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THE MYTH THAT CHINA HAS NO CREATION MYTH

PAUL R. GOLDIN

It is often averred, as one of the prime differences between China and the West, that China has no myths of cosmogony. One of the earliest examples is a remark by the missionary E.J. Eitel (1838–1908) from 1879: “The idea of creation out of nothing has ever remained entirely foreign to the Chinese mind, so much so that there is no word in the language to express the idea of creation *ex nihilo*.”¹ Over time, claims about the lack of Chinese creation myths have only become more inflated. Take the view of Derk Bodde:

It is rather striking that, aside from this one myth [i.e. the myth of Pangu 盤古, discussed below], China – perhaps alone among the major civilizations of antiquity – has no real story of creation. This situation is paralleled by what we find in Chinese philosophy, where, from the very start, there is a keen interest in the relationship of man to man and in the adjustment of man to the physical universe, but relatively little interest in cosmic origins.²

[The Chinese] cosmic pattern is self-contained and self-operating. It unfolds itself because of its own inner necessity and not because it is ordained by any external volitional power. Not surprisingly, therefore, Chinese thinkers who have expressed themselves on the subject are unanimous in rejecting the possibility that the universe may have originated through any single act of conscious creation.³

Or Frederick W. Mote:

The basic point, which outsiders have found it so hard to detect, is that the Chinese, among all people ancient and modern, primitive and advanced, are apparently unique in having no creation myth – unless we use the word “creation” as is sometimes done in the more general sense of “genesis.” That is, the Chinese have regarded the world and man as uncreated, as constituting the central features of a spontaneously self-generating cosmos having no creator, god, ultimate cause, or will external to itself. If this was ever otherwise, even in the earliest periods of Chinese history, no evidence for it has persisted to influence later Chinese thinking. Moreover, other fundamentally different cosmogonies presenting the idea of a creation and a creator external to the created world, when encountered by the Chi-

¹ “Chinese Philosophy before Confucius,” *China Review* 7 (1879) 6, p. 390.

² *Essays on Chinese Civilization*, ed. Charles Le Blanc and Dorothy Borei (Princeton 1981), p. 81.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

nese among South China minorities, or in successive contacts with Indian, Islamic, and Christian thought, made no significant impression on the Chinese mind.⁴

Or A.C. Graham:

The past to which Confucius looks back is not the beginning of things; there is no cosmogonic myth in pre-Han literature, merely a blank of pre-history before the First Emperors, who for Confucius are the pre-dynastic sages Yao and Shun.⁵

Notwithstanding Mote's comment that "outsiders have found it so hard to detect" China's uniqueness in having no creation myth, these three opinions, from three of the greatest Western historians of China in the twentieth century, show that there has been near unanimity among learned outsiders in upholding this cardinal item of China's alleged difference. "China has no creation myth," far from being an arcane truth accessible only to insiders, has become nothing less than a cliché in contemporary historiography.⁶

⁴ "The Cosmological Gulf between China and the West," in *Transition and Permanence: Chinese History and Culture*, ed. David C. Buxbaum and Frederick W. Mote (Hong Kong 1972), p. 7. Compare the very similar passage in Mote's *Intellectual Foundations of China*. Studies in World Civilization (New York 1971), p. 17f. In "The Cosmological Gulf," Mote cited the early article by K.C. Chang, "The Chinese Creation Myths: A Study in Method," *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology* 8 (1959), pp. 47-79, but I suspect that Chang eventually repudiated this. I have found no references to it in any of his later works; moreover, "China on the Eve of the Historical Period," in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*, ed. Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (Cambridge 1999), pp. 37-73, one of Chang's last publications, contains a section (pp. 66-68) in which he speculated that certain Chinese cosmogonic myths, notably that of Pangu, go as far back as the Upper Paleolithic.

⁵ *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, Ill. 1989), p. 12.

⁶ For more examples from prominent scholars, see Henry Rosemont, Jr., *Rationality and Religious Experience: The Continuing Relevance of the World's Spiritual Traditions*. The First Master Hsüan Hua Memorial Lecture (Chicago - La Salle, Ill. 2001), p. 13; David N. Keightley, "Early Civilization in China: Reflections on How It Became Chinese," in *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*, ed. Paul S. Ropp (Berkeley 1990), p. 35; Victor H. Mair, "The Narrative Revolution in Chinese Literature: Ontological Presuppositions," *CLEAR* 5 (1983), pp. 5ff. (heavily influenced by Bodde); Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge 1954-), vol. II, p. 581f.; Marcel Granet (1884-1940), *La pensée chinoise*. Bibliothèque de l'Évolution de l'Humanité (Paris 1934; rpt., Paris 1999), p. 283; and Alfred Forke (1867-1944), *The World-Conception of the Chinese: Their Astronomical, Cosmological and Physico-Philosophical Speculations*. Probsthain's Oriental Series 14 (London 1925), p. 34. Among books for popular taste, Ted J. Kaptchuk's *The Web that Has No Weaver: Understanding Chinese Medicine*, 2nd ed. (Chicago 2000), with its endless platitudes about "the Chinese worldview," is a typical example. Two of the few recent works to challenge this consensus are Andrew Plaks, "Creation and Non-Creation in Early Chinese Texts," in *Genesis and Regeneration: Essays on Conceptions of Origins*, ed. Shaul Shaked. Publications of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities: Section of Humanities (Jerusalem 2005), pp. 164-191; and Michael J. Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford 2001), pp. 12-20. For two noteworthy early works, see Eduard Erkes (1891-1958), "Spuren chinesischer Welterschöpfungsmythen," *TP* 28 (1931), pp. 355-368; and Berthold Laufer (1874-1934), *Jade: A Study in Chinese Archaeology and Religion*. Field Museum of Natural History Publication 154; Anthropological Series 10 (Chicago 1912; rpt., New York 1974), p. 146f.

In recent years, the most forceful exponents of this view have been David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames. Contrasting ancient China and ancient Greece, Hall and Ames contend that “the sort of cosmogonic speculations central to the Western tradition were of no great importance to the Chinese.” They continue:

The Chinese tradition, therefore, is “acosmotic” in the sense that it does not depend upon the belief that the totality of things constitutes a single-ordered world. Employing Western cosmogonic assumptions in the interpretation of the classical Chinese tradition can only result in an expectation that the modes of reflection and argumentation undergirded by these cosmogonic assumptions are shared by the Chinese. Such a resort to the “transcendental pretense” would lead, as it has often in the past, to a skewed understanding of classical China.⁷

And similarly:

The classical Chinese thinkers are primarily *acosmotic* thinkers. By “acosmotic” we shall mean that they do not depend in the majority of their speculations upon either the notion that the totality of things (*wan-wu* 萬物 or *wan-you* 萬有, “the ten thousand things”) has a radical beginning, or that these things constitute a single-ordered world.⁸

Although Bodde, Mote, Graham, and Hall and Ames do not make precisely the same arguments, I shall endeavor to demonstrate that they are all refuted by primary sources. However, the crucial point is not that all these esteemed scholars happen to be mistaken – for then my title would have to be merely “The Erroneous Belief That China Has No Creation Myth,” or perhaps “The Factoid That China Has No Creation Myth”⁹ – rather, I suggest that they insist on the absence of creation myths in traditional China because their vision of China is one that *cannot have* creation myths. This is because they present China as a reified foil to a reified West, an antipodal domain exemplifying antithetic mores and modes of thought. If one of the basic characteristics of Western civilization is to delineate the universe and our place in it through the heuristic of creation myths, then

⁷ *Anticipating China: Thinking through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany 1995), p. 11f. Ames’s students have frequently echoed their teacher. See, e.g., Janghee Lee, *Xunzi and Early Chinese Naturalism*. SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany 2005), p. 90; and James D. Sellmann, *Timing and Rulership in Master Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals* (Lüshi chunqiu). SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany 2002), p. 21.

⁸ *Anticipating China*, p. 184.

⁹ Applying the new definition of “factoid” in Norman Yoffee, *Myths of the Archaic State: Evolution of the Earliest Cities, States and Civilizations* (Cambridge – New York 2005), p. 7: “a speculation or guess that has been repeated so often it is eventually taken for hard fact.” Yoffee continues (p. 8): “Unlike ‘facts,’ factoids are difficult to evaluate because, although they often begin as well-intended hypotheses and tentative clarifications, they become received wisdom by dint of repetition by authorities.” The word was coined by Norman Mailer in *Marilyn: A Biography* (New York 1975), 21, where he offered a somewhat different definition: factoids are “facts which have no existence before appearing in a magazine or newspaper, creations which are not so much lies as a product to manipulate emotion in the Silent Majority.” For Mailer, factoids are by no means “well-intended.”

China, as our Radical Other, cannot possibly do the same thing. For then China would no longer be “China.”¹⁰

This is why I say that “China has no creation myth” is not simply an untenable thesis, but a myth in its own right. It is a narrative device used to invent a world and logic that transcend empirical evidence. Myth-making in this sense is not necessarily a worthless or objectionable enterprise; one can imagine many contexts in which a mythic “China” serves definite intellectual purposes. The French journal *Tel Quel*, for example, represented China according to its own myth of alterity in the late 1960s and early 1970s: “Chinese writing as an antitype to the horizontal, vocal, temporally linear, and unidirectional writing of alphabetic cultures.”¹¹ It would be unreasonable to oppugn the accomplishments of *Tel Quel* just because its image of China was mythopoeic. That would be like dispensing with Montesquieu because he misrepresented Persia.

For historians, however, myth-making is *verboten*.

There is no shortage of speculation in classical Chinese literature about how the universe attained its present state. Texts as famous as the *Laozi* 老子 readily take up this subject (*Laozi* 25):¹²

有物混成，先天地生，寂兮寥兮，獨立不改，周行而不殆，可以為天下母。吾不知其名，字之曰道，強為之名曰大，大曰逝，逝曰遠，遠曰反。故道大，天大，地大，王亦大。域中有四大，而王居其一焉。人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然。

There is a thing that is shapeless and complete; it was born before Heaven and Earth. It is still! It is vast! It stands on its own and does not change; it goes everywhere but is never endangered. It can be taken as the mother of the world. I do not know its name, so I style it “the Way”; if I were forced to give it a name, I would call it “Great.” “Great” means “to pass beyond”; “to pass beyond” means “to go far”; “to go far” means “to revert.” Thus the Way is great; Heaven is great; Earth is great; and the King is also great. Within the realm there are four great things, and the king occupies one place among them. Humans model themselves on Earth; Earth models itself on Heaven; Heaven models itself on the Way; the Way models itself on “being so by itself.”¹³

¹⁰ Compare, generally, Zhang Longxi, *Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China* (Stanford 1998), pp. 19-54. See also Miranda Brown, “Neither ‘Primitives’ Nor ‘Others,’ but Somehow Not Quite Like ‘Us’: The Fortunes of Psychic Unity and Essentialism in Chinese Studies,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 49 (2006) 2, pp. 219-252.

¹¹ Thus Haun Saussy, *Great Walls of Discourse and Other Adventures in Cultural China*. Harvard East Asian Monographs 212 (Cambridge, Mass. – London 2001), p. 147. Cf. also Eric Hayot, *Chinese Dreams: Pound, Brecht. Tel quel* (Ann Arbor 2004), pp. 103-175; and Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca, N.Y. – London 1991), pp. 136-189.

¹² Text in Gao Ming 高明, *Boshu Laozi jiaozhu* 帛書老子校注, Xinbian Zhuzi jicheng (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 25.348-354.

¹³ Compare the translation in Robert G. Henricks, *Lao-tzu Te-tao ching: A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-wang-tui Texts*. Classics of Ancient China (New York 1989), p. 77.

Ziran 自然, the final phrase, does not mean “nature” (as it is so often mistranslated); literally it means “being like this [*ran*] of its own accord [*zi*].” In other words, the Way is not created. The Way causes itself.

Elsewhere, from the same text (*Laozi* 42):¹⁴

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和。

The Way bore the One; the One bore the Two; the Two bore the Three; the Three bore the Myriad Things. The Myriad Things carry *yin* on their backs and embrace *yang*; harmony is made through the blending of *qi*.¹⁵

The commentarial literature on this passage¹⁶ – which has served as the foundation for countless later cosmogonies – is understandably enormous, inasmuch as one cannot possibly know for sure what is meant by the One, the Two, and the Three. My own suspicion is that “the Two” must refer to *yin* and *yang*, that is, to the two complementary aspects of *qi*, and “the One” to *qi* in its undivided state. (Perhaps “the Three,” in line with *Laozi* 25, refers to Heaven, Earth, and the King.) But even if one does not accept these specific referents, it is clear from the final line that all the Myriad Things are made up of *qi*. The text narrates creation as ramification: from the Way, which exists before division itself; to the One, the basic stuff of the universe; all the way down to the Myriad Things, which represent *qi* in its infinitely differentiated manifestations.

One cannot decide whether these records qualify as “myths” without descending into the ambages of mythological theory, and most of those who have undertaken this adventure emerge with the sense that “‘myth’ does not turn out to be an analytic category of any great usefulness.”¹⁷ (The original meaning of *muthologia* is merely “telling stories.”)¹⁸ So it may be best to set that question aside. But regardless of whether it can be categorized as a myth, *Laozi* 42 is clearly a cosmogony, that is, an account of the generation of the cosmos. Thus the first of the above-surveyed opinions to appear questionable is that of Graham. Obviously, Graham knew the *Laozi* well (in the same book he even quoted Chapter 25,¹⁹ although, curiously, he did not discuss Chapter 42), so the most reasonable and

¹⁴ *Boshu Laozi jiaozhu*, p. 29.

¹⁵ Compare the translation in Henricks, *Lao-tzu Te-tao ching*, p. 11.

¹⁶ For a useful and neglected study, see Eduard Erkes, “Spuren einer kosmogonischen Mythe bei Lao-tse,” *Artibus Asiae* 8 (1940) 1, pp. 16-35.

¹⁷ Jack Goody, review of G.S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*, *Antiquity* 45 (1971) 178, p. 159. Cf. also Mark P.O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, 7th ed. (Oxford – New York 2003), p. 3. Contrast the optimistic view of Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, tr. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York 1963), p. 210: “a myth is ... felt as a myth by any reader anywhere in the world.” Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford 2004), p. 5, defines myth “as simply a story about something significant.” This is too diffuse for most analytical purposes; a story about World War II, for example, is likely to be a story about something significant, but would not be recognized by most readers as a myth.

¹⁸ E.g., Plato, *Laws* 752a. Cf. G.S. Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths* (New York 1974), p. 22.

¹⁹ *Disputers of the Tao*, p. 226.

charitable interpretation is simply that he overstated his case. When he declared that there is no cosmogony in pre-Han literature he may have had in mind something like Marduk bisecting Tiamat, or Kronos castrating Ouranos – both myths that allow life as we know it by separating the sky from the earth – but cosmogony need not be limited to the violent forging of order by a deity with a proper name.

In one important respect, however, these passages from *Laozi* do not constitute a creation story, and the key statement in this connection is that the Way models itself on *ziran*. The universe is not created by some willful Author who causes everything to be so; on the contrary, the Way is so of its own accord, and all things flow from this source by an autonomous and unchanging mechanics. *Laozi* 25 and 42 thus bear out many of the assertions of writers like Mote, Hall and Ames. We have not yet encountered a “creator external to the created world,” as Mote put it.

An oft-cited cosmogony from the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 is of the same species: taking largely the same form as *Laozi* 42, but with more details, the following cosmogony tells how the world developed without a creator to create it:

天墜未形，馮馮翼翼，洞洞瀾瀾，故曰太昭 [=始]²⁰。道始于虛霏 [=廓]²¹，虛霏 [=廓] 生宇宙，宇宙生 [元]²² 氣。[元] 氣有涯垠，清陽者薄靡而為天，重濁者滯凝而為地。清妙之合專易，重濁之凝竭難，故天先成而地後定。天地之襲精為陰陽，陰陽之專精為四時，四時之散精為萬物。積陽之熱氣 [久者]²³ 生火，火氣之精者為日；積陰之寒氣 [久] 者為水，水氣之精者為月。日月之淫為 [=氣]²⁴ 精者為星辰。天受日月星辰，地受水潦塵埃。²⁵

When Heaven and Earth were not yet formed, all was vague and formless, turbulent and dark; thus it was called the Great Beginning. The Way began in void and emptiness; the void and emptiness engendered space and time; space and time engendered primordial *qi*. Primordial *qi* has a brink: the clear and bright kind is disseminated like dust²⁶ to become Heaven; the heavy and murky kind congeals to form Earth. It is easy for the bright and marvelous to conjoin, but difficult for the heavy and murky to coalesce; thus Heaven was completed first and Earth fixed afterwards. The spliced essences of Heaven and Earth made *yin* and *yang*; the integrated essences of *yin* and *yang* made the four seasons; the dispersed essences of the four seasons made the Myriad Things. Over a long period of time, the hot *qi* of accumulated *yang* engendered fire, and the essence of fiery *qi* made the sun; over a long period of time, the cold *qi* of accumulated *yin* made water, and the essence

²⁰ Following the commentary of Wang Yinzhi 王引之 (1766–1834).

²¹ Following the commentary of Qian Tang 錢塘 (1735–1790).

²² Following the commentaries of Zhuang Kuiji 莊達吉 (1760–1813) and others.

²³ Following the commentaries of Wang Yinzhi and others.

²⁴ Following the commentary of Wang Yinzhi.

²⁵ “Tianwen xun” 天文訓; text in Zhang Shuangli 張雙棣, *Huainanzi jiaoshi* 淮南子校釋 (Beijing 1997), 3.245.

²⁶ Following the commentary of Gao You 高誘 (ca. 168–212).

of watery *qi* made the moon. The essence of the overflowing *qi* of the sun and moon made the stars and constellations. Heaven received the sun, moon, stars, and constellations; Earth received the waters, floods, dust, and sand.²⁷

This is indisputably a cosmogony (though it does not refute Graham's claim that there are no *pre-Han* cosmogonies), but, in a sense that Mote and Hall and Ames would be right to stress, it is not a creation story. The Way, *qi*, Heaven, Earth, and all the Myriad Things emerge spontaneously from a state of "void and emptiness"; the multifarious entities of the universe, rather than being created by a divinity, appear to be self-generated and self-generating.

Another cosmogony from the same text, however, complicates the issue.

古未有天地之時，惟像無形，窈窈冥冥，芒芘漠閔，瀕濛鴻洞，莫知其門。有二神混生，經天營地，孔乎莫知其所終極，滔乎莫知其所止息，於是乃別為陰陽，離為八極，剛柔相成，萬物乃形，煩氣為蟲，精氣為人。²⁸

In antiquity, before there were Heaven and Earth, there were only images without form. All was cryptic, vast, and fluid; no one knew its gates. There were two gods that were born of this shapelessness; they regulated Heaven and arranged Earth. So extensive! No one knows where it reaches its limit. So copious! No one knows where it stops. Then they made *yin* and *yang* by division; they made the Eight Directions by separation. Hard and soft completed each other, and thus the Myriad Things were formed. Coarse *qi* became animals; refined *qi* became human beings.²⁹

The ambiguous phrasing of the original makes it difficult to reconstruct this scheme with any certainty. For example, the term *chong* 蟲, denoting the form of life comprised of coarse *qi*, can refer to any non-human organism from a bug to a mammal.³⁰ More consequentially, the manner in which *yin* and *yang* and the Eight

²⁷ Compare the translations by Rémi Mathieu in Charles Le Blanc and Rémi Mathieu (eds.), *Philosophes taoïstes*, vol. II: *Huainan zi*. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 494 (Paris 2003), p. 101f.; John S. Major, *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought: Chapters Three, Four, and Five of the Huainanzi*. SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany 1993), p. 62; Marc Kalinowski, "Mythe, cosmogénèse et théogonie dans la Chine ancienne," *L'Homme* 137 (1996), p. 44; Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction* (Baltimore 1993), p. 32; and Max Kaltenmark, "La naissance du monde en Chine," *La naissance du monde: Égypte ancienne, Sumer, Akkad, Hourrites et Hittites, Canaan, Israel, Islam, Turcs et Mongols, Iran préislamique, Inde, Siam, Laos, Tibet, Chine*. Sources orientales 1 (Paris 1959), p. 465.

²⁸ "Jingshen" 精神, *Huainanzi jiaoshi* 7.719.

²⁹ Compare the translations by Rémi Mathieu in Le Blanc and Mathieu (eds.), *Philosophes taoïstes*, p. 299; Michael J. Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China*. Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series 57 (Cambridge, Mass. – London 2002), p. 270f.; Birrell, *Chinese Mythology*, p. 32; Claude Larre, *Le traité VII du Houai nan tseu: Les esprits légers et subtils animateurs de l'essence*. Variétés Sinologiques 67 (Paris 1982), p. 53f. (with lengthy comments, pp. 109-129, that have not in the main been followed here); Kaltenmark, "La naissance du monde en Chine," p. 466; and Erkes, "Spuren chinesischer Weltschöpfungsmythen," pp. 360ff.

³⁰ Cf. Michael Carr, "Why Did 蟲 d'jōng Change from 'Animal' to 'Wug'?" *Computational Analyses of Asian and African Languages* 21 (1983), pp. 7-14.

Directions were divided and separated is unclear. The verbs *biewei* 別為 and *liwei* 離為 could convey that the two gods made *yin* and *yang* and the Eight Directions, as in the translation above; alternatively, the wording could mean that the two gods became *yin* and *yang* and the Eight Directions; or even that *yin* and *yang* and the Eight Directions came into being without the involvement of the two gods whatsoever. It is not even apparent when and how Heaven and Earth came to exist. We are told only that the two gods “regulated” and “arranged” Heaven and Earth. Is this an oblique way of saying that they *created* Heaven and Earth? And if not, which came first – the two gods or Heaven and Earth? The text implies that the two gods were the first entities to take form, but if they did not create Heaven and Earth, Heaven and Earth must have pre-existed them.³¹

By any interpretation, however, this is the most complex cosmogony we have observed so far. Even if we prefer not to let the two gods create anything, their presence is still required to confer the order on Heaven and Earth that permits all the subsequent stages of cosmogony. The universe, then, is not strictly autonomous and self-regulating. Perhaps we do not yet have a “creator external to the created world,” but we do have *custodians* external to the created world – without whom the created world would be chaotic and dysfunctional. Moreover, the passage seems to belie the assertion of Hall and Ames that the Myriad Things have no “radical beginning.” In this account, they surely do: before the two gods arrived to regulate and arrange Heaven and Earth, the transformations that resulted in the creation of the Myriad Things were not yet possible. There was a time before the Myriad Things, and the Myriad Things could not have come to exist by *ziran*.³²

If the two gods of the last cosmogony are not incontrovertibly creators, there are other myths about primordial beings whose part in creation is still more vital.

天地混沌如雞子，盤古生其中。萬八千歲，天地開闢，陽清為天，陰濁為地。盤古在其中，一日九變，神於天，聖於地。天日高一丈，地日厚一丈，盤古日長一丈，如此萬八千歲，天數極高，地數極深，盤古極長。後乃有三皇。數起於一，立於三，成於五，盛於七，處於九，故天去地九萬里。³³

Heaven and Earth were mixed together in chaos, like a chicken embryo, and Pangu was born within them. Over the course of eighteen thousand years, Heaven and Earth parted ways: clear *yang* became Heaven, and turbid *yin* became Earth. Pan-

³¹ Mark Edward Lewis, *The Flood Myths of Early China*. SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany 2006), p. 120, suggests that the two spirits are Fuxi 伏羲 and Nüwa 女媧 (who will be discussed further below); I am not aware of any traditional commentator who makes this association.

³² Cf. Christoph Harbsmeier, “Some Notions of Time and of History in China and in the West: With a Digression on the Anthropology of Writing,” in *Time and Space in Chinese Culture*, ed. Chun-chieh Huang and Erik Zürcher. *Sinica Leidensia* 33 (Leiden 1995), p. 50: “... it would seem profoundly wrong to say that the idea of a beginning of the world was completely alien to Chinese thinking.”

³³ Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢 (557–641) *et al.*, *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚, 2nd ed. (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1999), 1.2f.; the source-text is *San Wu liji* 三五曆紀, by Xu Zheng 徐整 (fl. 3rd c.).

gu lay within them; each day he underwent nine transformations, so that he became more divine than Heaven and sager than Earth. Heaven rose higher by a yard each day; Earth became thicker by a yard each day; Pangu grew by a yard each day. Continuing like this for eighteen thousand years, Heaven reached its ultimate height, Earth reached its ultimate depth, and Pangu reached his ultimate size. Only afterwards came the Three August Ones.³⁴ Numbers began with one, were erected with three, were completed with five, were fulfilled with seven, and attained their place with nine. Thus it is that Heaven is ninety thousand *li* removed from Earth.³⁵

首生盤古，垂死化身，氣成風雲，聲為雷霆，左眼為日，右眼為月，四肢五體為四極五嶽，血液為江河，筋脈為地理，肌肉為田土，髮髭為星辰，皮毛為草木，齒骨為金石，精髓為珠玉，汗流為雨澤，身之諸蟲，因風所感，化為黎甿。³⁶

When Pangu, the firstborn, was declining toward death, he transformed his body. His *qi* became the wind and clouds; his voice became the thunder; his left eye became the sun; his right eye became the moon; his four limbs and five extremities became the Four Directions and Five Peaks; his blood and fluid became the Yangzi and Yellow Rivers; his sinews and arteries became the veins of the earth; his muscles and flesh became the soil of the fields; his hair and beard became the stars and constellations; his skin and body-hair became the grasses and trees; his teeth and bones became the metals and minerals; his semen and marrow became pearls and gems; his sweat and secretions became the rain and mire. And the various bugs on his body, moved by the wind, were transformed into the black-haired peasants.³⁷

These passages confute many of the “China has no creation myth” arguments. Like the tale of the two gods from *Huainanzi*, the story of Pangu begins with a time before the Myriad Things and narrates a process of development from chaos to order that could not have taken place without the agency of an external being. Moreover, the Pangu myth goes beyond that of the *Huainanzi* by identifying the birth of our cosmos with the separation of Heaven and Earth. Thus it recalls the

³⁴ The Three August Ones are explained in the “Sanhuang” 三皇 chapter of *Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義 as Fuxi, Nüwa, and Shennong 神農; text in Wang Liqi 王利器, *Fengsu tongyi jiaozhu* 風俗通義校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1981), 1.2 (see Wang Liqi’s note at p. 3, n. 2 for other early sources).

³⁵ Compare the translations in Kalinowski, “Mythe, cosmogénèse et théogonie,” p. 50f.; Birrell, *Chinese Mythology*, p. 32f.; Rémi Mathieu, *Anthologie des mythes et légendes de la Chine ancienne*. Connaissance de l’Orient (Paris 1989), p. 28f.; N.J. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism* (Berkeley – Los Angeles 1983), p. 193; David C. Yu, “The Creation Myth and Its Symbolism in Classical Taoism,” *Philosophy East and West* 31 (1981) 4, p. 479; Bodde, *Essays*, p. 58f.; and Kaltenmark, “La naissance du monde en Chine,” p. 456.

³⁶ Ma Su 馬驢 (1621–1673), *Yishi* 繹史, ed. Wang Liqi (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 2002), 1.2; the source-text is *Wuyun linian ji* 五運歷年記, likewise attributed to Xu Zheng.

³⁷ Compare the translations in Birrell, *Chinese Mythology*, p. 33; Mathieu, *Anthologie des mythes et légendes de la Chine ancienne*, p. 29; Girardot, *Myth and Meaning*, p. 194; Yu, “The Creation Myth and Its Symbolism in Classical Taoism,” p. 480; Bodde, *Essays*, p. 59; and Kaltenmark, “La naissance du monde en Chine,” p. 457. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning*, p. 365, n. 90, and Kaltenmark, p. 456, both misidentify the source-text as *Shuyi ji* 述異記.

myths of Tiamat, Kronos, and all the other Western creation stories that tell how the world emerged from undifferentiated chaos.

The Pangu myth is often dismissed by those who hold the “China has no creation myth” position because it may not be originally Chinese. It is not attested until late antiquity, and, since it shares so many features with Indo-European and ancient Near Eastern myths, many scholars believe it was borrowed from some foreign source (or set of sources).³⁸ Mote, for example, conceded that the Pangu myth “can be called a creation story,” but continued:

It clearly is both relatively late in its appearance in the Chinese records, unknown before the second century A.D., when China’s distinctive cosmology had been fully worked out, and is clearly of alien origin. It probably came from India where there was a quite similar creation story, although there are also parallels to the Chinese version in the legends of the Miao people of South China and Southeast Asia.³⁹

But the fact that the Pangu myth is unattested before the Han dynasty does not mean that it must have been “unknown” before then. Mote’s reasoning is not only an example of *argumentum ex silentio*; it also reflects a misunderstanding of how myths are recorded in history. By their nature, myths appear, in Chinese as in Greek literature, in the form of allusions rather than comprehensive narrations,⁴⁰ with the result that the most complete compendia tend to be late works by mythographers who consciously aimed to flesh out the bare sketches that the high ancients had left behind. Two of the best extant sources of Greek myth, namely the *Library*, attributed to Apollodorus of Athens (b. ca. 180 B.C.) but written at least two centuries later, and the *Description of Greece*, by Pausanias (fl. 2nd c.), are of precisely this kind. If some element of Greek mythology – for example, the detail that Herakles slew the Centaur Eurytion⁴¹ – is found only in such late materials, one cannot conclude on this basis alone that it was unknown to earlier Greeks.

Moreover, even if Mote was right that the Pangu myth “came from India,” that hardly disqualifies it from being legitimately Chinese – any less than Mahāyāna Buddhism could be deemed un-Chinese for the same reason. Indeed, Mote’s scenario would only invalidate his own claim that foreign creation stories “made no significant impression on the Chinese mind.” On the contrary, the “Chinese

³⁸ See Rao Zongyi 饒宗頤, *Zhongguo zongjiao sixiangshi xinye* 中國宗教思想史新頁. Beida xueshu jiangyan congshu 11 (Beijing 2000), pp. 95ff.; and Liu Qiyu 劉起鈞, *Gushi xubian* 古史續編 ([Beijing]: Zhongguo shehui kexue 1991), pp. 84-91. Rao’s general view is that creation stories are to be found not in the original Daoist classics, but in later Chinese sources, which reflect exposure to Buddhism and other foreign systems of thought.

³⁹ Mote, “The Cosmological Gulf between China and the West,” p. 7f. (repeated nearly *verbatim* in *Intellectual Foundations of China*, p. 18f.). Mote presented these opinions as though they were taken directly from Bodde, but Bodde himself (*Essays*, pp. 58-62) was more circumspect.

⁴⁰ Cf. Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths*, p. 14.

⁴¹ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 4.33.1; Hyginus, *Fabulae* 31 and 33; and Apollodorus, *Library*, 2.5.5.

mind” (if it is even permissible to employ so reductionist a fiction) eagerly sought out and accommodated foreign ideas throughout the history of its civilization.

But there is yet another creation myth that is undisputedly Chinese and thus resists demurrers on grounds of pedigree.

俗說：天地開闢，未有人民，女媧搏黃土作人，務劇力，不暇供，乃引繩於泥中，舉以為人。故富貴者，黃土人也；貧賤者，繩人也。⁴²

It is said among the vulgar: When Heaven and Earth had parted ways, but before there were any people, Nüwa kneaded yellow earth to create human beings. She worked with great industry, but did not have enough time, so she stretched a rope through the soil, and lifted it up to make people. Thus the wealthy and noble are people of the yellow earth, and the poor and base are people of the rope.⁴³

This version of the famous myth appears in a lost essay called “Dissecting Delusions” (“Bianhuo” 辨惑), by the noted satirist Ying Shao 應劭 (fl. 189–194). Because the context of the passage is beyond recovery, it is impossible to be sure of Ying’s own opinions, but the very title of the essay (together with the introductory phrase “It is said among the vulgar”) suggests that he disbelieved and disapproved of the tale. Nevertheless, the fact that Ying Shao felt obliged to discredit the story implies that it was widely known. Like the better-known *Lunheng* 論衡 (Balance of Discourses) by Wang Chong 王充 (27 – ca. 100), Ying Shao’s critiques of popular customs have been profitably exploited by historians as documentation of commonplace beliefs and practices. Moreover, it is probably not a coincidence that this particular line from an otherwise lost essay has been preserved: generations of later commentators quoted it as an authoritative early reference to a myth that everyone knew well (from the worlds of both informal story-telling and iconographic art).

There is a familiar objection to calling the story of Nüwa a creation myth: it is not creation *ex nihilo*.⁴⁴ Heaven and Earth already existed, obviously, as did the materials that Nüwa used in completing her task. The same text records, furthermore, that Nüwa was the younger sister of Fuxi 伏羲;⁴⁵ thus she was not even the first sentient being, divine or otherwise, to appear in the universe.

⁴² *Fengsu tongyi jiaozhu*, p. 601.

⁴³ Compare the translations in Birrell, *Chinese Mythology*, p. 35; Bodde, *Essays*, p. 64f.; and Kaltenmark, “La naissance du monde en Chine,” p. 459.

⁴⁴ E.g., Bodde, *Essays*, p. 65. Cf. also Michael Loewe, *Chinese Ideas of Life and Death: Faith, Myth and Reason in the Han Period (202 BC–AD 220)* (London 1982), p. 64f.

⁴⁵ From the lost “Yinjiao” 陰教 chapter, *Fengsu tongyi jiaozhu*, p. 599. In other versions of the myth she becomes Fuxi’s mate. Cf. Lewis, *The Flood Myths of Early China*, pp. 109–133; Liu Qiyu, *Gushi xubian*, pp. 78–83; Girardot, *Myth and Meaning*, pp. 202–207; Andrew H. Plaks, *Archetype and Allegory in the Dream of the Red Chamber* (Princeton 1976), pp. 27–42; and esp. Wen Yiduo 聞一多 (1899–1946), “Fuxi kao” 伏羲考, *Wen Yiduo quanji* 聞一多全集, 3rd ed. (Shanghai 1948), vol. I, pp. 3–68.

Fuxi is the first name mentioned in the cosmogony of the Chu Silk Manuscript (where he is called Baoxi 雹戲); text in Rao Zongyi, “Chu boshu xinzheng” 楚帛書新證, in Rao Zongyi and Zeng Xiantong 曾憲通, *Chudi chutu wenxian sanzong yanjiu* 楚地出土文獻三種研究 (Beijing

Rarely is it pointed out that, in such a strict sense, creation *ex nihilo* cannot be found in Greek myth either.⁴⁶ Consider the origin of the universe according to Hesiod:

Verily at the first Chaos came to be, but next wide-bosomed Earth, the ever-sure foundation of all the deathless ones who hold the peaks of snowy Olympus, and dim Tartarus in the depth of the wide-pathed Earth, and Eros (Love), fairest among the deathless gods, who unnerves the limbs and overcomes the mind and wise counsels of all gods and all men within them. From Chaos came forth Erebus and black Night; but of Night were born Aether and Day, whom she conceived and bare from union in love with Erebus. And Earth first bare starry Heaven, equal to herself, to cover her on every side, and to be an ever-sure abiding-place for the blessed gods. And she brought forth long Hills, graceful haunts of the goddess-Nymphs who dwell amongst the glens of the hills. She bare also the fruitless deep with his raging swell, Pontus, without sweet union of love. But afterwards she lay with Heaven and bare deep-swirling Oceanus, Coeus and Crius and Hyperion and Iapetus, Theia and Rhea, Themis and Mnemosyne and gold-crowned Phoebe and lovely Tethys. After them was born Cronos the wily, youngest and most terrible of her children, and he hated his lusty sire.⁴⁷

This is not creation *ex nihilo* – nor does it include Mote’s “creator external to the created world.” Similarly, if Robert Graves’s reconstruction of the Pelasgian creation myth is to be trusted, when Eurynome, the “Goddess of All Things,” emerged from Chaos, she “found nothing substantial for her feet to rest upon, and therefore divided the sea from the sky.”⁴⁸ That was not creation *ex nihilo* either. Neither Plato’s Demiurge⁴⁹ nor Aristotle’s Prime Mover⁵⁰ performed creation *ex nihilo*. At the risk of belaboring this point (though it is not trivial), I shall cite one more Greek example, namely the Orphic account of the generation of the universe as related by the Chorus in Aristophanes’s *Birds*:

At the beginning there was only Chaos, Night, dark Erebus, and deep Tartarus. Earth, the air and heaven had no existence. Firstly, blackwinged Night laid a germless egg in the bosom of the infinite deeps of Erebus, and from this, after the revolution of long ages, sprang the graceful Eros with his glittering golden wings,

1993), p. 230. This text is not clear enough to permit many definitive conclusions, but it does not seem to narrate creation *ex nihilo*.

⁴⁶ Cf. Plaks, “Creation and Non-Creation in Early Chinese Texts,” p. 165.

⁴⁷ Hesiod, *Theogony*, pp. 116-138; tr. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (d. 1924), *Hesiod: The Homeric Hymns and Homeric*, revised ed. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass. 1936).

⁴⁸ *The Greek Myths*, combined ed. (New York 1992), p. 27.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., *Timaeus* 30a and 53b. Cf. Francis MacDonald Cornford (1874–1943), *Plato’s Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato* (New York 1937), pp. 34-39. Consider also the famous fragment of Heraclitus: “This world-order [the same of all] did none of gods or men make, but it always was and is and shall be: an everliving fire, kindling in measures and going out in measures”; tr. G.S. Kirk *et al.*, *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge 1983), p. 198.

⁵⁰ See, e.g., *De caelo* 301bf. Cf. Sir David Ross (1877–1971), *Aristotle*, 6th ed. (London 1995), p. 189.

swift as the whirlwinds of the tempest. He mated in deep Tartarus with dark Chaos, winged like himself, and thus hatched forth our race, which was the first to see the light. That of the Immortals did not exist until Eros had brought together all the ingredients of the world, and from their marriage Heaven, Ocean, Earth and the imperishable race of blessed gods sprang into being. Thus our origin is very much older than that of the dwellers in Olympus.⁵¹

Once again, no creation *ex nihilo*, no “creator external to the created world.”

Where *does* one find creation *ex nihilo*? Most readers are apt to think of Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” But even that creation, when subjected to scrutiny, becomes problematic. On which day did God create water? We read in Genesis 1:2-8, lines which present some of the most tenacious problems in all Judeo-Christian theology:

[2] And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. [3] And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. [4] And God saw the light, that *it was* good: and God divided the light from the darkness. [5] And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day. [6] And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. [7] And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which *were* under the firmament from the waters which *were* above the firmament: and it was so. [8] And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.

This narrative is incoherent unless one assumes that water was already present at the time of creation. Thus if *ex nihilo* is to mean literally “out of nothing,” and not just out of unformed chaos, then even the cunctipotent Judeo-Christian God (at least as he is depicted in Genesis)⁵² did not create the universe *ex nihilo*.

Whereas Eitel, as a Christian missionary, seemed to take creation *ex nihilo* as the norm, and judged China eccentric for not having embraced such an idea, today one must admit that creation *ex nihilo* is in fact highly peculiar among the traditions of the world. Christianity is one of the few religions to have made it an article of faith. Thus when Eitel affirms that “the Chinese mind” did not conceive of creation *ex nihilo*, it sounds almost as though he is censuring China for being a nation of heathens.⁵³ After all, it could be said that the pre-Christian West had no

⁵¹ *Birds*, pp. 693-702; tr. Eugene O’Neill, Jr., in Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O’Neill, Jr. (eds.), *The Complete Greek Drama: All the Extant Tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and the Comedies of Aristophanes and Menander, in a Variety of Translations* (New York 1938), vol. II, p. 762.

⁵² Other passages in the Scriptures present a less determinate picture. See, generally, Gerhard May, *Creatio ex nihilo: The Doctrine of “Creation out of Nothing” in Early Christian Thought*, tr. A.S. Worrall (Edinburgh 1994); and Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932), *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit: Eine religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung über Gen 1 und Ap Joh 12* (Göttingen 1895).

⁵³ Cf. Eitel, “Chinese Philosophy,” p. 389: “The ancestors of the Chinese appear to have early come under the influence of a weird feeling of veiled powers in nature and to have expressed their sense of the Infinite, which dimly dawned upon their intellect, by offering sacrifices to the visible powers of nature, and especially to the sun and moon, but worshipping likewise the spirits

creation myth either – in the sense that there was no single narrative of creation with universally recognized authority. Rather, the landscape was, if anything, similar to that of non-Christian China: a multiplicity of accounts, for the most part mutually contradictory, none of which was ever upheld by the entire civilization as the sole orthodox view. If “China has no creation myth” is to mean no more than “China is not a Christian nation,” then, of course, the statement is true – but tautological.

If one is prepared to remove the stipulation that a creation story must portray creation *ex nihilo*, one can find literally dozens of creation stories in Chinese literature. As sober an author as Lu Jia 陸賈 (ca. 228 – ca. 140 B.C.), who presided over scholastic learning in the early Han dynasty, opened his book with a detailed account – transmitted by his predecessors, he asserts – of how Heaven created all things and Earth nurtured them:

傳曰：「天生萬物，以地養之，聖人成之。」功德參合，而道術生焉。故曰：張日月，列星辰，序四時，調陰陽，布氣治性，次置五行，春生夏長，秋收冬藏，陽生雷電，陰成霜雪，養育群生，一茂一亡，潤之以風雨，曝之以日光，溫之以節氣，降之殞霜，位之以眾星，制之以斗衡，苞之以六和，羅之以紀綱，改之以災變，告之以禎祥，動之以生殺，悟之以文章。⁵⁴

It is handed down: “Heaven engendered the Myriad Things; they were nurtured by Earth and completed by the sages.” The power of these achievements came together, and the techniques of the Way⁵⁵ were born thereby. Thus is it said: [Heaven] stretched out the sun and moon, arrayed the stars and constellations, made the procession of the four seasons, attuned *yin* and *yang*, spread *qi* and ordered things’ natures, and established the Five Phases in their sequence. In the spring, things are born; in the summer, they grow; in the autumn, they are harvested; in the winter, they are stored. *Yang* engenders thunder and lightning; *yin* achieves frost and snow. [Heaven] nourishes and rears the throng of living things. Now they flourish; now they perish. It moistens them with wind and rain, dries them with the rays of the sun, warms them with moderated *qi*, brings them down with mortiferous frost. It positions them according to the host of stars, regulates them with the Pole Stars, envelops them within the Six Directions, makes a network for them with social relations,⁵⁶ reforms them with disasters and disturbances, makes

of winds, mountains, forests, rivers, valleys, and the dragon spirits of the ground, as also the spirits of their ancestors, vainly hoping to influence and aid them by invocations and incantations, by music and dances.”

⁵⁴ “Daoji” 道基; text in Wang Liqi 王利器, *Xinyu jiaozhu* 新語校注. *Xinbian Zhuzi jicheng* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1986), A.1.1f.

⁵⁵ On the “techniques of the Way” (*daoshu* 道術) in the philosophy of Lu Jia’s contemporary Jia Yi 賈誼 (201–169 B.C.), see Mark Csikszentmihalyi, “Chia I’s ‘Techniques of the Tao’ and the Han Confucian Appropriation of Technical Discourse,” *Asia Major* (third series) 10 (1997) 1–2, pp. 53f. Rune Svarverud, *Methods of the Way: Early Chinese Ethical Thought*. *Sinica Leidensia* 42 (Leiden 1998), e.g., p. 156, n. 9, is less illuminating.

⁵⁶ Literally, “reticulates them with skeins and cables,” but Wang Liqi’s note (p. 4, n. 14) shows that *jigang* 紀綱 refer in practice to social relationships.

announcements to them with auspicious omens, motivates them with life and death, and innerves them with patterns and revelations.⁵⁷

This is hardly creation *ex nihilo*, because Heaven requires Earth to nurture its creation and (most strikingly) human sages to complete it.⁵⁸ But one cannot plausibly deny that Lu Jia is talking about creation. Lu Jia's *dao* is not self-generating.

We have still not exhausted the inventory of Chinese creation stories, and the evidence that remains to be considered is even more damaging to the "China has no creation myth" tenet. For it appears that narratives displaying a concept of creation *ex nihilo* are found in China after all.

太一生水，水反輔太一，是以成天。天反輔太一，是以成地。天地復相輔也，是以成神明。神明復相輔也，是以成陰陽。陰陽復相輔也，是以成四時。四時復相輔也，是以成寒熱。寒熱復相輔也，是以成濕燥。濕燥復相輔也，成歲而止。故歲者，濕燥之所生也。濕燥者，寒熱之所生也。寒熱者，四時之所生也。四時者，陰陽之所生也。陰陽者，神明之所生也。神明者，天地之所生也。天地者，太一之所生也。是故太一藏於水，行於時，周而又始，以己為萬物母；一缺一盈，以己為萬物經。此天之所不能殺，地之所不能埋，陰陽之所不能成。⁵⁹

The Magnificent One engendered water; water went back and assisted the Magnificent One; in this manner they completed Heaven. Heaven went back and assisted the Magnificent One; in this manner they completed Earth. Heaven and Earth returned and assisted each other; in this manner they completed the spirits and the luminaries. The spirits and the luminaries returned and assisted each other; in this manner they completed *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* and *yang* returned and assisted each other; in this manner they completed the four seasons. The four seasons returned and assisted each other; in this manner they completed heat and cold. Heat and cold returned and assisted each other; in this manner they completed wetness and dryness. Wetness and dryness returned and assisted each other, completed the year, and then stopped. Thus the year is engendered by wetness and dryness; wetness and dryness are engendered by heat and cold; heat and cold are engendered by the four seasons; the four seasons are engendered by *yin* and *yang*; *yin* and *yang* are engendered by the spirits and luminaries; the spirits and luminaries are engendered by Heaven and Earth; and Heaven and Earth are engendered by the Magnificent One. Thus the Magnificent One is hidden in water, moves with the seasons, makes one cycle and then begins again; he takes himself as the mother of the Myriad Things. Now deficient, now replete, he takes himself as the regulator of the Myriad

⁵⁷ Compare the translations in Jean Levi, *Lu Jia: Nouveaux principes de politique* (Paris 2003), p. 19f.; Miyazaki Ichisada 宮崎市定, *Miyazaki Ichisada zenshū* 宮崎市定全集 (Tokyo 1991–1994), vol. V, p. 331 and p. 346f.; Mei-kao Ku, *A Chinese Mirror for Magistrates: The Hsin-yü of Lu Chia*, Faculty of Asian Studies Monographs: New Series 11 (Canberra 1988), p. 63f.; and Annemarie von Gabain, "Ein Fürstenspiegel: Das Sin-yü des Lu Kia," *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen* 33 (1930), p. 17f. The "patterns and revelations" (*wen-zhang* 文章) are probably to be understood as astronomical phenomena.

⁵⁸ Cf. Puett, *To Become a God*, pp. 248ff.

⁵⁹ Text in Li Ling 李零, *Guodian Chujiàn jiaodu ji* 郭店楚簡校讀記, revised ed. (Beijing 2002), p. 32.

Things. He is what Heaven cannot kill, what Earth cannot cover, what *yin* and *yang* cannot achieve.⁶⁰

I say “he takes himself as the mother of the Myriad Things,” rather than the more idiomatic “it takes itself as the mother of the Myriad Things,” because there is good external evidence that Taiyi 太一, the Magnificent One, was worshiped as a god in antiquity (though it should be apparent that, by his very nature, he transcends sex). By Han times, he was associated with a star,⁶¹ and a proper cult was organized for him under imperial auspices, but artifacts uncovered since the 1960s attest to his widespread veneration centuries earlier.⁶² However, the Magnificent One’s status is still unclear because few straightforward accounts of the god survive from before imperial times. It is also far from certain whether off-hand references in philosophical texts to notions such as *dayi* 大一, “great unity,” are intended to allude specifically to this god or to a more general concept of oneness or monadism.⁶³

The text is from a manuscript excavated at Guodian 郭店 in 1993, for which Chinese palaeographers have supplied the title *The Magnificent One Engendered Water* (*Taiyi sheng shui* 太一生水). Is this creation *ex nihilo*? If not, it is very close – much closer than Genesis 1. Nothing is said, either directly or indirectly, to have existed before the Magnificent One engendered water. Although all subsequent stages of creation are completed through marvelous cooperation (Heaven is created by the Magnificent One and water; Earth is created by the Magnificent One and Heaven; etc.), and although the Magnificent One abides immanently in the cosmos after its creation to attend to its functioning, everything begins with the principal and unassisted act of producing water. There is a “radical beginning”;

⁶⁰ Compare the translations in Thomas Michael, *The Pristine Dao: Metaphysics in Early Daoist Discourse*. SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany 2005), p. 23f.; and Puett, *To Become a God*, pp. 160ff.

⁶¹ The clearest discussion is Ho Peng Yoke, *Chinese Mathematical Astrology: Reaching Out to the Stars*, Needham Research Institute Series (London – New York 2003), pp. 42-44. See also Sun Xiaochun and Jacob Kistemaker, *The Chinese Sky during the Han: Constellating Stars and Society*. Sinica Leidensia 38 (Leiden 1997), p. 50; and Edward H. Schafer, *Pacing the Void: T'ang Approaches to the Stars* (Berkeley 1977), p. 45.

⁶² The fullest investigation is Li Ling, “An Archaeological Study of Taiyi (Grand One) Worship,” tr. Donald Harper, *Early Medieval China* 2 (1995–1996), pp. 1-39; see also Qian Baocong 錢寶琮 (1892–1974), *Qian Baocong kexueshi lunwen xuanji* 錢寶琮科學史論文選集 (Beijing 1983), pp. 207-234. (Of course, Qian died before the discovery of *Taiyi sheng shui*, but his study is still useful for its references to received texts.)

⁶³ A good example is in the “Lilun” 禮論 chapter of *Xunzi* 荀子; text in Wang Xianqian 王先謙 (1842–1918), *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解, ed. Shen Xiaohuan 沈嘯寰 and Wang Xingxian 王星賢, *Xinbian zhuzi jicheng* 新編諸子集成 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1988), 13.19.352 and 355. Cf. Donald Harper, “The Nature of Taiyi in the Guodian Manuscript *Taiyi sheng shui*: Abstract Cosmic Principle or Supreme Cosmic Deity?” *Chūgoku shutsudo shiryō kenkyū* 中國出土資料研究 5 (2001), pp. 1-23; and Ding Sixin 丁四新, *Guodian Chumu zhujian sixiang yanjiu* 郭店楚墓竹簡思想研究 (Beijing 2000), pp. 91ff.

there is a “single-ordered cosmos”; there is a “creator external to the created world.”

Because *Taiyi sheng shui* was not published until 1998, none of the opinions quoted at the beginning of this paper (the latest being that of Hall and Ames, 1995) could have taken it into account.⁶⁴ Therefore, although it is now evident that they all must be revised, one could make the plea that there was no way for the authors to have known about such evidence. But more than one myth involving creation *ex nihilo* is contained in the Daoist Canon (*Daozang* 道藏), which has been available for almost eighty years.⁶⁵ The *ex nihilo* in question is of a distinctly Chinese kind, but I believe it is one that stands up to critical examination.

Consider first the cosmogony in the *Santian neijie jing* 三天內解經 (Scripture of the Inner Explanations of the Three Heavens):

道源本起出於無先。溟滓鴻濛，無有所因，虛生自然，變化生成。道德丈人者，生於元氣之先。從此之後，幽冥之中，生乎空洞。空洞之中，生乎太無。太無變化玄氣、元氣、始氣三氣，混沌相因而化生玄妙玉女。玉女生後，混氣凝結，化生老子，從玄妙玉女左腋而生。生而白首，故號為老子。老子者，老君也。變化成氣天地人物，故輪轉而化生，鍊其形氣。老君布散玄、元、始氣。清濁不分，混沌狀如雞子中黃，因而分散。玄氣清淳上昇為天；始氣濃濁凝下為地；元氣輕微通流為水。日月星辰於此列布。老君因冲和氣，化為九國，置九人三男六女。至伏羲、女媧時，各作姓名。⁶⁶

The Dao originally arose with nothing prior to it. Dark and attenuated, vaporous and opaque, it had no cause. It was born in the Void through self-actualization. Transforming, it gave birth to the Elder of the Way and Its Power, who appeared before there were primal pneumas. [There follows a list of the gods of the highest heavens.]

After this, the Vacuous Grotto was born in Utter Blackness. Then from the Vacuous Grotto, Grand Nullity was born. Grand Nullity transformed itself into the three pneumas: the Mystic, the Primal, and the Inaugural. Joined alike in undifferentiated Chaos, these three pneumas transformed to give birth to the Dark and Wondrous Jade Maiden. Once the Jade Maiden had been born, the undifferentiated pneumas coalesced in her to give birth to Laozi. Laozi was born from the left side of the Dark and Wondrous Jade Maiden. Born with white hair, he was styled Laozi [“the Elder Master”].

Now, Laozi is Lord Lao. Lord Lao transformed and the pneumas took shape as the heavens, earth, humanity, and all beings. This was the result of Lord Lao cyclically transforming himself, refining his form and pneumas. Lord Lao spread out the Mystic, Primal, and Inaugural pneumas. Still, the clear and the turbid pneumas

⁶⁴ However, it is disappointing that Mark Edward Lewis ignored *Taiyi sheng shui* in his discussion of cosmogony in *The Flood Myths of Early China*, pp. 21-28.

⁶⁵ A facsimile of the Daoist Canon held in the White Cloud Monastery (Baiyunguan 白雲觀) in Beijing was published by the Commercial Press in Shanghai in 1924-1926. The best guide to the Daoist Canon is now Kristofer Schipper and Franciscus Verellen (eds.), *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang*, 3 vols. (Chicago - London 2004).

⁶⁶ *Santian neijie jing* (HY 1196), A.2a-3a.

were not divided from one another, but remained undifferentiated, in shape like the yolk of a chicken egg.

Thereupon he divided and distributed the pneumas. The Mystic pneumas were clear and pure, so they ascended to become the heavens. The Inaugural pneumas were thick and turbid, so they congealed below to form earth. The Primal pneumas were light and subtle, so they flowed throughout as water. With this, the sun, moon, and stars were arrayed.

Lord Lao then mixed together the pneumas and, transforming them, made nine kingdoms, placing in them nine sorts of human beings, three male and six female. During the time of Fu Xi and Nü Wa, each made for themselves names and surnames.⁶⁷

Lord Lao did not create the universe *ex nihilo*; Lord Lao emerged from the left armpit of the Jade Maiden and made use of the three primordial forms of *qi*. But did the Dao create the world *ex nihilo*? On the one hand, it is impossible to say, since we are told nothing of the manner in which the Dao “arose” – other than that the Dao had no cause and was self-conceiving. On the other hand, the Dao effected its own existence and then initiated the process that led to the creation of everything else. And it did so *ex nihilo*: there was nothing before the Dao. The creation in this account is not *ex nihilo* in the standard Judeo-Christian style, but it is *ex nihilo* nonetheless.

Whereas the *Santian neijie jing* places the Dao at the instauration of the cosmos, and Lord Lao in the position of the Dao’s proxy in the subsequent niveaux of creation, a later text, the *Taishang Laojun kaitian jing* 太上老君開天經 (Scripture of the Opening of Heaven by the Most High Lord Lao), places Lord Lao instead at the beginning, and entrusts to a series of disciples the sundry elements of the cosmos that were Lord Lao’s responsibility in the earlier text.

| | |
|----------|---|
| 蓋聞： | This is made known: |
| 未有天地之間 | In that interval when Heaven and Earth did not yet exist, |
| 太清之外不可稱計 | Incalculably far beyond grand clarity, |
| 虛無之裏 | Inside of barren nullity, was |
| 寂寞無表 | Silent, unoccupied—there was nothing beyond. |
| 無天無地無陰無陽 | Neither sky nor earth; neither <i>yin</i> nor <i>yang</i> ; |
| 無日無月無晶無光 | Neither sun nor moon; neither scintilla nor radiance; |
| 無東無西無青無黃 | Neither East nor West; neither blue nor yellow; |
| 無南無北無柔無剛 | Neither South nor North; neither tender nor tough; |
| 無覆無載無壞無藏 | Neither covering nor carrying; neither spoiling nor preserving; |

⁶⁷ Tr. Stephen R. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*. Taoist Classics 1 (Berkeley 1997), pp. 207ff. Compare the translation in Kalinowski, “Mythe, cosmogénèse et théogonie,” pp. 54f.

| | |
|-----------|---|
| 無賢無聖無忠無良 | Neither competent nor incomparable; neither loyal nor estimable; |
| 無去無來無生無亡 | Neither going nor coming; neither living nor passing away; |
| 無前無後無圓無方 | Neither before nor after; neither round nor square. |
| ... | ... |
| 唯吾老君猶處空玄 | Only our Lord Lao dwelt all the while in the empty and obscure, |
| 寂寥之外玄虛之中 | [Even] beyond the silent outerworld and within the obscure barrens. |
| 視之不見聽之不聞 | Look for him – he is not visible; listen for him – he is not audible. |
| 若言有不見其形 | You may say “he exists” – (but) one does not see his form; |
| 若言無萬物從之而生 | You may say “he does not exist” – (but) the myriad creatures are born from him. |
| 八表之外漸漸始分 | Beyond the Eight Outsides, very gradually [it/he] began to divide; |
| 下成微妙以爲世界 | Formed below [something] tenuous and subtle from which was created a dimensional world. |
| 而有洪元 | Thus “Vast Prime” came to be. |

[Here follow descriptions of two primordial entities, Vast Prime and Encompassing Prime, which give way, after myriads of kalpas, to Grand Antecedence.]

太初之時，老君從虛空而下為太初之師。口吐開天經一部四十八萬卷。一卷有四十八萬字，一字辟方一百里，以教太初。

In the time of Grand Antecedence, Lord Lao descended from Barren Emptiness and became the teacher of Grand Antecedence. His mouth emitted the entire set, in forty-eight myriads of scrolls, of the scripture of the opening of heaven. A single scroll had forty-eight myriads of characters. A single character was a square with sides of one hundred *li*. With it he taught “Grand Antecedence.”

| | |
|---------|--|
| 太初始分別天地 | Grand Antecedence first separated Heaven and Earth |
| 清濁剖判 | And parted clear and turbid, |
| 溟滓洪濛 | Split apart the boundless fog and vast haze; |
| 置立形象 | Set forms and simulacra in place; |
| 安豎南北 | Planted South and North securely; |
| 制正東西 | Constrained East and West correctly; |
| 開闢顯明 | Opened the covert and revealed the luminous; |
| 光格四維 | Light involved the Four Ligatures. |
| 上下內外 | Above and below, inside and outside; |

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| 表裏長短 | Exterior and interior, long and short; |
| 麤細雌雄 | Coarse and fine, feminine and masculine; |
| 白黑大小 | White and black, great and small; |
| 尊卑常如夜行 ⁶⁸ | Honorable and humble – [all were] constantly operating as if in the night. ⁶⁹ |

The text continues in this vein for several pages. Grand Antecedence separates Heaven and Earth and oversees the creation of the sun, moon, and human beings; Grand Initiation, the next disciple in the sequence, created *qi* (thus human beings existed before *qi* – as surprising as that may seem); Encompassed Potentiality created mountains and rivers; and so on.⁷⁰ Like the Dao in the *Santian neijie jing*, Lord Lao in this myth dwells alone in absolute nothingness, and then, at some mysterious moment, commences the longspun burgeoning that culminates, after a mind-boggling number of kalpas, with the Zhou dynasty and the beginning of Chinese civilization.

The time has come to ask why a group of scholars that includes some of the greatest historians of China in the twentieth century should have unanimously upheld a doctrine that has been shown to be incorrect in every respect. Their views were not simply off the mark; on most counts they have proved to be almost diametrically opposed to the truth. China has no creation myth? Wrong – China has many creation myths. China does not have creation *ex nihilo*? Wrong – Greece does not have creation *ex nihilo*; China does. Classical Chinese philosophers are primarily acosmotic thinkers? Wrong again – cosmology has always been one of the paramount concerns of Chinese philosophy, and virtually no thinker abstained from expressing an opinion.

Furthermore, with the exception of *Taiyi sheng shui*, all the texts examined in this paper are well known and easily located in both the primary and secondary literature. It is not likely that scholars such as Bodde, Graham, and Mote were unaware of these documents. Thus the only way to account for the glaring disjuncture between the “China has no creation myth” stereotype in scholarly theorizing and the cornucopia of creation myths in Chinese sources is to conclude that the evidence has been ignored because it conflicts with the mythic vision of China as the “Place Where Everything Is Different.” If you want to understand China, we are told – perhaps too often with a homiletic overtone – forget everything you learned about the West, because none of it applies. It would be judicious advice with a single crucial emendation: none of it necessarily applies. Otherwise, it col-

⁶⁸ *Taishang Laojun kaitian jing* (HY 1425), 1a-2a.

⁶⁹ Tr. Edward H. Schafer, “The Scripture of the Opening of Heaven by the Most High Lord Lao,” *Taoist Resources* 7 (1997) 2, pp. 1ff. Compare the translation in Livia Kohn, *The Taoist Experience: An Anthology*. SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany 1993), pp. 35ff.

⁷⁰ See the convenient chart in David C. Yu, “The Creation Myth of Chaos in the Daoist Canon,” *Journal of Oriental Studies* 24 (1981) 1, p. 8.

lapses to nothing more than an updated Orientalism. The fact that China is not the West does not mean that China is the opposite of the West.

In this vein, it should be emphasized that “China has no creation myth” typifies one of the worst fallacies in comparative study. Comparing world cultures does not mean identifying something purportedly essential about the West and then poking around to see whether the same thing exists somewhere else. Regrettably, this has been the approach of most comparative work involving China. What is wrong with declaring (usually in poorly concealed triumphalist rhetoric) that China has no capitalism, or monotheism, or epic poetry, or science, or human rights, or democracy, or feminism, or creation *ex nihilo* is not just that most of these phenomena *can* be found, in their own way, in Chinese sources; rather, what is most wrong is that this mode of inquiry prevents China from being anything more than a pallid reflection of the West. Whether that reflection is good or bad tends to vary with the sympathies of the investigator. To Joseph Needham, for example, China is great because the three arch-inventions extolled by Francis Bacon – namely printing, gunpowder, and the magnet – originated, unbeknownst to Bacon himself, in China.⁷¹ But this is merely a well intentioned instantiation of the same sterile method, the same reduction of China to the role of the West’s shadow.⁷² (A more innocuous, but no less misguided, example is the fusty habit of calling Sima Qian 司馬遷 the “Chinese Herodotus” or Pengzu 彭祖 the “Chinese Methuselah.”)⁷³ The most salient features of Chinese civilization are not those that happen to have had the greatest impact on European history. For if history had unfolded differently, we might be asking today why the West has not exhibited filial piety, pyroscapulimancy, or this-worldly immortality. (And perhaps that time is coming.)

Finally, if there is one valid generalization about China, it is that China defies generalization. Chinese civilization is simply too huge, too diverse, and too old for neat maxims. For every China-is-this or China-does-not-have-that thesis, one can always find a devastating counterexample, and usually more than one.

⁷¹ Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. I, p. 19, and vol. VII.2, p. 74. Cf. also *id.*, *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West* (London 1969), p. 62f.; and *Within the Four Seas: The Dialogue of East and West* (London 1969), p. 84. For a typical example of the “China was great because they did such-and-such before the West” mentality, see Robert Temple, *The Genius of China: 3,000 Years of Science, Discovery, and Invention* (New York 1986), where Needham, in a preface (p. 7), again refers to the three inventions singled out by Bacon. In a book intended for secondary schools (but as such very serious), Frank Ross, Jr., *Oracle Bones, Stars, and Wheelbarrows: Ancient Chinese Science and Technology* (Boston 1982), p. 3, adds paper-making to the list.

⁷² Cf. Kim Yung Sik, “‘Fossils,’ ‘Organic World-View,’ ‘The Earth’s Motions,’ Etc.: Problems of Judging East Asian Scientific Achievements from Western Perspectives,” in *Historical Perspectives on East Asian Science, Technology and Medicine*, ed. Alan K.L. Chan *et al.* (Singapore 1999), pp. 14-26.

⁷³ Similarly, I take a dim view of Vitaly Rubin’s characterization of the legendary Bo Yi 伯夷 as “a Chinese Don Quixote.” See “A Chinese Don Quixote: Changing Attitudes to Po-i’s Image,” in *Confucianism: The Dynamics of Tradition*, ed. Irene Eber (New York 1986), pp. 155-184.

“中國沒有創世神話”就是一種神話

常常有人斷言，中國與西方文化的主要區別之一是中國沒有宇宙起源論。儘管若干主張“中國沒有創世神話”說的傑出學者所做的論斷並不完全一致，但是本文仍要表明，他們的觀點與中國主要文獻所反映的情況完全相悖。問題的關鍵在於持上述論點的學者並非偶然出錯。在我看來，這些學者將中國視為“固化”西方世界的“固化”反襯，一個代表着相反習俗和思維模式，與西方截然對峙的另一極。他們認為，如果西方文明的基本特徵之一是通過對創世神話的探索來勾畫宇宙以及我們在其中所處的位置，那麼中國文化作為與西方文化對立的另一極，就不可能做與西方同樣的事。他們先入為主地認定中國不能有創世神話，這使他們必然堅持中國傳統上缺乏創世神話。

在這種情況下，需要強調指出，“中國沒有創世神話”說是比較文化研究中十分典型的荒謬結論之一。對世界上各種文化進行比較，並不意味着先鑒別某些西方的假定本質性內容，然後查看同樣的事物是否存在於別處。這種探詢模式妨礙了對中國的認識，使中國僅僅成為西方世界的一個蒼白反映。

(羅新慧 譯)