



Myths of the Yellow Emperor

The god called the Yellow Emperor played a minor role in the early tradition, but he gradually acquired a complex biography, an elaborate genealogy, and a cycle of folkloristic legends that gave him an exalted status in the divine pantheon. Although later tradition made the Yellow Emperor the supreme deity of the Taoist pantheon, when philosophical Taoism had acquired a more religious coloration and was espoused by imperial rulers, and although traditional histories have presented this god as the pacific culture bearer, the early tradition clearly shows that the Yellow Emperor (Huang Ti) is first and foremost a warrior-god who successfully fought against a series of enemies—the Flame Emperor, Ch'ih Yu the god of war, the Four Emperors, the hero Hsing T'ien, and the one-legged god K'uei, besides many other lesser known mythical figures. When the warrior function of the Yellow Emperor is compared with gods in mythology worldwide, his battles are violent but not frenzied, purposeful but not mindless, pacific in motive but not anarchic in the way that Thōrr, Indra, and Odin are in their warrior function. In addition to his functions as warrior and peacemaker, this god also had the function of culture bearer in later local traditions. For the Han historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien, the Yellow Emperor symbolized the fountainhead of Chinese culture and civilization.

The Battle between the Yellow Emperor and the Flame Emperor

The first two readings, from the early and later tradition, narrate the battle between the Yellow Emperor and his brother, the Flame Emperor, Yen Ti. Each ruled half the world but fought for total supremacy. Georges Dumézil has shown that the concept of dual sovereignty is a major motif in myth and is epitomized in Indo-European mythology by the Indic gods Mitra and Varuna (cited in Littleton 1973, 64–65). In other traditions the contest for total supremacy by brothers is illustrated by the myths of Romulus and Remus and Cain and Abel, in which, like the Flame Emperor, Remus and Abel are killed. As such, the motif of dual supremacy and the motif of fraternal enmity characterize the narrative of the two Chinese gods and fit the paradigm of binary opposition.

A second major motif in the narrative of the hostility between the two brothers is the elemental dualism of fire and water. As Puhvel notes, “Fire and water are archetypally antithetical in the physical world and in human perception alike. In the former their incompatibility is relentless, but in the mind of mythopoeic man it has created its own dialectic of conflict resolution that is reflected in ancient tradition” (1987, 277). By tragic necessity, the antithetical weapon of water controlled by the Yellow Emperor conquers the elemental weapon of fire. The myth is narrated in *Annals of Master Lü* and *Huai-nan Tzu* of the third and second centuries B.C. A variant occurs in the third reading, from *New Documents* (second century B.C.), which says that the weapons were not elemental fire and water but clubs.

The fourth reading is from the *Lieh Tzu*, which is a late text but incorporates early myth material. It probably dates from the fourth century A.D. In this text the image of the all-conquering warrior-god is underscored by his control of the natural world, so that besides the element of water, the god has power over spirits and the most violent of the birds and beasts.

Because the fighting had gone on for a long time, the Yellow Emperor and the Flame Emperor used the elements of water and fire. (*Lü-shih ch'un-ch'iu*, *Tang ping*, SPTK 7.3a)

Because the Flame Emperor used fire to destroy him, the Yellow Emperor finally captured him. (*Huai-nan Tzu*, *Ping lueh*, SPPY 15.1b)

The Flame Emperor had the same father and mother as the Yellow Emperor, and he was his younger brother. Each possessed one half of the universe. The Yellow Emperor followed the Way, but the Flame Emperor refused to obey. So they fought on the Waste of Cho-lu. Blood flowed in streams from their clubs. (*Hsin shu*, SPTK 2.3a)

When the Yellow Emperor and the Flame Emperor fought on the Wastes of P'an-ch'üan, all the bears, grizzly bears, wolves, panthers, cougars, and tigers were in his [the Yellow Emperor's] vanguard, while the eagles, fighting pheasants, falcons, and kites served as his banners and flags. (*Lieh Tzu*, *Huang ti*, SPPY 2.22a)

After three battles, he [the Yellow Emperor] succeeded in fulfilling his ambition. (*Ta Tai Li chi*, *Wu ti te*, SPTK 7.1b)

Ch'ih Yu Attacks the Yellow Emperor

The next two narratives, both from late chapters of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (first century A.D.), deal with the battle between the Yellow Emperor and the god of war, Ch'ih Yu. The name Ch'ih is based on the word for a reptile (*ch'ung*), a flying creature that belongs to air, water, and earth. Besides his other functions as the god of war and inventor of military weapons, Ch'ih Yu is a rain god with power over the Wind God (Feng Po) and the Rain Master (Yü Shih). But the Yellow Emperor has control over superior forces, the Responding Dragon (Ying lung) and Drought Fury, his daughter, who can both afflict the world with severe drought by withholding water and rain.

In one version of this war of the gods, the battlefield is said to be Cho-lu, the same place-name as the arena of the fighting between the Yellow Emperor and the Flame Emperor. Karlgren has shown that certain place-names are mythopoeic in the sense that they are used in several different narratives "simply because they have a *nimbus*, which lends glory to the myth in question" (1946, 210). These are names like Ch'ung-sang or Exhausted Mulberry, Ming-t'iao, and Cho-lu.

The two readings from *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* on the Ch'ih Yu/Yellow Emperor myth demonstrate another mythographic point: that the same source may present different versions of a myth. In the first reading the battle is said to be between Ch'ih Yu and the Yellow Emperor, who is aided by Responding Dragon and Drought Fury. In the second, the executioner is said to be Responding Dragon, and neither the Yellow Emperor nor Drought Fury appears. In this version,



Figure 6. Responding Dragon executes the God of War, Ch'ih Yu, after his battle with the Yellow Emperor. 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.

Ch'ih Yu is linked with K'ua-fu, who, according to several mythic narratives, was killed because he dared to challenge the power of the sun in a race against time. Paired in this way, Ch'ih Yu and K'ua-fu are gods executed by Responding Dragon for the crime of hubris.

The latter version is a valuable document insofar as it combines aspects of myth and of ritual. The myth of Responding Dragon in his function of drought bringer may be viewed as "the spoken correlative of the acted rite," in this case, the rite of rainmaking.

In the great wilderness there is a mountain called Pu-chü, where rivers and seas flow in. There are the Related Brothers Mountains and there is the Terrace of Kung Kung. Bowmen did not dare to go north

of it. There was someone dressed in green clothes named the Yellow Emperor's daughter, Drought Fury. Ch'ih Yu took up arms and attacked the Yellow Emperor, so the Yellow Emperor commanded the Responding Dragon to launch an attack against him in the wilderness of Chi Province. The Responding Dragon stored up all the water. Ch'ih Yu asked the Wind God and the Rain Master to release a cloudburst. Then the Yellow Emperor sent down the Daughter of Heaven named Drought Fury and the rain stopped. Then he killed Ch'ih Yu. (*Shan hai ching, Ta huang pei ching*, SPPY 17.4b-5b)

In the northwest corner of the vast wilderness there is a mountain called Cruel-Plow Earth-Mound. The Responding Dragon lived at its southern boundary. He killed Ch'ih Yu and K'ua-fu. He did not succeed in getting back up to the sky, so there were frequent droughts on earth. But during these droughts someone assumed the guise of the Responding Dragon and so they managed to receive a heavy rain-fall. (*Shan hai ching, Ta huang tung ching*, SPPY 14.6a-b)

The Yellow Emperor Captures the K'uei Monster

The warrior god's battle with the god K'uei is also recounted in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (in a first-century A.D. chapter): K'uei is a one-legged storm god of mountain and water. He is killed by the Yellow Emperor, who uses his hide as a war drum to bring the world to order through terror. With its typical rationalizing logic, *The Classic of History* historicizes this god as Yao's humanized, and sanitized, master of music, with a magical talent (his vestigial divinity) for making animals dance. This version of the K'uei myth is the subject of a classical joke: when Confucius was asked if "K'uei really only had one foot?" (*K'uei yi tsu*), he avoided the mythological account with the punning reply, "One K'uei was enough!" (*K'uei yi tsu yeh*). The purely mythical, unhistoricized figure of K'uei is, however, attested by an early text that predates *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* and *The Classic of History*. In the *Chuang Tzu*, K'uei is mentioned as a storm god with one leg who lives in the mountains (Watson 1968, 183, 203).

In the eastern seas there is Flowing Waves Mountain. It sticks up seven thousand leagues from the sea. There is a beast on its summit which looks like an ox with a blue body, and it has no horns and only one hoof. When it comes in and out of the water there are severe

storms. Its light is like the sun and moon; its voice is like thunder. Its name is K'uei. The Yellow Emperor captured it and used its hide for a drum. When he struck it with a bone from the thunder beast the sound was heard for five hundred leagues, and it made the world stand in awe. (*Shan hai ching, Ta huang tung ching*, SPPY 14.6b)

The Yellow Emperor Conquers the Four Emperors

A further aspect of the Yellow Emperor cycle of myths is his battle with the Four Emperors, which is preserved in *The Myriad Sayings of Master Chiang*, dating from the third century A.D. The mythic text states the ambiguity inherent in a warrior-god who hates war: "He took no pleasure in war or aggression" but who nevertheless goes on "to destroy the Four Emperors." This ambiguity may simply mean that the warrior-god must use destructive force to bring about constructive peace. Yet, when this account is compared with earlier mythic texts from *Huai-nan Tzu*, *Annals of Master Lü*, and *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* concerning battles with the Flame Emperor and Ch'ih Yu, it is clear that a moralizing element has crept in. Master Chiang, or Chiang Chi, clearly felt that the primeval violence of the Yellow Emperor had to be toned down and explained in palatable terms for the more cultivated society of the Wei dynasty, in which he lived and wrote. By a late tradition, the Four Emperors are T'ai Hao, god of the east, with the emblematic color green; the Flame Emperor, god of the south, with the color scarlet; Shao Hao, god of the west, white; and Chuan Hsu, god of the north, black. If this tradition is to be believed, the Flame Emperor rose again and had to be killed twice.

At the beginning of the Yellow Emperor's era he cared for his own person and loved his people. He took no pleasure in war or aggression. But the Four Emperors each took the name of their regional color and gathered together to plot against him. Each day they threatened him near his city walls, refusing to remove their armor. The Yellow Emperor sighed and said, "If the ruler on high is in danger, the people beneath will be unstable. If the ruler suffers the loss of his kingdom, his officers will 'marry' themselves off to another kingdom. Because of this kind of damage, it is the same as harboring bandits, isn't it? Today I stand at the head of the people, but you four robbers oppose me and cause my army to be on the alert constantly."

Then he moved his army over to the fortified walls in order to destroy the Four Emperors. (*Chiang Tzu wan chi lun, Huang Ti wei ssu tao*, SYTS 1.4a)

The Yellow Emperor Loses the Black Pearl

The *Chuang Tzu*, the earliest verifiable work of philosophical Taoism, is a valuable source of primal myth, but its value is seriously diminished by the practice of its author, Chuang Chou, or Master Chuang, of utilizing myth for the purpose of propounding and illustrating his philosophical beliefs, in so doing often distorting those myths. This tendency is exemplified by Chuang Tzu's treatment of the mythical figure of the Yellow Emperor. The only reference to the god as a warrior occurs in a negative critique of his battle with Ch'ih Yu (Watson 1968, 327). Most of the other references to the Yellow Emperor in *Chuang Tzu* are ambiguous or negative, since he casts him in the role of a lesser god and as a demythologized figure who subserviently seeks the Truth from wiser Taoists or innocents (*ibid.*, 119, 266). Therefore, while Chuang Tzu subverts the classical mythological tradition for polemical and satirical purposes, he embarks on a new mythopoeic course, creating his own myths.

The first reading on the myth of the Yellow Emperor's black pearl is a prime example of this mythopoeia. In it the philosopher argues that knowledge, sensory excellence, and technical debating skills are the marks of civilized behavior, which has to be learned, whereas inborn nature or instinct, characterized as Shapeless, belongs to a higher order of human existence. The myth of the instinctual versus the civilized has been explored brilliantly by Lévi-Strauss in his analyses of the Bororo myths of Central Brazil, in which he establishes his paradigmatic paradox of *le cru: le cuit* 'the raw: the cooked', or the primitive and civilized (Lévi-Strauss 1970).

The second reading is a variant text of the black pearl myth. It comes from a T'ang source, *Seven Tomes from the Cloudy Shelf*, a Taoist text. The third reading is from a Sung dynasty account of the eleventh century A.D.

The Yellow Emperor was traveling north of Scarlet River. He climbed up the Mound of K'un-lun and gazed south. On his way back he dropped his black pearl. He told Chih [Knowledge] to look for it, but he could not find it. He told Ch'ih Kou [Wrangling Debate] to

look for it, but he could not find it. So he told Hsiang-kang [Shapeless] to do so, and Hsiang-kang found it. The Yellow Emperor said, "That's amazing! How was Hsiang-kang the one who was able to find it?" (*Chuang Tzu, T'ien-ti, SPPY* 5.2b-3a)

He [the Yellow Emperor] made Kang-hsiang search for it and he found it. Later, because the daughter of the Meng clan, the Lady Chi-hsiang, stole the black pearl, he [Kang-hsiang] drowned in the sea and became a god. (*Yun chi ch'i ch'ien, Hsien-yuan pen chi, SPTK* 100.23a)

According to ancient history, when the daughter of Chen Meng's clan stole the Yellow Emperor's primeval pearl, he sank into the river and drowned. He changed into the god of this place. Today he is the god of the River Tü-miao. (Chang T'ang-ying's commentary on *Shu t'ao wu, HH* 1.9b)

The Yellow Emperor Questions the Dark Lady on the Art of War

The last reading is a fragment from the fourth to the fifth century preserved in a Sung dynasty encyclopedia. The narrative underscores the Yellow Emperor's function as a warrior god, but it demythologizes the god by making him subservient to a newly invented Taoist goddess. To borrow Puhvel's phrase, the Dark Lady is "a latter-day manipulative invention," designed to enhance the new deity of the post-Han neo-Taoist pantheon.

The Yellow Emperor and Ch'ih Yu fought nine times, but for nine times there was no winner. The Yellow Emperor returned to T'ai Mountain for three days and three nights. It was foggy and dim. There was a woman with a human head and bird's body. The Yellow Emperor kowtowed, bowed twice, and prostrated himself, not daring to stand up. The woman said, "I am the Dark Lady. What do you want to ask me about?" The Yellow Emperor said, "Your humble servant wishes to question you about the myriad attacks, the myriad victories." Then he received the art of war from her. (*T'ai-p'ing yü-lan, citing Huang Ti wen Hsuan nü chan fa, SPTK* 15.9b)