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Book Review: "Chinese Mythology Philosophy" by Ye Shuxian

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Abstract

Ye Shuxian's Chinese Mythology Philosophy is a distinctive theoretical work which explores mythological foundations of Chinese philosophical modes of thinking, focusing on the relationship between mythological and philosophical thinking, and the evolution of the philosophical embryo in myths into philosophy. It is a masterpiece in the study of Chinese mythology.

Keywords

Ye Shuxian, Chinese Mythology Philosophy, Book Review.

1. Overview

The book *Chinese Mythology Philosophy*, first published in January 1992 by the China Social Sciences Press, can be said to be the first philosophical study of ancient Chinese myths, exploring the philosophical implications of Chinese myths and the mythological foundations of the Chinese philosophical mode of thinking. The author, Ye Shuxian, is a senior professor in the humanities and social sciences at Shanghai Jiao Tong University and serves as an executive director of the Chinese Comparative Literature Association and vice president of the Chinese Literary Anthropology Society. He has been awarded the title of "Expert Enjoying Special Government Allowances" and has previously held visiting professor positions at Yale University in the United States, as well as at the British Academy, Oxford University, Cambridge University, and the Royal Netherlands Academy. His primary research areas include comparative literature and literary anthropology, with a focus on ancient Chinese culture and literature. His research in comparative literature and literary anthropology is among the leading positions in China.

The author, contrary to the traditional research method of discussing myths in terms of myths, takes in a wide range of myths and puts Chinese prehistoric to ancient myths into a broad world mythological and cultural background, and puts forward a number of novel and persuasive expositions of ancient Chinese myths through the reference and comparison of many similar mythological patterns. This book draws on and incorporates theories and methods from Western humanities, particularly the archetypal model theory in contemporary cultural anthropology, and systematically organizes Chinese mythology and cultural heritage. It consciously breaks down the boundaries between linguistics and the science of thinking, and also provides a three-dimensional, integrated perspective on ancient myths, rituals, customs, writing (oracle bones and jinwen), architecture, and even archaeological artifacts. It conducts comparative cultural research across the three major fields of literature, history, and philosophy to trace the prehistory of Chinese philosophy, exploring the relationship between Chinese mythology and Chinese philosophy, as well as the evolutionary process of how Chinese mythology developed into Chinese philosophy. The book clarifies, from both theoretical and empirical perspectives, how the pictographic characteristics of Chinese characters preserve the intuitive representations of mythological thinking, further demonstrating that the thinking patterns of Chinese philosophy are directly inherited from mythological thinking patterns. The model of the Chinese cosmology drawn in this book suggests a macroscopic context for understanding ancient history from a deep structure that, when viewed today, is still illuminating for understanding many of the problems of early Chinese culture.

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2. Contents and Comments

The entire book is divided into three parts with eight chapters. The first part discusses the metalanguage of mythological philosophy. The second part introduces the philosophical aspects of time and space in mythology. The third part explores the philosophy of life as reflected in mythology.

The first part discusses the metalanguage of mythological philosophy, consisting of three chapters.

The first chapter analyzes the cosmic schema within Chinese mythological thinking through the Taiyi Song. The author attempts to reconstruct the cosmic schema of mythological thinking in ancient China by examining this collection of ritual songs that have been passed down to the present day, which includes *Qingyang*, Zhuming, *Xihou*, and *Xuanying*. Through an investigation of the Taiyi Song, the author demonstrates that the Taiyi ritual is a religious activity related to the movement of the sun, originally intended to assist the sun god in its normal functioning by mimicking human symbolic actions, thereby ensuring the normal order of natural processes and social life. The Taiyi deity is an abstraction and conceptualization of the primordial sun god. The author infers through the analysis of the Taiyi Song that the abstract concepts of time and space, as understood in later philosophical thought, do not exist within mythological thinking; rather, time and space are integrated in an undifferentiated form within concrete visual representations. The cyclical nature of the sun's movements gives rise to the changing of the seasons, the four times of day, the four directions, the four colors, and the four spirits, among other cycles. This cosmic order is established in the *Yao Dian*. The author argues that the highest wisdom of Chinese philosophy originates from the mythological cosmic schema that conflates time and space. Both the Taiyi as a religious category and the Taiji as a philosophical category are abstractions of the cyclical movement of the sun in mythological thinking.

The second chapter further analyzes the ancient Chinese mythological cosmology through ancient characters. The author examines the opposing unity of the Chinese characters “ Kun” and “Xi” to identify the vertical system of ancient mythological cosmic models and analyzes “Dan” and “ Hun” to outline the horizontal system of mythological cosmology, together forming a metalanguage that can explain broad cultural phenomena. The foundation of this metalanguage lies in the natural cosmic concepts of the ancient ancestors, which are derived from the characteristics of the sun's movements. From this cosmology, value models in religion, morality, and other areas are deduced, embodying the binary oppositions of space and time, positive and negative values, as well as life and death. The metalanguage, as an interpretative model in anthropology, holds significant decoding or interpreting functions for many unconscious issues at the cultural substratum. When constructing the mythological cosmic system, the author illustrates the oppositional patterns within mythological thinking. In examining the animal symbolism and transformation systems of the cosmic model, the author reveals the patterns of generation within both Chinese mythological and philosophical thinking. Through an analysis of the myth of the Kunpeng in Zhuangzi, the author points out that, unlike other civilizations' cosmologies that emphasize the struggle of opposites, Chinese mythological cosmology places greater emphasis on the unity of opposites. Chinese mythological philosophy embodies a monistic worldview within the dialectic of unity and opposition, wherein the opposition between Yin and Yang is merely a changing form of the same cosmic source, the Taiyi, represented in different states of Dao's operation. The dialectic of Laozi and the doctrine of moderation from Confucianism, which form the core content of Chinese cultural thought, are indeed developments and extensions of this philosophy of "mutual generation" and "mutual accomplishment." In this chapter, the author reconstructs the model system of ancient mythological cosmology and demonstrates how this model system unconsciously shapes cultural phenomena as a metalanguage.

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The third chapter breaks down the ancient Chinese mythological cosmology into four major archetypal models and explores the associated myths, rituals, customs, and taboos. In mythological thinking, spatial orientation and temporal concepts are not purely objective categories; they also serve as value categories with relatively fixed archetypal meanings. Corresponding to the vertical and horizontal systems of the cosmic model, the author delineates four subsystems: (1) Dan: Eastern Model, (2) Kun: Southern Model, (3) Hun: Western Model, and (4) Xi: Northern Model. Eastern Model: The east, being the direction of sunrise, aligns with spring and carries various archetypal values such as life, birth, and emergence beyond its spatial connotation. Thus, myths, legends, rituals, and customs associated with these archetypal values typically adopt the east and spring as their temporal and spatial backdrop. Southern Model: Summer is the season of peak vegetative life when the sun's vitality is strongest throughout the year, embodying positive values like "prosperity" and "vigor." The legend of the Three Sovereigns, as passed down in ancient China, is derived from the eastern and southern models, characterized by reverence for the sun. Western Model: Autumn represents the decline of vegetation and is imagined as a time of diminishing life and approaching death. At this point, the life force of the solar deity also wanes, signaling the impending death of autumn closely associated with the spatial direction of the west, where the sun sets. Myths and rituals associated with the western model are situated within the archetypal temporal and spatial framework of "the decline of the sun and the flourishing of darkness." Northern Model: In mythological thinking, the north is closely linked to darkness, coldness, winter, and the underworld. The dark underworld symbolically interchanges with femininity, the maternal womb, and creation. The northern direction is thus a very special and mysterious spatial orientation, where the winter myths and rituals of the northern model exhibit dialectical qualities of life and death transformation

The second section introduces the philosophical dimensions of mythological time and space, comprising four chapters.

Chapter Four explores the archetype of Dao from a mythological perspective. The author investigates "Dao," the highest category in Chinese philosophy, through cross-cultural comparative studies, tracing its formation process from the mythological stage (personal gods) to the monotheistic and pantheistic stages (semi-personal or non-personal religious concepts), and eventually to the philosophical stage (conceptual categories). This exploration illuminates how human rational thought has evolved from mythological thinking. The mythological archetypal model, as an organic whole, exists in a state of eternal movement, with its most typical form being cyclical repetition. This model derives from natural phenomena, extending through analogy to numerous things exhibiting cyclical change, ultimately elevated to the highest law and movement principle of the universe, summarized as "Dao." In Chinese philosophy, the highest category of "Dao" has two distinct sources. The first is a reality-oriented source; the original meaning of "Dao" refers to the paths of everyday experience, which is the source of the term in Confucian thought. The second is a mythological-oriented source; "Dao" signifies the general laws or principles exemplified by the movements of the sun and water—this cyclical pattern forms the basis of the Dao concept in Daoist philosophy. The author investigates the emergence of the "Dao" category from the perspective of mythological archetypes, tracing the relationship between various characteristics of "Dao" and their archetypal origins. The discussion includes specific myths, such as the story of Kua Fu chasing the sun, which embody the cyclical movement of "Dao" as a latent theme, thereby providing new angles and insights for the study of the "Dao" category and other categories in Chinese philosophy.

Chapter Five investigates the origins of the Ming Tang (Bright Hall) structure. As history progressed, the original meaning of the Ming Tang system has persisted in its material forms and various symbolic characteristics. Discovering the original functions of the Ming Tang is

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tantamount to uncovering the origins of ancient cosmological concepts. The Ming Tang is a carefully designed and constructed model of a small universe, derived from a mythological cosmology divided into the underworld (water), the terrestrial world (land), and the divine realm (sky). It can be viewed as the center of politics, religion, military, diplomacy, science, and education in ancient feudal China. The Ming Tang's appearance is circular on top and square on the bottom, indicating that its material form was fundamentally rooted in the observation and worship of the sun. The original structure of the Ming Tang, without walls on all sides, was also designed to effectively observe the sun's trajectory. After the Eastern Han Dynasty, the astronomical function and the symbolic representations of political rule of the Ming Tang architectural complex became distinctly separate. The Ming Tang served as a religious ceremonial building where the emperor would monthly inhabit different rooms within it. The emperor followed this custom of cyclical habitation and worship within the small universe model because the Dao of Heaven is manifested through the sun's movements, thus he had to emulate the sun's course within the artificial Sun Hall. Through the analysis of the Ming Tang, the author concludes that Chinese civilization has long equated the ruler with the sun, forming a cultural archetype that has been continuously passed down and reinforced across generations, permeating the collective unconscious of the entire Huaxia nation.

Chapter Six explores the original aspects of the mythological narratives surrounding the Four-Faced Yellow Emperor. The "Four Faces of the Yellow Emperor" myth carries cultural information similar to that of the Ming Tang but has been forgotten under the influence of rational Chinese culture. The structure of the Ming Tang, which also resembles the Yellow Emperor's temple, is modeled after the image of the Yellow Emperor himself. The Yellow Emperor has four faces united in one essence, which corresponds to the four cardinal points represented by the four grand temples of the Ming Tang, centered around the "Great Chamber" that connects all four temples together. Each of these four grand temples comprises three chambers, aligning perfectly with the twelve months of the year. For an emperor to ascend the throne, he must emulate the "Dao of Heaven," which adheres to the rules of the sun's path through the twelve zodiac, having their abode changed within the Ming Tang across the twelve months. The architecture of the Ming Tang mirrors the archetypes of cosmic time and space, thus becoming a small universe model and a center for the ruler to emulate the Dao of Heaven in governance. By conducting cross-cultural comparative studies, the author asserts that the appearance of the Yellow Emperor as a four-faced deity is not a mere figment of the ancient imagination but reflects mythological thinking's abstraction of two-dimensional spaces (i.e., planar space), thus possessing sacred cosmic symbolism. The mysterious number "four" highlights the structural rules of human spatial consciousness. The author argues that throughout the development of numerical concepts among humans, the assignment of non-numeric significance to "four" transformed it into a sacred number, stemming from physical four-directional spatial orientations. Through comparing mythological systems across ancient civilizations, including Babylon, Egypt, India, and China, it is concluded that the Yellow Emperor embodies the identity of a creator god and the sun god, where his four faces symbolize the sacred four-quarter spaces designated by him. The "Four Faces of the Yellow Emperor" refer to an ancient creation myth, depicting the creator sun god born from darkness, bringing forth a world divided into light and darkness, whose cyclical movements "designate" the four directions and four seasons, establishing the cosmic order upon which humanity relies for survival. The author emphasizes that among all types of myths, creation myths seek to address the philosophical questions of the universe's origin, with their regulatory functions being the most fundamental and significant. The origins of mythic regulations arise from primitive humans observing the "Dao" of the sun's movement and the resulting sense of the spatial-temporal order that emerged from this observation. The intrinsic structure of the initial myths is embodied in creation myths, whose deep structures possess generative attributes, allowing

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them to derive new mythic regulations and even "human language" regulations from the same archetypal model.

Chapter Seven explores the mystical number "seven" and the Chinese Chicken-Human creation myth. Symbolic system is a broader concept, which includes symbols, images, and primitive writing systems related to cosmology, politics, religion, and ideology. "Seven," as a cosmic number, represents a universal archetype in humanity. Across various cultural contexts, "seven" consistently emerges as a symbol of cosmic numbers and cosmological concepts, frequently linked to creation myths that describe the origins of the universe, embodying a significance of cosmic constants, and often used to denote certain limits or cycles of development. The number "seven" appears as a sacred (or mysterious) number related to creation myths across different cultural spheres due to the shared psychological structures of primitive cultures. In ancient China, there was a festival celebrated on the seventh day of the year—Renri (Human Day). From the first to the seventh day of the lunar new year, there were specific "sacred days" dedicated to chickens, dogs, sheep, pigs, cattle, horses, and humans. This folk ritual and its accompanying taboos can be seen as a "re-enactment" of ancient creation myths. The Chicken-Human myth serves as a mythic prototype for New Year's rituals. On the surface, this myth can be reconstructed as follows: on the first day, the creator made the chicken; on the second day, the dog; on the third day, the sheep; on the fourth day, the pig; on the fifth day, the cattle; on the sixth day, the horse; and on the seventh day, the human. The author uses a structuralist approach to draw a comparison between this myth and the story in *Zhuangzi* about the chaos opening seven orifices. Although the surface narratives differ greatly, they share an underlying structure based on the sacred number "seven," a part of a creation myth series present in various cultures. Similar to the mystical number "four," the emergence of the number "seven" is closely linked to the development of primitive spatial consciousness: "seven," as a cyclical and cosmic number, symbolizes a three-dimensional spatial concept involving the seven directions. The creation myth's underlying structure rooted in the sacred number "seven" originates from prehistoric humanity's comprehensive spatial awareness numerically represented through their mythological thinking, with each number from one to seven corresponding to directions—east, west, south, north, down, up, and center. Initially, spatial awareness distinguished only four directions, represented by the sacred number "four," and later expanded to develop three more directions, thus establishing the concept of the sacred number "seven." As real space consists only of six dimensions—front-back, left-right, and up-down, plus a center—this corresponds to the limits of spatial awareness. Consequently, "seven" becomes the cosmic number and the ultimate cycle number, embodying not only the significance of spatial orientation but also possessing magical and even taboo associations.

Mythical thinking has the characteristic of connecting spatial orientations with various concrete or abstract phenomena. Not only does the number "seven" overall symbolize a full spatial (including temporal) orientation, but each animal created on a specific day also serves as a metaphorical expression for corresponding spatial parts. The author speculates that the Chicken-Human creation myth is a product of Yin culture, with its metaphorical coding based on an animal-location four-directional spatial symbol system unique to the ancient inhabitants of the Central Plains. The chicken, as a symbolic representation, correlates with phenomena associated with the eastern sunrise, light replacing darkness, solar energy overcoming yin forces, and spring emerging from the cold of winter. Thus, it serves as the first creation on the day of creation, expressing a dual commencement of time and space. From the identification of the chicken with the east, it is noted that various clans in the eastern regions regarded birds as totems, and from the perspective of the Central Plains inhabitants, the east was a region of bird totems. In the mythological construct, the bird has become a specific symbol denoting the abstract spatial orientation of the east. Regarding the identification of dogs and the south, the Shang people saw the south as the dominion of dog-totem clans such as the Miao Li. As for the

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association with sheep in the west, in the minds of those from the Shang dynasty, the abstract direction of the west is concretely connected to the Qiang people, the principal adversary in that direction, characterized by mimicking sheep attributes, such as wearing sheep horns. Lastly, the identification of pigs with the north relates to the Shi Wei, a clan that revered pigs as their totem, residing in the northern regions of the Central Plains. The worldview unique to the ancestors of the Yin and Shang dynasties, characterized by their use of totems from surrounding territories as spatial symbols, lends an established symbolic language for the metaphorical coding of the Chicken-Human creation myth.

This chapter follows the enlightening clues of the mystical number “seven” to address the origins of ancient Chinese rituals related to the Day of Man. It uncovers a long-lost ancient Chinese creation myth and, through the process of deciphering the myth's codes, reveals the sacred significance of the number "seven"—that the complete dimensional structure of human mythological thought encompasses seven directions. This understanding allows for an explanation of the universal patterns wherein creation myths with "seven" as a deep structure appear simultaneously across various cultures worldwide. The different meanings of creation myths structured around the sacred number "seven" also relate to fundamental spiritual differences between Eastern and Western cultures. Both the Chinese creation myth of the Rooster People and the biblical creation myth reference a seven-day timeline. However, the position of humans differs in the narrative structure of these two myths. In the biblical account, the sacred role of "seven" is designated for Jehovah as a day of rest, a day of remembrance for God. In the Chinese myth, the sacred role of "seven" is bestowed upon humanity itself, marking it as a day of remembrance for humans. Chinese creation beliefs do not envision a transcendent, omniscient, and omnipotent deity, like Jehovah, who exists outside of the universe and before time and space. The obscuring of divine figures thereby provides a prerequisite for highlighting the theme of humanity. The Rooster People creation myth assigns the sacred number "seven," symbolizing limits of development and a state of perfection, to humanity, intentionally placing humans at the center of the unfolding cosmos. This vividly represents humanity's central position within the natural world, shaping a cultural tradition of humanism in China.

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