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From Myth to History: The Emergence of Historiographical Tradition in China

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Abstract

The Chinese civilization, despite having experienced many historical shocks, shows consistency in its sociocultural institutions and adherence to traditional values which were formed in ancient times. Many experts claim the Chinese people's deep knowledge and respect for their history is one of the reasons for China's cultural consistency. The worship of antiquity is one of the important characteristics traced in many spheres of Chinese history. In this paper, we will elaborate on the issue of the basis for the emergence of this worship. The studied phenomenon arose during the Zhou period and was strengthened by Confucius and his disciples. Since then, antiquity worship hasn't been revised by society. The formation of antiquity worship in traditional China went gradually, and a total reshaping of Ancient China's spiritual life was needed for that. In this research, we will try to find out how this worship came to be. Such analysis is not only interesting for the studies of Chinese civilization but also for the research of the specifics of the Middle Kingdom's spiritual culture. The analysis of cultural specifics of China must help uncover the mechanisms of this civilization's consistency.

Keywords: China, Chinese history, Confucius, Ancient Chinese myths, Euhemerization, Zhou Dynasty, Shang-Yin Dynasty, Historicization.

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Introduction

Mythmaking is a very important phenomenon in humankind's cultural history, something which determined humanity's spiritual life for many centuries.

Mythmaking, unlike other parts of the early religious complex, mainly tasks itself with explaining the existing ties and values of the world. It's a specific form of knowledge of that time period. The consolidation of such knowledge happened through ceremonies and rituals. According to Ye. M. Meletinsky, myth and ritual are two aspects of a primordial culture – verbal and operational (Bazhanova, et al, 2014).

Mythological knowledge consolidated by rituals has two main functions in society. Firstly, it explains to people the main principles of their basic existence and thus sanctions and sacralizes the status quo which provides for stability in a community. Secondly, it streamlines and provides for a reliable contact between a community and its environment, the whole outside world, with all deities and spirits, in order to guarantee an individual's spiritual comfort.

In practice, the first function comes down to creating a simple algorithm of explanations and actions. The main burden here is carried by the ritual which practically implements the principles and norms of existence sanctioned by society, organizes relationships in a community, i. e. is directed at human relationships and thus guarantees stability. The second function is the necessary basis for the emergence of mythology per se. It pertains mostly to human interactions with the outside world filled with deities and spirits. While addressing the outside world, mythological knowledge becomes more complex and acquires some traits of physics and metaphysics. In this second function, myths create conditions for the emergence of pre-philosophical knowledge on their basis.

During Zhou Dynasty, the first function of myths starts dominating with a tendency towards ritualized formalizations of social life. This very function would eventually lead to the historicization of Chinese mythology and the emergence of historiographical tradition. But that is a rather lengthy process. The final phase of transformations of the Chinese myth belongs to the Axial Age (5th – 3rd centuries BC) (Bichurin,1842). From that moment in history, we can trace the appearance of regional cultural differences.

Such a situation is typical for all cultures which pass through this stage of civilizational development. In European Antiquity we can discover the “self-abnegation” of ancient myths, but in Ancient China the mythological system “self-destructs” and the worship of historical tradition appears.

Methods

The theoretical framework of this paper was based on works by Russian, Western and Chinese sinologists and fundamental writings on the history of myths and mythmaking.

The source list comprises dynastic histories *zhengshi*, the canons of the Four Books of Confucianism, and Chinese myths compiled by Yuan Ke in his *Myths of Ancient China*.

A number of methods of historical analysis were utilized, including:

- 1) Historical-genetic method allowed to trace the dynamics of development of Chinese mythology and the emergence of historiographical tradition;
- 2) Comparative methods was used to define the specifics of Chinese mythology in comparison with the mythological systems of other cultures;
- 3) Problem-chronological method allowed to specify the degree of myth historicization at different stages of history.

Results and Discussion

As a result of this, Ancient China's mythological system was largely lost (Birrell, 1999). Only various remnants remained scattered over ancient and Middle Age treatises, but they are not parts of a system and cannot rival the mythology of Ancient Greece.

Ancient myths were collected in China for quite some time – “starting from Eastern Zhou period up to Wei, Jin and Six Dynasties periods (8th century BC – 6th century AD)”, which, according to Yuan Ke’s calculations, would amount to over a thousand years (Hung, 2011). During that timeframe, ancient myths were forged more than once. Other Russian pre-Revolutionary sinologists pointed to that, including I. Bichurin in 1842 (Jaspers, 1994). Importantly, late recordings of myths led Yin mythology not being represented in the text corpus at all. Zhou myths were rethought by philosophical schools and entered records only partially. Mythical rudiments can be found in such canons as *Shi jing*, *Shu jing*, *Yi jing*, *Shanhai jing*, treatises *Zhuangzi*, *Huainanzi*, and *Liezi*; but of special interest is their appearance in purely historical works like “Records of a Grand Historian” (*Shi ji*) by Sima Qian, “Discourses of the States” (*Guo yu*), and “Records of Emperors and Kings” (*Diwang shiji*) by Huangfu Mi (3rd century AD).

It is theorized that the first steps in myth historicization were made by nameless historians of Western Zhou and early Qin periods, but the most significant works in myth rethinking were made during Han period and can be attributed to Confucianism whose adherents edited ancient Chinese texts.

One of the most telling attributes of myth historicization in China is the anthropomorphization of initially zoomorphic and/or supernatural, godlike mythological creatures. Mythological descriptions of Huangdi (“had the face of a dragon, a horn of Sun, four eyes, and four faces”) were preserved in the documents of Qin and Han periods (Yan Deliang), but later in *Shizi* (4th century BC) a dialog can be found “Zigong asked: The ancient Huangdi had four faces, can one believe that? Confucius replied: Huangdi chose four appropriate people and dispatched them to rule the four ends of the Earth; while they didn’t consult and didn’t act in unison, they still were successful, that’s why they were called the four faces” (of Huangdi) (*Shizi*). Sima Qian (140 – 87 BCE) in his “Records” specified the names of those four people: “Huangdi called Feng-hou, Li-mu, Chang-xian and Da-hong to rule the people” (Sima Qian, *Wudi bengji*), and then in *Diwang shiji* he elaborated “people dispatched by Huangdi to the four ends of the country ruled it like he would do, so people spoke about them like four faces (of Huangdi)”; thus

the initial myth was further historicized and made entirely real. In fact, historicization led to Confucianism turning mythology into a system that helped explain the phenomena of social and cosmic order and served as an illustration for philosophical reflection. This, in turn, kickstarted the process of moving along to a new worldview based on philosophical consciousness.

However, the process of rethinking myths started long before Confucius. Such change can be traced to the Shang-Yin period and was tied to the practice of fortune telling. Almost all divination inscriptions from that time began with an address to the forebear Shangdi who was asked by a wang (ruler) or a divining official for advice or request. As E. M. Yanshina thinks, divination was rational, without mysticism and the supernatural, according to strictly defined rules (Birrell, 1999).

Divination ritual played a very important role because a reply depended on its correctness. This led to rituals gradually displacing mythological thinking and worldview. Mysticism was basically non-existent even where it was supposed to be – in divination. Everything came down to a sober and practical interpretation of cracks on oracle bones. Rationalized rituals and the practical nature of divination led not only to the demythologization of thinking.

Of course, there was still place for emotional discharge outside of the official world (in orgiastic holidays or human sacrifices) and for figurative mythological constructions. But all this served to satiate religious necessities of the people. As V. V. Malyavin stated, the presence of two contradictory trends in the Yin's religious system (formalized rituals and orgiastic holidays) also led to the crisis of the mythological system (Jiachen, 2017).

After conquering Shang-Yin, the Zhou people aimed to overcome, rethink and reinterpret everything that was different from Yin's traditions in Zhou's early traditions. At the same time, the search took place for a new source of tribal identity which could give the Zhou Dynasty the right to rule the new state and spiritually unite the country.

Shang-di was the Yin forebear. Something else, more significant, had to be found. The Heaven finally became such a thing symbolizing an abstract and faceless regulating power, in principle akin to Shangdi. The Heaven and its mandate became an alternative to Shangdi. Initially, the Heaven and Shangdi were equal and interchangeable, and they were used in parallel.

According to M. Ye. Kravtsova, this influenced the idea of the execution of power. Formal and genetic ties of a living ruler with his heavenly ancestors and defenders faded away. They were replaced by the idea of a divine sanction for a ruler's earthly power (Kravtsova, 1991).

There was no such term as *de* during Yin; it was the early Zhou period when it emerged in its primary, and at that time the only, sense – “virtue” with a connotation of divine grace. Until Confucius and definitely in *Shu jing*, *de* always had a connotation of sacred and not ethical.

To consolidate *de*, Zhou Gong (周公) had to make callbacks to history, namely two historical precedents. To that end, Zhou Gong introduced the idea of the Xia Dynasty as possessing *de* and their descendants lately losing it, so that the heavenly mandate was transferred to Cheng Tang. From him, *de* moved to the last Yin wang Zhou Xin. Thus, dynastic cycles appeared.

The emergence of *de* and gradual strengthening of the ethical component led to ethics and rituals replacing religious dogmas; a ruler who was previously the center of society now needed to adhere to ethical norms and rituals. In the words of L. S. Vasilyev, this influenced all sides of the religious life of Zhou society. First of all, changes happened in sacrifices and divination practice. Zhou people ended these practices decisively because gifts were not needed to create a link with the Heaven, as the future only depended on the virtuous deeds of a ruler. The only thing needed was adherence to ethical regulations (Literature of the Ancient East.1984).

The ritual had the same fate as *de*. Gradually, religious meanings of the ritual of the Yin and partly of the Zhou society moved to the background and gave the floor to the ethical component. The ritual became a part of a strict detailed ceremony. Following that norm became equivalent to nurturing *de*.

That process required conceptual framing. Earlier, mythology could manage that easily, but was in crisis already, so it was necessary to formulate a new system of understanding which would be equally significant. That system was created, and it was transferred to paper. The authority of a written document – that was the basis for the Zhou’s ethical standard. In turn, this became the dawn of the worship of history, historical writing, and documental texts – something which is so characteristic for the many centuries of Chinese tradition.

In V. V. Malyavin’s opinion, the same manticism was at the core of the written practice of Ancient China (Jiachen, 2017). Compilers of oracle inscriptions were not only the first literate people but essentially also creators and monopolists of writing itself. It was they who became court historiographers (*shi*) and began the process of historicization.

Myths also contributed to the demise of the Chinese mythology by turning into a part of history. Aiming to align myths with the Zhou ethic, Confucians did much to turn spirits into people and find rational explanations for myths and legends. For instance, Kui, according to *Shanhai jing* (“The Catalog of Mountains and Seas”), was a weird one-legged creature: “There is a mountain called Liuboshan in the eastern seas. <...> On that mountain lived a beast resembling a hornless bull with a blue body and one leg. Just as he entered or exited water, winds started blowing and rain started pouring. His shining was like that of the Sun or the Moon, and his voice was like rolling thunder. His name was Kui. Huangdi hunted it down and made a drum from its skin. When that drum was hit with Kui’s bones, the rattle spread out for 500 li and aroused fear across the whole Kingdom under Heaven.” (*Shanhai jing*) (Malyavin, 2000). In *Shu jing* (“The Book of Historical Tales”), in the chapter “Regulations of Yao”, Kui turned into an official who was in charge of musical performances under Emperor Shun (Hung, 2011).

Thanks to this euhemerization of mythology, Chinese historical tradition acquired legendary rulers Yao, Shun, and Yu, who all filled the Xia epoch (Meletinsky, 2012). This information is illustrative in this regard: ruler Yao (the myth of ten suns), according to tradition, lived in 2357-2256 BC, and ruler Yu (the myth of the flood) lived in 2205-2198 BCE (Mythology of the Ancient World. 1977). As we can see, specific life periods were ascribed to these mythological characters, and they are very real for the Chinese people and are important parts of national history. Obviously, this contradicts the facts of historical science, but until the late 19th century it was not a matter of doubt. Current Chinese

researchers theorize that the last stage of historicization of Yao and Shun was Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian* because his treatise was the first in the line of official dynastic histories which formed a huge part of Chinese historical and political culture and were considered matters of national importance. Historicization of myths was also important because it "ancientified" the country's history – instead of abstract stories of the past the national consciousness got a long historical memory filled with great individuals, which directly contributed to the sense of national pride. Furthermore, despite being rather non-systematic, ancient myths were logical from a political order standpoint - within them, the institution of the emperor's power existed in ancient times, during the reign of the Five Emperors; thus, the model of centralized rule deepens its roots in the national consciousness. Chinese historians also point to a reverse process – mythologization of history. For instance, apart from writing mythical characters into official history, real people (such as the founder the Han Dynasty Liu Bang) sometimes were ascribed mythological traits, such as his very birth being tied with a miraculous event – his mother conceived him by a dragon (Vasilyev, 1989). The tradition of linking a ruler's birth to a supernatural occurrence date back to totemism and in case of Chinese historical tradition can be considered the initial legitimization of his power. The secondary legitimization is the response of Heaven after its Son ascended the throne. Chinese historical tradition required that a ruler's genuineness must be assured after he received the heavenly mandate by a certain supernatural event, such as an unusual natural phenomenon (e. g., seven rainbows) or an appearance of a beast of good fortune, such as a dragon, a fenghuang, or a qilin. Such an appearance was always written down by historians and was a sign of legitimacy for an emperor. With time, initial legitimization faded away, and during Ming and Qing dynasties the births of emperors did not coincide with any mythological phenomena. However, secondary legitimization existed until the very demise of Imperial China. Unusual occurrences were included in a special chapter called *wu xing zhi* (the treatise of the five elements) with the date, time, and nature of the phenomenon. De facto, apart from historicization of myths (*shenhua lishihua*) here we can find the reverse process - mythologization of history (*lishi shenhuahua*) (Yanshina, 1977).

We must also mention some cases of turning of ancient deities and heroes into officials in the Chinese tradition. For example, the Zhou's mythical ancestor Houji ("the governor of millet") was turned into "the minister of agriculture" (14, p. 126). Such stories can be encountered not only in *Guo yu* ("Discourses of the States") but also in *Zhou li* and other treatises. Keeping in mind the time of writing, we can state that the process took place approximately in 5th – 3rd centuries BC. With time, as E. M. Yanshina opined, many positions became abstracted from those deities who were deemed to be the patrons of such professions (Yanshina, 1984). Such processes, of courses, were results of historicization, but they also ascribed traits of sacredness not only to rulers but to simple bureaucrats as well (Yuan, 1987; Yerizon et al., 2018).

History was filled not only with deities' names but also with their feats and actions. Thus, the myth became devoid of a deity and all events linked with it, and those events were reinterpreted according to rational and ethical norms of the Zhou period.

Summary

Chinese traditional history consolidated a qualitatively different perspective of myths – mythology turned into written history; mythological forebears became first ideal rulers and officials, their reign periods were specified, and their genealogy was created. The continuum of historical events was linearized and supplemented with dynastic houses.

Obviously, with all its tendency towards myth historicization, historical tradition still retained mythological elements, which allowed, on one hand, to preserve links with a huge chunk of time which was tied with a similarly huge reservoir of culture, and on the other hand, to strengthen the awareness about national identity based on many centuries of stories kept in people's memory.

Conclusions

For Chinese traditional culture, written history is of huge significance. It's not only the basis for patriotism but also didactic examples of noble and virtuous behavior of the people of the past, as well as examples of punishments for violations of the ritual and Confucian norms. The correctness of historical facts was under no doubt because they were postulated by court historiographers and confirmed by the Son of Heaven. As the basis for such historical texts during the Middle Ages, Chinese historiographers used documents and chronicles preserved carefully in various places across the Middle Kingdom. But the authority of history arose during the Zhou Dynasty and was caused by the wish of Zhou people to legalize their right to rule the land.

To that end, they undertook a massive effort to change the basics of worldview and turn myths into historical writings that would not become subjects of qualm. As a result of that work, Chinese mythology almost disappeared, and the worship of history arose.

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