the mountains, cutting down the trees in the forests and deepening the seas and rivers to drain all the water on earth into the sea. This inscription shows that the technique of recording myth in Chinese characters had become relatively mature nearly 3,000 years ago. Additionally, it illustrates that at least as late as the middle of the Western Zhou Dynasty, the myth about Yu controlling the flood had already been spread, and it had been historicized into a legend about a great hero or a great king in the upper class of society.

古代神话的最早书面记载可追溯到大约 3000 年前，不过其他与神话可能有关的在贝壳、骨头和青铜器上的图案及绘画形式出现得更早。最近，研究人员发现了一件名为“遂公盃”（遂国的国君为遂公，遂国在今山东省境内；“盃”是一种古代青铜食器，有盖和两个耳）的青铜器，其年代可追溯至公元前 9 世纪或 8 世纪，即西周中期。这件青铜器内底上的铭文共有 98 个字，歌颂了神话英雄大禹的功绩。铭文讲述了上天命令大禹分布息壤（一种能自己生长、永不耗减的土壤），于是大禹走遍所有的山川，砍伐森林中的树木，加深海洋和河流，使地球上的所有水都流入大海。这段铭文表明，在近 3000 年前，用汉字记录神话的技术已经相对成熟。此外，它还说明，至少在西周中期，大禹治水的神话已经流传开来，并且已经被历史化为一个关于伟大英雄或上层社会伟大君王的传说。

3 But these inscriptions recorded myths very simply. Sometimes the mythological stories they

illustrate are hard to understand. Therefore, Chinese scholars rely primarily on accounts of myths recorded in later ancient writings after the Western Zhou Dynasty to study these myths.

但这些铭文对神话的记录非常简略。有时它们所阐释的神话故事很难理解。因此，中国学者主要依靠西周以后的古代文献中记载的神话故事来研究这些神话。

4 In China, there is no sacred canon recording myths, beliefs, or sacred history like the Bible or the Koran, nor were there any literati, troubadours, or shamans (sorcerer or sorceress) who collected myths from oral tradition and compiled them into a systematic and integrated mythology, like the Greek collections attributed to Homer and Hesiod. Rather, myths in ancient China were usually spread in scattered and fragmented forms in various written material. These sources contain information about archaeology, literature, philosophy, geography, history, witchcraft, ethnography, religion, folklore, and so on. Many of them preserve only a few myths, but some of them hold a comparatively large number of myths and thus become treasures of ancient Chinese myths. Among them, Shanhaijing (The Classic of Mountains and Seas), Chuici (The Songs of Chu) and Huainanzi are thought to be the major repositories of Chinese ancient myths.

在中国，没有像《圣经》或《古兰经》那样记录神话、信仰或神圣历史的神圣经典，也没有像希腊传说中被认为是荷马和赫西俄德所收集整理的那样，有文人、行吟诗人或萨满（巫师）从口头传统中收集神话并将其编纂成系统、完整的神话集。相反，中国古代的神话通常以零散、碎片化的形式散布在各种书面材料中。这些材料包含考古、文学、哲学、地理、历史、巫术、民族志、宗教、民俗等方面的信息。其中许多只保留了少量神话，但有些则包含了相对较多的神话，从而成为中国古代神话的宝库。在这些材料中，《山海经》《楚辞》和《淮南子》被认为是中国古代神话的主要宝库。

5 Myths are neither static nor separate from society. Rather, their existence and transmission are deeply influenced by their social and cultural contexts. On the other side, those myths that have been handed down for thousands of years and contain Chinese people's philosophy, art, beliefs, customs, and value systems also have had a great influence on Chinese society and culture.

神话既不是静态的，也不是与社会相分离的。相反，它们的存在和传承深受其社会和文化背景的影响。另一方面，那些流传了数千年、包含着中国人的哲学、艺术、信仰、习俗和价值体系的神话，也对中国社会和文化产生了巨大的影响。