



## Origins

Chinese etiological myths of cosmogony, which explain the origin of the universe, describe how the world came to be ordered out of chaos. These myths are ways of conceptualizing the universe at the moment when it was created, *in illo tempore*, or “in the beginning” of mythological time. Chinese cosmogonic myths fit the general pattern of myths worldwide in the sense that they do not describe creation *ex nihilo*: the cosmos is created from “some already existing matter” (Dundes 1984, 5). Many mythologies containing accounts of the origin of the world and of human life reveal a deep interest in ultimate origins, in tracing the world back to a single primeval element that existed from the time before “the beginning” and from which all things emerged. In the ancient cosmologies of Greece, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and elsewhere, the mythic narratives describe this primeval element as water. In Vedic Indian myth, it is fire in water. By contrast, the basic principle of Chinese cosmology is a primeval vapor, which was believed to embody cosmic energy governing matter, time, and space. This energy, according to Chinese mythic narratives, undergoes a transformation at the moment of creation, so that the nebulous element of vapor becomes differentiated into dual elements of male and female, Yin and Yang, hard and soft matter, and other binary elements.

Besides the concept of a primeval element, most ancient cosmolo-

gies contain narratives that present a picture of the cosmos that emerged from it. The ancient Chinese conceived the world as a square area of land or earth, above which was the round sky, held up like a dome by four supports from the earth. In some accounts these supports are said to be four giant pillars, or eight pillars fastened by cords to the sky's canopy, or four immense mountains reaching from earth to the sky, which they prop up. This world picture bears a strong resemblance to the ancient Egyptian view, an account of which is given by J. M. Plumley (1975, 17-41). Since Egyptian mythic narratives predate the Chinese by about two and a half millennia, the resemblance may well reflect a cross-cultural influence from Egypt to China through Central Asia.

Another important point is that the ancient Chinese conceived of the cosmos in this world picture as the only world, not as part of a vast, limitless universe. One of the Chinese accounts from the fourth century B.C., "Questions of Heaven," makes it clear that the edges and boundaries, seams and corners are all observable in this world picture. And like the Babylonian, the Chinese cosmogonic myths describe how the stars, sun, and moon became fixed and ordered in their trajectories soon after the moment of creation.

The cosmogonic myths differ fundamentally from those of other traditions, such as the Judeo-Christian, in the absence of a creator and lack of any necessity for a divine will or benevolent intelligence to ordain the act of creation. Consequently, Chinese cosmogonic myths are not marked by the seal of authority within a monolithic religiocultural system, such as is the function of the account in *Genesis*, which serves as the authorized version of the origin of the world in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Rather than one authorized version in the Chinese tradition, there are several accounts of the creation of the world and of human beings. G. E. R. Lloyd has observed of ancient Greek cosmology, "There is no such thing as *the* cosmological model, *the* cosmological theory, of the Greeks" (1975, 205). Thus Lloyd speaks of "Greek cosmologies" in the plural. Similarly, it is more accurate to discuss the pluralism of Chinese cosmological conceptions. This point is important for the Sinological debate on ancient Chinese cosmology, for many scholars have asserted that the cosmological tradition in ancient China is negligible, or even nonexistent, as N. J. Girardot amply demonstrates in his seminal article on this subject, "The Problem of Creation Mythology in the Study of Chinese Religion" (1976, 289-318). Exceptions to this "benign neglect" in Sinology are the scholars Wolfram Eberhard, Derk Bodde, Eduard Erkes, Max Kaltenmark, and K. C. Chang.

Using the pluralistic approach to ancient Chinese cosmologies, therefore, it will be seen that five main traditions emerge based on mythic narratives drawn from six classical texts, which are early or relatively late. The five main traditions are: (1) the cosmogonic myth that describes the world picture in "Questions of Heaven," dating from about the fourth century B.C.; (2) the cosmogonic myth that describes the creation of the universe and humans out of formless misty vapor in *Huai-nan Tzu*, dating from the second century B.C., and also in the *Tao yuan*, a recently excavated mortuary text believed to date from the fourth century B.C.; (3) the cosmogonic myth that describes the separation of earth from sky and the origin of the firstborn semidivine human in *Historical Records of the Three Sovereign Divinities and the Five Gods*, dating from the third century A.D.; (4) the myth of the cosmological human body in *A Chronicle of the Five Cycles of Time*, dating from the third century A.D.; and (5) the myth of the making of human beings by a creatrix in *Explanations of Social Customs*, dating from the late second century A.D.

Within these cosmogonic mythic narratives there are four separate accounts of the creation of human beings, which range from nature-oriented myths to anthropogonic ones and from a male-dominated creation myth (in which the firstborn semidivine human is male) to a female one. In terms of dating, the earliest cosmogonic Chinese myths are from the fourth to the second century B.C., and the latest appears in the third century A.D. It is significant that as the early myths began to be codified and rationalized in the late and postclassical era, it was the latest, male-dominated creation myth of P'an Ku which became the generally accepted account and acquired a sort of orthodoxy in the ensuing centuries. Compared with other cosmogonic myths in the ancient world, Chinese accounts appear relatively late in the mythographic tradition.

In his essay "The Cosmology of Early China," Joseph Needham usefully summarizes the three schools of cosmological thought which had become current by the late Han period. His discussion does not, however, take into account the earliest texts cited in this chapter, which date from the fourth century B.C. These three schools, which so dominated and informed astronomical science in the late classical period, were described by Ts'ai Yung (A.D. 133-192) as the K'ai t'ien, or domed universe school; the Hun t'ien, or celestial circles of the astronomical sphere school; and the Hsuan yeh, or infinite empty space school (Needham 1975, 87-93).

Finally, it will be seen that whereas in Chinese cosmogony an

upper world and an earthly world are described, little mention is made of an underworld. None of the accounts gives a detailed description of the geography of the world of the dead, or the underworld, such as that ruled by Hades, brother of the sky god, Zeus, in Greek myth, or in Mesopotamian myth.

### The Origin of the World

The source of the first reading in this section is "Questions of Heaven," chapter 3 of *Songs of Ch'u*. "Questions of Heaven" is the most valuable document in Chinese mythography. Written in about the fourth century B.C., it presents a systematic account of the main myths of ancient Ch'u in its 186 verses. The account opens with a narrative of the creation of the world and proceeds to the acts of the gods and suprahumans, and of mythical figures of the prehistorical era, ending with the deeds of historical personages up to the kings of Ch'u in the late sixth century B.C. An earlier date than the fourth century B.C. may be surmised for the myths related in the text, since it clearly draws on a preexisting fund of myths. The reasons the text is so valuable are that it is a rich store of ancient myth; that it constitutes the earliest repertoire of most primary and some minor myths; and that it serves as a control text by which to compare and contrast other mythic texts, whether earlier fragments, contemporary accounts, or later narratives. It is a unique document in the Chinese tradition because it contains in its brief confines the totality of deeply held beliefs at a single point in the mythological tradition.

The format of "Questions of Heaven" is a series of questions, about 160 in all (David Hawkes arrived at 172 [1985, 122], and Chiang Liang-fu found over 100 [1984, 337]). The questions contain fairly substantial information, so that if they do not hold the answer to the question posed, they point toward it. They are often expressed in such an arcane, convoluted manner that they form what might be termed sacred riddles. Another difficulty in interpretation is that the context or background of the myth referred to in some riddling questions has not been preserved in another version or contemporaneous document.

The purpose of these questions remains enigmatic, although their general substance has to do with cosmology, mythology, and history. Yet the unwritten answers to them were indubitably fixed in the mind of the person who framed them and in the minds of the audience for whom they were formulated. It is possible to infer that the puzzling

questions were meant to prompt a long-remembered knowledge and were designed to stir the mind, to entertain, and to serve as a sort of catechism concerning the most basic beliefs and sacred truths of the community of Ch'u which engendered them.

The anonymous author of "Questions of Heaven" was clearly an authoritative member of the sophisticated society of Ch'u state in Central China during the Warring States period of the late Chou dynasty. Well educated, deeply versed in his rich cultural traditions, he was probably an official of aristocratic standing in the Ch'u court. The unknown author served as custodian of the cultural heritage of Ch'u in its religious, historical, and political aspects. Traditionally, authorship of the text has been ascribed to Ch'ü Yuan, a shadowy figure in the aristocratic court circle of Ch'u, but modern scholarship views him more as an adapter of a priestly textual tradition than the author (Hawkes 1985, 126). The mythopoeia created by the mystique of this and other texts in *Songs of Ch'u* ascribed by tradition to Ch'ü Yuan has been brilliantly—and one would have thought conclusively—exposed by James Robert Hightower in "Ch'ü Yüan Studies" (1954, 192–223).

The first reading in this section marks the opening of the anonymous account, which declaims the sacral words *It says*, similar to the Western scriptural refrain *It is written*, for both appeal to a dim and distant tradition. The phrase distinguishes the mythic narrative of "Questions of Heaven" as sacred history, since the account of the more recent kings of Ch'u at the close of the text traces their ancestry back to the beginning of time, linking the Ch'u kings of history to the primeval era of gods and heroes.

The mythic narrative of the origin of the world in "Questions of Heaven" presents a vivid world picture. It mentions no prime cause, no first creator. From the "formless expanse" the primeval element of misty vapor emerges spontaneously as a creative force, which is organically constructed as a set of binary forces in opposition to each other—upper and lower spheres, darkness and light, Yin and Yang—whose mysterious transformations bring about the ordering of the universe. First the heavens and the celestial bodies appear. The vaulted sky, nine layers deep with nine celestial gates, is propped up by eight pillars rooted in the earth below. The cosmological question "Why do the eight pillars lean to the southeast and why is there a fault?" is answered in other mythic narratives that tell of the cosmic disorder caused by the marplot, Kung Kung (chap. 4). The play of mythic numbers is significant. There is the duality of binary forces, the trinity of the threefold

changes of Yin and Yang which wrought the cosmos, and the nonary system in the nine layers of sky and gates, besides the numerological significance of the number eight. The number nine is endowed with special meaning in the early culture of Ch'u, as is evidenced by several titles in *Songs of Ch'u*, such as "Nine Songs," "Nine Declarations," "Nine Arguments," and others (Hawkes 1985, 8). The number nine generally has a divine connotation, being especially linked to the sacred sphere of the sky. The number eight has distinctively Chinese connotations of cosmic harmony and felicity. The number three is of world-wide significance as a mystical or magical figure, and the number two, especially in its dualistic aspect, is distinctively Chinese.

The cosmological account ends with a description of the ordered movement of the sun, moon, and stars, "Dipper's Ladle," "the Cord," and "the twelve divisions." It is clear that although there is an interest in astronomy, the concept of heliocentricity does not play a significant role. Moreover, the world presented in this picture is conceived of as the only world, one that is not part of a limitless universe. Thus the narrative tells of the "ends" of the sky and their "corners and edges," which are observable and comprehensible to the human mind.

The second reading is from a newly discovered text, believed to date from the fourth century B.C. and from the same region of Ch'u as the first text. It was excavated from a Han tomb in Ch'angsha, Hunan, the area of ancient Ch'u culture (Jan Yün-hua 1978, 75). The narrative describes the chaos prior to creation, when everything was a wet, dark, empty space. Its concept of unity before creation, "all was one," strikingly resembles the modern cosmogonic concept of "singularity" at the moment of creation.

The third and fourth readings are from the *Huai-nan Tzu*, an eclectic work compiled in the early Han period, circa 139 B.C., by Liu An, king of Huai-nan (ca. 170-122 B.C.) and by members of his coterie of scholars and thinkers, mainly of the Taoist persuasion. The first of the two citations is from chapter 7, "Divine Gods." The second is from chapter 3, "The System of the Heavens." To some extent, the narratives provide some kind of answer to questions posed in "Questions of Heaven," but, together with the second reading, they present a cosmogonic picture that is quite different. Their mode of expression is discursive rather than interrogative. They also reveal an impetus toward natural philosophy in their conceptualization of the world at the moment of creation. Although in method and style the *Huai-nan Tzu* does not approach the Latin classic *De rerum natura* of Lucretius (ca. 94-55 B.C.),

a near contemporary of Liu An, there is an affinity between the two cosmogonic accounts in *Huai-nan Tzu* and the works of Roman nature philosophers in their reference to the theory of the elements, lightness, density, vapor, and so forth.

Both passages from *Huai-nan Tzu* develop the dualistic concept of Yin and Yang in "Questions of Heaven." The first citation narrates that there were "two gods born out of chaos," who divided into Yin and Yang and became "the hard and the soft"; the second citation elaborates this dualism. This dualism lends itself to Lévi-Straussian analysis, but if one looks beyond his theory of binary opposites and mediation, the use of abstract concepts in this dualism suggests that they may be the vestige of a much older mythological paradigm that was then rationalized and diminished. It is useful to hypothesize that the Chinese dualism of Yin and Yang and of the two primeval gods may be the rationalized remnant of the sort of motif to be found in Akkadian cosmogony, the mythic narrative of which was preserved in seventh-century B.C. texts but probably is much older. The Akkadian myth relates that in the beginning there were Apsu and Tiamat, male sweet water and female salt water; from them another male-female pair (possibly signifying silt), Lahmu and Lahamu, were born, and from them Anshar and Kishar (aspects of the horizon), who produced the sky god, who in turn produced Ea, the earth god (Kirk 1970, 121).

The second of the *Huai-nan Tzu* readings (the fourth reading) differs from the other cosmogonic accounts in its introduction of the mechanistic concept of a primal generator, the Tao, or Way. Though both extracts narrate the birth of all living things, the first specifies that "the pure vapor became humans," but the second integrates human beings into a generalized idea of all creatures, "the ten thousand things in nature."

The fifth reading is a late mythological account from *Historical Records of the Three Sovereign Divinities and the Five Gods* by Hsu Cheng, of the third century. The work now exists only in fragments preserved in later works. The text is important, even though it is late in the mythological tradition, because it has acquired the status of orthodoxy as the most generally accepted account of the cosmogonic myth in China. Rémi Mathieu suggests that the myth may derive from Tibetan peoples of the southwestern region, where the author, Hsu Cheng, lived in the era of the Three Kingdoms (1989, 29 n. 1). The text differs radically from the other accounts in its use of the cosmic egg as an image of primordial chaos. But the presentation of the egg motif through a simile rather than a statement of truth or fact, in the mythic mode, betrays the

lateness and literariness of its composition. The text also differs from those preceding in its presentation of an anthropogonic account of cosmogony, in which P'an Ku, Coiled Antiquity, is the firstborn semi-divine human who takes his place in the universe as an equal in the cosmic trinity of Heaven, earth, and human. This tripartition was not new with Hsu Cheng but was derived from early Han philosophers such as Tung Chung-shu (?179-?104 B.C.), a Confucian scholar and putative author of the sociopolitical philosophical work *Heavy Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals*. His school of thought sought to prove a line of reciprocal interaction among Heaven, earth, and human, the reigning Han emperor mediating among the three spheres as the archetypal human (Fung Yu-lan 1953, 2:16-87).

A further difference between the organismic cosmogony of "Questions of Heaven" and the *Huai-nan Tzu* and the anthropogonic account of the P'an Ku myth is the clear, but as yet unelaborated, narrative of the myth of the separation of sky and earth. It relates that at creation the sky rose higher with the light elements and the earth sank deeper with the heavy matter, and in the mesocosm between sky and earth P'an Ku was born. This myth of the separation between sky and earth receives a more elaborate treatment in narratives presented in chapter 4, from much earlier sources of the late Chou era.

The last reading tells of the transformation of P'an Ku's body into the various parts of the universe. It is from *A Chronicle of the Five Cycles of Time*, a work also attributed to Hsu Cheng, of the third century A.D., which again is extant only in fragments. The narrative presents the motif of the cosmological human body, in which the microcosm of the human body of P'an Ku becomes the macrocosm of the physical world. It is important to note that this is also a myth of the dying god: P'an Ku is the firstborn, not quite a god nor yet fully human; he is a giant who shares the cosmic powers of Heaven and earth. He is also the first dead, and the creation of the world results from the metamorphosis of his dying body. In a recent study, Bruce Lincoln compiled a list of the characteristics of the Indo-European myths of the cosmological human body, epitomized by the Norse creation story of Ymir. The features of the P'an Ku myth fit Lincoln's general pattern for the most part. The most striking similarities occur in what Lincoln terms homologic alloforms, or homologic set. That is, the physical world was made from various parts of the body, natural forms corresponding in a logical way to bodily parts (Lincoln 1986, 2-3, 5-20). In the P'an Ku myth there are sixteen such alloforms, as against nine typical Indo-European allo-



forms, and they conform in such aspects as flesh becoming earth, hair becoming plants, and so forth. The P'an Ku narrative is expressed with lyricism and elegance. Just as the simile of the chicken's egg for primordial chaos denoted a literary rather than an authentically mythological genesis, so too does the P'an Ku transformation narrative. It is possible to conclude that this myth did not originate from the native Chinese tradition, for two reasons. First, it does not appear in the early mythic texts of classical China but emerges only in late sources of the third century A.D. Second, the myth shares so many features with the Indo-European mythologem of the cosmological human body that it seems likely that it was borrowed at a late date, perhaps through Hsu Cheng himself, from Central Asian sources reaching China. The specialist Jaan Puhvel suggests that it is traceable to the traditions of the ancient Near East (1987, 285).

It says: At the beginning of remote antiquity, who was there to pass down the tale of what happened? And before the upper and lower worlds were formed, how could they be explored? Since darkness and light were hidden and closed, who could fathom them? In the formless expanse when there were only images, how could anyone know what they were? When were brightness and gloom created? Yin and Yang commingled three times; what was their original form and how were they transformed? The round sphere and its ninefold gates, who planned and measured them? Whose achievement was this? Who first created them? How are Dipper's Ladle and the Cord fastened, and how were the poles of the sky linked? Why do the eight pillars lean to the southeast and why is there a fault? Where are the ends of the Nine Skies situated and where do they join up? Their corners and edges are so many that who knows what they number? How do the heavens coordinate their twelve divisions? How are the sun and moon connected? How are the serried stars arranged? (*Ch'u Tz'u, T'ien wen*, SPTK 3.1b-4a)

In the beginning of the eternal past  
When all was the ultimate sameness in vast empty space,  
Empty and the same, all was one,  
One eternally at rest,  
Moist-wet and murky-dim,  
Before there were darkness and light.

(*Tao yuan*, from Jan Yün-hua, TP 63, 1978: 75,  
Chinese text, English trans. emended)

Long ago, before Heaven and earth existed, there were only images but no forms, and all was dark and obscure, a vast desolation, a misty expanse, and nothing knew where its own portals were. There were two gods born out of chaos who wove the skies and designed the earth. So profound were they that no one knew their lowest deeps, and so exalted were they that no one knew where they came to rest. Then they divided into Yin and Yang and separated into the Eight Poles. The hard and the soft formed, and the myriad living things took shape. The dense cloudy vapor became insects, and the pure vapor became humans. (*Huai-nan Tzu, Ching shen*, SPPY 7.1a)

Before Heaven and earth had formed, there was a shapeless, dark expanse, a gaping mass; thus it was called the Great Glory. The Way [Tao] first came from vacant space, vacant space gave birth to the cosmos, the cosmos gave birth to the Breath, and the Breath had its limits. The limpid light [Yang] rose mistily and became the sky, the heavy turbidness congealed and became earth. Because rare limpidity easily condensed but heavy turbidity congealed with difficulty, the sky was the first to form, and earth settled into shape later. The double essence of sky and earth became Yin and Yang, the complex essence of Yin and Yang became the four seasons, the diffuse essence of the four seasons became the ten thousand things in nature. The hot Breath of concentrated Yang gave birth to fire, the essence of the fiery Breath became the sun, and the cold Breath of concentrated Yin became water, the essence of watery Breath became the moon. The excess from sun and moon became the stars. The sky received the sun, moon, and stars, and the earth received rivers and rain water, and dust and silt. . . .

Heaven is round; earth is square. (*Huai-nan Tzu, T'ien wen*, SPPY 3.1a, 3.9b)

Heaven and earth were in chaos like a chicken's egg, and P'an Ku was born in the middle of it. In eighteen thousand years Heaven and earth opened and unfolded. The limpid that was Yang became the heavens, the turbid that was Yin became the earth. P'an Ku lived within them, and in one day he went through nine transformations, becoming more divine than Heaven and wiser than earth. Each day the heavens rose ten feet higher, each day the earth grew ten feet thicker, and each day P'an Ku grew ten feet taller. And so it was that in eighteen thousand years the heavens reached their fullest height, earth reached its lowest depth, and P'an Ku became fully grown.

Afterward, there were the Three Sovereign Divinities. Numbers began with one, were established with three, perfected by five, multiplied with seven, and fixed with nine. That is why Heaven is ninety thousand leagues from earth. (*San Wu li chi*, cited in *Yi-wen lei-chü*, CH 1.2a)

When the firstborn, P'an Ku, was approaching death, his body was transformed. His breath became the wind and clouds; his voice became peals of thunder. His left eye became the sun; his right eye became the moon. His four limbs and five extremities became the four cardinal points and the five peaks. His blood and semen became water and rivers. His muscles and veins became the earth's arteries; his flesh became fields and land. His hair and beard became the stars; his bodily hair became plants and trees. His teeth and bones became metal and rock; his vital marrow became pearls and jade. His sweat and bodily fluids became streaming rain. All the mites on his body were touched by the wind and were turned into the black-haired people. (*Wu yun li-nien chi*, cited in *Yi shih*, PCTP 1.2a)

### The Goddess Nü Kua Creates Human Beings

The mythical figure of Nü Kua appears early in the tradition, as the brief reference to her in "Questions of Heaven," the first reading below, dating from circa the fourth century B.C., attests. Another short passage in *Huai-nan Tzu* describes Nü Kua's creative role: "Nü Kua made seventy transformations," which the commentator, Hsu Shen (ca. A.D. 100) interpreted to mean Nü Kua's creative power. Clearly, Nü Kua predates P'an Ku in classical mythology by six centuries. The second reading is from a compendium of explanations of the origins of social customs compiled by the Latter Han author, Ying Shao (ca. A.D. 140–ca. 206). The reading opens with the words "People say that," referring to beliefs held to be true in the late Han era about the primeval goddess. This text recounts an etiological myth about the origins of the human race, and it constitutes the fourth different account among our readings. It predates both P'an Ku myths of the firstborn human and of the body mites that became humans when P'an Ku died. But it postdates the *Huai-nan Tzu* myth that humans were created from "pure vapor." Thus Ying Shao's narrative of Nü Kua the creatrix is about a century earlier than that of the male creator of humans (from P'an Ku's body) in the Chinese tradition.

Several motifs in Ying Shao's brief account feature in similar myths worldwide. The first is the substance from which the goddess made humans. Various Greek myths, for example, narrate that humans were made from dragons' teeth, as in the story of Cadmus, or from a "mother's bones," or from stones, as in the story of Pyrrha and Deucalion, or from the ashes of Titans destroyed by Zeus. The Norse myth of Ymir tells how humans were made from the murdered corpse of Ymir. Most etiological myths of the creation of humankind narrate that the substance from which humans were made was dust, as in *Genesis*, or else earth, or dirt, or clay. The motif of clay, dirt, soil, or bone to create the first humans is examined in a cross-cultural survey by Frazer (1935, 5-14). In this myth of Nü Kua, humans are made from the materials of yellow earth and mud. A second worldwide motif is that of social stratification. In the Nü Kua myth humans are polarized into "rich aristocrats" made from yellow earth and "poor commoners" made from mud. A distinctive motif is the tool that Nü Kua uses for creation, a builder's cord. It is with this emblem that she is represented in later iconography. The early pottery of the pre-Shang and Shang periods shows the motif of twisted cord, perhaps registering a vestige of this or a similar myth. In Han iconography, Nü Kua is also shown holding a builder's compass.

From the period of the Former Han, the female gender of Nü Kua was underscored (some primeval gods being of indeterminate gender), and at that time she began to be paired with the mythic figure of Fu Hsi, the two being presented as a married couple and patrons of the institutions of marriage.

The third reading on the Nü Kua myth is from *A Treatise on Extraordinary and Strange Things* by the T'ang dynasty writer Li Jung (fl. ca. A.D. 846-874). This much later tradition presents Nü Kua as the first mortal, with her brother; the two institute marriage and become the progenitors of humankind. In this narrative, the goddess has been demoted from primal creatrix to a mortal subservient to God in Heaven (T'ien), and also a lowly female subservient to the male, in the traditional manner of marital relations. This late version of the Nü Kua myth shares with the Garden of Eden mythologem the motif of shame and guilt in sexual intercourse, the fan covering brother and sister as the figleaf covered Adam and Eve. Implicit in the Adam and Eve narrative is the theme of incest; it is also present in the Chinese myth, and it recurs in the repertoire of Chinese mythology. In this narrative the incest is condoned. In sum, the three readings demonstrate the ways in which an

arcane primal myth develops into a specific theme, from creative power to the act of creation, and then further evolves, or degenerates, into a myth that contradicts the original intent and meaning of the early mythic expression.

How was Nü Kua's body made? How did she ascend when she rose on high and became empress? (*Ch'u Tz'u, T'ien wen*, SPTK 3.20b)

People say that when Heaven and earth opened and unfolded, humankind did not yet exist. Nü Kua kneaded yellow earth and fashioned human beings. Though she worked feverishly, she did not have enough strength to finish her task, so she drew her cord in a furrow through the mud and lifted it out to make human beings. That is why rich aristocrats are the human beings made from yellow earth, while ordinary poor commoners are the human beings made from the cord's furrow. (*Feng su t'ung-yi*, CFCE 1.83)

Long ago, when the world first began, there were two people, Nü Kua and her older brother. They lived on Mount K'un-lun. And there were not yet any ordinary people in the world. They talked about becoming husband and wife, but they felt ashamed. So the brother at once went with his sister up Mount K'un-lun and made this prayer:

Oh Heaven, if Thou wouldst send us two forth as man and  
wife,

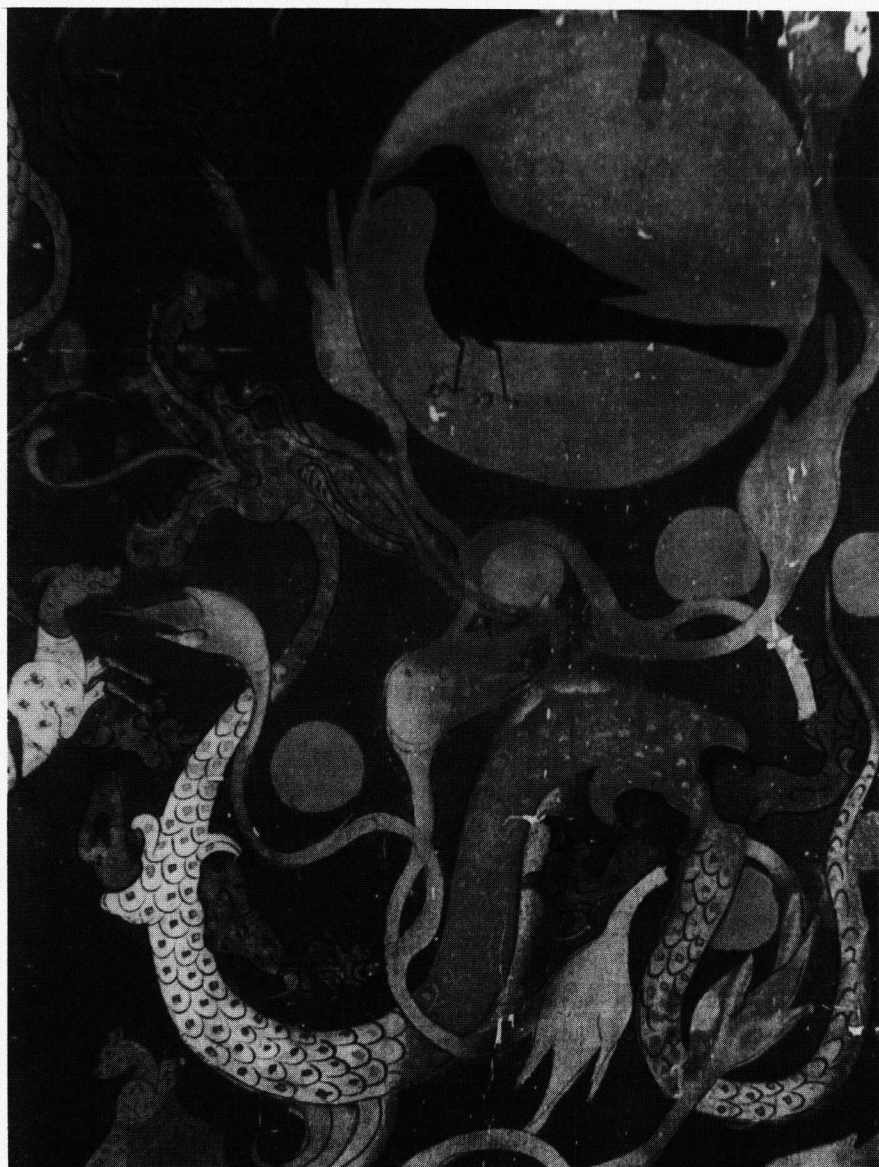
then make all the misty vapor gather.

If not, then make all the misty vapor disperse.

At this, the misty vapor immediately gathered. When the sister became intimate with her brother, they plaited some grass to make a fan to screen their faces. Even today, when a man takes a wife, they hold a fan, which is a symbol of what happened long ago. (*Tu yi chih*, TSCC 3.51)

## Sunrise, Sunset

Chinese solar mythology is a very large topic and has been the subject of a specialist study by Henri Maspero (1924), no doubt inspired by the nineteenth-century nature mythologists, who were mainly concerned with origins in myth and proposed different single natural phenomena as the most important for the study of primitive man (de Vries 1984, 31-40). Since Maspero's monograph, no Sinologist or specialist in



*Figure 1. The world-tree, Leaning Mulberry, with the crow in the rising sun and other suns. Funerary Ch'u silk painting, tomb of the wife of the Marquis of Tai, Ma-wang-tui, Ch'ang-sha, Hunan province, circa 190 B.C. Wen-wu, *The Western Han Silk Painting*, 1972, detail from Fig. 1.*

myth has dealt fully with Chinese solar myths using recent findings in Sinology and comparative mythology. Ho Hsin's monograph is based on the outdated theory of Max Müller and employs unscientific phonology to argue for the primacy of a sun god and the worship of solar deities in archaic China (1986).

The three readings on solar myth which follow contain several primary myths. Though they do not belong to cosmogonic myths per se, they are of major importance in terms of cosmological narratives, and so they are included here. Various solar motifs are examined in later chapters.

The first two readings here are from *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*. This is an anonymous work of mixed authorship and dating, compiled in the late Chou and the Han periods from earlier source material. After the Ch'u "Questions of Heaven," this text is the second most valuable source of classical myths. Rémi Mathieu, who has made a special study of this classic, dates its first five chapters to the third century B.C., chapters 6–13 to the second century B.C., and the last five chapters to the Latter Han period, circa the first century A.D. (1983, I: c–ciii). The text of the classic itself contains two valuable indicators of its dating. At the end of chapters 9 and 13 appear the official signatories, Wang, Kung, and Hsiu, with the statement that they checked the material, that is, chapters 1–13, in the year 6 B.C. That the signatories read this part in the late first century B.C. means that the material clearly dates from an earlier period (Yuan K'o 1980.I, 266, 334). The presence of these official editors may also indicate that the material was censored.

The classic differs from "Questions of Heaven" in that it is not so culture bound and does not reflect a single belief system or cultural tradition but seeks to explore the known and imagined world of the classical era in terms of its mythology, geography, ethnography, medicine, and natural history. In form, style, and content it may be characterized as an uneasy mélange of several styles—a snatch of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a whiff of Lucretius's *De rerum natura*, and an echo of Ctesias's fabled descriptions of India. Compiled in an age of travel and exploration and appearing at the dawn of Chinese geographical science, this repository of myth and fable clearly does not seek to convey scientifically verifiable information about Chinese regions and foreign lands and peoples; rather, it aims to amuse, delight, shock, horrify, and at times inform its readers. Its first five chapters, especially, advise on remedies for numerous and varied ailments (Mathieu's list of 69 ailments, 1983, 2:1046–48). Although the text was finally compiled in the Han period, the classic

contains a great deal of mythographic material which is corroborated by earlier sources. But there is a fundamental difference between this classic and those earlier: whereas they utilized myth for the purposes of philosophy, history, ritual, law, or political theory, the primary intent of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* was to gather together, and so preserve, a vast repertoire of mythic narratives about various parts of China in all their contradictory, enigmatic, and seemingly useless variety.

The two readings from this classic narrate separate solar myths. The first tells how the ten suns (one for each day of the ancient ten-day week) are each washed clean after their passage through the world and are hung to dry in the world-tree, Leaning Mulberry (Fu-sang), in the east. The classic recounts six myths of the rising of the sun and moon, and six of their setting. The second reading gives another version: a crow carries the sun to the crest of a leaning tree before it departs for its daily journey. The gigantic tree described is probably Leaning Mulberry. The crow motif in this account is unique among versions of this solar myth, for usually the crow (sometimes said to be three-legged) is described as being in the center of the sun.

The third reading comes from the chapter entitled "The System of the Heavens" of *Huai-nan Tzu*. It relates the sun's journey from dawn to dusk as it passes through the Seven Halts in the sky and over the Nine Provinces on earth. There are fifteen stages of the sun's journey, and each is named: five refer to variations of the sun's light, three signify human mealtimes, four relate to the sun's position, and two refer to a pestle and one to a carriage. The last name, "tethered carriage," refers to the place where the charioteer of the sun rests the dragon-steeds. In this edition of *Huai-nan Tzu*, the charioteer of the sun is called "the Woman" (*ch'i nü*). In a citation of this passage in a much later text, *Sources for Beginning Scholarly Studies*, compiled by Hsu Chien (A.D. 659-729), the words *the Woman* are replaced by the name Hsi-Ho. The identity of Hsi-Ho is problematic. One tradition has it that Hsi and Ho were two male ministers of the semidivine ruler, Yao. Another makes Hsi-Ho a single person, a man who was Master of the Calendar. A quite separate tradition makes Hsi-Ho a female who was the charioteer of the sun, and this is followed by Hsu Chien in his citation of the *Huai-nan Tzu* passage. Yet another tradition makes Hsi-Ho the mother of ten suns, who cares for them after their journey through the sky. This motif and its attendant problems are addressed in chapter 5.



Beside T'ang Valley there is the Leaning Mulberry, where the ten suns are bathed—it is north of the Land of Black-Teeth—and where they stay in the river. There is a large tree, and nine suns stay on its lower branches while one sun stays on its top branch. (*Shan hai ching*, *Hai wai tung ching*, SPPY 9.3a-b)

In the middle of the great wasteland, there is a mountain called Nieh-yao Chün-ti. On its summit there is a leaning tree. Its trunk is three hundred leagues tall; its leaves are like the mustard plant. There is a valley called Warm Springs Valley. Beside Yang Valley there is Leaning Mulberry. As soon as one sun arrives, another sun rises. They are all borne by a crow. (*Shan hai ching*, *Ta huang tung ching*, SPPY 14.5a-b)

The sun rises from Yang [Sunny] Valley and is bathed in Hsien Pool, and when it brushes past Leaning Mulberry it is called bright dawn. When it climbs Leaning Mulberry and is about to begin its journey, it is called daybreak. When it reaches Winding Riverbank, it is called daylight. When it reaches Ts'eng-ch'üan, it is called breakfast. When it reaches Mulberry Wilds, it is called supper. When it reaches Pivot Sunshine, it is called angle center. When it reaches K'un-wu, it is called perfect center. When it reaches Mount Niao-tz'u, it is called small return. When it reaches Sad Valley, it is called evening meal. When it reaches Nü-chi it is called great return. When it reaches Yuan Yü, it is called high pestle. When it reaches Lan-shih it is called low pestle. When it reaches Sad Springs and stops the Woman and rests its six dragons with stunted horns, it is called tethered carriage. When it reaches Yü Yuan, it is called yellow gloaming. When it reaches Meng Valley, it is called fixed dusk. When the sun rises from Yü Yuan's riverbank and brightens the slopes of Meng Valley, and then passes over the Nine Provinces and the Seven Halts, it has covered 517,309 leagues. (*Huai-nan Tzu*, *T'ien wen*, SPPY 3.9b-10b)