

ANDREW H. PLAKS

Archetype and Allegory in the “Dream of the Red Chamber”



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Red Chamber

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PREFACE

THIS book grows out of a close reading and structural analysis of the Ch'ing novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* with a view towards accounting for the widely acclaimed greatness of the work in terms that do justice both to its own narrative tradition and to recent advances in general literary theory. It is based on the assumption that the major works of Chinese narrative can, in fact, be meaningfully interpreted in accordance with critical concepts developed through the discipline of comparative literature—concepts derived primarily from Western literary models. The point is not that the specific aesthetic forms of European literature are to be applied in a normative sense to non-Western works, but, on the contrary, that those Western critical theories which aspire to universality cannot possibly be validated without reference to what is perhaps the major portion of the world's literary corpus. In the following discussions it may often appear that representatives of the Chinese and European traditions are accorded a particular privilege of neat, even antipodal, contrast. While broad comparisons of these two civilizations naturally arise within the context of Chinese studies in a Western milieu (and few other civilizations, for that matter, are comparable with respect to both antiquity and continuity), this is of course not meant to imply a two-party monopoly of cultural alternatives.

The reader whose interests lie primarily in the area of Chinese literary studies will notice that a considerable portion of this book is devoted to a lengthy discussion of several works of European allegory that seem to provide significant analogues and contrasts to the artistry of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

PREFACE

This approach is based on the conviction that comparative literary studies are most valid when critical attention is focused with equal earnestness on both sides of the comparison. It is hoped that these chapters may be of interest to readers in their own right, as well as providing a necessary link in the elucidation of the concept of allegorical composition as it applies to the Chinese text.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to Professor Yukung Kao for his initial inspiration and continuous guidance of the preparation of this study, and to Professor Frederick W. Mote for his thoughtful reading of the manuscript and invaluable comments and corrections. Chapters v and vi were prepared with the specific encouragement of Professor Robert Eagles of the Department of Comparative Literature of Princeton University, who also offered valuable advice with respect to other sections of the text. In addition, I owe a debt of gratitude to the other faculty members, librarians, administrative staff, and colleagues of the Department of East Asian Studies of Princeton University for their kind cooperation and support in the project. Finally, I wish to give thanks to the Council on International and Regional Studies of Princeton University for a summer grant that made possible the uninterrupted preparation of this manuscript, and to the Princeton University Committee on Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for grants in support of publication.

Archetype and Allegory in the
Dream of the Red Chamber

INTRODUCTION

THIS book attempts to cover a good deal of territory. It begins and ends in the interpretation of a single Chinese narrative work, but its scope of inquiry necessitates extensive side-ventures into such diverse provinces as ancient mythology, logical method, European allegory, and garden aesthetics. Because of this somewhat circuitous—it is hoped, not circular—nature of the argument, it may be useful to set forth at the outset the path of reasoning to be pursued in the following pages.

The study takes its starting point in a consideration of the sense of encyclopedic fullness that emerges upon a reading of the Ch'ing novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*.^a Since the actual mimetic level of the narrative is singularly lacking in epic breadth, this impression must be attributed to the author's ability to project a broader vision of the nature of existence, even as he recounts—much like Proust—the slow passing of days in the garden of his youth. In proceeding to investigate the

^aBy the time these pages come into print, the title of David Hawkes' masterful new translation of the first eighty chapters, *The Story of the Stone* (*Shih-t'ou Chi*, the common designation for this first section of the text), may have begun to replace *Dream of the Red Chamber* as the name of the book among the English-speaking audience. Since we are considering the novel *Hung-lou Meng* here in its relation to Chinese literature as a total system, rather than as a literary phenomenon *in vacuo*, we will refer throughout to the entire 120-chapter version generally ascribed to Ts'ao Hsüeh-ch'in and Kao E. Certainly it is this text which has established itself as a landmark of Chinese literary history and a treasured cultural possession of nearly two centuries of readers. The question of whether the work as we have it is the product of a single hand or the result of a variously appraised continuation will therefore not be relevant until we take up the problem of the ending of the narrative in Chapter ix.

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specific contents of this vision, we turn to the two critical concepts set off by convenient alliteration in the subtitle of this book: archetype and allegory. In the case of both of these often-abused terms, what we are talking about is the manner in which the reduction of a broader framework of intelligibility into a limited narrative form tends to fall back upon patterns of literary structure that comprise homologies for the various formal models of conceptualization by which human experience is apprehended in different cultural spheres. The distinction between the two concepts comes in when we note that the presence of such patterns in a text is at some times simply implicit within a given linguistic and literary heritage, while at others they appear to be explicitly foregrounded and signposted—one might say *planted*—by the author in order to illuminate the nature of his own personal vision. The authors of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, at any rate, move freely back and forth between these two possibilities, now pushing hard at the meaning of their figures, now conveying levels of meaning of which they can hardly have been consciously aware. Since we can never presume to pin down the authors' original consciousness or lack of it—even the contemporaneous Chih-yen Chai commentary, to which we will turn for support at numerous points, cannot be said to speak with absolute authority on this issue—it is always the recognition of a range of possible meanings rather than the labelling of a given passage as archetypal or allegorical that will be pursued in the ensuing discussions.

In identifying the concept of literary archetype with the abiding structural patterns that underlie cultural forms of diverse period and genre, we must emphasize that what we are concerned with here is a particular rather than a universal tool of analysis. That is, we will not pursue the notion of archetype as an ultimate indicator of the pristine deep-structure of human thought, or even as a key to the "mind" of a single civilization, but simply as a recognizable unit of recurrence whose variation and transformation may provide an aid in the interpretation of the specific works of a given tradition. The fact that archetypes

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of structure are sharply conditioned by the cultural context in question becomes clearer when we turn to consider the area of mythology, the habitual stamping ground of archetypal critics. Here we find that the common conception of literary archetypes as patterns of narrative shape—the abstraction of *mythos* from myth—is not borne out in the corresponding Chinese materials. We observe that such mythical figures as Huang-ti, Kung Kung, and Hsi-ho are generally not treated through stories of human action, but are set into patterns of interrelation and sequence that reflect more the ritualizing than the mythologizing function of pre-literate culture: patterns that are no less archetypal for their apparent lack of narrative movement. Although we may not jump to the conclusion that archaic Chinese ritual provides a key to the entire civilization, the fact remains that the three-thousand-year literary tradition has consistently drawn upon non-narrative patterns of order and balance, patterns we tend to associate sooner with ritual than with myth, as its formal underpinnings.

Since the later text that comprises the object of this study opens with the mythical figure Nü-kua, the following chapter investigates the details of some of the earlier literary materials relating to this “goddess” and her consort Fu-hsi. It is suggested that the treatment of the conjugal relation between the two figures reflects archetypal patterns of mutual implication and cyclical recurrence that link the fragmentary mythological sources with the remainder of the tradition. The very fact that such patterns are expressed in terms of yin-yang dualism and five elements cosmology—the sort of formulas that mark out the sources of the study as examples of traditional “systematizing” rather than pristine mythic vision—serves to point up the common ground of formal continuity under consideration here.

In Chapter III the archetypal patterns traced in mythological fragments dealing with Nü-kua and Fu-hsi are reconsidered and restated within the broader context of Chinese philosophy. In order to emphasize the point that it is the formal patterns rather than the specific formulations that are at issue in the

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present study, the terms "complementary bipolarity" and "multiple periodicity" are introduced to refer to the logical relations underlying the yin-yang and five elements concepts. These archetypal relations are then further analyzed into four essential formal features: bipolar or cyclical arrangement of individual terms, ceaseless alternation from term to term, mutual implication of opposites, and infinite overlapping of axes or cycles. It is argued that in the Chinese tradition dual and five-term alternation is generally conceived of as a logical step from hypothetical unity to existential multiplicity, rather than the other way around, so that the "meaning" conveyed by the use of such patterns comes in only in the implication of a totalized vision within which all cycles complete themselves and all dual schemes hypothetically balance out. At certain points in the discussion it will be convenient to refer to this sort of overall vision as "spatialized" in the sense that it implies the simultaneous inclusion of all phases of temporal alternation, although admittedly this may lead to a certain amount of confusion with other usages of that term in recent criticism. In any event, the argument is that archetypal patterns of bipolar and sequential alternation are abiding ones underlying much of the literary tradition, not that they may account for all phases of the civilization.

In keeping with the pursuit of literary archetypes as a manageable tool of analysis for approaching difficult texts, the fourth chapter moves on to a close reading of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* in order to trace these formal patterns in the structure of the work. It is shown that ceaseless alternation along such axes as movement and stillness, union and separation, or prosperity and decline, goes to make up the overlapping web of narration that comprises the dense texture of the novel. Even more important, we observe the pains taken by the authors to structure the complex relations between characters in accordance with seasonal and elemental periodicity. It is suggested that this profuse overlapping of archetypal patterns in the novel adds up to something more than pseudo-philosophical ornamentation: that it evokes an all-inclusive vision

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of the totality of existence that underlies and sheds a measure of "meaning" upon the particular mimetic figures of the text. The fact that the characters in the novel most often fail to draw comfort from such a total vision (the same may be said for the authors and readers, at those points where vicarious identification outweighs literary detachment) serves to point up what we may call a "tragic" disjunction of vision between the time-bound perspective of mortal sensitivity and the detemporalized structure of intelligibility that is by definition beyond the scope of mimetic representation.

When we speak of the "intelligibility" that emerges from a close reading of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* we begin to pass over into the area of allegory, since the finely ordered correspondences between mimesis and meaning in the novel make the impression nearly inescapable that the authors were aware of and in control of at least some of these patterns of structure. This impression is supported, at any rate, by the traditional commentators on the novel, whose attempts to uncover the hidden meanings of the text often revolve around the sort of alternating sequences considered in the preceding chapter. Turning to a detailed inquiry into the nature of allegorical writing in the European tradition, with specific critical attention focused on the works of Dante, Chaucer, and Spenser, we find that the two-level ontological disjunction on which this mode is based in the West does not apply in the monistic universe of Chinese literature. But, by the same token, the most important of the various conceptual schemes by which Western thinkers have proposed to reconcile logically unbridgeable realms of existence (Platonic ideas and forms, Patristic incarnational aesthetics, Medieval figuralism etc.) do provide extremely significant contrasts with the approach to the problem of duality reflected in archetypal patterns of complementary bipolarity and multiple periodicity in the Chinese context. Such a distinction becomes even clearer when we note that the entire range of existential mutability—the object of the Chinese total vision of phenomenological flux—is represented in the Western allegorical texts as some-

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thing noticeably less than the sum total of being: in the circumscribed dominion of Fortune, in one view, or in the realm of Nature hierarchically subordinated to the grace of its Maker in another. As a result, the essentially metaphorical relation between the European allegorist's fictive text and its immutable meaning must be distinguished from the manner in which the structural patterns woven into the *Dream of the Red Chamber* simply fall into, or add up to, the infinite totality of all such patterns (a relation that may be characterized as synecdochical).

This contrasting treatment of the problem of mutability is particularly relevant when we move on in Chapters VI and VII to a comparative study of the literary garden *topos*, an area of striking coincidence of concern between *Dream of the Red Chamber* and such works as the *Romance of the Rose*, the *Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost*. Where the disjunction between being and becoming in the Western *locus amoenus* is expressed in terms of either a tropological choice between truth and falsity or a hierarchical ordering of lesser to greater degrees of perfection, the Chinese allegorical garden draws upon bipolar and multiple coordinates of perception to evoke a vision of the totality of existence in the given "natural" universe.

In Chapter VIII we return to the Ta-kuan Yüan garden, here rendered as the Garden of Total Vision (a translation that though somewhat forced does, I believe, convey the associations implicit in the term), and find the same "spatial" vision of totality evoked through archetypal patterns of bipolarity and periodicity. It is argued that the allegorical level of meaning behind the author's arrangement of the figures of his text lies in the sum total of all of its intelligible patterns, so that even the inexorable breakdown of the earthly paradise and the intense suffering that accompanies the expulsion of its inhabitants may be seen as forming, along with the rich plenitude of its earlier phases, yet another axis of complementary alternation within the total vision of the work. But since one of the principal logical underpinnings of this overall allegorical vision is the

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sheer endlessness of temporal change, this presents a particular critical problem in dealing with the literal ending of the narrative. In attempting to reconcile the sense of finality that accrues to Pao-yü's ultimate departure from the garden with the patterns of ceaseless alternation that keep rolling through to the final pages of the novel, we appeal once again to the aesthetics of complementarity. Given the essentially non-dialectical relation between finality and infinity within the authors' totalized vision, the title of our concluding chapter may reflect more the linguistic and academic milieu of the present study than the object of its critical focus.

CHAPTER I

ARCHETYPE AND MYTHOLOGY IN CHINESE LITERATURE

NEARLY all readers of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*—both native and foreign—come away with the impression that what they have experienced in the lengthy span from cover to cover is a comprehensive view of the entire civilization of Imperial China. This sense of cultural completeness may be largely attributed to the simple fact that the novel presents at exceedingly close range the day-to-day life of a bygone age of glory—and there is little doubt that this aspect is responsible for the degree of emotional attachment with which the work has been treasured by two centuries of readers. But for the purposes of this study we will focus attention on the fact that the *Dream of the Red Chamber* provides in one volume a summation of the three-thousand-year span of Chinese literary civilization. It contains within its pages a sampling of all of the major modes (poetry, drama, classical essay, vernacular fiction, etc.) and genres (*shih*, *tz'u*, *sao*, *fu*, etc.) of that tradition, and it takes up some of the central issues of its seminal thinkers (Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, Confucius, Mencius, and Ch'an masters). As a result, the work stands in its own cultural milieu as the major works of Homer, Virgil, Murasaki, Dante, Milton, Cervantes, Goethe, and more recently Proust and Joyce, do in theirs: as an encyclopedic compendium of an entire tradition in a form that itself serves as a model against which to judge works of less imposing stature.

It is on the basis of this role as an encyclopedic vessel of culture that we will justify speaking of the "archetypes" of the entire Chinese literary tradition within the scope of this one work. The conception of archetype, after all, has meaning only

within the context of a total *system* of knowledge, one in which recurring structural patterns both condition the formation of individual elements and are themselves modified by each new addition to the corpus. If it may be objected that the notion of systematization runs contrary to the spirit of literary expression, we may counter that it is precisely the existence of such a network of models, cross-references, and feedback that defines literature as a *tradition*, rather than simply an accumulation of finite works. In both the Chinese and the Western case, this system of literature must be seen as encompassing all verbal art, so that the distinction between history, philosophy, and what is commonly referred to as literature becomes one more of convenience than of substance. The fact that literature in this fuller sense has formed the basis of traditional education in the major civilizations further adds to this sense of the literary corpus as a self-contained system, a view that is particularly valid in the context of Chinese civilization, with its strong tradition of textual exegesis and its unique system of literary bureaucracy.

This is of course not to minimize the importance of the continuous development of styles and genres in literary history. On the contrary, it is precisely the fact of orderly development—from epic through romance to novel, from four-word poetry through *sao* and popular ballads to *shih*, *tz'u*, and *ch'ü*—that enables us to perceive the outlines of a unified system within literature. The abiding patterns of literary form to which we apply the term “archetype,” then, stand out as the synchronic underpinnings that set off and render intelligible the diachronic dimension of historical modification within the system.

On the most immediate level one may note the recurrence of elements of content within a given literary system: particular character types, favored themes and motifs, conventional *topoi*. But what we are really concerned with here in connection with the notion of archetype are patterns of more generalized structure, since it is only on this subsurface level that we can perceive a common ground within the widely varying details of religious

belief, historical event, social milieu, and natural environment (and national language in the Western context) that occur over a span of millennia. Just as the spectrum of colors in painting and the tonal scales in music provide internal orders within the materials of artistic creation, so do archetypes of literary structure provide the ground of coherence, the aesthetic expectations, that may be fulfilled, subtly varied, or negatively transformed in a given work.

It must be added here that the sort of structural patterns we are talking about are nothing more than the cultural preferences shaped by a given tradition during the course of its literary history. This point must be emphasized, since in recent years the term "archetype" has often come to be a vague catch-all for nearly any observable pattern of mental activity, with the corollary assumption that literary archetypes must provide a universal key to the infrastructure of the human mind.^a In the following pages, however, we will attempt to keep our sights lowered to the specific aesthetic forms that recur throughout a given cultural tradition, and thus provide a tool of analysis for approaching its more complex literary works.

It is by now a commonplace of literary criticism that the archetypes of a given tradition may be studied within its ancient mythology. But while the association between depth of vision and chronological age of literary materials seems to arise naturally out of the central role of the Homeric epics and the Old Testament in Western culture, and is implicit in the work of such archetypalists as Frazer and Jung, and more recently Frye and Campbell, it should not go unquestioned here. Mythology, to be sure, is not the simplest or clearest form of literary expression. Nor is it more directly concerned with the ultimate questions of existence than other phases of literature such as, say, metaphysical poetry or the modern novel. We must be careful, in this regard, to avoid confusing the authors of the oral myths

^aCf. Jolande Jacobi, *Complex, Archetype, Symbol in the Psychology of C. G. Jung* (Princeton, 1971), p. 34: "... in time it was extended to all sorts of patterns, configurations, happenings, etc. . . . Ultimately it came to cover all psychic manifestations of a biological, psychobiological, or ideational character, provided they were more or less universal and typical."

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that have found their way into writing with some sort of primeval seers at the dawn of human consciousness forging what Cassirer calls the "radical metaphors" of human experience.¹ Even if idealizations such as this may accurately reflect the origins of language and culture, this would have to be located far back along the time line of man's residence on the earth, while the mytho-poets who stand near the beginnings of the written traditions a mere handful of millennia removed from us cannot be said to be significantly closer to the pristine vision than we are today. Unfortunately, arguments based on this "pristine vision" fallacy occupy a good portion of contemporary discussions of ancient literature.

Perhaps the proper ground of mythological studies can be found if we agree to leave primitive man in the hands of the anthropologist and return literature to its proper sphere: the written record of civilization. Mythology may or may not provide a key to the secrets of the human mind, in the Jungian sense, but it can clarify our study of literature by roughly demarcating the starting point of the continuous tradition that we have, perhaps arbitrarily, roped off as a subject of inquiry. Taking the entire corpus of material from the *terminus a quo* up to the present as a total, self-perpetuating system, on the authority of tradition and education, we can proceed to uncover the recurrent formal relationships that pertain throughout the system. In this light, the term "mythology" may often indicate no more than the earliest body of literary materials in which the archetypes of the entire system are already evident. Frye seems to emphasize this chronological, rather than mystical, significance of mythology when he notes that it "provides the main outlines and the circumference of a verbal universe which is later occupied by literature as well."²

It seems significant that the specific patterns that critics have isolated within Western mythology, and further traced as archetypes of the Western literary tradition, fall primarily under the heading of narrative shape. The actual identification of these forms, of course, differs from author to author: some draw such categories as separation-initiation-return, while others

speak of patterns of expulsion and integration, fall and rise, confrontation and mortal combat, death and resurrection. In fact writers such as Frye and Campbell go on to outline total cycles of archetypal movement, of which each individual myth represents but a segment. What concerns us here is that these archetypes are nearly always conceived of in terms of action or movement, from the presentation of tension to its final resolution. Even more significant is the fact that such archetypal patterns of praxis are often abstracted from their narrative context and treated as cross-generic forms, such that the dialectical movement of drama, and even the progression of images in lyric, are thrown back upon archetypes of formal movement that are essentially narrative in shape. As a result, Frye's use of the Aristotelian term "mythos" in reference to such units of narrative shape tends to become synonymous with the concept of literary archetype as a whole. It is assumed in the present study, that, while this association of archetype with narrative "mythos" may be valid in describing the Western tradition, it need not necessarily hold true for other literatures as well.

In attempting to define the function of mythology within the system of Chinese literature, one is immediately struck by a singular lack of interest in preserving the specific details of pre-literary lore. Mythical figures appear only occasionally in later Chinese writings and almost never in a full recapitulation or reinterpretation of their deeds. Rarely do we find a later literary expansion of the battle between Huang-ti and Ch'ih-yu, a recounting of the hydraulic labors of Yü, or even, for that matter, an extended treatment of the careers of Yao or Shun.^b

Part of the reason for the apparent deemphasis of mythology in the system of Chinese literature must lie in the fact that the aesthetic impulses underlying the tradition simply are not geared to the forward thrust of beginning, middle, and end that

^bSuch exceptions as the *pien-wen* tale of Shun's youth are conspicuous for their rarity. One might note the existence of the titles 大禹治水, 禹會塗山記, 盤古至唐虞傳, and 虞初小說, etc., but it can hardly be claimed that such works are central to the tradition (SunK'ai-ti, pp. 23f, 174f).

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we naturally associate with patterns of narrative shape in other cultures. As a result of this, what is truly archetypal, in the sense described here, in the pre-literary lore recorded in China's early texts must be sought elsewhere, in the area of non-narrative qualities and relationships. Before we proceed to an investigation of the exact nature of these structural forms, however, it will be necessary to consider some of the issues that arise in connection with the sources employed in this study.

The problem in dealing with Chinese mythology is not, as has often been suggested, any lack of systematic compilations of mythical materials. The troublesome task of isolating and collecting Chinese myth, as described by Bodde—"... these materials are usually so fragmentary and episodic that even the reconstruction from them of individual myths—let alone an integrated *system* of myths—is exceedingly difficult"³—is a problem encountered by mythologists of all cultures. Robert Graves, for example, voices a similar complaint with regard to his work with Greek mythology: "... genuine mythic elements may be found embedded in the least promising stories, and the fullest or most illuminating version of a given myth is seldom supplied by any one author."⁴ Certainly the presence of any systematic treasury of mythology is the exception rather than the rule in human culture, and generally of quite late date. Moreover, the student of Chinese mythology soon becomes aware that the apparently chaotic proliferation of sources in fact revolves around a diminishing, manageable number of texts, primarily of the Han period. Such works as the *Huainan Tzu*, *Lun Heng*, *Shan-hai Ching*, and *Feng-su T'ung-i* are of course not intended to be exclusively mythological compilations. But what Han thinkers such as Wang Ch'ung and Ying Shao do seem to be trying to do is to construct a meaningful system of knowledge out of all the sources available to them, including what we now label mythology. In other words, they are indeed involved in analyzing and interpreting mythical materials. The fact that nearly all of the elements that characterize the mythologies of other cultures—personifications of natural phenomena, supernatural beasts, monumental battles,

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a golden age, a great deluge, and a schism between Heaven and Earth—are found in these materials leads to the conclusion that the difficulty of interpreting Chinese mythology is not a textual one. The reason that myth is not rearranged into an organized system in its own right is due primarily to the fact that it is treated as an integral part of human knowledge rather than a subdivision roped off by the attribution of divinity.

This last point brings us to the question of the nature of the actors in the mythological drama. The student of Chinese mythology soon observes that the common conception of myth in terms of a class of suprahuman actors engaged in the creation and destruction of worlds fails to describe the material at hand. Upon first sight, Maspero's explanation of the process as the euhemerization of supernatural beings of pre-literary lore into figures of strictly human proportions (e.g. the installation of such bizarre creatures as K'uei and Kung Kung as ministers at the court of Yao in the first chapter of the *Shu Ching* classic) seems to present a neat contrast to Frye's characterization of Western mythology as "the imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire."⁵ Upon further examination, however, it becomes clear that the distinction implied by both of these writers between divine-oriented and human-oriented cultural forms must be sharply qualified. For one thing, we must recognize that the Olympian gods to whom Frye's remark refers are immortal only in the literal sense of invulnerability to death. In nearly all other respects they are quite subject to the desires, pain, and, most important, the frustrations of mortality. This is even more true of all the actors in the early books of the Old Testament save the Creator Himself. Clearly, it is not the attribution of omnipotence that sets the heroes of Western mythology off from their Chinese counterparts.

At the same time, the wealth of supernatural detail attached even to such euhemerized figures as Yao, Shun, and Yü shift them yet closer towards the barely immortal actors of Western myth, as Karlgren notes: "The divine nature and powers of those early heroes were ever present in the minds of all the

writers of the last few Chou centuries, and in this sense, the tales about them are frankly mythological.”⁶ The resulting position of the Chinese sage-kings—somewhat beyond the monumental deeds of legend, yet somewhere on this side of the infinite potential of divinity—therefore cannot be cited as the factor responsible for the unique character of Chinese mythology.

With this qualification in mind, we must be extremely cautious in evaluating Bodde’s observation that the Chinese have no creation myth.⁷ It is certainly true that this fact accords well with the Chinese propensity to substitute human for divine patterns of authority, but we must note at the same time that the non-centrality of cosmogonic speculation applies to early Greek mythology as well (such that Hesiod’s framing of a creation myth inspires suspicions as to importation from the Fertile Crescent), although this did not hinder the fusion of spiritual and temporal authority in the Classical and Christian traditions of the West. On the other hand, we do find tantalizing indications, both in textual fragments and in archaeological and anthropological findings, to the effect that pre-literate Chinese culture may have been rich in such elements as creation myths and anthropomorphic gods. What concerns us more in this study, however, is the manner, rather than the fact, of cosmic creation. Here we do find an interesting difference between the essentially autochthonous generation implied in the P’an Ku and Hun T’un fragments,^c and the world-shaping will of creation *ex nihilo*.^d In the final analysis, the question of cosmogony turns back upon the possibility of an absolute standard of judgement in human affairs: the ultimate accountability of man for his actions. It would be hasty to overlook, in this regard, the function of the conception

^cSignificantly, when the notion of a creator (*tsao-wu-che* 造物者) does appear, as in the “Ta-tsung Shih” 大宗師 chapter of the *Chuang Tzu*, its usage refers specifically to a mold of human forms, rarely to a Prime Mover of the universe itself.

^dBut, again, we also find the theme of spontaneous generation in many cultures, including ancient Greece, while the notion of creation *ex nihilo* has had rough going, to say the least, in Western theology.

of Heaven in early Chinese texts—for all its impersonality and spontaneity—as a backdrop of moral order against which to judge the deeds of mortal men. In any event, we can sidestep the issue of divinity in mythology by citing Lévi-Strauss' simple truism that mythology “refers to events alleged to have taken place . . . long ago.”⁸ In spite of their varying degrees of omnipotence, creativity, and hypothetical historicity, the Chinese figures who are generally classified as mythical share a common quality of high antiquity that sets them apart from latter-day heroes.

A second issue that has been raised with respect to the sources of studies in Chinese mythology—the fact that most of the texts are deliberate redactions of myth cited in defense or illustration of specific arguments—also should not impede us. Bodde's mention of this state of the sources: “All that we have are casual references and tantalizing fragments, widely scattered among texts of diverse date and ideological orientation,”⁹ as well as Lu Hsün's complaint that Chinese mythology was deliberately expurgated by the Han Confucianists in the interests of philosophical coherence,¹⁰ must again be read in conjunction with statements of similar difficulties on the part of mythologues of other cultures. Even in the case of myths recorded by anthropological field workers among non-literate peoples, for that matter, we should not overlook the centuries and millennia of *oral* redaction that have gone by in the interest of cultural demands external to “original” myth. Interesting as it would be to have them for comparison, any pursuit of the pristine forms of myth can be only pure speculation. With this in mind, Karlgren's careful distinction between “free” Chou texts and Han “systematizing” scholarship, “the products of scholars who deliberately tried to lay down laws or make a consistent whole of the ancient traditions and ritual ideas,”¹¹ seems perhaps to miss the point. For if the Han mythologues are guilty of imposing conceptual order upon mythical materials, the same evaluation must fall with nearly equal weight upon the Chou texts for their handling of traditions handed down from pre-literate times. For example,