

# The Flood Myths of Early China

MARK EDWARD LEWIS



THE FLOOD MYTHS  
OF EARLY CHINA

SUNY series in  
CHINESE PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE

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Roger T. Ames, *editor*

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OF EARLY CHINA

MARK EDWARD LEWIS

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## INTRODUCTION

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Among the remnants of early Chinese mythology, tales of the taming of a great flood figure prominently. These stories of the creation of an ordered world out of chaos provided a rich ground for reflecting on the nature and components of human society. Among the aspects of society whose roles and origins were depicted in these tales were the ruler, the lineage, the household, and even the human body. The institutional background and philosophical or literary aspects to many of the ideas dramatized in these stories are dealt with in a separate book, *The Construction of Space in Early China*. This volume on the flood myths examines the manner in which the early Chinese read the origins of many Warring States and early imperial institutions or practices into high antiquity. As such it forms a companion volume to *The Construction of Space*, but it can also be read independently as a study of a major topos of early Chinese mythology. This introduction places the Chinese myths within a larger context by examining stories of a great flood that appear in different parts of the world. These stories provide a useful background for understanding the Chinese flood myths by showing how they both resemble and are distinct from related myths found in other civilizations.

### COMPARATIVE FLOOD MYTHS

In this book, “myth” refers to any “traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance,” in which the vexed word “traditional” means that it has no identifiable author but appears in several sources and develops over time. These stories “express dramatically the ideology under which a society lives,” reflect on the elements and tensions that form a society, and “justify the rules and traditional practices without which everything in a society would disintegrate.”<sup>1</sup> Myths thus belong to and serve to define particular groups, and both their form and significance will entirely depend on the uses to which they are put by those groups. As the groups change across time, the form of the myths and their uses will likewise change, or the stories will simply be forgotten.

This account of myths means that they cannot be defined as an objective “substance” that exists outside or apart from the people who create and employ them. The impossibility of any “substantial” definition of myth has been pointed out in recent years by scholars who have shown that myths are not a distinctive mode or genre of narrative that can be distinguished from other stories by any substantive trait or linguistic mark. They have usually concluded that the category “myth” is an illusion or a modern construct used to fetishize or deride certain stories in the service of some rival program that claims to transcend “primitive” myths, for example, philosophy, dogmatic religion, science, or history.<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, rival intellectual programs, such as Gnosticism or some forms of Romanticism, embraced the same hypostasized concept of “myth” as a weapon against the all-encompassing claims of dogma or reason.<sup>3</sup> However, this dismissal of the category of “myth” can be challenged in several ways.

First, while myths are not distinguished from other stories by any definitive attributes, they can be operationally defined in terms of who told them, on what occasion, and for what purposes. Thus Lowell Edmunds, in his introduction to *Approaches to Greek Myth*, examines various discussions of stories and storytelling in ancient Greece, and is able to show how a certain set of stories that we would call myths were distinguished by the Greeks on the basis of their subject matter (supernatural or heroic), their variable forms of transmission (poetry for pan-Hellenic or oral for local), the motives for telling them, and their constant reappearance in new versions depending on their range (pan-Hellenic or local) or context.<sup>4</sup> While the formal theory of a category of stories called myths was not formulated until Plato created it as a negative term to valorize his own definition of “philosophy,” Edmunds shows how an incipient category already operated in the writings of Pindar, Aristophanes, and Herodotus.

Second, it is striking that the critics who constituted the category of myth as a negative term used to set off the glories of their own programs elaborated their own stories that performed the sanctioning role of myths. Plato’s use of stories about the afterlife, Atlantis, the origins of the world, and other clearly “mythic” themes has been the object of considerable study. The traditional myths condemned by Plato were in turn interpreted as poetic truths by Aristotle, or as veridical allegories by the Hellenistic philosophers.<sup>5</sup> Paul contrasted the “godless and silly myths” of the Greeks with the Christian logos (adopting Plato’s categories), Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus attacked classical mythology as the work of demons, and the rejection of Gnosticism hinged in part on the criticism of its reliance on an elaborate mythology. Nevertheless, elaborate tales spun out from the New Testament and later lives of saints formed a “Christian mythology” as analyzed at length by scholars of the Enlightenment and the early Romantic movement.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, propagandists proclaimed that modern science supplanted the errors of myth, which Francis Bacon and others described as a primitive attempt to answer the questions that true science would resolve.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, science elaborated mythic

accounts of its own heroic origins, for example, the misrepresented trial of Galileo, and as Kurt Hübner has shown at length, the tale of science supplanting myth is only one version of numerous mythicizing accounts of the end of mythology.<sup>8</sup> Finally, whereas historians from the time of Thucydides have defined themselves in opposition to myth, and modern positivist historiography made the supplanting of earlier myths one of its chief tasks, increasing numbers of modern historians have incorporated myths into their work, studying the work of mythology as a central topic of their research.<sup>9</sup> This constant resurgence of mythic tales within the works of those who demonize mythology suggests that it is not purely the invention of those critics.

Finally, the operative definition of myth refutes the criticism that the category of myth is an illusion or invention precisely by defining it not through the nature of the tale but through the attitudes of its tellers and listeners. This point is made most clearly in Hans Blumenberg's *Work on Myth* (*Arbeit am Mythos*). As the title itself indicates, this book elaborates its theory of mythology in terms of what is done *to* or *with* the stories, rather than some quality of the stories themselves. In a sense, Blumenberg applies to myth the same sort of ideas as those applied to literature in the "reception" theories elaborated by Ingarden, Iser, and Jauss, in which the assumptions, questions, and rules of reading provided by the audience constantly shape and reshape the meaning of the text.<sup>10</sup> The primary difference is that, unlike literature, in which new readings are applied to a given text, in the case of a myth the story itself will be constantly adapted and rewritten as the concerns of its tellers and its audience change. It is for this reason that, as Blumenberg points out, myths are "stories that are distinguished by a high degree of constancy in their narrative core" but by an equally pronounced capacity for variation. These correlate attributes allow myths to be transmitted over centuries; their constancy produces the attraction and the authority due to familiarity, while their variability allows for constant adaptation to new intellectual needs.<sup>11</sup> This combination helps account for the power of myths, which, as Blumenberg argues, are the product of a "Darwinism of words" in which stories that seize attention and help people cope with their world are selected for repetition, and in which these same stories are adapted over time to changing circumstances.

This variability of myths, in which new versions are constantly elaborated to explain or supplant old ones, also helps to explain why mythology is routinely theorized by those who claim to refute it, only to fashion new myths in their own turn. As Lowell Edmunds has pointed out, even before "myth" was theoretically formulated by Plato as a negative category, the term was often applied to stories that the author chose to reject in favor of some other version or tale. Thus, in Aristophanes's *Wasps*, Bdelycleon tells his father not to tell "myths [*mythoi*]" about supernatural creatures, but "stories of the human kind." Likewise, Pindar prefaces his version of the story of Pelops by repudiating a version of the myth that he claims was started by "malicious neighbors" of Pelops's family. Edmunds concludes that, for many Greeks, "My

version is the truth, but yours is a *mythos*.”<sup>12</sup> Given that the coining of variants and competition between these different versions was a feature of the tales that emerged as myths, the repeated theorization of mythology as a target of criticism is not a proof of the illusory character of the category, but rather of its mode of generation and perpetuation.

Tales of a world-destroying flood are one of the most widespread and continuously evolving categories of stories in the world, and probably the most exhaustively studied by scholars over the centuries. The most thorough collections of such tales have described more than 300 examples drawn from every continent.<sup>13</sup> Western studies of the flood across the centuries were dominated by the biblical tale of Noah, although versions of the myth were also known from ancient Greece and Rome.<sup>14</sup> The true beginning of comparative studies on flood tales, however, was the publication in 1872 by George Smith of a fragment of the flood story from what is now identified as chapter eleven of the Gilgamesh epic. This version, supplemented by Smith’s discovery in the next year of much of what is now known as the *Atrahasis*, showed the world that the biblical account was based on, or closely related to, earlier accounts that had circulated in the Middle East.<sup>15</sup> The rise of comparative folklore and anthropology in the final decades of the nineteenth century produced evidence of flood tales from many other areas. Some scholars argued that such widespread accounts were evidence of the historicity of a universal flood, and even in recent decades people have written books seeking to demonstrate the veracity of these stories.<sup>16</sup> However, for scholars not religiously committed to a belief in the absolute veracity of the biblical account, the multiplicity of versions across the globe was treated as an interesting phenomenon for analysis through the methods of comparative folklore or mythology. Thus, the first great summation of comparative flood myths by James Frazer—who collected evidence of tales from Mesopotamia, the Bible, ancient Greece and Rome, South Asia (both ancient and modern), Southeast Asia (both continental and the islands), Australia, New Guinea, Melanesia, South America, and North America—was published in a book entitled *Folklore in the Old Testament: Studies in Comparative Religion, Legend, and Law*. The biblical account, once a central element of belief in Western culture, was reduced to the role of being a single case, and apparently a derivative one, in a worldwide phenomenon.

The sheer breadth and diversity of flood legends also mean that it is impossible to speak in any meaningful sense of *the* flood myth or to derive any useful generalizations that would apply to all cases. No interesting statement can be made that is true of all accounts of the flood. This point is made by Dorothy Vitaliano:

However, there is not *one* deluge legend, but rather a collection of traditions which are so diverse that they can be explained neither by one general catastrophe alone, nor by the dissemination of one local tradition alone. Some are highly imaginative but very wide-of-the-mark attempts to explain local topographic features or the presence

of fossil shells high above sea level. A large number are recollection—vastly distorted and exaggerated, as is the rule in folklore—of real local disasters, often demonstrably consistent with special local geologic conditions. . . . Flood traditions are nearly universal . . . mainly because floods *in the plural* are the most universal of geologic catastrophes.<sup>17</sup>

Although the prevalence of floods is certainly a necessary condition for the frequency of flood myths, it is not sufficient as an explanation. Not all widespread phenomena become the subject of stories, much less of fundamental myths. Furthermore, it provides no insight into the wide ranges of meanings attributed to the flood in different versions.

Floods become the recurring topic of stories because, like animals, they are “good to think.” Although there is no *single* feature or meaning common to all versions, certain topoi or ideas to which floods lend themselves do recur in many contexts. In the balance of this introduction I will examine several major recurrent themes in flood myths, emphasizing those that provide insights into the Chinese case. These themes are: (1) the flood as a re-creation of the world within the human era, in which the world’s enduring survival is made possible by new institutions or practices; (2) the flood as a form of punishment or revenge by some powerful spirit; (3) the repopulation of the earth after the flood as a means of dramatizing kinship structures, incest taboos, or the origins of the different peoples of the earth; (4) the relations of people and animals, who collaborate or compete for the purposes of rescue or repopulation; and (5) water as an image of formlessness and fertility.

One of the most important points about flood myths is that they are often closely linked to creation myths that they either repeat or modify. Thus, the flood story is frequently, as Alan Dundes notes, a *re-creation* myth.<sup>18</sup> Dundes, on the basis of a single example, argues that the original creation is always feminine and that the tales of a re-creation all express male womb envy. While male–female tensions do figure in some versions of the flood myth, as will be discussed, they are far from a universal feature. Much more striking is the fact that the world re-created after the flood, particularly in the myths preserved in literary traditions, is often altered through the imposition of new laws or institutions. Thus the flood myth, a tale of origins that are subsequent to human creation, regularly becomes a sanction for the existence of a particular body of practices that are central to the people who created the myth.<sup>19</sup> This feature of the flood stories is central to the biblical and the Mesopotamian versions, as well as those from China.

In the story in Genesis, the flood ends with the establishment of a new relationship between God and his creation, and the institution of new rules for the human race. At the end of Chapter 8, Noah emerges from the ark and makes a sacrifice of every clean animal and bird, which leads God to say that he will never again curse the earth because of man or destroy all living

creatures. In the next chapter, he announces a new order, in which humans are granted lordship over all creatures whom they are allowed to eat. God bans only the eating of an animal's blood. This is followed immediately by the statement that any animal or human who kills a human being will likewise be slain. As Tikva Frymer-Kensky has pointed out, this marks a new legal order based on the absolute sanctity of human life, for in the pre-deluge world murderers such as Cain and Lamech were not slain but marked with a sign of God's protection and then exiled. The spilling of the blood of unavenged innocents had consequently polluted the earth and made it sterile, so that the flood at least in part was a means of cleansing the earth prior to the imposition of the principle of a life for a life.<sup>20</sup> This is followed by God's proclamation of a covenant with Noah, all his descendants, and all the creatures of the earth, in which He pledges to never again destroy the earth through a flood and places the rainbow in the sky as a sign. This tradition of a covenant with the entire human race that preceded the establishment of the covenant with the Jews alone was developed in rabbinic theology in the tradition of the "seven Noahide commandments" that supposedly bound all men, unlike the later ten Mosaic commandments that applied only to the Jews. Early Christian writers also elaborated this theme, as in the case of Irenaeus who argued that this covenant introduced the practice of eating meat, for prior to the flood humans had been vegetarian.<sup>21</sup>

While the biblical account presents the flood as the occasion for the imposition of the first laws and first covenant—an intermediate step between Adam, the full covenant with Abraham, and the Mosaic ten commandments—the earlier Mesopotamian version as best represented in the *Atrahasis* emphasized the question of population control and the shifting relation between humans and gods. In this account, the lesser gods were originally burdened with the labor of digging channels and carrying heavy loads, so they rebelled. In response, the high gods created humans to do the work. However, with the passage of time, people, who were apparently in this initial period immortal, grew too numerous and their clamor prevented the gods from sleeping. As a consequence the latter decided to destroy the human race. They first attempted to cause a drought, but sacrifices to the rain god instituted on the advice of the god Enki (a Prometheus figure) to his favorite, Atrahasis, brought an end to this threat. Soon the people were again too numerous, so the gods brought on a plague, but once again the institution of a sacrifice to the proper deity ended the disease. The third and final attempt to destroy the burgeoning human race took the form of a flood, which only Atrahasis and his family survived by building a boat at the urging of Enki. However, with all people now gone, the gods discovered that they missed the fruits of regular sacrifice. When the offerings of Atrahasis alerted them that one family had survived the flood, they allowed the human race to endure. However, they introduced sterility, miscarriages, and the institution of attaching virgin female devotees to temples in order to restrict population growth. Judging from a recently

discovered Sumerian text, the story closed with the imposition of death as the fate of all humans.<sup>22</sup> The *Atrahasis* myth thus provides a just-so account of how death, in all its forms, entered the world, but it also serves to justify key practices related to temple cults as well as the central role of temples themselves. In particular, it explains the introduction of regular sacrifices to the gods, and the practice of removing women from the household to serve as dedicated attendants of the gods at the temple.

In the Tamil versions of the myth from south India there is no single flood but a series of recurring deluges that destroy the world at intervals. In these stories the equivalent of the legal or ritual innovations that prevent future floods are the institutions that survive the flood and provide a fixed point from which the world could be re-created. In some versions of the myths, this institution is the *Caṅkam*, literary academies in which the compositions of the poets were gathered and judged. In other tales that grew up around specific shrines, the institution was the shrine itself, which magically survived the flood and provided the place from which the god, usually Śiva, could restore the land.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the myths are once again about the re-creation of the world and the institutions that guarantee its survival, but this re-creation—like the destruction that precedes it—is a recurrent phenomenon rather than a unique event.

A second recurring topos of flood myths, closely related to the first, is the idea that the flood was a form of punishment or revenge. In an extreme formulation, Hans Kelsen argued that virtually all flood myths were about retribution, and although this is certainly not true in all cases, it highlights a feature of many versions.<sup>24</sup> Thus, in the biblical account God creates the flood to destroy all life because of mankind's evil. In the Mesopotamian version the gods create the flood because people are too noisy, and while this does not strike all readers as morally serious, it certainly falls within the category of retribution or revenge.<sup>25</sup> In the two main surviving versions of the flood myth from classical antiquity—the tale of Deucalion and Pyrrha, and that of Philemon and Baucis—Zeus resolves to destroy humanity by a flood for violations of the laws of hospitality of which he is the patron deity. Kelsen also has gathered tales from Persia, Southeast Asia, Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, Africa, South America, and North America of floods unleashed by gods for unspecified wickedness or particular offenses. Sometimes these appear as moral failings, and sometimes as personal insults to the god, such as an Australian tale in which the world was inundated because one man did not lend his boomerangs and opossum bags to the moon god. In many cases the flood occurs as one step in a series of acts of vengeance, as in the Algonquin myth in which some water lynxes kill the nephew of a medicine man who in turn wounds one of the lynxes and thus unleashes a great flood. There are also versions, such as that found in the *Popol Vuh*, in which earlier races of creatures are destroyed by the gods because they lacked certain necessary features. These are yet further examples of the flood legends as tales of



*re-creation*, but in these cases a series of physical creations are necessary to attain the desired result.<sup>26</sup>

In some versions the flood appears not as punishment for some crime(s), but is itself a criminal act. Thus, the Acauaoios in British Guiana told how the flood was unleashed by a mischievous monkey who removed the lid from a basket in which the waters of the world were enclosed. The Arawaks from the same region told how a wicked woman caused a river to swell up so as to cover the entire plateau. Her husband exiled her to become the moon, and opened up a great waterfall to drain the plateau so that agriculture could be resumed there. Again the Chirguanos of Bolivia tell how the flood was created by an evil supernatural being who rebelled against the true god and sought to destroy humanity. The south Indian myths tell not of the punishing of criminality, but of a battle between the inchoate and violent forces that periodically submerge the world, and the creative powers of the gods who time and again must conquer the forces of chaos.<sup>27</sup> As we will see, these themes of criminality as the origin of floods and proper drainage as its cure figure prominently in the Chinese myths.

The third recurring aspect of flood myths is their frequent linkage to accounts of male–female relations, the origins of families, and the process of reproduction. In a few cases—as in the Arawak myth or a tale of the Narrinyeri in South Australia, where the flood is unleashed by a man to punish his two wives for deserting him—the flood is produced by failures in marital relations. The Mandingo in the Ivory Coast tell of a generous man who distributed all his goods to animals and, ultimately, to a god. His wife and children deserted him, and were consequently destroyed in a flood from which the man was rescued. A tale of the Basonge relates how several animals wooed the granddaughter of the high god, who accepted the zebra. However, the animal broke its pledge not to allow his wife to work, and she poured forth a great flood that covered the earth.<sup>28</sup> Improper marriages figure also in one element of the biblical account, which precedes God’s decision to destroy the human race by describing the mating of the “sons of God” with the “daughters of men” to produce a race of “mighty men” or giants.

However, the primary focus on marriages in the flood myths figures in accounts of the survivors. Thus, in the biblical version, the *Atrahasis*, the Greek versions, and many other flood myths, a single family survives the deluge and goes on to repopulate the world. However, many versions insist on the unusual character of the surviving pair, their manner of reproduction, or their relation to their children. Some are marked by criminality or the violation of fundamental taboos. In this way myths on the restoration of the world after the flood, a restoration based on the formation of a single household, often provide modes for thinking about the characteristics, tensions, or taboos that form the household.

A classic example is the biblical account. This version follows the story of the flood and the covenant with an account of Noah’s inventing wine and consequently becoming drunk. Ham, the father of Canaan, sees his father’s

genitals and reports this to his two brothers, who back into their father's presence and cover him without looking. As a consequence Noah curses Canaan and his descendants to be slaves of the other two. This account overtly provides a just-so story about the origins of ethnic tensions in the Middle East, but it also hints at the theme of rivalry, explicitly sexual rivalry, between father and son. Later Jewish commentary on this story elaborated the theme of sexual rivalry between Noah and Ham, describing how Ham attempted to castrate Noah. In a highly speculative essay Eleanor Follansbee argues that the story of Noah—in its account of him as cultivator and inventor of wine—is a version of myths of the castration, death, and rebirth of a vegetation spirit, in which case the father-son tension would become even more graphic.<sup>29</sup> Although Noah's relation to his wife does not play any role in the biblical account, it became important in later developments of the tale, such as the Eastern European version in which the devil seduces Noah's wife and with her aid either destroys a first version of the ark or enters the completed ark and attempts to sink the ship to destroy all life.<sup>30</sup> In this version, she replays the role of Eve in the biblical creation myth.

Another recurring topos of reproduction in the flood myths that figured in the tale of Noah and his sons was the identification of the different peoples that populate the earth as each being the descendants of one of the sons of the survivor of the flood. Thus, the Lolos in northern Myanmar and southern China had a tradition that the literate peoples, such as themselves and the Chinese, were each descended from one of the four sons of the flood survivor Du-mu, while the illiterate peoples were descendants of wooden figures carved by Du-mu after the flood in order to repopulate the earth. The Kammu of northern Thailand told how a brother and sister survived the flood sealed in a drum and, at the urging of a bird, became husband and wife. The sister gave birth to a dried gourd, from which they constantly heard the sound of talking. Finally they heated a long iron rod to bore open the gourd, from which emerged in sequence the Rameet (whose skin turned brown from the ash that lined the hole), the Kammu, the Thai, the Westerners, and the Chinese. The full version of the myth also narrates how these people acquired different languages, writing systems, and levels of economic development. In a myth among the Brazilian Indians around Cape Frio, the flood was triggered by a fight between two brothers who alone survived it, and the different tribes traced their ancestry to one or the other brother. In a gruesome version of this myth from Myanmar, a brother and sister who survive the flood take refuge in a cave inhabited by two elves (*nats*) where they give birth to a child. The child's squalling disturbs the female *nat* who chops up the baby, strews its blood and flesh at the meeting place of nine roads, and serves the remnants to the unsuspecting parents. On learning the truth, the mother goes to the crossroads and calls on the Great Spirit to restore her child. The Great Spirit confesses that it cannot put the child back together, but in recompense it makes the woman the mother of all nations, with each of the nine roads among which the child

was distributed corresponding to one people.<sup>31</sup> As we will see in chapter four, there are also versions of the flood myth from the south of China preserved in later texts in which the sibling pair who marry to repopulate the earth produce an undefined blob that is carved up and distributed throughout the world to form the different peoples of the earth. Thus, in each of these stories the account of the repopulating of the earth becomes a just-so story on the division of mankind, a division based on the struggles between brothers or the carving up of a single ancestor who is often the product of an incestuous union.

While the Atrahasis myth does not have any narrative elements overtly reflecting tensions within the household, it does problematize families and the male–female bond in two ways. First, the theme of human reproduction is central to the story (as it also is in the biblical account, which highlights the theme of people’s “multiplication” both before and after the flood). Second, the great reform that ends the problem that had led to the flood is the introduction of a pivotal role in the temple for women who will never marry. This practice, which challenged or limited the institution of the household, becomes the basis of the future survival of the human race.

The theme of couples and reproduction is also central to the Greek myth of Deucalion and Pyrrha. This is another version of the story in which a single couple survives the flood and must repopulate the earth. However, rather than reproducing by conventional means, Deucalion and Pyrrha repopulated the earth by picking up rocks (the “bones” of their “mother” the Earth) and throwing them over their shoulders. Those that Deucalion threw became men, and those that Pyrrha threw became women. Apart from its nonsexual mode, the striking feature of this form of reproduction is that women produce women and men produce men, so the two genders form distinct races. This notion of women and men as separate races or species is a recurrent theme in Greek mythology, most notably in the story of Pandora, the first woman, who was manufactured by Hephaestus as a trap for men. As has been demonstrated by Nicole Loraux in a series of works, the myths of men and women as separate races, and their original reproduction from the Earth without sex, figure prominently in the claims of Athens to unique, autochthonous origins.<sup>32</sup> However, while the insistence on autochthony was distinctively Athenian, the radical division between men and women implicit in the myths of Pandora, and of Deucalion and Pyrrha, was part of a much broader Hellenistic phenomenon.

In several cases repopulation after the flood involves incest. Sometimes this entails the joining of father and daughter, most notably in the classic Indian flood myth of Manu. In this story Manu alone survived the flood. Desiring offspring, he performed austerities and cast offerings of clarified butter, sour milk, whey, and curds into the water. In a year these offerings congealed to become a woman. When the woman encountered the gods Mitra and Varuna, they asked who she was, and she replied that she was Manu’s

daughter. Despite their demands that she acknowledge herself to be theirs, she insisted on her paternity from Manu. When she met the sage, she presented herself as the offspring generated by his offerings and insisted that if he would use her as the benediction in the middle of the sacrifice (where the sacrificial food is eaten) he would be rich in offspring and cattle. He used her repeatedly in his offerings, and thus generated the human race. Although the whole account is mediated through the mechanism of sacrifice, for which it provides an origin tale, the theme of the joining of father and daughter to repopulate the earth remains explicit. As J. C. Heesterman has elaborated in several places, in this earliest version of the Indian flood myth the themes of cosmogony, incest, and the origins of sacrifice are all intertwined.<sup>33</sup> A similar story among the Muratos in Ecuador told how only a single man survived the flood, and to repopulate the earth he cut off a piece of his own flesh that he planted in the ground. A woman grew up from this, whom he married. The Dyaks in Borneo related how the flood survivor created multiple wives from stones, logs, and other objects and thereby repopulated the earth. A few other flood myths from South America and insular Southeast Asia recount how the world was repopulated through the incestuous union of father and daughter or mother and son.<sup>34</sup>

Far more common than tales of incest between parent and child are those of the marriage of siblings. Frazer's collection of flood myths includes versions from India, continental Southeast Asia, and South America in which a brother and sister form the primal couple who repopulate the earth, and Baumann has collected examples from Africa.<sup>35</sup> Versions involving sibling incest are particularly frequent in Southeast Asia, southern China, and Taiwan, where over fifty examples have been collected.<sup>36</sup> These tales, sometimes linked with accounts of a cosmic egg or gourd from which the world emerged (related to accounts of the shapeless primal offspring), offer an embodied form of myths of the generation of the world through the union of the two sexual principles, or rather of a complementary pair of generative principles that are sexual when manifested in animal life. Thus, once again these are flood myths that reenact in human time with human actors the cosmological processes of primal creation. A few versions of the myth also contain explicit references to the origins of the incest taboo.<sup>37</sup> Some modern scholars have attempted to read these traditions back into early Chinese mythology, an argument that will be discussed in chapter four.<sup>38</sup>

A final form of irregular marriage that often figures in flood myths is the union of humans (usually men) and animals. The Cañaris of Ecuador tell how two brothers who alone survived the flood discovered that food had been mysteriously prepared for them. After this had recurred for ten days, they hid and discovered that the food was being prepared by two macaws who had the faces of beautiful women and wore clothing like the Cañaris. They managed to capture one of the birds, and with her they sired six children from whom all the Cañaris are descended. In a story told by the Huichol

people of western Mexico, the earth goddess instructs a man how to survive the flood by making a box and placing in it five grains of corn of each color, five beans of each color, five squash stems, fire, and a black bitch. After surviving the flood the man planted the crops and lived with the bitch. As in the other story, the survivor regularly came home to find that food had been mysteriously prepared, and on hiding he discovered that the bitch removed her skin to become a human woman who cooked his food. Throwing the dogskin into the fire he forced her to permanently become a woman with whom he sired a large family that repopulated the world. The Montagnais in Canada described how the world was repopulated by the marriage of a man with a muskrat who had fetched the soil for the rebuilding of the earth. The Haida of Queen Charlotte Island reversed the standard gender arrangement, telling how a being that was half-human and half-crow repopulated the world through marriage to a human woman that it had sired on a cockle shell through pure desire. Some tribes in British Columbia relate how all the different peoples of the region were sired by a coyote who mated with diverse trees.<sup>39</sup> As we will see in chapter four, the early Chinese also had a version of the flood myth that entailed the generation of offspring through the mating of a human with an animal.

These tales of the joining of people and animals to repopulate the earth after the flood relate to a much broader range of topoi in which animals figure in every aspect of the myths of the deluge. First, animals are often responsible for causing the flood. In some cases the killing of a particular animal apparently causes god(s) to unleash a deluge. In other cases the flood is created by the animal kin of a slain creature, for example, the mother of a crocodile killed by some people or by a wounded creature itself. Mischievous animals, such as a monkey, also trigger the flood through curiosity or carelessness.<sup>40</sup> Second, animals often warn a chosen person of the imminent coming of the flood. Thus, Manu is warned of the flood, and ultimately saved, by a small fish whom he rescues, rears, and finally releases. In other stories the survivor of the flood is warned by a dog, a llama, a coyote, or a water rat, who also provide instructions on how the survivor can escape from the water's ravages.<sup>41</sup> Again, certain versions describe how the human survivors took a few animals, or examples of all animals, onto their raft either before the flood struck or as the water was rising. The most elaborate example of this is the biblical account, but the rescue of key animals figures in stories found throughout the world. Some of these stories account for the physical features of certain animals by describing what happened to them during the flood.<sup>42</sup>

Such animals, in turn, often play a major role in detecting the end of the flood, rescuing the survivors, or bringing the survivors fire or some other necessary object. In versions of the Mesopotamian myth, the biblical account, and stories influenced by it, the use of animals to detect the end of the flood takes the form of sending out first the raven and then the dove. In a version common throughout much of North America, known to folklorists

as the “Earth-Diver myth,” a list of animals—often including the beaver, otter, types of aquatic fowl, and muskrat—attempt sequentially to bring up mud from beneath the flood. This mud, usually recovered by the muskrat, is breathed on or magically manipulated by the human to create a new earth.<sup>43</sup> In other versions a human ghost having taken on the form of a kingfisher tricks the high god into restoring fire to the survivors, a frog preserves fire in his belly and gives it to the surviving brother-sister pair who have incestuously wed, a pelican rescues the people out of lust for one woman, a frog or a bittern swallows up the flood, birds fetch the lumps of soil that people need to restore the earth, a turtle carries the survivors on its back, and a dove teaches the surviving children how to speak.<sup>44</sup> In some African versions, people turn into animals in order to escape the flood or as a punishment.<sup>45</sup> In one myth from the Native Americans of California, all animals perished in the flood, but the ghosts of the ancestors of the human survivors became every species of animal.<sup>46</sup> Finally, as we have seen above, the repopulation of the earth often involved human-animal cooperation or mating.

There are several reasons for this prominence of animals in every aspect of the flood myths from around the world. First, animals function as markers of the universality of the catastrophe, which included not only humans but all living things. Second, in what could loosely be described as their “totemic” role, the animals were necessarily involved in the reestablishment of the human order because they defined the social structure by becoming the ancestors or the insignia of the human groups. Third, the flood collapses distinctions between formerly separate zones or substances: the worlds of water, land, and air. Many of the animals who figure in these stories are those who can move from one zone to the other, particularly from land to water such as the beaver, muskrat, and aquatic birds. Fourth, in some cases the mixing of people and animals marked a stage in the evolution of the world, a stage that in certain versions ended with the flood. Thus, some South American Indians described the prediluvian world as one in which wild beasts mingled freely with men, while in a North American version early animals and men shared a common language.<sup>47</sup> Elements of the story of Noah’s flood are related to this idea, although in inverted form, as Noah in the new covenant receives lordship over all animals and the right to eat them. It is possible that the absence of boundaries between men and animals was linked to the idea of the flood itself, which drowned all divisions in universal nondistinction. This last point is yet another version of the flood myths serving as charters for fundamental features of the world known to the tellers of the myth, in this case the separation of men and animals.

A final recurring element in the flood myths is the pivotal role of water. This is not a trivial point, for at least two reasons. First, flooding is not the only means by which the world could be destroyed. The most common alternative is fire or the closely related drought. In several stories, floods follow or alternate with cataclysmic fires. However, the universal flood is mythically

far more common than tales of a universal fire. The Chinese materials also occasionally pair fire and water, but once again the theme of the flood is much more frequent. Disaster by water, as opposed to disaster by fire, produces many of the characteristic recurring features of the flood myths, such as the reliance on boats to survive, the taking of refuge on high mountains or trees, or the importance of amphibians and aquatic birds or mammals in rescuing humans or repopulating the earth.

More important, the watery nature of floods allows for the elaboration of myths around the contrast of contained or channeled water that is beneficial, and rampant water that is destructive.<sup>48</sup> In analyses of non-Chinese materials, the clearest demonstration of the importance of this contrast between conflicting modes of water as a theme of flood myths appears in *The Origin of Table Manners* by Claude Lévi-Strauss. As he points out, in both North and South America certain myths are structured around the contrast between the “two extreme modes” of water: the voyage up and down stream by canoe that regulates the passage of time (as linked to the motions of the sun and the moon, or the seasonal moving of settlements), versus the floods or storms that upset the natural course of things. While Lévi-Strauss embeds this contrast between the contrasting modes of water within analyses dealing with the seasonal cycle and seasonal migration, his collected material provides considerable detail showing how water functions as an alternating image of order and chaos.<sup>49</sup> As will be discussed throughout this book, this contrast is prominent in the Chinese flood myths.

Furthermore, destruction of the human race through water allows flood myths to recapitulate stories of creation. Because it has the three attributes of formlessness, dynamism, and fructification, water frequently figures in the human imagination as the source of life and of all things. Mircea Eliade has pointed out how water is a recurring element in many cosmogonic myths.<sup>50</sup> Although not explicitly cosmogonic, many myths also relate how specific plants or creatures, including the human race, emerged from water.<sup>51</sup>

The link of flood myths to tales of creation through their shared reliance on water as a major image is shown by the fact that in many cosmogonies or creation myths the chaos that precedes the emergence of the world is described in terms of water. Thus, the account in Genesis states that at the time of creation “darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” Furthermore, on the second day God created a firmament (Heaven) that “divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament.” On the next day God then concentrated the lower waters to allow the emergence of dry land. Thus, the original state of the world was a watery chaos, from which the structured cosmos was created through sequential steps of division and concentration. Consequently, the onset of the flood essentially restored the world to its original state prior to creation. Indeed, this link of creation and

flood played a fundamental role in early modern scientific thought, when a series of authors appealed to the biblical account of a vast “abyss” of waters stored up beneath the earth at the time of the first separation in order to resolve the question of where the waters of the flood had come from and to where they had departed.<sup>52</sup> These authors thus read the flood as the reversal of the process of creation, and the ending of the flood as a reenactment of the world’s origins.

The same is true of other flood myths. In the Akkadian origin myth, *Enuma elish*, the primal chaos of the waters formed by the pair Apsu (fresh waters) and Tiamat (the all-engendering ocean) is defeated in battle and the body of the ocean carved up to form the heavens and earth.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the flood abolishes the division that had made possible the world’s existence, and overcoming the flood replays the process of creation. That Mesopotamia’s creation myth parallels its flood myth is marked by the fact that just as in the latter the gods decided to destroy humankind because their clamor prevented sleep, so Ansu and his followers originally decided to destroy the gods for the same reason.

Similarly, in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, the world is progressively carved out of its primal state through a series of spontaneous divisions, acts of violence, and ultimately war between the forces of order and chaos. While in this version the primal chaos is explicitly distinguished from the ocean, which appears only in the course of the divisions, the earlier *Iliad* described the ocean, Okéanos, and his wife Tythus as the primordial couple from which all things emerged. Moreover, these passages from Homer were interpreted as a cosmography by Plato and Aristotle, the same idea appears in a cosmogonic poem by Alcman, and Thalés argued that all life emerged from water. The links between the Akkadian and the Greek myths are particularly strong, because both connect the emergence of ordered space from chaos to the establishment of social order on the basis of political sovereignty.<sup>54</sup> This link, as we will see, was also central in the case of early China.

In summary, while there is no single flood myth, the flood regularly figures as an image of the collapse of the distinctions and boundaries that had defined the world. Consequently, accounts of the ending of the flood constitute a second creation of the world in which humans and other creatures take an active part. On the one hand, the flood itself can be provoked by people or animals, often through some act of crime or rebellion. On the other hand, the world re-created after the flood is often marked by the imposition of some new regime or institutions, and the purpose of many flood myths is to explain or justify such institutions. Among the institutions created, altered, or restored in the flood, particular prominence is often given to the marital and kin relations that constitute the family. In addition, because the flood myths deal with the dissolution and re-creation of boundaries, the crossing of major boundaries such as that between people and animals or water and land figures prominently in these myths.



## CHINESE FLOOD MYTHS

In China during Warring States period (481–221 B.C.) and the early empires (220 B.C.–A.D. 220) the myths through which literate people dramatized their self-understanding took the form of accounts of the creation of human civilization by the sage-kings. These superhuman beings recognized the patterns implicit in the natural order, and from these brought forth the tools, technical procedures, virtues, and institutions that separated men from beasts.<sup>55</sup> In the case of the flood, most of the tales center on the work of the sage-king Yu, sometimes in association with the earlier sages Yao and Shun. A small number focus on the female divinity Nü Gua. As is now generally recognized, these tales were developed from earlier myths dealing with supernatural beings who figured in shamanic rituals, cosmogonic tales, or stories of the origins of various tribes or clans.<sup>56</sup> Thus, these tales already exemplified the variability and dynamism that characterize myths in other cultures. As will be shown in the course of the book, the tales also varied considerably in their details depending on the argument or idea that they were being used to justify. They also continued to evolve in later periods, as new religious or philosophical movements adapted existing accounts of antiquity to their own uses.<sup>57</sup>

The Chinese flood myths exhibit all the features previously described in accounts of flood myths from other parts of the world. First, they were tales of the re-creation of the world that provided origin myths and thus justifications for major political institutions, particularly those associated with the role of the monarch or emperor and his servants.<sup>58</sup> Second, they employed water as an image for the dissolution of all distinctions, and thus presented the taming of the flood as a process that recapitulated in the age of men, and, through human action, the creation of the world. Several versions of the myth also explicitly contrasted channeled water that flowed properly and thus was beneficial with the rampant waters of the flood. Third, those versions that touched on the origins of the flood attributed it to rebellion, and several versions identified the taming of the flood with the punishment of criminals. Fourth, many of the stories associated with the flood dealt with the question of the emergence of a properly constructed lineage, in the relations of father and son, or a household, in the joining of husband and wife to generate offspring. Fifth, the issues of man–animal relations, notably in the importance of metamorphoses and hybrids in taming the flood, figure in many versions of the myths, as does the theme of animal assistants. Thus, while many of the particular forms of these myths were distinctive to China, as were their political and social messages, the major topoi and themes through which these tales of the flood were employed to think about human society were common with those of many other societies.

This book is organized around these themes and topoi. The first point, the myths as sanctions of political authority, is fundamental to the entire book, and thus does not figure as the topic of a distinct chapter. Each

of the other points forms the topic of one chapter. Chapter one examines how early Chinese cosmogonic myths and accounts of the origins of human society were organized around the image of the sequential carving up of a primal chaos. Against the background of these images and theories, tales of the flood and its taming provided narratives that graphically dramatized both the creation of a structured spatial order and a regulated human society. Thus, many stories described the watery chaos of the flood, and presented the ruler's or officials' dredging and channeling as the sole means of establishing fixed courses for the water and thereby defining the land. The classic late Warring States account of this process in the "Tribute of Yu" also explicitly links the proper flowing of water to the movement of tribute that spatially defined the state by distinguishing periphery and center. These tales thus constituted a mythology of origins that justified the state through literally demonstrating its role in water control in the period, and figuratively dramatizing the role of the ruler as the one who maintained the crucial distinctions that defined human society. The earliest versions of these stories in the *Shang shu* dealt with the fashioning of world order, but later accounts also developed them into stories of the creation of distinctive regional cultures.

Chapter two deals with a second set of tales, in which the flood appears as the work of malefactors and its taming thus becomes a process of punishing evil. In some versions of these tales, a numbered set of criminals is expelled to the edges of the earth, which gives dramatic form to cosmological accounts of a world defined by establishing a center and the four cardinal directions. As will be discussed in this chapter and further in chapter three, in many versions these numbered sets of criminals are sons of a ruler. In other versions the criminality that leads to the collapse of order is linked with the invasion of the human realm by animals. This is another case of using man-animal relations to dramatize the themes of the flood stories. Other tales focus on named rebels, usually Gong Gong or Gun, who embody destructive aspects of the flood that is tamed through the process of punishing them. Stories of Gun, like those of the criminal sons mentioned earlier, also deal with the tensions between fathers and sons that figure prominently in the myths. Finally in the *Shan hai jing* (*Classic of the Mountains and Seas*), or more accurately in the *Hai jing* (*Classic of the Seas*) that forms the second half of this text, such tales become part of an encompassing world model in which the physical traces of the battles between rulers and rebels provide key visual signs marking out the structure of space.

Chapter three deals with tales of the flood as stories of the emergence of the human lineage, dramatized in tales of the tensions between fathers and sons, and how these tensions were resolved. Aspects of this problem, as already noted, figure in chapter two. Chapter three begins with a discussion of the mythology of the emergence of the dynastic state, which presupposes the establishment of proper relations between fathers and sons as the basis of the transmission of political power from the former to the latter. A central