

廟 媽 女

Matriarchy at the Edge The Mythic Cult of Nu Wa in Macao

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INTRODUCTION

The mythological repertoires of early Chinese culture and civilization are contained in a number of classical texts. These texts are invaluable sources for understanding the power of mythological narratives, which both re-enact and confound the history of China, and which crucially foster cultural cohesion and a sense of collective identity. As Anne Birrell argues, mythological narratives are sacred narratives, chiefly because ‘they relate acts of the deities in addition to other episodes, and they embody the most deeply felt spiritual values of a nation’ (Birrell 2000: 7). In Macao—the former Portuguese enclave at the edge of south China—there is a small temple consecrated to Nu Wa 女媧. This were-snake Daoist goddess has been an influential deity since antiquity, and played a pivotal role in Chinese mythical history. She represents the cosmogony,¹ or creation myth, of Chinese culture. Bits and pieces of Nu Wa’s portrayal as the primeval creator-

goddess and saviour of human life are narrated in various time-honoured classics: a Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.) text, the *Lie Zi* 列子 (Master Lie), and two Han-dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) texts, *Feng Su Tong Yi* 风俗通义 (The Comprehensive Interpretation of Customs), and the *Huai Nan Zi* 淮南子 (Master Huai Nan). Apart from her matriarchal image as the Earth Mother, she is depicted as a beautiful but wrathful goddess in a Ming 明 dynasty (1368-1644) mythological narrative, *Feng Shen Yan Yi* 封神演义 (Creation of the Gods). Moreover, Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (1717-1763) opens his masterpiece, *Hong Lou Meng* 红楼梦 (The Dream of the Red Chamber), with a decisive reference to Nu Wa as the repairer of the sky.

In Macao, amidst an assortment of other divinities, this archaic goddess does not offer the more coveted “mainstream” services associated with the sea. Instead, she represents another layer in the spirit world by providing “subsidiary” divine assistance. Given that the cult of Nu Wa still retains its hold, even today, the pertinent questions now are: why is Nu Wa honoured at the periphery of China and how is the Chinese pantheistic spirit exemplified in her “divine abode”? What is the significance of the Nu Wa myth and her evolving status in the spiritual hierarchy? How are Chinese literary texts made to serve as a vehicle to consolidate myth-making? And what are the differences and similarities between the creation myths of the East

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and the West? While using an etiological approach to trace the origins and explanations of the Nu Wa myth, this paper also undertakes a broader exegesis, combining the disciplines of the classics, history, literature, religion, art, folklore, anthropology and psychology, to further the discussion.

THE TEMPLE OF NU WA

After the founding of Macao as a Portuguese settlement in 1557, it became a bastion of Catholicism and was believed to have more churches and chapels for its size than anywhere else in the world. It was, however, also permeated with a rich ambience of the polymorphism of Buddhism and Daoism. An autochthonous Chinese religion, Daoism has been called the religion of the masses, and is described as the most popular religious tradition in China (Welch 1958: 140). It is into Daoism that most of the mythological characters of ancient China were incorporated. And Nu Wa was appropriated as the supreme deity in the Daoist divine hierarchy. Among some eighty Chinese temples in Macao,² there is a tiny one dedicated to Nu Wa.³ This insignificant temple truly does not seem a decent way to honour such a prominent divinity.

The humble Nu Wa Temple is located at the junction of Rua das Estalagens [*Cao duei jie* 草堆街] and Travessa dos Algibebes [*Gao wei jie* 高尾街]. It was built in 1888 and its main entrance once faced the Rua de S. Paulo, which led to the impressive façade of the Church of the Mother of God, better known as the Ruins of St. Paul's. Just as a fire destroyed the Church of the Mother of God in 1835 and left it as the "Ruins," so did a fire break out in a cloth shop adjacent to the temple in the winter of 1914. The fire reduced the temple's main hall and rear hall to rubble. Only the side hall was narrowly unscathed. After the disaster, the temple was not re-built; the government made use of the land to widen the Rua das Estalagens, while the side hall was restored and a new entrance added. This is the two-storey structure that stands today, while the present "public" courtyard was originally the site of the main hall. Given its excellent location in the town centre, the temple's courtyard is almost always occupied by vendors selling food and clothes. Passers-by can easily miss this unique piece of Macao's heritage.



The entrance of the Temple of Nu Wa.

Although the temple was much smaller after the renovation, the image of Lu Zu 吕祖 was newly enshrined.⁴ Hence the subordinate name of the temple, Ling Yan Guan 灵岩观, [the Temple of the Spirit Rock], was added on the lintel just below the three bigger Chinese characters: Nu Wa Miao 女娲庙 [the Temple of Nu Wa]. One may ask why a male deity was added to share this "sacred space" with a female divinity. Lu Zu, also known as Lu Dongbin 吕洞宾 (755-805), is a historical figure. He is popularly dubbed Lu Chunyang 吕纯阳, meaning "pure essence of the masculine force." He is believed to have attained immortality at the age of fifty and was deified as one of the Daoist Eight Immortals. It is said he acquired the mysteries of alchemy and the magic formula of the elixir of life. He generally carries a sword across his back and holds a fly-whisk as his attribute. The fly-whisk alludes to his ability to fly at will through the air

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and to walk on the clouds.⁵ Folklore even makes the exaggerated claim that he has a flying phallus. He has long been worshipped as a deity of fertility. Perhaps because both Lu Zu and Nu Wa are associated with fertility, they have been put in the same temple.

On the right side of the entrance, four big Chinese characters “悦城龙母,” or “Yuecheng Dragon Mother,” are vertically inscribed on a stone pilaster. It is clear from this that the temple is also dedicated to the Dragon Mother of Yuecheng 悦城. The cult of the Dragon Mother is believed to have begun in Yuecheng, Deqing 德庆 county, Guangdong 广东 province, around the first century A.D. Legend maintains that a living maiden with the surname Wen 温 emerged as a shaman in the Qin 秦 dynasty (221-206 B.C.) and was later worshipped as a deity associated with the sea and fertility. Nu Wa thus has to share her “divine abode” with Lu Zu and the Dragon Mother.

Wei Tuo, the defender of the Buddhist faith and protector of monasteries.



As the Chinese (at least in the instance of the lived experience of Macao) seem to advocate the spirit of pantheism through religious inclusion, compromise and syncretism, a plethora of deities is honoured in Nu Wa's divine abode. When one enters the ground floor, there is a staircase leading to the first floor where two images of Nu Wa are enshrined on the main altar. One depicts her as Repairer of Heaven, and the other as Mother Goddess. The modest altar also provides spaces for the Yuecheng Dragon Mother and Lu Zu, as well as Guan Yin 观音, the Buddhist Bodhisattva of Mercy; Guan Gong 关公, the God of War; Zhong Kui 钟馗, the Slayer of Devils; and Zheng Yin 郑隐 and Ge Hong 葛洪, both healing spirits. In addition, scattered around are several small altars dedicated to the Buddhist tutelary deities—Wei Tuo 韦陀, defender of the Buddhist faith and protector of monasteries, and Di Zang Wang 地藏王, King of the Subterranean Kingdom—as well as to the Buddhist Trinity: Past, Present and Future.⁶

Similar to the ancient Greek theory of euhemerism,⁷ the Chinese are inclined to espouse the practice of raising historical characters to “godhood.” This temple indiscriminately enshrines multitudinous mortals who have, over time, euhemeristically become represented as Daoist immortals. They are Jiang Ziya 姜子牙, the God of Chinese gods; Bao Gong 包公, the God of Justice; Tian Hou 天后, the Daoist Empress of Heaven; Bei Di 北帝, also known as Xuan Tian Shang Di 玄天上帝, the Lord of the Black [Pavilion of] Heaven; Cai Bo Xing Jun 财帛星君 the God of Wealth; Wen Chang 文昌, the God of Literature; Jin Hua Furen 金花夫人, the Patroness of Child-Bearing and Fecundity; and Tai Sui 太岁, the God of the Annual Cycle. Moreover, the mythological child-god Na Zha 哪吒 and the trio of Fortune, Affluence and Longevity (福禄寿 *fulushou*) are also honoured. Two animal deities are also enshrined here—the Monkey King Sun Wukong 孙悟空, and the Pig Fairy Zhu Bajie 猪八戒.

Like most Chinese temples in Macao, the Temple of Nu Wa transgresses religious boundaries to enshrine a whole gamut of popular deities from Daoism, Buddhism and Chinese folk religion. It thus offers a potpourri of beliefs to meet worshippers' various quotidian requirements. This sacred space is another example that illustrates the religious syncretism that has been central to the religious life of the Chinese since the Ming dynasty.⁸

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THE WERE-SNAKE NU WA

In Chinese mythology Nu Wa has been the Great Goddess of matriarchal society since antiquity. She is a Mother Goddess, personifying Mother Earth and the source of all human life. There are myriads of “mythemes”⁹ constitutive of embodied meaning in the Nu Wa myth. Legend claims that her father was Shui Jingzi 水精子, the Spirit of Water. She belonged to a tribe in northern China with the surname Ying 嬴, meaning “snail.” She was formed like a human being except that, instead of having legs, she had a tail and glided over the earth. She had a long head with two fleshy horns, and her body resembled that of a snail (蜗, *wo*); hence she was called Nu Wa (meaning “snail-maid”), and was worshiped as a snail goddess (蜗牛神 *woniushen*) (Werner 1932: 334; see also Wang 1977: 400). In the visual arts, Nu Wa has long been portrayed with the head of a human and the body of a snake, and is commonly considered a were-snake deity. The snake-like Nu Wa reminds us of the Aztec Goddess of the Earth and Mother of gods and men, Coatlicue, who is often shown wearing her characteristic skirt of writhing snakes. The two mother goddesses from different hemispheres are inseparably linked with the snake.

Legend has it that Nu Wa was born three months after her brother Fu Xi 伏羲 (2953-2838 B.C.). Fu Xi was the first legendary sovereign of the Hunting Age of the early nomadic tribes who settled in ancient China. He is credited with many cultural inventions and is regarded as the founder of Chinese civilization. Another account maintains that Fu Xi was from a tribe in central China bearing the surname Feng 风, meaning wind, and the tribal tattoo was a large dragon. The literal meaning of his name “Fu Xi” indicates that he had a prostrate and curvy body, like that of a snake. Obviously, both Nu Wa and Fu Xi had snake-like bodies, and perhaps because of their physical resemblance, legend maintains that Nu Wa was both sister and wife of Fu Xi. They are taken as the first divine married couple.

Similarly, in early Persian mythology, Yima, a solar deity and god of fertility, married his sister (Leeming 1994: 225). Moreover, the theme of incestuous marriage between siblings cannot fail to recall the offspring of Adam and Eve, who, Christians believe, procreated the whole human race. Incest, being a violation of exogamy, was among the taboos of many



Guan Gong, the God of War.

tribal societies, and remains a major crime in most present-day communities. According to Michael Grant, however, out of fifty representative mythologies of the world, no less than thirty-nine include incest among their subject matter (Grant 1963: 230). Carl Jung even contends that incest in itself symbolizes the longing for union with the essence of one's own self, or, in other words, for individuation. This hypothesis may explain why the gods of antiquity very frequently engendered offspring through incestuous relations. In this way, the epic of Nu Wa/Fu Xi relationship falls in line with other ancient mythologies.

Despite their own incestuous marriage, it is believed that Nu Wa called Fu Xi's attention to the need to prohibit marriage between members of the same family and between people with the same surname. Fu Xi instituted the laws of marriage, providing first for betrothal through go-betweens,

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making rules for ceremony and gifts, and forbidding pre-marital relations. As a result, Nu Wa and Fu Xi are regarded as the God and Goddess of Marriage.

Both of them are often represented as partly human and partly supernatural; when they are represented together, the lower parts of their bodies are shown in the form of entwined serpents' tails. This representation symbolizes mating. In tombs of the Han 漢 dynasty, there are archaeological findings showing Nu Wa and Fu Xi with human heads and interlacing snake tails. Such a portrayal is readily reminiscent of the cult of the Naga (in Sanskrit, "Naga" is a male snake or serpent, and "Nagini" a female). In the Buddhism practiced in south and southeast Asia—particularly in India and Cambodia—the snake is almost a saintly motif. Legend has it that when the Buddha was in his sixth week of meditation after his Enlightenment, a serpent king (king of the Nagas) named Mucilinda sheltered him during a great storm and a torrential rain that lasted for seven days. The serpent king

surrounded him with the coils of his body and outspread his seven heads to form a protective hood like an umbrella. This notable episode has become a favourite subject in the Buddhist visual arts. The Naga cult appears to be popular in China too, and the snake is worshipped as a form of divine spirit. It comes to represent immortality because of its ability to shed its old skin and emerge renewed, regenerated and reborn.

In world mythology, the snake is believed to control the sources of water and is hence a kind of water god; it is worshipped among the fertility gods in the hope of assuring a successful growing season for crops (Rosenberg 1999: 330). The snake is believed to embody knowledge, wisdom¹⁰ and the power to heal. It is also a phallic symbol associated with the earth goddess in fertility rites. It is regarded as a benevolent "genie of the ground" and a friend of human beings (Frédéric 1995: 91, 277). It is even worshipped by some as a god (Hall 1995: 285). In Mesoamerican civilization, the snake is perhaps the most enduring

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icon. The Mayas worshipped the mythic plumed-serpent (or feathered-snake) god, Kukulcan, known to the later Toltecs and Aztecs as Quetzalcoatl. Moreover, the image of a snake (together with an eagle perching on a cactus) is even represented on the present-day Mexican flag, thus showing the positive iconography of the snake.

By contrast, in Christian culture, the snake is a demonic animal. In the Bible, the snake is the craftiest of all God's creatures, and the chief agent in the scene of the Temptation (Genesis 3: 1-7). It is believed that the snake persuaded Eve to eat the fruit of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Eve ate the forbidden fruit and gave some to Adam, who ate it too. Hence, the snake was condemned: "...the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan which deceiveth the whole world..." (Revelation 12: 9). As we can see, the words "dragon," "serpent," "Devil, and "Satan" are interchangeable in Christian culture; the snake is a symbol of evil and a Biblical synonym for Satan. These semantic entanglements virtually blur the exact distinctions among these words. The iconographic meaning of the snake vividly espouses opposed interpretations in varying traditions, and the same animal in different cultural contexts is endowed with contrasting semiotics.

THE CREATOR OF THE COSMOS AND HUMAN BEINGS

A creation myth is a cosmogony, a narrative that describes the original ordering of the universe and reveals the great struggle to survive in chaos. Virtually all cultures have cosmogonic myths, because human beings are preoccupied with their own origins and those of the world in which they live. In Chinese mythical history, there were two authoritative versions of creation,¹¹ namely, the myths of Pan Gu 盘古—literally "Coiled Antiquity"¹²—and of Nu Wa. While Pan Gu was worshipped as the Ancestor God (祖神 *zushen*) among different ethnic minorities in the south-western part of China, Nu Wa was regarded as the Mother Goddess (*mushen* 母神) in the northern regions, and was mainly worshipped by the Han Chinese (Wang 1977: 583-4). Even today, the cult of Nu Wa enjoys huge popularity in central-northern provinces of Henan 河南, Hebei 河北 and Shaanxi 陕西 (Yang 1997: 144-162).

The Chinese creation myth holds that Pan Gu was a divine cosmic giant. Each day for 18,000 years he grew ten feet taller. He created order out of a huge egg containing chaos by separating the sky from the earth. With a great chisel and a huge mallet, he carved out the mountains, valleys, rivers, and oceans. During his 18,000 years of life he made the sun, moon, and stars. As his death created a vacuum within which pain and sin were able to flourish, his corpse gave shape and substance to the universe. The parasites (or mites) on his body, impregnated by the wind that had been generated by his breath, became the black-haired people.¹³

The Pan Gu creation myth, which represents the cosmological human body, is stunningly similar to that of other ancient mythologies. For instance, in the mythology of northern Europe, the sea, the earth and the sky were created from parts of the primeval giant Ymir's body after he was slain by Odin, the

The Daoist goddess Nu Wa.



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Bei Di, the Lord of the Black [Pavilion of] Heaven.

Scandinavian god of war (Shapiro 1979: 214). In the Vedic tradition, the “Primal Man” Purusha (or Purusa) was a cosmic giant who created the universe. His head became the sky, his feet the earth, his navel the air, and his limbs produced mortals (Coulter & Turner 2000: 392). The resemblance of the Pan Gu myth to these creation myths reveals some sort of intertextuality and suggests that it was probably Indo-European in origin. It might have been adapted from Central Asian sources, due to increased cross-cultural contacts among people from south-western China and Central Asia in the third century A.D.

Unlike the somewhat unappealing male-dominated myth of Pan Gu, the female-dominated creation story of Nu Wa¹⁴ clearly indicates that human beings are not on a level with parasites. The myth of Nu Wa is briefly mentioned in an Eastern-Han dynasty (25-220 A.D.) text, *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* 说文解字 (Talking

about Texts and Explaining Words), compiled by Xu Shen 许慎 (d. 120 A.D.?). This text relates that Nu Wa was a “holy maiden in antiquity, who created and impregnated all things” [古之神圣女, 化万物者也 *gu zhi shen sheng nü, hua wan wu zhe ye*] (Xu 1997: 623). These ten words neatly encapsulate the idea that the cosmos was established and all living things took shape through Nu Wa’s creation.¹⁵ She is the matriarchal primogenitrix *par excellence*.

In *Feng Su Tong Yi*, another Eastern-Han dynasty text compiled by Ying Shao 应劭 (c. 140-206 A.D.), there is a comparatively more detailed description, which indicates that Nu Wa created human beings so as to enrich and beautify the world. She is specifically portrayed as the Earth Mother [地母 *dimu*], or the Creatrix of humankind:

“Legend has it that at the very beginning when heaven and earth first took shape, there were no human beings. Nu Wa patted and modelled yellow clay in order to create human beings. The task was very tedious and her strength could not tolerate the burden. So she pulled a rope through the mud, lifted it up, and each drop of clay that fell off became a human being. Therefore, the rich and the noble were those moulded from yellow clay, whereas the poor and the ordinary were those made by pulling the rope through the mud.”¹⁶

This fragment explains not only the primeval creation of humankind, but is also redolent of other connotations. First, it explains the origins of social hierarchy. The humans made of yellow clay became the ruling class of rich and noble people, while the mud produced the underclass of poor and servile people. Secondly, it tacitly embraces the Chinese concept of predestination—that is, the idea that the fate of human beings was preordained from the moment they were created. In the Christian creation myth, however, the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, betrayed God by eating the forbidden fruit, and were expelled from the Garden of Eden—an episode that perhaps suggests the first couple’s uncompromising challenge to a predestined fate. Thirdly, the reference to the yellow clay on the banks of the Yellow River is key to the Chinese creation myth. The Yellow River, on which life and culture have depended, was the cradle of Chinese civilization. The association of the Nu Wa myth with the Yellow River thus enhances the

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nationalistic spirit (in a modern sense) of the Chinese, and strengthens a sense of ethnic solidarity.

Creation stories involving the idea that the first man was formed from dust, soil or clay are found in other religions, notably Babylonian. Similarly, Ovid (43 B.C.-17 or 18 A.D.), retelling a Greek myth in *Metamorphoses*, describes the Titan Prometheus fashioning the first figure of a man from clay in the image of the gods:

Then man was made, perhaps from seed divine
Formed by the great Creator, so to found
A better world, perhaps the new-made earth,
So lately parted from the ethereal heavens,
Kept still some essence of the kindred sky—
Earth that Prometheus moulded, mixed with
water,

In likeness of the gods that govern the world—
And while the other creatures on all fours
Look downwards, man was made to hold his head
Erect in majesty and see the sky,
And raise his eyes to the bright stars above.
Thus earth, once crude and featureless, now
changed

Put on the unknown form of humankind.

(*Metamorphoses* 1: 76-88)

In the same vein, the Bible relates, “The Lord God took some soil from the ground and formed a man out of it; he breathed life-giving breath into his nostrils and the man began to live” (Genesis 2: 7). Apart from this similarity—that the first man was made of clay—the Chinese creation myth embodies different elements from that of the Christian. In the *Bible*:

“God created human beings, making them to be like himself. He created them male and female, blessed them and said, “Have many children, so that your descendants will live all over the earth and bring it under their control” (*Genesis* 1: 27-28).

In Christianity, there was only one single Creator/God; but in Chinese mythology there were two cosmic creators, namely Pan Gu and Nu Wa. The Christian creation myth conforms to the *patriarchal* idea of God the Father, whereas the Chinese creation myth also espouses the *matriarchal* concept of the Mother Goddess, in addition to the divine cosmic giant. While the Christian god created only a man and a woman, Nu Wa created human beings in groups—nobles and commoners. Contrary to the Greek god and the Christian God who made man in

their images, Nu Wa did not create humanity in her likeness. Unlike Adam and Eve’s disgraceful Fall, which predestined their descendants to a condition of original sin, the people made by Nu Wa did not fall from her grace and were not punished. Most especially, Nu Wa created only the Chinese people, whereas the Greek and Christian creation myths seem to apply to all humanity.

In the Bible, Eve was the mother of all human beings (Genesis 3: 20), but it was she who brought forth the Fall of humankind. In quite a different vein, Nu Wa was the Mother Goddess and Guardian Goddess of the people and the country, and a great matriarch in the epics of Chinese culture.

Zhong Kui, the Slayer of Devils.



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REPAIRER OF HEAVEN
AND GUARDIAN OF HUMAN LIFE

Chinese mythology holds that in antiquity, the sky and the earth were in utter chaos. There were torrential rain and infernal fires, and human beings were in great danger. Nu Wa then came to the rescue. She tamed unbridled nature, restored the cosmic order, and effected stability on earth. This episode can be traced to the *Huai Nan Zi*, compiled by Liu An 刘安 (c. 170-122 B.C.) in 139 B.C. (during the Western Han dynasty):

“In antiquity, the four extremities [the four corners of the earth] were in decline, the nine continents were cracked, the sky did not cover the entire earth and the earth did not fully support the sky, fires blazed unextinguished, waters flooded unchecked, fierce beasts ate the people, and birds of prey seized the old and the weak. Nu Wa therefore melted stones of five colours to repair the azure sky, cut the feet of the celestial tortoise to set upright the four extremities, slaughtered the black dragon to rescue the people of Ji province, gathered ashes to fill up the flooding waters, and rescued the land.”¹⁷

This fragment undoubtedly consolidates her role as the repairer of the sky and the guardian goddess of human life.

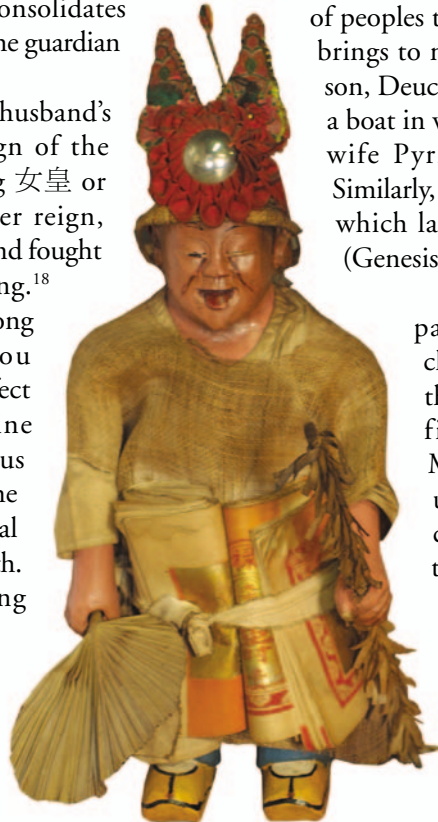
Meanwhile, after her brother/husband's death, Nu Wa reigned as sovereign of the kingdom under the title Nu Huang 女皇 or “Empress.” Towards the end of her reign, however, Gong Gong 共工 rebelled and fought with Zhuan Xu 颛顼 to become king.¹⁸ Demonic and ambitious as Gong Gong was, he violently shook Buzhou Mountain 不周山 (literally, “imperfect mountain”), seized one of the nine heavenly columns and broke it, thus creating an enormous black hole in the celestial vault, from whence torrential rain poured down and flooded the earth. After committing this crime, Gong Gong fled, but was caught and killed by Nu Wa. She then returned to build a scaffolding to support the heavens, and saved humanity from destruction. The episode plainly suggests that the cosmic order was

disrupted by male violence, and that disorder was restored by female benevolence. Hence, Nu Wa's matriarchal importance is emphasized. Consider this excerpt from *Lie Zi*, a Daoist classic, compiled by Lie Yukou 列御寇 during the Warring States Period:¹⁹

“In former times, Nu Wa melted five-coloured stones to repair the hole in the sky, and cut off the feet of the celestial tortoise to set upright the four extremities of the earth. Later Gong Gong and Zhuan Xu fought to become king. He (Gong Gong) wrathfully shook Buzhou Mountain, broke the pillar in the sky, tore the strings that tied the earth; so the sky leaned towards the northwest, where the sun, the moon and the stars were positioned; the water could not flow to the south-eastern part of the earth, and therefore the stagnant waters flooded.”²⁰

The above two fragments simultaneously emphasize that ancient China suffered from severe floods. The chaos of the deluge forms part of many creation myths. Though destructive, water is also the source of new birth, and represents the desire for a new beginning. Accounts of a great flood appear to be common features in the mythology and folk-history of peoples throughout the world. The flood story brings to mind the Greek myth of Prometheus' son, Deucalion, who escaped a flood by building a boat in which he floated for nine days with his wife Pyrrha (*Metamorphoses* 1: 348-415). Similarly, Noah built an ark to escape the deluge, which lasted for one hundred and fifty days (Genesis 7, 8: 1-19).

Although these two fragmentary passages are short, and drawn from classical texts, they succinctly illustrate that Nu Wa was the archetypal saviour figure in the catastrophe myth. Moreover, her role as a divine smith is underlined, since she smelted the cosmic five-coloured stones and restored the sky. One may wonder how many magic stones were required to repair the sky, and how big they were. In *Hong Lou Meng*,²¹ the author Cao Xueqin appropriated the Nu Wa myth and provided a mathematical hermeneutics at the very beginning of the novel:



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“Long ago, when the goddess Nu-wa was repairing the sky, she melted down a great quantity of rock and, on the Incredible Craggs of the Great Fable Mountains, moulded the amalgam into three hundred and six thousand, five hundred and one large building blocks, each measuring seventy-two feet by a hundred and forty-four feet square. She used three hundred and six thousand five hundred of these blocks in the course of her building operations, leaving a single odd block unused, which lay, all on its own, at the foot of Greensickness Peak in the aforementioned mountains.”²² (Hawkes 1973: 47)

In this excerpt, the cult of Nu Wa and the cult of the stone are closely interwoven. The narrative not only pinpoints the size and number of stones Nu Wa used,²³ it also reveals the Chinese passion for stone (and metonymically for jade). Stone has long been regarded as possessing supernatural powers in aniconic form,²⁴ as an antidote to malign and inauspicious influences. It is this single unused stone left by Nu Wa that constitutes the story line of *Hong Lou Meng*, which is also known as *The Story of the Stone* [*Shi Tou Ji* 石头记].

NU WA'S ENTICING CHARM

Nu Wa was re-invented in another mythological repertoire and incorporated as one of the most fascinating characters in *Feng Shen Yan Yi*. This classical novel was developed over centuries as a folk tale, and first appeared in book form in the late Ming dynasty.²⁵ In the novel, the real world and the fantastic world are presented in a harmonious and holistic manner. It combines fictionalized historical romance and popular mythological tales based on the fall of the Shang 商 dynasty (1766-1121 B.C.) and the rise of the Zhou 周 dynasty (1122-221 B.C.). During the fictitious battles between evil spirits and divine beings that were involved in the transition of power, Nu Wa appears three times to intervene. The novel comes to the end with Jiang Ziya's canonization of three hundred and sixty-five mortals (a reference to the 365 days in a year) in the Daoist pantheon under a celestial hierarchy, and with Emperor Wu's 武 confirmation of the official titles granted to his subordinate feudal lords.²⁶

At the outset of this fictional narrative, Nu Wa's supreme status as the sovereign of the cosmos was recapitulated by Shang Rong 商容, the Prime Minister of Emperor Zhou 纣 (1154-1121 B.C.):



“Goddess Nu Wa has been a great goddess since ancient times, and possesses saintly virtues. When the enraged demon Gong Gong knocked his head against Buzhou Mountain, the northwest section of Heaven collapsed and the earth sank in the southeast. At this critical moment, Nu Wa came to the rescue and mended Heaven with multi-coloured stones she had obtained and refined from a mountain.” (Gu 1992: 3)

Although Nu Wa's greatness was emphasized, she was “demoted” to the position of guardian angel for Zhaohe 朝歌 (present-day Anyang 安阳, in Henan province), the capital of the Shang dynasty), and was honoured merely as a “proper goddess” [*zheng shen* 正神].

Under the advice of the Prime Minister, Emperor Zhou made a pilgrimage to worship Nu Wa and held a ceremony at her temple on her birthday, the 15th day of the third lunar month. Suddenly a whirlwind blew up, “rolling back the curtain and exposing the image of the goddess to all. She was dazzlingly beautiful, much more so than flowers, more than the fairy in the moon palace, and certainly more than any woman in the world. She looked quite alive, smiling sweetly at the king and staring at him with joy in her eyes” (Gu 1992: 4). The ancient prototype of the snake-like Nu Wa was embellished as a heavenly beauty in this scene. Emperor Zhou was immediately besotted

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by her bewitching beauty, as none of his concubines was as attractive as the goddess' image. As an expression of his immense admiration and infatuated love for her, the licentious Emperor then wrote the following poem in praise of her on the wall near her image:

The scene is splendid with phoenixes and dragons,

But the clay and golden colours are only deftly applied.

Curving brows like winding hills in jade green,
Dancing sleeves aflutter, clothed in radiant dew.

As pear blossoms soaked with raindrops compete with beauty,

Charming as peonies enveloped in mist.

This sweet beauty can ever walk with graceful movements,

I'll bring her along to Chang Le Palace to serve me.²⁷

This flirtatious poem becomes the peripeteia and the main cause of the fall of the Shang dynasty. It also foregrounds a whole sequence of fantastic battles between the evil and the divine in *Feng Shen Yan Yi*.

On her birthday, before Emperor Zhou arrived, Nu Wa had already left her temple to pay respects to the triadic group San Huang 三皇, or the Three Emperors: Fu Xi, Shen Nong 神农, and Huang Di 黄帝.²⁸ Once the archetypal creatrix and saviour of humankind, Nu Wa now became a figure inferior to the three patriarchal deities, and was "degraded" by scribal prejudice. After she returned, she found the poem and was furious. She felt hugely insulted, because the provocative poem blatantly expressed the Emperor's sexual desire towards her, and by expressing such desire, he committed the sin of blasphemy. Such blasphemy on the part of a mortal towards a "proper goddess" can be seen as symbolic rape, which symbolically violates her virginity and defiles her saintly image. Emperor Zhou's visit to the Nu Wa Temple was a key episode, which gave rise to a theme of sin-and-punishment.

AVENGING GODDESS

Just like the Hindu God Shiva and his consort Parvati, who appear in both gentle and terrifying images,²⁹ Nu Wa manifests her angry form as an avenging goddess as the plot of her story unfolds. She uses the magic "Demon-Summoning Banner" to call

forth three sprites from a golden gourd. She commands them to transform themselves into beauties, enter the palace and distract Emperor Zhou from state affairs, but not to harm the ordinary people (they actually killed many commoners). She promises to reward them with a state of immortality, making them "legitimate immortals" if they help destroy the Shang dynasty. The three sprites gladly accept the "mission," and fly away.

Meanwhile, one of the three sprites, the Vixen Demon, kills the innocent beauty Su Daji 苏妲己,³⁰ who had been sent by her father to serve Emperor Zhou, and takes on her physical shape. The enticing vixen-Daji seduces the Emperor with her unsurpassed charm and becomes the most patronized concubine in the court. She fulfills her duty to annihilate the continuity of the Shang dynasty with exceptionally cold-hearted craftiness. The historical Daji was thus appropriated in the Nu Wa myth, and served as the medium through which Nu Wa could wreak vengeance on the Emperor. Metaphorically, Daji represents the manifestation of the destructive, wrathful and demonic aspect of Nu Wa.

At the denouement, the capital Zhaoge was besieged and Emperor Zhou was defeated. Nu Wa then stepped in to fulfil her role as the ultimate saviour, and to show poetic justice. She broke her promise to grant the three wicked sprites a state of legitimate immortality, and killed them all. In this way, the sprites were "victimized" to illustrate Nu Wa's avenging wrath. After she had initiated the whole sequence of destructive episodes for her revenge, through Daji, she also wreaked havoc on many innocents. Nu Wa's killing of the three sprites was an act to restore the divine order, as well as a gesture to get rid of the vicious manifestation of her own self, and to regain her saintly status as proper goddess.

THE MYTH-SYMBOL COMPLEX

Myths are considered narrative projections of a given cultural group's sense of its sacred past and its relationship with the surrounding world and universe. Anthropologists emphasize that the myth-symbol complex is salient in social and cultural processes. In particular, they argue, human behaviour and experience are guided by systems of significant symbols, which contribute towards governing people's beliefs and lifestyles. Hence, ethnic myths, religious symbols,

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traditional values and collective memories are indispensable for the continuity of collective cultural identity. "By a collective cultural identity," Anthony D. Smith maintains, "is meant those feelings and values in respect of a sense of continuity, shared memories and a sense of common destiny of a given unit of population which has had common experiences and cultural attributes" (Smith 1990: 179). For Smith, myths and symbols are cultural attributes, which in turn have been woven into ethno-history. The enduring role of ethno-history, as the arguments run, does not only sustain a sense of individual meaningfulness, it also assures collective dignity, appeals to collective posterity, and ensures collective immortality (Smith 1990: 180-83). As such, the mythic figure Nu Wa honoured in peripheral Macao helps inspire a collective cultural identity, and more especially reveals cultural responses to the issues that unite the Chinese at the "edge" with the "centre."

The functions of myths are to illuminate the heroism of the human condition, and to dispense with realistic detail and experiment with the supernatural. As myths are seen as symbols of human experience, Sigmund Freud and his followers interpret them as an expression of the individual's unconscious wishes, fears and drives. More broadly, Carl Jung and his followers view myths as the expression of a universal, collective unconscious. When comparing the stories of famous myths and Freud's dream-symbols, Michael Grant contends that mythology, like dreams, seem a royal road to our understanding of unconscious processes. This is on the grounds that myths contain thinly disguised representations of certain fundamental unconscious fantasies common to all humankind (Grant 1963: 230). Grant is of the opinion that the myth-symbol and dream-symbol are the keys to our comprehension of the unconscious.

We may therefore understand the unconscious of an ingrained part of Chinese culture through its myth-symbol complex. The myth of Nu Wa was seemingly created as an entertaining series of stories, but its underlying structures embodied a more serious purpose. These structures invariably appealed to a broad audience, which has enabled the myth to survive for thousands of years. The serious purpose of the Nu Wa myth is to satisfy the human need for roots—that is, to explain the origins of the Chinese people. While Nu Wa binds the ages together and embodies a "primordial" value in

popular consciousness, she also comes to reflect a nostalgic longing for myths and memories in the distant past. Notably, she represents an important mythic theme: matriarchal dominance, which is an unconscious reaction to the patriarchy of Chinese society.

CONCLUSION

Chinese mythology contains a treasure trove of mythic themes, motifs and archetypes, which are vital to the survival of its culture. Although a written record of the Nu Wa myth appeared for the first time during the Han dynasty, it had actually been transmitted from an earlier period. In the preceding Qin dynasty, Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇, China's first emperor, burned a colossal number of books as a measure of political and cultural control. Consequently, there was an irreparable loss of literary texts, and many old myths were only passed down orally. It was not until the Han dynasty that scholars revised and recorded them anew.



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The Nu Wa myth embraces “mythemes” from non-orthodox histories, legends, folklore and fiction, not to mention the fact that it confounds real history. Even though the fragments of mythic stories are disjointed and brief, in the words of Anne Birrell, they are “a rare survival of primitive authenticity” (Birrell 2000: 14). Moreover, these fragmentary pieces of writing enable the Nu Wa myth to enter and establish itself in traditional currency. Literary texts are thus made to serve as a vehicle to consolidate the autochthonous Chinese myth-symbol complex, which constitutes a crucial part of the common people’s religious life.

Nu Wa has been constructed as the archetypal figure in the supernatural reality of initial events, and her story is in keeping with the consistent pattern of the “creation myth.” As she rescued the world from the catastrophes of raging fires and flooding waters, she is the saviour and heroine in the “catastrophe myth.” Apart from being the inaugurator of the social institution of marriage, she also embodies the “fertility myth,” which is a response to the need for human procreation, social stability and economic cultivation. The mythic elements of Nu Wa on the one hand illustrate ancient China’s relationship with the primal cosmos, and on the other hand convey a process of continuity that helps assert a collective identity for the Chinese people.

The “degrading” transformation of Nu Wa from the supreme goddess to the consort of Fu Xi may speak to the gradual social change from matriarchy to patriarchy that occurred in ancient China. In the Nu Wa Temple in Macao, however, her somewhat subordinate status as Fu Xi’s wife is not in evidence. She is still honoured as Repairer of Heaven and the Mother Goddess, thus retaining her matriarchal greatness. In the heyday of Macao, Nu Wa was popularly venerated and the temple well patronized. What then was her divine intervention? Formerly there were many prostitutes in Macao, especially in Rua da Felicidade [*Fulong xin jie* 福隆新街]—Macao’s “red light” district. It is gathered that prostitutes used to go to pray to this matriarchal deity for protection from venereal diseases and gynaecological problems (Tang 1994: 208). They would naturally pray for a return to “normal” life, and to find “proper” husbands. Hence, Nu Wa has come to be a quasi-patroness of prostitutes in Macao. In this respect, her role is similar to that of Ishtar, the great Babylonian goddess of love, sex, and fertility.³¹ As the

goddess of fertility and bestower of children, she is mostly honoured by barren women who would pray for children, and in particular for male heirs to continue the family line. Given the myth that she repaired the heavens, broken-hearted worshippers may beseech her to repair their *qing tian* 情天 (literally, “love heaven”). By and large, she is mainly worshipped as the goddess of marriage and of match-making (媒神 *meishen*) in Macao. It is plain to see Nu Wa’s divine roles have been re-shaped and modified in response to the interests and preoccupations of the people there.

After a glorious beginning, the Nu Wa Temple has fallen into a state of neglect. The cult of Nu Wa has also seen a gradual decline and lost its lustre amidst rapid socio-cultural changes. The decline of a cult, as C. K. Yang argues, is partly due to its failure to continue developing magical and mythological lore in order to sustain its existence. Also, when ethico-political values gradually lose their urgency and importance, a cult may enter a crisis period and might finally be replaced by another, newer, cult (Yang 1970: 172-3). In Macao, Nu Wa is greatly overshadowed by the dominant divine virgin trio—the Virgin Mary (the Christian Mother of God), Tian Hou (the Daoist Empress of Heaven) and Guan Yin (the Buddhist Bodhisattva of Mercy).³² Just as Tian Hou is the patron goddess of fishermen, sailors and maritime merchants, Guan Yin is associated with saving mariners from shipwreck. Both goddesses, moreover, share similarities with the Virgin Mary, who is sometimes apostrophized as the “Star of the Sea” and “Haven of the Shipwrecked.” The three divinities offer the more urgent and coveted “mainstream” services associated with safety at sea in peninsular Macao, whereas Nu Wa only provides “subsidiary” assistance in connection with gynaecological matters and marriage. Macao obviously needs emerging cults to guard its seascape and protect its position at the estuary of the Pearl River. Despite the decline of the cult of Nu Wa in Macao, it still possesses the elemental grandeur of myths and epics. While the Temple of Nu Wa represents the cultural heritage of Macao, the matriarchal Great Goddess helps foster cultural cohesion and constitutes one of the epics of Chinese culture at the edge. **RC**

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NOTES

- 1 The term “cosmogony” is derived from the Greek word *kosmos*, meaning order, genesis, and birth.
- 2 According to the Heritage Preservation Department at the Cultural Affairs Bureau of the Macao SAR, this figure excludes altars and niches, which are often found along streets or at the entrances to houses.
- 3 Unlike other temples in Macao, the Nu Wa Temple is open only from 8 am to 3 pm daily.
- 4 In Macao, there are celebrations on Lu Zu's birthday, which falls on the 14th day of the fourth lunar month.
- 5 The fly-whisk represents obedience to the Buddhist law and a symbol of the compassion of Avalokitesvara towards all beings. However, it transgresses religious boundaries, for it is also a typical attribute of the Daoist Lu Zu.
- 6 The Buddhist trinity are in fact the manifestations of Lord Buddha. The Buddha of the Past is Amitabha, the Buddha of the Present the historical Buddha, Gautama Siddhartha, better known as Sakyamuni (c. 563-483 B.C.), and the Buddha of the Future is Maitreya.
- 7 The term “euhemerism” comes from Euhemerus, a Greek mythographer and philosopher of the 4th century B.C. He advocated a theory that the gods of mythology were merely deified mortals.
- 8 On the eclectic complexity of Chinese religious culture and euhemerised Daoist deities, see Cheng 2003.
- 9 Levi-Strauss' term “mytheme”, meaning the synthesis of the relational units in a myth, is borrowed from the linguistic concepts of “phoneme” and “morpheme.” See Levi-Strauss 1972: 169-194.
- 10 The snake is the attribute of Minerva, the Greek Goddess of Wisdom.
- 11 The Chinese have three basic creation myths. The other is the myth of Yin and Yang, who were two gods that emerged out of chaos and represent complementary essences in the universe. This myth first appears in *Huai Nan Zi*, compiled by Liu An in 139 B.C.
- 12 Two pieces of the Pan Gu myth were originally compiled by Xu Zheng 徐整, who lived in southwestern China around 222-280 A.D. They were in *San Wu Li Ji* 三五历记 (Historical Records of the Three Sovereign Divinities and the Five Gods) and *Wu Yun Linien Ji* 五运历年记 (A Chronicle of the Five Cycles of Time). On the Chinese creation myth, see Wang 1977: 485-527.
- 13 For an English version of the Pan Gu myth, see Rosenberg 1999: 328-9. See also Leeming 1994: 49-50.
- 14 Although Wang Xiaolian 王孝廉 maintained that the myth of Nu Wa preceded that of Pan Gu, Donna Rosenberg argues that by the time the creation story of Nu Wa emerged, the myth of Pan Gu already existed, at least in an oral form. See Wang 1977: 486, 677. See also Rosenberg 1999: 324.
- 15 The cult of Nu Wa enjoyed great popularity in central China during the Han dynasty. Apart from the classical literary sources, there are also abundant fragmentary episodes derived later in popular culture and folklore among different ethnic groups in various parts of China. Despite varying degrees of storytelling, the uniformity of her role is emphasized. See Yang 1997, Chapter 1.
- 16 俗说天地开辟, 未有人民, 女娲抟黄土为人, 剧务, 力不暇供, 乃引绳系互泥中, 举以为人。故富贵者黄土人也, 贫贱凡庸者系互人也。(Ying, 1980: 449)
- 17 往古之时, 四极废, 九州裂, 天不兼覆, 地不周载, 火熅焱而不灭, 水浩洋而不息, 猛兽食颛民, 鸷鸟攫老弱, 于是女娲鍊五色石以补苍天, 断鳌足以立四极, 杀黑龙以济冀州, 积芦灰以止淫水。(Liu 1926: 39)
- 18 Gong Gong was a primeval mythical water god, who had a human face, the body of a snake and red hair, and rode on two dragons. Zhuan Xu was a tribal chief in antiquity.
- 19 The *Lie Zi* was highly prized by the Tang dynasty Emperor Xuan Zong 玄宗, who included it in the imperial examination in 742 A.D. However, it soon became controversial whether or not it was an authentic text by Lie Yukou. Since it embodied philosophical thoughts typical of the Wei 魏 and Jin 晋 periods (220-265 and 265-316 A.D., respectively), some argued that it could well have been written between the third and fourth centuries A.D. See Lie 1987, Preface.
- 20 昔者女娲氏鍊五色石以补其阙; 断鳌之足以立四极。其后共工氏与颛顼争为帝, 怒而触不周之山, 折天柱, 绝地维; 故天倾西北。日月星辰就焉; 地不满东南, 故百川水潦归焉。(Lie 1987: 115).
- 21 The first printed edition of *Hong Lou Meng* was published in January 1792.
- 22 却说那女媧皇炼石补天之时, 于大荒山无稽崖炼成高十二丈, 见方二十四丈大的顽石三万六千五百零一块; 那媧皇只用了三万六千五百块, 单单剩下一块未用, 弃在青埂峰下。(Cao 2001: 1)
- 23 One may miss the cosmic implications of these numbers in English translation. According to Wang Xiaolian, the numbers in the Chinese version—12, 24, 365—symbolize 12 months, 24 seasonal changes, and 365 days of the year. See Wang 1977: 696.
- 24 The term “aniconic form” refers to a representation through sign and symbol without any figural image.
- 25 In a study on *Feng Shen Yan Yi*, Wan Pinpin discovered that it was first published probably between 1567 and 1619, and certainly not later than 1623. In 1965, Liu Cunyan 柳存烟 published his doctoral dissertation on the authorship question and argued that a Daoist named Lu Xixing 陆西星 was the most plausible author. See Wan 1987: 2-3.
- 26 See the 1987 edition of *Feng Shen Yan Yi*. For the English translation, see Gu 1992.
- 27 凤鸾宝帐景非常
尽是泥金巧样妆
曲曲远山飞翠色
翩翩舞袖映霞裳

梨花带雨争娇艳
芍药笼烟媚媚妆
但得妖娆能举动
取回长乐侍君王
- 28 Fu Xi (2953-2838 B.C.) is venerated as the God of Hunting, Shen Nong (2838-2698 B.C.) as the God of Agriculture, and Huang Di (2698-2598 B.C.) as the God of Architecture. This ancestral triad may rightly begin any account of the primordial myths of China, and their myths have been arranged in such a way as to explain the development of early Chinese civilization. On the Three Emperors, see MacCulloch 1964, Vol. III, Chapter II.
- 29 In Hinduism, Shiva and his consort Parvati embrace a duality in their manifestations. As a fearsome destroyer of life and angry avenger, Shiva represents a destructive force, but he is also the re-creator and a benign herdsman of souls. Parvati (the Mountain Goddess) is his *sakti* (female energy or energizing power) and his calm, benevolent wife. She is an aspect of the great mother-goddess Devi, but can also manifest a demonic form as Durga or Kali, who becomes the fierce goddess of war and personifies the destructive aspect of divine power.
- 30 Su Daji, the historical concubine of Emperor Zhou, is believed to have caused the downfall of the Shang dynasty.
- 31 Ishtar (her Akkadian name) was called Inanna by the Sumerians, and venerated as the Mother Goddess. However, she was also a War Goddess, often referred to as “the Lady of Battles.”
- 32 On the three deities venerated as sea goddesses in Macao, see Cheng 1999, Chapter 4 (“The Rendezvous of a Virgin Trio”).

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