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PREVIEW

THE ALLUSIVE DRAGON

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THE ALLUSIVE DRAGON

by

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Prologue

In the Spring of 1981, I made my first contact with the philosophy of the East--specifically that of China. It was to be the beginning of a long and fascinating journey which I hope will never end. At that time, however, Philosophy 3552, Chinese Philosophy, loomed in front of me as an overwhelming challenge which I was not sure I could handle. The previous semester I had taken my first philosophy course, and was still not at home in a world of thinking about thinking or of criticizing abstractions. However, under the guidance of my mentor, Professor David Hall, I soon discovered that all of those threatening philosophical questions did not necessarily need to be answered by facts--one did not always have to "get it right"-- and that so often a question answered by a question or a speculation was the way to open the door to greater knowledge. As a result, I relaxed and became more and more drawn to Chinese thought, not because I found Western thought particularly lacking, but because of the infinite possibilities that the study of Chinese philosophy *suggested*. My literary background, my interest in history, languages, anthropology, and archeology, my concern with aesthetics, and my one philosophy course all joined forces to prod me forward on a journey along the path of Chinese thought and culture. While this background gave me some sense of security, I do not think that it blinded me or prevented me from evaluating what I found along the way. If anything, it helped me keep my eyes open so as to be conscious of those sideways glances that are often so important.

All this began four years ago, and I am still traveling along the same road, but on each outing, I find something that is new and exciting--at least for me. During my extended Graduate Student period, I have written, among others, three papers on aspects of Chinese thought and culture, and one on Western thought as it relates to myth. The present paper is a natural extension of these previous four, infused with a great deal of new blood.

One of the areas of Chinese studies that offers largely unexplored territory and quite diverse opinions (from both Western and Eastern scholars) is that referred to as "Chinese Mythology." Within this sphere of investigation, a most tantalizing subject for inquiry is that of creation or foundation myths. This area is fascinating, particularly from the perspective of comparative philosophy, since there do not appear to have been any important cosmogonic myths in classical China until about the middle of the Han dynasty (202 B.C.E. – 220 C.E.).¹ This apparent lack of cosmogony has been noted by numerous scholars, but many of them have dropped the observation at this point, attributing the absence to loss of the original myths through historical events such as the Burning of the Books in 213 B.C.E., or to the early euhemerization and other reinterpretations of the ancient myths which transformed them either into what might be called "mythological history" or into "mythical" underpinnings of various philosophical systems. Thus, it would appear that very few scholars have devoted much time to the question of why there are no significant cosmogonic myths from ancient China. While the problems surrounding this question are numerous and complex, China seems to be quite unique in the lack of these myths in her ancient literature. This in itself justifies

investigation into the possible reasons for this omission, even though we may not "get it right."

I would suggest that myth--especially cosmogonic myth--as we of the Anglo-European culture define myth, might not even have existed in ancient China. I believe that this approach has as much value as previous attempts to explain the lack of cosmogony in the China of antiquity. In order to consider this supposition, it will be necessary to look at what the ancient Chinese did develop. Certainly their written language, a language with such visual aesthetic potentiality, can be seen as an effective tool of unification and a prime culture carrier of sacred ideas. It is my opinion that the importance of language cannot be overemphasized when dealing with almost any aspect of Chinese thought and culture, and I will spend a good deal of time searching for language connections in the following pages. We also need to look at the elaborate cosmological tradition developed by the early Chinese--things like the ancient book of divination, the *I-Ching*; the Taoist, *Yin-Yang*, and *Wu-hsing* (Five Elements) schools; and the ancient astrological and astronomical traditions. Suggestions gleaned from the Shang oracle bones, inscribed bronzes, and hints from ancient literature will also have to be considered for clues to what embodied the cultural values of the ancient Chinese.

The Chinese view of the world, as I have come to understand it, is one of change where reality is centered on a "becoming" or process, and the world is understood in terms of occurring events. This can be contrasted to the dominant Western world view where reality appears to be thought of as being and existence, and the world is conceived of in terms of things or

substances. I hope to find that the sources quoted above will support a process world view, and that the lack of cosmogonic myth in ancient China can be seen largely as a consequence of this view.

The purpose of the MAIS program is to allow for the expansion of knowledge into new and different areas, and the final endeavor is meant to be a reflection of this expansion. It is my belief that this project should not constitute an end but rather another step in an ongoing process. My intention is that what I am doing be exploratory in nature so that movement and change must be an accepted part of the discourse. It is hoped that each step in the process will be stimulated by what has gone before, and that each occurrence will point the way toward the next event. While this approach involves a certain amount of speculation, digression, and risk, I believe it to be the purpose of imagination and intuition to seek out those novelties which reason and logic must discipline and regulate.

My insistence on the need for accepting movement and change when dealing with China can also be seen reflected in the image of the dragon. A symbol for strength and goodness and the spirit of movement, change, and creation, the Chinese dragon is not the evil, destructive monster of Western medieval imagination. On the contrary, we find a beneficent force in China that wields the power of transformation and has the gift of rendering itself visible or invisible and of enlarging or contracting itself, and of doing these things at will. It lies hidden in caverns in the earth or coiled in the depths of the sea until the time comes for it to slowly rouse and unfold itself into activity.² Thus, I have not chosen the daughters of Mnemosyne to aid me in my quest; I must follow the trail of the playful dragon.

As I mentioned before, this paper is the direct extension of four other papers written for MAIS courses at this university, but it is certainly much more than that. For my interest in and great love of ancient mythology, I must thank Professor Philip Gallagher, who introduced me to the subject and continued to hold out tantalizing baits in the form of exciting classes revolving around our Western mythology. Given my propensity for analogical thinking, it was most natural that I should become attracted to the subject of Chinese Mythology in the search for similarities and differences. While I was unable to find many similarities in the field of mythology, I thought I saw much similarity between Chinese thought and Western Medieval thought. For my interest in this subject and my desire to expand and extend this knowledge in a comparative manner, I am grateful to Professor Lawrence Johnson. It was also professor Johnson who first introduced me to the MAIS offerings and who was always there to listen to my problems and give advice during my first years in the program.

The one individual without whose help, belief, prodding, and patience I would never have attempted this project is , Professor David Hall. He introduced me to the study of philosophy and, more importantly, he introduced me to China. Professor Hall is a true interdisciplinary scholar, and his ability to inspire his students is a rare gift indeed. He encouraged me, even prodded me, to continue when I felt that I could not, and hopefully he will not regret his actions.

While all of these individuals have had a great deal to do with what will follow, I should not like them to feel responsible for the direction I

may take. They have merely provided me with provisions for the journey; which way I go and what I may find are my responsibility.

PREVIEW

Plans and Provisions

Is there room in the field of scholarly endeavor for those who lack the qualifications of "specialists"? Every discipline has its experts whose lives have been devoted to certain aspects of their chosen field so that their expertise is usually unquestioned. Their word is highly respected and they have reputations that must be carefully protected. Even the field of interdisciplinary studies has its experts, since it draws scholars from all of the disciplines that make up the whole. Upon what ground does the "generalist" dare to tread? Is there a place for the tentative contributions of these explorers? Certainly there is the danger that intended contributions may lead to misunderstanding and distortion rather than to clarification and discovery (since inadequate background often supports false premises), but there is always risk when there is movement from limited activity to active pursuit of a goal. Moreover, even when the above occurs, there is the possibility of some novelty being found in a new passageway. The generalist, concerning herself with a more holistic view of things, and having less of an image to protect, can perhaps be more daring in blazing a broad trail for specialists to investigate and evaluate at a later time.

If we can agree that there is room for works of a general character which do not claim to be the result of specialized knowledge, can these works not also serve to illustrate different modes of human thought? Since we are all human beings, from whatever culture we arise, all of the

different traditions and attitudes can be seen as expressions of the human mind.

Chad Hansen, in his *Language and Logic in Ancient China*, discusses this idea of a common human psychology in his treatment of interpretive theory. He uses the term "principle of humanity" (which he attributes to Richard Grandy) saying that "the explanation is relative to some audience, and we regard an explanation or interpretation [he includes translation under interpretation] as adequate when it reveals a 'pattern of relations among beliefs, desires, and the world as similar to ours as possible'."¹ Hansen goes on to say that without this kind of principle, interpretations between differing cultures would be impossible, so that the language, concepts, and distinctions used in any explanation or interpretation of a foreign culture must be those of the tradition making the interpretation. Thus, the comparisons and contrasts drawn with Western thought and culture explain, in our own terms, elements which differ remarkably from our own tradition.² While using ourselves and our times as models for comparison does confront us with the everpresent problem of anachronism, it seems to be the only access we have for making a plausible interpretation about the beliefs of the ancient Chinese--they were, like us, human beings. It looks as though our own language, our concepts, and our distinctions will provide us with the necessary tools to deal, on our own terms, with what we find on Chinese soil.

Of course there are many who maintain that the approach to Chinese thought and culture ought to be by means of a detached and disinterested inquiry, whereby attempts at comparison are subsumed under the need to

"think like the Chinese" in order to be able to understand how they see their world and why. The assumption here is that the Chinese do not think like we do. We must not carry that assumption to extreme, however, for, as Hansen points out, "If Western minds are incommensurably different from Chinese minds then we could not discover anything at all about Chinese thought. . ."³ Since we are certainly interested in discovering as much as possible about this subject, we can happily take along our Western mind and its Western logic, with which we can "think like Westerners" and be hopeful that it is possible to understand what we find in China if we pack the right provisions, proceed cautiously, and keep our eyes wide open.

In dealing with a foreign culture such as the Chinese, it is important to remember that what is strange is not necessarily unintelligible. If it were, there would be no hope of ever understanding the Chinese. We can find reasons for the attitudes that we may find strange if we take the time to search them out and reflect upon them. In a world of potential nuclear holocaust, where the population of China represents one fifth of the world's total inhabitants--statistically, one Chinese for every four persons of any other nationality--it certainly seems important to make an attempt to understand what grounds the Chinese value system. Furthermore, understanding and agreeing are not the same thing. Just because we find the reason for a particular point of view, it does not necessarily follow that we will agree with it. Nevertheless, we will know of the existence of this other view and understand where it came from and why. At the very least, this should put a dent in dogmatism and allow for more deference and humanization of the "other," thus removing a barricade and permitting

further progress. It seems clear that the idea of the incomprehensibility of the Chinese mind must be left behind when we begin our journey. Certainly there are presumptions that are uniquely Chinese, but these can be grasped by the Western mind and will be picked up as we move along.

The thrust of this paper being toward Chinese "mythology," a working definition of the term "myth" and related terms such as "cosmogony" and "cosmology" seems necessary, and they certainly should to be taken along in order for any intelligent comparisons or contrasts to be made. If an author fails to lay out her use of a term or becomes careless in her choice of words when describing a condition, the reader is free to use his own discretion as to meaning. This so often causes misunderstandings and distortions. Likewise, if an explorer fails to orient followers as to the rules of the expedition, they can easily get lost or injured.

There are probably as many definitions of the word "myth" as there are scholars to create them. Mircea Eliade prefers a definition he describes as the "least inadequate because most embracing."⁴ This seems like a good choice in that it should be acceptable to specialists as well as intelligible to generalists. According to Eliade,

Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings'. . . Myth tells of how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality. . . always an account of a 'creation'; it relates how something was produced, began to be.⁵

According to this definition, myth narrates a history. History, as a chronological account of events, must have a beginning or starting point. If we are dealing with "how something was produced or began to be," the stress is on the entity that is coming to be. Myth, then, can be seen as a return to the origins of some-thing. I believe that Eliade's language would find trouble accommodating itself to a world of process--a world of events *becoming* rather than of substances *being*. This is not to say that the idea of process is not found in Western thought, but the emphasis in the West is placed on the being, not on the becoming. Reality is represented by the entity itself, and attention is directed toward specific beings or events and their histories. Transformations are important only insofar as they relate to the entity. On the other hand, the Chinese tend to stress the becoming or transformation over the being. Chuang-tzu, the famous Taoist poet-philosopher (fl. c. fourth century B.C.E.), exemplifies this Chinese characteristic in his dream of the butterfly:

Once Chuang Chou dreamt he was a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Chuang Chou. But he didn't know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou. Between Chuang Chou and a butterfly there must be *some* distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things.⁶

Neither Chuang Chou nor the butterfly are important in themselves here; it is the transformation that is stressed. It is also the case that neither

entity surpasses the other since both are equally important to the interaction.

The term "myth" is closely associated with what we refer to as an etiological tale, which, in its modern usage, refers to the description or assignment of causes (Greek *aitia*). Thus, an etiological tale explains the origin of a custom, a condition, or feature in nature or the human or divine world. Kees W. Bolle maintains that modern usage of the term "myth" is vague, which obscures the distinction between an etiological tale and a myth. He says that, generally, the typical etiological tale answers the question *why* such and such is the case, and the typical myth answers the question *whence* and thus indicates the *basis* of something or the validity of a custom.⁷ This suggests to me that it is the whence that gives myth its meaning; it is the whence that constitutes the underlying principle embodied in the myth; and it is the whence that points to origins. Bolle goes on to say that etiological tales were often added to mythical narratives and are thus not the distinctive characteristic of myths.⁸ This gives further support to the primacy of beginnings in myths embodying first principles. I hope it will become clear as we move along that Chinese literature did not concern itself with beginnings, nor was it ever meant to function as an instrument to convey principles or "truths."

Cosmogony, the subject of cosmogonic myth, is derived from the Greek *Kosmos* ("universe"), and *gonos* ("origin," "beginning," "creation"), and describes the creative action and the primordial events to which the world owes its existence. At a certain stage of development, a cosmogonic myth will often include a theogony and an anthropogony. Such myths are found in

almost all cultures, so that their apparent absence from the literature of ancient China is quite surprising. One could also speculate that cosmogony and mythology should be found together. If myths are narratives of beginnings, would not the first origin (that of the cosmos) be of prime importance? If a culture paid attention to any beginnings, we would expect them to be vitally interested in the big one. Since the early Chinese did not appear to concern themselves with the origin of the universe, it is perhaps not so surprising that we have trouble discovering a mythology in their ancient literature.

Cosmology, on the other hand, simply defined as the study of the physical structure and character (nature and relation of the parts) of the universe, could and did find more fertile soil in ancient China. In fact, as will be discussed later, elaborate systems designed to guide and regulate the behavior of the empire were modeled on the various ancient cosmological theories. While Western cosmologies do study origins, for the basic meaning of the term, I will stick to the roots of the word "cosmology" where the *logos* ("word," "reason," "plan") imparts to the term something like the idea of a cosmic plan.

Ernst Cassirer believed that language and myth were born together at some unknown prehistoric time.⁹ If this is so, then they should be able to illuminate one another. It is for this reason that I will attempt to extend some of Chad Hansen's thoughts on language (even though he confines himself to philosophical interpretation) into other areas, namely mythology and cosmology. It seems to me that this avenue of approach offers the best hope of finding a satisfactory explanation of why creation myths did not

seem to be necessary in ancient China, and why the theory of process is a necessary pre-condition of this exception.

Before we can enter new territory in search of models, we must first take a careful look at the barriers--both tangible and postulatory--that stand in the way. If we know they are there, we can learn to recognize them, and this will help us keep our eyes wide open and our senses attuned so as not to miss anything that might aid in finding answers.

PREVIEW

Barriers

Tangible Barriers

If language and myth are twin creatures, then in order for us today to learn anything about the subject of ancient Chinese mythology, we must turn to the Chinese language. Since we have no access to the ancient spoken language, we will have to look at what was written down. It is here that we run into one of the most perplexing problems in our search for the elusive dragon. As Joseph Needham has noted:

Chinese is the only language that has remained faithful to ideographic, as opposed to alphabetic, writing for more than three thousand years. . . There was no transition such as that in Egyptian from hieroglyphic through hieratic to demotic in which a syllabic alphabet arose.¹

Thus, one could almost say that two separate languages developed in China. One, a spoken or colloquial language, differing greatly as to the areas where it was spoken, underwent constant changes throughout time. The other, a classical written language, developed very early into a relatively stable form of expression because it did not have to follow the changes that were occurring in the spoken idiom.² It is perhaps significant that the Chinese developed two distinct terms to distinguish between these two types of language. *Wen-yen* (written word) is the traditional written Chinese, and *pai-hua* (plain speech) refers to the oral speech which also eventually developed a written form. The bulk of the writings produced before the

early 1920's were in *wen-yen*, the study of which has become a specialized field of endeavor with modern editions of old texts appearing with *pai-hua* annotations and translations.³ Mastery of the written language was quite difficult, but once attained, a literate Chinese could communicate in writing even when he could not converse intelligibly with another. This situation created great unity among the educated and gave the scholar in China a status unequalled in any other society.⁴ However it must also have created a great gulf between the elite, aristocratic element of society and the popular or folk element (at least on a broad level), since communication would be impossible outside of the home language area. Of course, prior to the development of the written language, it is probable that communication could only occur within a particular dialect group, so in that sense, writing set up a far reaching unity for at least some of the members of society. The dominance of *wen-yen* as the classical literary language established the early classics as models of style and prevented the emergence of regional type literatures.⁵ However, many "mythic" motifs come from the folk element of any culture, and when we try to reconstruct myths or to decide whether they existed at all, we have to look to the elite tradition for clues and must realize that there may be a great deal that will remain hidden from view. Wolfgang Bauer refers to the classical written language as "a silent communication,"⁶ which seems very appropriate to me in view of the fact that for meaning, it depended on seeing and feeling but not on hearing.

The ancient Chinese had great respect for, and stood in awe of the written word. Derk Bodde has noted that within Chinese literate history,

"orators are rare but calligraphers are 'legion'," and that what made a sacred composition efficacious was its reproduction in written or printed form.⁷

One can look at the extensive number of written records that we have from ancient China in such fields as poetry, divination, history, genealogy, philosophy, and especially astronomy, in confirmation of this concern for the written word. In fact, one of the most important things about the astronomical tradition of ancient China is that so much of it is written down. Based on observation, these written records are part of a continuous cultural tradition going back at least as far as 1800 B.C.E. Written astronomical records in China have been used to amplify, illuminate, and explain what has been lost from other traditions.⁸

There is also evidence in the field of astronomy to suggest that the tendency for "creating" history began quite early. Evan Hadingham states that "certain omens, such as eclipses, were reported on dates which were astronomically impossible, suggesting that the importance of securing a sign overrode the Han astronomers' concern for facts."⁹ Thus, we find that ancient Chinese astronomers were not adverse to manipulating the heavenly signs. Perhaps this had a great deal to do with these diviners wishing to remain alive in a society where the emperor was all-powerful, but they could also have been engaged in trying to harmonize heaven, earth, and man.

Unfortunately, the written word in China has been fraught with difficulties, especially for the Western scholar. The fragmentation of the myths is complicated by linguistic difficulties inherent in the Chinese classical language. There are many homophones, and the characters are easily confused with one another. Brevity coupled with lack of gender,

number, and tense permits variant translations in the absence of a larger clarifying context. Each word remains always the same no matter how it is used. The tense of the verb or the number of the noun is determined by the context of the sentence.¹⁰ Furthermore, as foreign ideas could only reach the Chinese consciousness through the filter of the written characters (and an appropriate one did not always exist), the translators were forced to choose a graph that was closest in meaning to the idea or ideas they were trying to convey. Due to the great flexibility and, in many cases, the lack of structures able to translate exact meanings, foreign ideas were sinicized, resulting in an altogether new creation. Moreover, the translation of Chinese values into Indo-European languages tended to cause distortions due to translators being committed to types of thinking not suitable for Chinese ideas.¹¹

China has had a long history of xenophobia, and it is not surprising to find that foreign activities found little aid and support. In the field of archeology, China lacked much in the way of modern archeological endeavors before the twentieth century. All of this, no doubt, tended to put the brakes on discoveries that might have allowed for more progression in the field of research into mythological materials. By the late 1960's the study of Chinese archeology was still dependent on materials collected during a brief span of nine years (1929-1937).¹² The Japanese had invaded Manchuria in 1931, and the period of the war years had been followed by the Communist takeover in the 1940's, which closed China to foreigners until the late 1960's. During this period of time, one can certainly suppose that the Communist leaders would have been disinclined to encourage "intellectual"

archeological excavations, even by Chinese scientists, unless motivated by political expediency.

Magic and superstition were very powerful in ancient China, and activities centered around the ancestral cult were very important. This fact coupled with the practice of *feng-shui* or geomancy must have impeded the excavation of ancient tombs. As recent archeology has shown us, these sites are veritable gold mines for evidence of what might be mythological and cosmological beliefs. Celestial and cosmological considerations affect the shape of many of the tombs, and astronomical manuscripts and celestially symbolic artifacts have been recovered from some of these.¹³ By taking note of the relation between death and the heavens, we can perhaps understand what death meant to the ancient Chinese and how this relationship fit into the giant cycle of cosmic order. In many cultures, death signifies a return to origins, and if there is a similar concept in the Chinese world view, would not one expect to find some reference to it at the point of departure from the world of the living?

Postulatory Barriers

Just as obstructive, but often more difficult to overcome (since they cannot always be seen clearly) are the barriers that prevent the searcher from selecting the correct path because he is not used to looking in a certain direction. This particularly afflicts the Anglo-European explorer (although Chinese of Western education and influence are not immune) and can be described as the failure to recognize what distinctions ground the Chinese tradition in contrast to the Western tradition. The result of this