



Myths of Yi the Archer

In the late Chou period several traditions were established concerning the mythical figure of Yi, and in the Han and post-Han periods Yi attracted different mythical accounts, many of which incorporate other figures. Yi is variously known as the East Barbarian, Yi the Good, Lord Yi, and Yi, Lord of the Hsia. The East Barbarians (Yi) are identified as the proto-Yueh people of Southeast China. The ethnographer Wolfram Eberhard linked the main solar myth of Yi the Archer with the Yao people of South China (1968, 86). Given the wealth of material in the Yi cycle of myths, it is not surprising to find numerous inconsistencies and contradictions in these traditions. For example, the classical texts set the deeds of Yi in the era of Ti Chün prior to the Golden Age of Yao, Shun, and Yü, but some texts also place him in the era of Yao. Furthermore, the greatest act in the whole of the Yi cycle of myths, averting solar disaster, is also attributed to Yao, for example, in *Disquisitions* by Wang Ch'ung of the first century A.D. (Huang Hui 1938, 11.511).

Moreover, so ambiguously are Yi's exploits recounted that he is precariously poised between the archetypal and antithetical roles of heroic savior and criminal villain. In his eufunctional role of saving the world from the ten suns at the command of Ti Chün, Yi is favored by the god, and in other versions by Yao. In his negative manifestation, Yi is depicted as a murderer, adulterer, and usurper. In this dysfunctional

role, he falls from grace with the gods, but, more important, he loses the good will and trust of human beings. Although the functional ambiguity of Yi is clearly and frequently expressed in the early texts, exegetes and commentators of the late Han and post-Han eras invariably sympathized with him and identified him as a positive hero. Thus commentators such as Wang Yi (A.D. 89-158), Kao Yu (fl. A.D. 205-215), and Ju Ch'un (fl. A.D. 198-265) explain away and rationalize Yi's actions and even go as far as to condone his crimes. In the literary mind and in popular imagination, the mythical figure of Yi remains Yi the hero and savior rather than Yi the antihero and usurper.

Yi Shoots the Ten Suns to Avert Disaster

The first and second readings relate the solar myth of Yi the Archer. The first is from a late chapter of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, dating from the first century A.D. The second, from *Huai-nan Tzu* (second century B.C.), elaborates Yi's heroism by relating how he killed six monsters.

Ti Chün presented Yi with a vermilion bow and plain-colored arrows with silk cords in order that he should bring assistance to the land below. So Yi was the first to bring merciful relief to the world below from all its hardships. (*Shan hai ching*, *Hai nei ching*, SPPY 18.7b)

When it came to the era of Yao, the ten suns all rose at once, scorching the sheaves of grain and killing plants and trees, so that the people were without food. And the Cha-yü Dragon-Headed beast, the Chisel-Tusk beast, the Nine-Gullet beast, the Giant-Gale bird, the Feng-hsi wild boar, and the Giant-Head long-snake all plagued the people. So Yao ordered Yi to execute the Chisel-Tusk beast in the wilds of Ch'ou Hua, to slaughter the Nine-Gullet beast near Hsiung River, to shoot down with his corded arrows the Giant-Gale at Ch'ing-ch'iu Marsh. He ordered him to shoot the ten suns up above and to kill the Cha-yü Dragon-Head beast below, to behead the Giant-Head long-snake at Tung-t'ing, and to capture the Feng-hsi wild boar at Mulberry Forest. The myriad people were overjoyed and decided on Yao as their Son of Heaven. And so for the first time in the whole world, there were roads and signposts in the broadlands and in the narrow defiles, in the deep places and on level ground both far and wide. (*Huai-nan Tzu*, *Pen ching*, SPPY 8.5b-6a)

The Rock of the Nine Suns

The next two readings narrate the Wu Chiao myth. The first is from an early fourth-century A.D. source and points up the remarkable potency of the Yi solar myth. The second reading is from a twelfth-century miscellany. The name Wu Chiao is an oxymoron representing the antagonistic elements of fire and water: Wu is the infinite power and capacity of a divine sea, Chiao is the fabled fiery furnace of rock which is where the suns shot down by Yi fell from the sky. The rock of Wu Chiao is thought to be the Kuroshio Current, or else Mount Min in northern Szechwan (Greatrex 1987, 185 n. 10).

Wei-lü is where the waters of the seas empty out. It is also called Wu Chiao, and it is in the center of the great ocean. The Wei is at the very end of all rivers; that is why it is called Wei [Tail]; *lū* means 'massed'; it is where water masses together, and that is why it is called *lū*. East of Leaning Mulberry there is a rock that is forty thousand leagues all round and forty thousand leagues thick. Although the seas and rivers empty into it, it never fails to consume all the water, and that is why it is called Chiao [Consume]. (Kuo Ch'ing-fan citing Ssu-ma Piao's commentary on *Chuang Tzu*, *Ch'iu shui*, *Chuang Tzu chi shih*, SHCSK 6.2.3b)

Wu Chiao is east of Pi Sea. It has a rock that stretches forty thousand leagues across, and it is forty thousand leagues thick. It lies at the tail end of all flowing rivers; that is why it is called Wei-lü. According to *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, in the era of Yao the ten suns all rose at once, so Yao ordered Yi to shoot down nine suns, and they fell onto Wu Chiao. (*Chin hsiu wan hua ku* referring to *Chuang Tzu su*, HHSC 1.5.3b)

Yi Shoots the Lord of the River

The readings that follow narrate the myth of Yi's crimes of murdering the Lord of the River, Ho Po, and appropriating his wife. The first reading below is from "Questions of Heaven." The second and fourth are from Wang Yi's commentary on that text. The third reading is a citation by the famous T'ang commentator Li Shan (d. A.D. 689) of the third-century A.D. commentator Ju Ch'un, who mythopoeically links the goddess of Lo River, Fu-fei, with the god Fu Hsi. The fifth reading, by the third-century A.D. commentator Kao Yu, seeks to condone Yi's

murder of the river god by stating that the Lord of the River had himself been killing humans.

The final reading, from *Chronicle of Tso*, deals with the myth of Yi the usurper. In a historicizing mode it removes the hero from the context of gods, suprahumans, and demigods and fixes him firmly among human beings. Here, Yi's crimes are directed not against deities but against the state. Thus Yi the demigod becomes Yi the human opportunist who usurps the Hsia state and embarks on a career of misrule and indulges in a reckless private life. The primary motif of Yi's skill in archery is subordinated to the demands of the humanizing narrative and is transmuted into Yi's excessive fondness for sport at the expense of affairs of state. Yi is consequently made to fit the paradigm of "the bad ruler." Yi's death is similarly narrated without regard for the mythological tradition, since the manner of his political assassination is identical to that of many other victims of palace intrigue recounted in the *Chronicle*.

God sent down Yi Yi to drive away the evils besetting the Hsia people, so why did he shoot down the Lord of the River and take his wife, Lo-pin? (*Ch'u Tz'u*, *T'ien wen*, SPTK 3.15b)

Lo-pin was a water-nymph and she was called Fu-fei. . . . Yi also dreamed that he had an affair with Fu-fei, the Goddess of Lo River. (Wang Yi's commentary on *Ch'u Tz'u*, *T'ien wen*, SPTK 3.15b)

Ju Ch'un says that Fu-fei, the daughter of [?Fu] Hsi, died by drowning in Lo River and then she became a goddess. (Li Shan's commentary on *Lo shen fu*, citing *Han shu yin yi*, *Wen hsuan*, SPTK 19.14b)

The Lord of the River turned into a white dragon and played on the riverbank. When Yi saw him, he shot him with his arrow, aiming for his left eye. The Lord of the River went up to complain to God in Heaven: "Kill Yi because of what he has done to me!" God in Heaven said, "Why were you shot by Yi?" The Lord of the River said, "When I transformed myself into a white dragon I came out to play." God in Heaven said, "If you had kept to the river depths as a god, how could Yi have committed this crime against you? Today you became a reptile, so you were bound to be shot at by someone. Of course he is in the right—what was Yi's crime in this case?" (Wang Yi's commentary on *Ch'u Tz'u*, *T'ien wen*, SPTK 3.15b)

The Lord of the River killed people by drowning them, so Yi shot him in the left eye. (Kao Yu's commentary on *Huai-nan Tzu*, *Fan lun*, SPPY 13.22a)

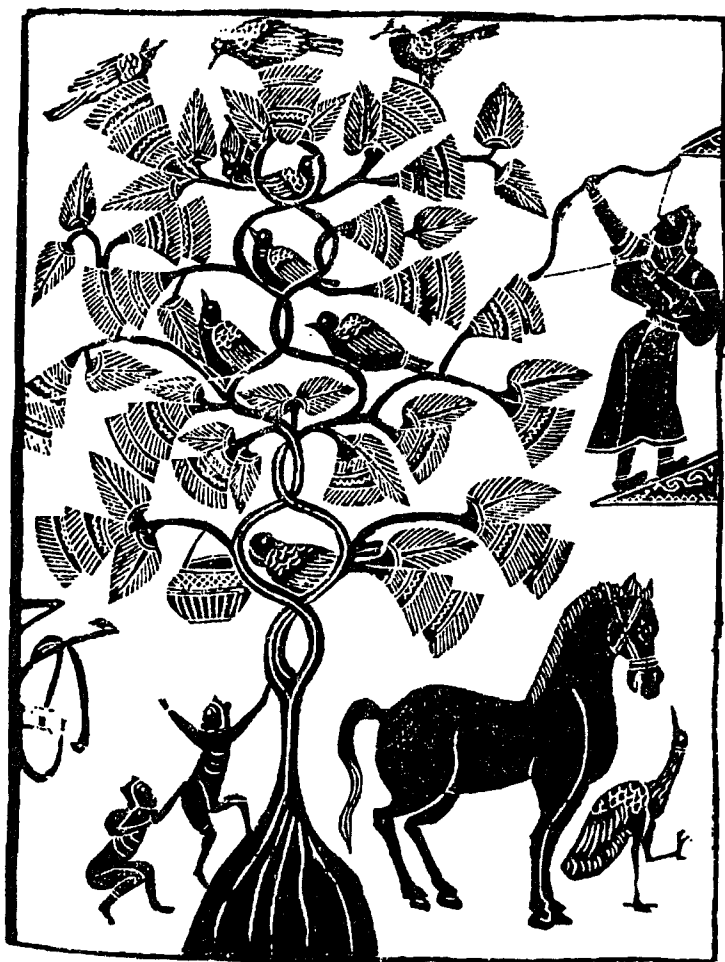


Figure 7. Yi the Archer and the world-tree, Leaning Mulberry. Funerary stone bas-relief, Wu Liang Shrine, Chia-hsiang county, Shantung province, A.D. 151. From Feng and Feng, *Research on Stone Carving* (1821) 1934, chap. 3.

The Prince of Chin said, "What happened to Lord Yi?" Wei Chiang replied, "Long ago, when the Hsia was beginning to decline, Lord Yi moved from Ch'u to Ch'iung-shih and, relying on the people of Hsia, replaced the Hsia government. He took advantage of his archery skills, neglecting public affairs and indulging in hunting game in the fields. He discarded the ministers Wu Lo, Po Yin, Hsiung K'un, and Mang Yü, employing instead Cho of Han. Cho of Han was a

treacherous young retainer of the house of Po Ming, and the Lord of Po Ming had dismissed him. But Yi Yi trustingly received him into his entourage and appointed him as his prime minister. Cho practiced flattery at court and bribery in society at large. He deceived the people and encouraged Lord Yi to go hunting. He devised a plot to deprive Yi of his state. Society and the court all acquiesced to Cho's command. But Yi still refused to mend his ways. One day, on his return from the hunt, his clansmen all assassinated him, and they cooked his corpse in order to serve it to his sons to eat. But his sons could not bear to eat him, and they were all put to death at Ch'ung-men." (*Tso chuan*, *Hsiang kung* Fourth Year, SPPY 29.12b-13a)

Feng Meng Kills Yi

This demythologized version of Yi's death contrasts strongly with the accounts of Yi's murder by Feng Meng (also known as Feng Men). These accounts have the authentic ring of myth. They mostly occur in late Chou texts, such as *Hsun Tzu* and *Meng Tzu* (the first and third readings below), and in Han texts, such as *Huai-nan Tzu* (the second reading below). These versions of Yi's death introduce the mythic theme of envy and rivalry in the figure of Feng Meng. It is interesting that when the two champion archers meet in mortal combat, Feng Meng does not use the weapon in which he is inferior but a crude, primeval club.

The motif of peach wood, from which the club is made, is explained by its connection with exorcism. In the *Chronicle of Tso* several accounts of exorcism mention its use (Bodde 1975, 134). The symbolic function of peach wood is clarified by James R. Hightower in his analysis of a Han text by Han Ying (fl. 157 B.C.): "As the word [*t'ao* = peach] is a homophone of 'to expel' [*t'ao*], peach wood was used to expel noxious influences" (Hightower 1952, 337 n. 2). Thus the phonetic interpretation and the mythical context combine to reveal the significance of this motif, and it occurs in the same way in the myth of Saint Shu and Yü Lü and the Giant Peach Tree related in chapter 14.

Yi and Feng Men were the best archers in the world. (*Hsun Tzu*, *Cheng lun*, SPPY 12.9b)

In archery contests of one hundred shots, the most skilled archers were always Yi and Feng Meng. (*Huai-nan Tzu*, *Shui lin*, SPPY 17.4a)

Feng Meng learned archery from Yi and acquired an exhaustive knowledge of Yi's style of shooting. He realized that only Yi in the

whole world was better than he, so he killed Yi. (*Meng Tzu*, *Li Lü*, 2, SPTK 8.8b)

"Club" is a large stick, that he [Feng Meng] made out of peach wood to batter Yi to death with. From that time demons are terrified of peach wood. (Hsu Shen's commentary on *Huai-nan Tzu*, *Ch'üan yen*, SPPY 14.1b)

Yi rid the world of evil, so when he died he became the god Tsung Pu. (*Huai-nan Tzu*, *Fan lun*, SPPY 13.22a)

Ch'ang O Escapes to the Moon

The myths centering on Yi discussed thus far include several other mythical figures—Ti Chün, Yao, the six monsters, the Lord of the River, Lo-pin, his wife (identified, probably mistakenly as Fu-fei, goddess of Lo River, who in turn is mistakenly identified as Fu Hsi's daughter), God in Heaven, Cho of Han, and Feng Meng. But the best-known myth centers on the figure of Heng O, also known as Ch'ang O, who was Yi's wife. She stole the elixir of immortality given to him by the Queen Mother of the West and she was metamorphosed on the moon. She is not the moon goddess as such but is said to be the "essence of the moon." Her lunar role is parallel in some respects to that of Ch'ang-hsi, the mother of the twelve moons and consort of Ti Chün. Although there is a myth that explains the disappearance of the nine suns, leaving just one, through the heroism of Yi the Archer, no myth exists for the eventual disappearance in myth narratives of the eleven moons to leave one. Michel Soymié has noted that the moon myth in China is not so developed or familiar as that of the sun (1962, 292). The demigod Yi is linked, however, to a major solar myth and a major lunar myth in the classical narratives, just as Ti Chün is through somewhat different narratives.

The earliest account of Heng O/Ch'ang O introduces the motif of a toad, the creature she metamorphosed into on the moon. This motif denotes immortality because of the toad's sloughing off of its skin and its apparent rebirth. The moon, with its phases of growth, decline, and rebirth has the same denotation. These two motifs of the cycle of eternal return have parallels worldwide, as James G. Frazer has shown in "The Story of the Cast Skin" (in "The Fall of Man" [1984, 88–95]). In Han iconography the toad on the moon is often depicted dancing on its hind legs while pounding the drug of immortality in a mortar. This and

other lunar motifs in Han iconography have been discussed extensively by Michael Loewe (1979, 53-55, 127-33).

Another worldwide motif that occurs in the Ch'ang O moon myth is the theft of a gift of the gods and the punishment of the thief. This motif has already been discussed with reference to Kun, and also to K'ai, or Ch'i. Ch'ang O, or Heng O, fits this pattern of the trickster in several respects: she stole the gift of the drug of immortality from Yi the Archer, who had received it from the Queen Mother of the West; she metamorphoses into an ugly creature with the saving grace of immortality.

Although her punishment is not specified but only surmised from the context of the myth, the theme of punishment is clearly expressed in the final reading. It concerns another mythical figure on the moon, Wu Kang. The text is from *A Miscellany from Yu-yang* by Tuan Ch'eng-shih (d. A.D. 863). This work contains much early material. It relates the fate of Wu Kang, an alchemist seeking the elixir of immortality, who was punished for making an error against the unseen world of the spirits. He is condemned to chop down a tree on the moon which forever grows again. The repeated action of his punishment is reflected in the name of the tree: *kuei* 'cassia' is a pun for *kuei* 'to return', signifying his eternal return in an eternal act of atonement. The brilliant red of the cassia perhaps mockingly reflects the color of cinnabar, the alchemist's stone. In contrast to the sun, which in some versions has only a single bird in it, the moon is cluttered with mythical figures: Heng O/Ch'ang O, the toad, a hare, the mortar and pestle, Wu Kang and his ax, and the cassia tree. In later iconography, the moon was furnished with a jade tree, a jade palace, and other accouterments denoting neo-Taoist symbolism.

Yi asked the Queen Mother of the West for the drug of immortality. Yi's wife, Heng O, stole it and escaped to the moon. She was metamorphosed on the moon and became the striped toad Ch'an-ch'u, and she is the essence of the moon. (Subcommentary of *Ch'u hsueh chi*, citing *Huai-nan Tzu*, SPCY 1.4a)

In those days people said that there was a cassia on the moon and the striped toad, Ch'an-ch'u. That is why books on marvels say that the cassia on the moon is five thousand feet high, and there is someone under it who is always chopping the tree but the gash in the tree soon becomes whole. This man's family name is Wu, and his given name is Kang, and he is from the West River area. They say that because he made a mistake in his quest for immortality, he was exiled and forced to chop the tree. (*Yu-yang tsa-tsu*, *T'ien chih*, SPTK 1.8b)