

TRANSMIGRATIONS AMONG CULTURAL IMAGINARIES PHILOSOPHICAL-POLITICAL SYMBOLS BETWEEN WEST AND EAST

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Abstract- In so far as intercultural learning between the West and the Far East is concerned, two of the main research questions can be: How can we explain the development of parallel schemes of mythical narrative which have grown independently of each other but which are still consonant with each other? How can we give a proper account of their cultural and political value? We can do it by considering an alternative way of interpreting the existence of consonances between Chinese and Jews. This step could be fundamental in order to let us understand the condition of reciprocal tolerance. This goes together with the Chinese inconceivability of ideologies such as antisemitism. In China there has never been religious discrimination against Jews: moreover antisemitism is an unknown concept. The imaginary, along with adequate historical and social factors, can be considered as a powerful ally of those who support the reasons for co-existence.

Key words- Imaginary, Mythologem, Chinese and Jews, Transcultural Myths

Introduction

Cultural studies are currently witnessing an increase in the search for homeomorphic correspondences, that is to say concepts and representations that are parallel and analogous among cultures []. At first sight this search would seem to be a formidable task. In 1774, Cornelius de Pauw, steadfast in his refutations of expert scholars, published his *Recherches Philosophiques sur les Egyptiens e les Chinois*. This work was based on unshakeable stereotypes. It is today opportune to move away from the superordinate view characterising the most arrogant Orientalism, and move towards its opposite []. This may be possible by consciously altering the direction of the classificatory and defining view of the Eastern world (and worlds) together with that of the already colonised nations []. The prevailing model put forward by the intellectual elites (western and male), i.e. the scientific establishment, up until the middle of the last Century is now replaced by gender-sensitive, decolonised and decentralised currents and energies. However, the roots of this model in disciplines and in the academies are late in becoming common knowledge within western societies. Two important ubiquitous and intercultural patterns follow, in order to unveil the still existing frames of references among diverse mythographies (the art of writing myths and the connected outputs). Being able to create bridges and passages, transmigrations and re-transcriptions of common narrative schemes helps to discredit the undemonstrated, (still fatal) postulate regarding the presumed reciprocal incommunicability or unyielding

attitude among cultures. The first mythic pattern is 'the lithic son', a mythologem which spans in Chinese and Hurrian cultures. Its unhistorical references are expressed in terms of a crude dynastic power, with two different outcomes. The second is the Phoenix.

I, 1

First of all, the Chinese example: let us start with the legend, which is a story with no historical-critical evidence, than the mythologem, a mythical plot of symbolic and moral meaning expressed in poetic and visual terms. Yu the Great (大禹 Dà-Yǔ) is one of the legendary Three Sage Kings and Five Virtuous Emperors at the dawn of Chinese civilization, enjoying the same reputation as Yao and Shun, the sage kings. It is said that a great flood lashed China thousands of years ago and Yu the Great was given the task of fighting against the great calamity. Drawing lessons from his predecessor's failure, he used methods of channelling and dredging instead of blocking and damming the water. Under his leadership, the flood water flowed into the sea through nine newly-dredged rivers. Over a decade's arduous works finally resulted in victory. Yu the Great from then on became the personification of selfless devotion and perseverance in the history of Chinese civilization with the story that "three times he passed the door of his house without going in" . In an apocryphal, mythographic version of this story, presented in Wang Jia' s *Shi Yi Ji* (4th century A.D.), Yu is helped in his work by a yellow dragon and a black turtle (Xuan gui, which is not necessarily but perhaps related to one of the celestial

emblems, the Black Tortoise Xuanwu, the Black Warrior of the North). One of the other four is the Red Bird, Fenhhuang, the Phoenix, which is perfectly symmetrical to the Tortoise. At the time there was a Mount Longmen on the Yellow River where a very narrow channel existed and blocked water heading east. Yu made it possible, thanks to the exhausting work of many people devoted to him and to the same enterprise, to open up this channel. According to another legend, Yu created the Sanmenxia "Three Passes Gorge" by cutting a mountain ridge with a divine battle-axe to control flooding. This was an act comparable, in other circumstances, to an act of empiety if it were not made legitimate, as it is, by the sacred power embracing Yu. Because of this success and his sacrifice, people referred to him as "Yu the Great". His hands were completely callused and his feet were completely padded. His toenails are said to have all fallen off. His shin ended up totally skinless. Many were said to have cried for Yu, who not only sacrificed his body but spent 13 years dealing with the floods. The legend has lasted till now, a multiple set of narratives with no historical-critical evidence, an enduring mythologem, a mythic plot of symbolic and moral meaning expressed in poetic and visual terms, presented in a Taoist transcription, which is already interpolated in the outputs of contemporary symbolical imaginary. The plot is that of the sublime hero sacrificing himself for the sake of the people and the land under his rule.

1, 2

The cosmogonic prologue is necessary to make the whole mythography intelligible:

"Kung-Kung, genius of the Wind, serpent monster with human face, spreads terror. The imperial messenger armed with light, wounds him to death. But he coils around the North West Mountain. It is the pillar of Heaven. He breaks it apart. The Sky cracks and partially falls apart. There are cascades of rocks and torrential rain. It tilts to one side and settles. From that day on the sky is like this, with a slight slope across the earthly table. Nuwa, daughter of the god of waters, captures the Great Turtle. She cuts off its paws. She makes new pillars of Heaven. Then she repairs the cracked celestial vault, with stones of the five colours. Still today we see them shine, the stars. Order is restored to the world. She marries her brother Fuhsi. We humans are said to originate from them. Kun, transformed into a three-legged monster turtle challenges the emperor for power. If he were to win chaos would reign. But the sovereign wins in the dancing contest. Kun is exiled to the borders of the empire. One of the sons of the Sun, Kun, unleashes the Great Waters in order to throw into confusion Heaven and Earth. And Yu is his son. Son of he who unleashed the great flood[]. The core story; however things are, it is with the great flood that the story of Yu begins. It is a flood that strikes the world during the reign of the emperor Yao. And here returns Kun, once again, but this time in the figure of the strongman, the hero, he who was before the wicked and guilty one. The council of heads charges Yu with taming the waters.

"Nine years of strenuous efforts. Kun attempts to oppose the waters. Banks and dikes are built. But they all fail. He is condemned. Yao leaves the empire to Shun. The floods continue and they call Yu, son of Kun, to cover the failure of his father. Thirteen years of unrelenting labours. He scrapes out the stream beds, dredges the rivers and sinks them to take the water to the sea. He designs and cuts outlet channels, valleys, mountains, watersheds. He makes them conform to the established Order, of which he is the image itself. He does not oppose but seconds the flood. His efforts are rewarded. The waters fall Yu is not alone, having powerful, supernatural allies. From the River Lo comes the Great Turtle, and it bears on its shell the Lo Shu, the Writing of the River. The image of celestial order. From the Yellow River comes the Dragon Horse and on its coat it carries the Ho Thu. The Image of the River. Image of earthly order. Figures and arrangements of numbers show natural relations and laws. The Magic Squares are where numbers and stars, mathematical, geometrical and logical divination coincide. Precise signs of the cosmic codes. The Nine Halls. It is with these parameters that Yu organises his work. With these yardsticks he measures the Nine Mountains, the Nine Rivers, the Nine Swamps and he makes them safe places. He smelts the metal that is a gift of the Nine Shepherds, and forges the Nine Tripod Cauldrons, upon which he etches shapes and images of all the beings under the heavens. The emblems of the world. He buries the Nine Tripod Cauldrons in the Nine Regions of the Earth, and in this way ensures order and peace for the empire []. In truth it is Yu himself, the man, the voice, the stature, the measure, Yu himself is the yardstick of the balances between Heaven and Earth. And the gods that recognise this consign to him the divine diagrams. But it is Yu that is the very unit of measurement. "In this way the road, the route that Yu follows during his great feat, rushing this way and that over the entire earth in order to rescue people and things becomes a model of the order of which he is an expression. The imprints of Yu are ritual signs. Not a walk but a dance, and an archetype. In other writing, the dance of Yu gives a figure to the world, it is the spiral of life. At the centre it gives shape to Ursa Major, the Great Bear, which is the celestial doorway between man and Heaven. This is the celestial pathway of the dance of Yu. The two fundamental pathways of this ritual dance, reciprocal and complementary, show the square and the straight line on the one hand, and on the other the spiral and the circle. They are the Earth and the Heaven of man, and it is Yu, the cripple, the different one, who, shuffling along, brings them about. It is the order of the asymmetric, the well-known law of Li. And in both moments, the unpaired imprints of Yu's journeys mark and teach in Earth and in Heaven the Numbers and in the number they recall balances of unity and totality. Yu is totally engrossed in his enormous task. Hands and feet covered with calluses and wounds, he stumbles to his work. Yu is crippled. To the north he consolidates Mount Kunwu that the wicked serpent of the primeval time split in two. And without rest he wanders, inspecting the

universe, he who is the meeting point of the external and internal universe. He who is crippled, asymmetrical. It is the sidereal dance. The dance of unity and diversity. The imprints mark in the sky the cosmic wheel, and at its centre there is the doorway to the precedent and to the undifferentiated. Chaos and vacuum as origin and end. The measure of access is the diversity in the way of walking of Yu the cripple. His stumbling step is the key to the non-repetitive order, the cosmic rule. The dance becomes thus cosmic. Bei-dou, the Great Bear, is both stage and doorway of representation. Bei-dou, the Bear, is the Origin and the Return.

Now comes the wedding of Yu. But the flood and his duty call. Yu abandons his young spouse and his home. For thirteen years he sees neither her nor his son. He neglects his family and himself. Spattered with mud and haggard, three times he stops on the doorstep of home, but does not enter. He cannot rest. He does not allow himself to 'waste' time with his family. The rain drenches him, the wind combs out his hair. No precious moment can be lost in stopping the flood. He reaches even the Land of the North, as far as the Northern Ocean. He reaches Amphora Mountain, in the shape of a vase, from which the Divine Stream flows. He has known the Miraculous Water. He has visited the Land of the Naked Peoples, and in order to enter he discards his own clothes, putting them back on only when leaving. Yu has become brutish. He has the form and movement of a bear, resembling the Great Bear, the Eye of Heaven, the Star. Yu is a bear. The bear is deity of stability and power. And of relation with chaos, with the transcendent, with all that is demoniacal. Yu is an ambivalent figure. He is man, saviour, bringer of order. He is a superhuman entity, in relationship with spirits and gods. He is in relationship with chaos and disorder. From this he gains power, vigour for his immense task. Yu therefore is now the bear. His new wife sees this. He is bear, she flees, and he is about to reach her when shame and fear change her to stone. Hard stone. Yu reaches her. She was pregnant of him. The rock splits in two. Qi is born. The son of Yu. It is the dynasty that continues, the past that returns. Tradition says that also the Emperor Qi, son of Yu, saw earthquake and flood. The Three Rivers of the Northern Province broke their banks and flooded the land and Qi, like his father, had to put things right. Time flies like the cloud in the sky. The dynasties pass like the days, one after the other. The powerful in the morning are forgotten by the evening. The new reflects the old. The story returns to where it began. Centuries after Yu the Great, out of the blue two dragons pay a visit to a Xia king. They are the good spirits of ancestors. They donate to the king their frothy drool. Wrapped in cloth, placed in a precious casket, the foam of the dragon is hidden. After the Xia dynasty follows the Shang dynasty. Then come the Qi. The tenth sovereign of the Qi orders the casket to be opened. His name is Li and it sounds like that of the other Li, the Asymmetric Order of Nature, the Cosmic Rule. And he puts in order, according to his name, that which is in things. So they open the casket. Astonishment abounds. The foam floods the palace.

Fear. The queens, faced with the ever encroaching foam, frenetically recite spells. The foam changes into a black lizard and runs to the women's quarters. A virgin hides it. Seven years later, having become woman, she gives birth to a girl who then becomes wife of the King, at that time called Yu. In this name, centuries and centuries, generations and generations later, there returns that other Yu, the Great, the Cripple, the Ancient".

The circle of events with symbolical meaning does not return on itself identically, but enlarged, in a spiral of growth, identical in its structure but individualised and innovated in its symbolic content. To summarise: according to a Taoistic myth, Yu has become brutish. He has the form and movement of a bear. The bear is deity of stability and power. And of relation with chaos, with the transcendent, with what is demoniacal. Yu is an ambivalent figure. He is man, saviour, bringer of order. He is a superhuman entity, in relationship with spirits and gods. In relationship with chaos and disorder. From this he gains power, vigour for his immense task. More than this, Yu and his lithic son are not perceived as dangerous or horrifying.

Now two other important examples, ubiquitous and reflectively intercultural, to be compared to Yu's mythography (the art of writing myths). They are wholly suited to creating bridges and transmigrational passages and retranscriptions of common and shareable narrative schemes. Thanks to parallels or to homeomorphic correspondences, they help to discredit the indemonstrable but fatal postulate regarding the presumed reciprocal incommunicability or unshakebleness among cultures, the relativistic trap. The first is the myth of the heavenly and telluric son who becomes a giant of stone, controversial symbol of contamination between Hurrian and Hebrew myths, associated with the double figure of the female principle in God, but nevertheless still corresponding to the lithic son of Yu the Great, and belonging to the same pattern. The second is the myth (and the pattern-mythologem) of the Phoenix, also a symbol of spurious origin, although Egyptian-Hebrew, but in perfect parallelism with one of the most venerated and antique representations of the Chinese imaginary.

II

We must refer for a moment to the celestial bull, the fourth Hayyoth, one of the four living creatures (man, eagle, bull and lion) that support the Throne in the visions of Ezekiel, then transformed into the winged bull, symbol of Luke the Evangelist. These show analogies or directly evoke, as documented in the ancient texts, the Sumerian and Mediterranean god, of which there are parallels in the Cretan and Etruscan worlds, known as El, assuming the appearance of celestial and solar bull. Last but not least, we have the spouse of El, father of Baal, giving her the name of Asherah. Until the eighth century B.C., El is always at the side of Asherah, as her spouse. As regards the physiognomy of Astarte-Anath, considered as a symbolic constellation per se, the predominance of one attribution and of a divine epithet

over others concerning the goddess of two faces and many names, at least within the Mesopotamian context, very much depended on the times and circumstances of the sites of worship. This followed the supremacy of one part of the population, settled in an urban centre, over another of the same ethnic stock, established elsewhere. In the Hurrian theogonies, in turn inherited by the Sumerians, the struggles between city states for strategic and territorial predominance over the water courses and supply lines, echo at a mythographical level in the periodic ousting of the eponymous gods on the part of their descendents or family members. Once a city was overthrown by another, or by allied cities, the events were reproduced in the mythical narratives and involved conspiracies, alliances, dynastic wars and plots taking place among the divinities of the enemy cities. Following one of these cruelly fought dynastic successions among divinities, there appears for the first time the creation of a giant of stone, born from the Earth, divine and rebellious, capable of growing out of all proportion and of threatening the gods of the air or supernal divinities and the story of his conflict with Anath, fatal for the goddess. The well-known story regards Kumarbi, the celestial god defeated by one of his sons, Teshub, the god of wind and tempest. The overthrown king does not renounce, and prepares a "restoration" with a singular coupling. He leaves the city of the gods, arrives at an enormous rock and, dreaming of generating a monster that would defeat his rival, lies with the rock as if with a woman. From this strange relation is born Ullikummi, the giant of volcanic stone, destined to avenge his father Kumarbi, overthrowing his step-brother Teshub. As a consequence Ullikummi is brought up by Irshirra, the slave goddesses of Kumarbi. They place him on the right shoulder of Upelluri (the World), who lives below the sea and bears sky and earth, from the deepest foundations of the whole of creation (the macrocosm is reflected in the political microcosm of the Sumerian, Hurrian, Hittite city states). Ullikummi grows, and soon his height reaches the heavens of the gods, the Kuntarra. Worried, Teshub and the Sun god meet secretly to plot the destruction of the rival, but the first attempts fail. Ullikummi is insensitive to the fascination of Ishtar, goddess of Love, graceful and alluring, but unarmed. The stone giant also defeats Teshub and with his immense stature, which challenges the heavens, forces Hebat (alias Anath) wife of Teshub, to flee her celestial temple. In this myth the two figures, that of Anath – Heba, queen of the heavens, and that of Ishtar, goddess of love, are disjointed. What is very important in this 'disjoining' step is a reflection on the symbolic inter-religious and intercultural significance of the specific female divinity, the celestial wife of the supernal god, already introduced above as homeomorphic goddess of Asherah-Astarte. This goddess, Hebat or Heba, is wife of the god of wind and tempest, Teshub, and is represented on the back of a lion in a rock sculpture at Hattusas, an iconographic and iconological passage that equates her precisely to Anath. As final transposition, also documented in the ancient texts, we have Hawwah as the Hebrew name for Heba.

In Genesis 20 it is the name of she who is referred to as the mother of all living beings []. Eve was venerated at Jerusalem, corresponding to Ebe, cupbearer of the gods and spouse of Heracles once the hero was admitted to Olympus. We should not underestimate the deeply persuasive effect that the middle-eastern cult of the goddess Astarte (-Anath) had, pervasively and long-lasting, on the Hebrews in general, but also on the Jews, on the people returning from their Babylonian exile. This attraction was due to it being very much a latitudinal cult from the cultural and inclusive point of view of the two attributes of the female face of God, always accepted and probed with veneration across the centuries by the Hebrew mystics. Astarte symbolised, as sweet goddess of the white doves, the forbearing and mild 'long-nosed' face of God, on the one hand, and, on the other, the ferocious warrior, the lioness goddess, who corresponds to the jealous face of the divinity. The same female divinity who tried unsuccessfully as Ishtar to combat the stone monster as a sweet queen of beauty, but who failed and was even banned as Anath by Ullikummi himself from Heaven. A different vision of the cosmic power and of the balance among the celestial and telluric forces? Yes. But, the end of the Hurrian story says: Not always does victory smile on the strongest. Instead of facing Ullikummi directly, the gods, Ea at first, cut off his feet, preventing him from advancing on them and breaking his contact with the earth. Thanks to the "knife that separates the sky from the earth" they can finally kill Ullikummi, severing the source of his telluric energy, which had created him and made him grow. The stone giant shatters into a thousand pieces and the throne of Teshub is restored over the created world. The harmony is restored through intelligence, if not through love; at least, not through violence. A still more important analogy to be noted here is the restoration of order, although the circle does not return on itself identically, but is enlarged, in a spiral of growth, identical in its structure but individualised and innovated in its symbolic content []. In transcultural myths, this happens to the Phoenix as well. You were the Phoenix, his life again and it is not subject to death.

III

The Phoenix, Fenghuang in Chinese, and corresponding to Milcham in Hebrew tradition and language, has been identified in biblical times with the Divine Wisdom in the Book of Job, 38, 36. The splendid and flourishing Phoenix is quintessential in all cultures of everything that is positive, warm, solar, good, regenerating, faithful, creative, harmonious, salvific, pacific and prosperous, of good augury. It is a solar symbol in Egypt and China, of faithfulness and purity in Chinese and Hebrew mythology.

The Milcham was the only creature in the Garden of Eden who did not give in to the flattery of Eve, already enslaved by the serpent, which would have had all the creatures participate in its sin, convincing them to lose their purity by eating the forbidden fruit. God rewarded

the Phoenix by putting it in a fortified city, where it could live in peace for a thousand years, and then be consumed by flames and arise from the ashes. It is a Christological and alchemical symbol, in analogy with the symbol of radical spiritual rebirth by means of the transmutation of base metals into gold, known as the philosopher's stone in the West, between ancient and medieval times.

Very different is the Leviathan's destiny and that of his mortal enemy, Behemoth. Together with Ziz, (analogous in the homomorphic sense to Peng, the Chinese mythical bird) all three are fantastic creatures destined eventually to be delicacies at the messianic banquet at the end of the world, in Saintly Jerusalem. Only the Milcham, sacred creature because faithful to the firstborn purity, will be exalted and not consumed by and by means of eschatological time.

Within such a wide theme one should open out of all proportion the critical and erosive fractures of the various mythographies. However, these, at least in the case of the Phoenix, show a well defined axiological sign as far as the West and China in particular are concerned []. Also regarding this syntony there is a question, to which we will be able to reply, in my opinion, only in future years. This regards the reserve of accurate and detailed multi-disciplinary research in the field of cultural and philosophical-political symbols, which, for the moment, is nowhere in sight.

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