



## Strange Lands and Peoples

An interest in geography, as defined by the Greek word meaning 'delineation of land', is apparent in several early classical Chinese texts. It is, however, usually subordinated to the main theme of a given text and presented in a fragmentary way, so that passages that might be designated as geographical are incidental to the central aim of the work. The main inspiration for such topographical writings was the myth of Yü and the flood. The most important texts dealing with this myth which incorporated geographical material are the chapter of *The Classic of History* entitled "The Tribute of Yü" (Karlgren 1950, 12-18), *Shih Tzu* (Karlgren 1946, 303), and *Mencius* (Lau 1970, 102, 113). The last two accounts are brief, but the first constitutes an extended essay that describes in detail Yü's progress through the Nine Provinces within the Four Seas, as the mythological world was known, when he channeled the flow of water and drained the flooded land. According to this account, Yü traveled over fifty rivers and numerous mountains, charting the land and noting regional variations in terms of topography, type and quality of soil, the names of local tribes, and their sources of revenue and forms of tribute. Among these peoples are the skin-wearing Niao-yi; the Lai-yi herdsmen; the Huai-yi, renowned for oyster pearls and silk; the grass-wearing Tao-yi; the Ho-yi, with their tributary gifts of metallurgical goods to the court of Yao; the felt-

wearing Hsi-ch'ing people; the San Miao people, with tribute of jewels; and the felt-wearing western Jung people of K'un-lun. The details of tribute and the information conveyed about different tribal groups no doubt replicate the sort of report compiled and presented to the Chou court when the Chou dynasty was at its apogee. Thus "The Tribute of Yü" constitutes a document that is part-history, part-mythology, and part-idealized political theory.

The chapter contains many place-names that cannot be identified or located with any certainty. As Karlgren observed, the exact position of "a framework of fundamental names" in pre-Han texts is "certain beyond any doubt," but most place-names "are to a large extent quite impossible to determine exactly" (1946, 209). Thus while the chapter records some factual data relating to names of known rivers, such as the Lo, Han, Huai, and so forth, it primarily belongs to the category of pseudo-geography or mythic geography.

Chinese geography becomes less mythological and more of a scientific study in the late Han era as speculation about the old world of gods and heroes ceded from the second century B.C., to a real knowledge of the Chinese empire and its contiguous lands and peoples. The first systematic attempt to provide a specific account is the "Treatise on Geography" by Pan Ku, the Han historian (A.D. 32-92). The word for *geography* in his treatise is *ti-li*, meaning 'land patterns', or 'the earth's system'. It is a combination of descriptive and historical geography in which the author seeks to set down and identify all known place-names. Yet Pan Ku was drawing for his source material on preexisting texts with exegetical commentaries that gave traditional explanations of names and places, and many of these are flawed through a lack of hard information. Karlgren's caveat, therefore, still applies to Pan Ku's "Treatise," and the number of place-names that can be identified or localized is very small (1946, 209).

Appearing after "The Tribute of Yü" and before Pan Ku's "Treatise," with some overlapping of early and late chapters, is *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, a work presented as a descriptive geography of the old world, its lands, and its peoples, incorporating myth, legend, and lore. In one respect its structure is similar to the format of "The Tribute of Yü," for its anonymous author charts first the mountains of the south, west, north, east, and central regions (chaps. 1-5); then the regions beyond the seas, or stretches of water, south, west, north, and east (chaps. 6-9); the regions within the seas south, west, north, and east (chaps. 10-13); the expanse of land to the east, south, west, and

north (chaps. 14-17); and regions within the seas (chap. 18). Scattered among its eighteen chapters are fragmentary accounts of strange lands and peoples, noted mainly for their differences and peculiarities vis-à-vis the Chinese. While much of this material has to do with mythology and the stuff of fable, it would be unwise to discount every descriptive detail. As Malinowski has shown, sociological data probably underlie and inform a good deal of this kind of early record of things un-Chinese. Many inhabitants of countries described in the *Classic* indicate societies marked by physical deformity, such as the Linked-Chest, the Three-Headed, the One-Eyed, Forked-Tongue, Odd-Arm, One-Foot, and Dwarf People. It is not difficult to conjure up parallels known to medical science and social science, such as the condition known as Siamese twins, or the practice of inflicting mutilations on members of society, including slitting the tongue (as in Australasian bull-roaring initiation rites), or punishing by removing a finger, limb, or even an eye. Accounts of peoples known as Deep-Set Eyes and as Whites are also clearly descriptive of un-Chinese physical characteristics. The names of the Country of Men and the Country of Women denote specific social systems based on matriarchy and patriarchy at their most extreme, in which the opposite sex is eliminated at an early age. The names of some countries are manifestly phonetic, such as Chih, Kushe, and Meng Shu (the last significantly having several variants).

In terms of methodology, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* may be viewed as a sort of mythological Baedeker guide to the ancient world, an enclosed chart of the world as it appeared to the Chinese at various stages between the third century B.C. (chaps. 1-5), the first century B.C. (chaps. 6-13), and the first century A.D. (chaps. 14-18). Some of its fanciful accounts were put to satirical use by Li Ju-ch'en (A.D. 1763-ca. 1830) in *Flowers in the Mirror* (Lin Tai-yi 1965, 58-127). Most of the readings in this chapter are from the *Classic*. For a different selection of translated texts from a variety of sources, see Mathieu's *Anthologie* (1989, 149-67) and Schiffeler's *Legendary Creatures* (1978).

### Pierced-Chest Country

The tradition about the Pierced-Chest Country dates as far back as the fourth-century B.C. text *Shih Tzu*, cited by Kuo P'u in his commentary to the account of this country in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (Yuan K'o 1980.1, 195). The entry in the *Classic* itself is very brief, and it accentuates the deformity of the people: "Hole-Chest Country is to the

east of there [San Miao]. Its people have a cavity through their chest. It is also said to lie to the east of Chih Country" (ibid., 194). A longer narrative from *The Treatise on Research into Nature* (third to fifth century A.D.) forms our reading. This myth explains the origin of their deformity, and it is linked to the major myth of Yü and the flood. It is based on the episode when Yü executed Fang-feng for arriving too late for the council of the gods. In this account, Yü is firmly associated with the Hsia. The author of the *Treatise* accredits Yü with the power of performing a miracle, when he resurrects the dead with the herb of immortality.

When the account in the *Treatise* is compared with the terse record in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, it becomes evident that several myths are fused in the *Treatise* to form a new narrative, myths that are culled from the classical tradition and mythic motifs from the Han and post-Han repertoire. They include Yü's founding role as ruler of the Hsia era, the flood, the assembly of the gods at K'uai-chi, Yü's execution of Fang-feng, the apparition of two divine dragons, the reference to the mythic place-name T'u-shan, the revenge of the lesser gods for Fang-feng's death, the miraculous storm, double suicide, and the healing role of Yü in the miraculous revival of the two dead avengers. All these mythic and legendary strands are brought together to explain the origin of the Pierced-Chest People, and as such they constitute a new etiological myth of a country, which itself constitutes a hybrid version of the myth.

Long ago, when Yü was bringing order to the world, he assembled all the lords in the wilds of K'uai-chi, but Fang-feng arrived too late, so he killed him. The power of the Hsia was in the ascendant, and two dragons came down to him from on high. Yü ordered Ch'eng-kuang to harness them, and he traveled beyond his territory. He toured everywhere and then came back. He reached Nan-hai and passed by Fang-feng's land. Because of the stabbing incident at T'u-shan, two gods, the officers of Fang-feng, were enraged when they saw Yü, and they pierced him. A sudden gale and storm blew up and the two dragons rose up and left. The two officers were terrified. They stabbed themselves in the heart with their daggers and died. Yü grieved over them, and so he pulled out their daggers and revived them with the herb of immortality, and they became the Pierced-Chest People. (*Po wu chih*, *Wai kuo*, SPPY 8.4b)

## Odd-Arm Country

The same sources give the earliest accounts of this country, inhabited by people having only one arm (variant: one thigh, *Huai-nan Tzu*; Yuan K'o 1980.2, 205). The first reading below is from a first-century B.C. chapter of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*. The version of the myth given in the second reading, from *The Treatise on Research into Nature*, sets the narrative in the era of the founder of the Shang, or Yin, named T'ang the Conqueror. The account of flying machines in the text is not the earliest, since the tradition of Mo Tzu's kite predates the *Treatise* by about seven centuries. The account in the *Treatise* is the first instance, however, of manned flight and may be said to present a mythological paradigm of future technology or a technological desideratum. At another level, the narrative may be viewed as a migration myth in the Shang era.

Odd-Arm Country is to its north. The people there have one arm and three eyes, for darkness and for daylight. They ride on piebald horses. There is a bird with two heads, red and yellow in color, which perches beside them. (*Shan hai ching*, *Hai wai hsi ching*, SPPY 7.1b-2a)

The people of Odd-Arm are clever at ways of carrying things on their shoulders. They can kill any type of bird and can make flying carriages that travel long distances in the wake of the wind. In the era of T'ang the Conqueror of the Yin [Shang], a west wind came and blew their carriages down to Yü-chou. T'ang broke up their carriages, so that his people would not see them. Ten years later an east wind came, and they made more carriages, and he sent them back home. This country is forty thousand leagues from the Jade Gate Pass. (*Po wu chih*, *Wai kuo*, SPPY 8.4a)

## The Country of Men

The sources for the myth of the Country of Men are *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* and Kuo P'u's commentary on it. The former, dating from the first century B.C., is typically terse. The latter, postdating it by some four centuries, is more informative in the manner of later mythology. Unfortunately, Kuo P'u does not indicate the sources for his new information, but it may be assumed that it derives from a Han or post-Han account that is from a text no longer extant.

Kuo P'u's narrative is set in the time of the Shang King Ta Wu (or, Wu the Great, trad. 1637-1562 B.C.). It takes the form of the odyssey of one Wang Meng to obtain the drug of immortality from the Queen Mother of the West. The details of the narrative mark Wang Meng as an adept in the art of longevity: dietary regimen, abstention from sex, and naturist clothing. He founds a new race of people descended from males through male conception and birth.

This myth of male procreation may have its origins in puberty initiation rites and the custom of couvade, instances of which Bruno Bettelheim has documented. He explained that these rites were the performance of rebirth, in which the male initiate is seen to be born anew from a male parent. Women are banned from such ritual, emphasizing the male denial of a woman's procreative role (Bettelheim 1954, as cited by Dundes 1984, 278-79). It may be assumed, by comparison of this myth with that of the Country of Women, that most female infants in such a society were left to die, while male children were allowed to survive.

The Country of Men lies north of Wei-niao. They are a people who wear clothes and carry a sword. (*Shan hai ching*, *Hai wai hsi ching*, SPPY 7.2b)

Wu the Great, emperor of the Yin [Shang], sent Wang Meng to gather drug herbs from the Queen Mother of the West and he arrived at this land. He broke off some grain but could not enter there. He ate fruit from the trees and wore tree bark to clothe himself. All his life he never had a wife, but he produced two sons who issued from the center of his body. When their father died, these sons became the people of the Country of Men. (Kuo P'u's commentary on *Shan hai ching*, *Hai wai hsi ching*, SPPY 7.2b)

### The Country of Women

The narratives of the myths about countries where only men and only women live appear to describe in mythic terms the existence of social systems that tolerate or emphasize only one sex. The first reading below is from a first-century B.C. chapter of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, and the second is Kuo P'u's commentary on that passage. The enigmatic myth of the first text is amplified and explained by Kuo P'u, who seeks to rationalize how a single-gender society is achieved: the female is mysteriously impregnated while bathing, and if she gives birth to a boy, he is left to die before he reaches the age of three. The motif of the

impregnating bath is similar to that of virgin birth in the narrative of Chien Ti. The motif of abandoning a baby also occurs in the myth of Chiang Yuan and her infant, Hou Chi.

The myths of the Country of Men and the Country of Women embody the most enduring of all human concerns, since they embrace associated myths of gender competition, gender roles, virgin birth, matriarchy, patriarchy, and the social control of kinship lines. That these ancient myths remain potent in contemporary society, not the least in Western society at the end of the second millennium A.D., is evident from the modern fascination with all manner of non-natural means of reproduction, including semen banks, surrogate motherhood, *in vitro* fertilization, artificial insemination for unmarried virgins (the so-called virgin birth phenomenon), lesbian or homosexual marriage with an adopted or "inherited" child, and so forth. It is possible to conjecture that this plethora of nontraditional social experimentation derives in the main from gender competition, which in turn has been engendered by the crisis of role reversals and role challenges due to political movements and socioeconomic trends in the twentieth century.

Gender competition is particularly evident in recent social developments, with the phenomenon of the "glass ceiling" blocking female promotion and the syndrome of equal opportunity employment for women and its practical side effect of "tokenism." A recent study of contemporary Western mores and myths of sex and gender focuses on attitudes in the late nineteenth century and their aftermath in the twentieth century. The author, Elaine Showalter, comments: "The myths that interest me most are the ones that project apocalyptic anxiety on to sexual change, particularly those having to do with reproduction, both biological and creative. When people think the distinction between the sexes is dissolving or intensifying, then you get panic" (1991.1, 20).

The Country of Women is north of Shaman-hsien. There two girls live, surrounded by water. (*Shan hai ching*, *Hai wai hsi ching*, SPPY 7.3a-b)

There is a yellow pool. When the women enter it to bathe, they emerge pregnant. If they give birth to a male child, within three years it will die prematurely. (Kuo P'u's commentary on *Shan hai ching*, *Hai wai hsi ching*, SPPY 7.3a-b)

## The Country of Meng Shu

This country is variously called Meng Shu, Meng Niao, Meng Hsi, Meng K'uei, and Meng Shuang. The multiplicity of names for a country of human-avian hybrids suggests a phonetic confusion in the transcription of a foreign name and possibly a confusion of place-names. Of the five names, Meng Niao and Meng Shuang clearly have a semantic value: *Niao* means 'a bird', and *Shuang* means 'a couple'. The words *Shu*, *Hsi*, and *K'uei* probably denote phonetic values. The word *Meng*, constant in all five, may signify here the idea of ferocity. The element *Niao*, meaning 'bird', correlates with the themes of three narratives, which constitute an ornithomorphous myth, a foundation myth, and a migration myth. These are the myths of Meng Niao, Meng Shu, and Meng Hsi. The myth of Meng Shuang is quite different. It relates a sibling marriage resulting in the exile of the incestuous couple from the region. The narrative appears in *The Treatise on Research into Nature* (Mathieu 1989, 158).

The first of the following readings is from a first-century B.C. chapter of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, which tells of a country of birds north of Mo, a Chinese transliteration of a foreign place-name, possibly in Central Asia. The second reading is from *The Treatise on Research into Nature*, of the third to the fifth century A.D., and it introduces a human feature in the description of the people. The third reading is from a tenth-century encyclopedia citing a lost text of *A General Atlas* dating from the Han period. This passage narrates a more complex myth. The ancestors of Meng Hsi are said to have emerged in the Shun era as a people skilled in domesticating birds and beasts, a skill that indicates that they were a settled community. This people migrated from their Hsia overlords, however, an exodus that, although unexplained, is marked by special favor with the escort of birds of paradise. This multilayered myth integrates the motifs of ornithomorphology, the foundation of a new people, migration, and the domestication of birds and beasts, as well as being a sitiological myth explaining how humans first began to eat eggs. This myth was also recorded in *The Treatise on Research into Nature* in a passage almost identical to the late citation from the Han work *A General Atlas* (Greatrex 1987, 132), which would seem to confirm the mythographic view that not all late citations are invalid as classical mythic texts.



Meng Niao is north of Mo Country. The birds there are speckled with red, yellow, and green, and they point toward the east. (*Shan hai ching*, *Hai wai hsi ching*, SPPY 11.2b)

The people of Meng Shu Country have a human head and a bird's body. (*Po wu chih*, *Wai kuo*, SPPY 8.5a)

In Meng Hsi people have a human head and a bird's body. Their ancestors tamed all the beasts and fowl for the Yü clan [of Shun]. In the era of the Hsia Lord, the people first started to eat eggs. When the Meng Hsi left them, male and female phoenix escorted them from there till they came to settle here. The mountains were thick with bamboo that grew eight thousand feet high. The male and female phoenix fed off the fruit of the bamboo, and the Meng Hsi ate from the fruit of the trees. It is eighteen thousand leagues from Chiu-yi. (*T'ai-p'ing yü-lan*, citing *K'uo ti t'u*, SPTK 915.9a)

### Owl-Sunshine Country

The description of the inhabitants of Owl-Sunshine Country makes them appear subhuman, although the wording of the text of the first reading below, from a first-century B.C. chapter of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, clearly refers to humans: *ch'i wei jen*, which means "as people, they. . . ." The account, with its grotesque depiction of foreigners, belongs to the type of hyperbolic and xenophobic ridicule of alien features and behavior. The fear of these inhabitants has led the anonymous author to portray them as wild beasts. The second reading comes from the commentary of the third-century A.D. writer Liu K'uei on a contemporary prose poem. A similar description to Liu K'uei's (fl. ca. A.D. 295) occurs in the *History of the Chou*, but there it refers to a creature called the Chou-mi-fei-fei. The Chou-mi is the name of a country believed to be in the southwest; *fei-fei* describes a primate or simian and is taken to be a man-eating beast rather than a cannibalistic human (Yuan K'o and Chou Ming 1985, 293; Knechtges 1982, 388 n. 223). A variant of this myth reads Owl-Ram Country, as in the second reading.

Owl-Sunshine Country lies west of North Ch'ü. As people, they have human faces with long lips, and black, hairy bodies. Their heels grow back to front. When they see humans, they break out laughing. In their left hand they hold a bamboo cane. (*Shan hai ching*, *Hai nei nan ching*, SPPY 10.2a-b)

The *Erh ya* [Dictionary] says: "Owl-Ram [Country] is also Yü-yü. There they have faces like human beings, with long lips and black, hairy bodies, and their heels point the wrong way. When they see humans, they laugh. So people carry a pole in their left hand." (Liu K'uei's commentary on *Wu tu fu* by Tso Ssu, citing *Erh ya*, *Wen hsuan k'ao yi* 5.9a)