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Zhang, Emma

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FLOOD MYTHS AND DOMINATION

A comparison of the flood myths in Chinese and Abrahamic traditions

Emma H. ZHANG*

Abstract: Many riverside or coastal civilizations in the world have a foundation myth that begins with the survival of its ancestral patriarchs (and matriarchs) from a catastrophic flood. According to James Frazer (1919), flood myths are disaster survival narratives about regional floods that threatened the livelihood of nearby communities. This means the characteristics of flood myths may differ across different geographical areas. These differences were determined by factors considered to be most essential to the survival of the tribe, and therefore bear distinct cultural demarcations. This paper will compare the differences between the flood myths in China and those in the Abrahamic religions and point out the distinct cultural traditions embedded therein. Myths from the Chinese civilization emphasize the hero's self-abnegation for the benefit of the community, the protection of land over life, and the continuation of the blood lineage. In contrast, Abrahamic flood myths highlight the survivor's individual virtue demonstrated by obedience to a greater power external to themselves (the divine), prioritize life over land, and stress the importance of establishing a covenant between the divine maker and his human subjects. The Chinese flood myth emphasizes the moral and physical superiority of the leader and therefore generates a form of dominance in which the leader's centralized hold on power is rarely questioned, as long as the leader is willing to sacrifice him/herself in face of disaster. Abrahamic flood myths emphasize the supremacy of divinely ordained law before the human patriarch and therefore produces a form of dominance based on social contract.

Keywords: Flood myths, deluge, domination, authoritarianism

* Dr. Emma H. Zhang

Lecturer of English, Division of Arts and Languages, College of International Education, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, zhxemma@hkbu.edu.hk

1. Introduction

Up until the 19th century, the prevalence of ancient flood myths and post-flood regeneration stories from around the world was widely interpreted as literary evidence of an ancient, universal flood that took place in Biblical times. Sir James George Frazer (1854-1941) challenged this assumption and provided an alternative explanation of the universality of deluge narratives that remains authoritative today.

In chapter four of his book *Folk-lore in the Old Testament* (1919), Frazer presented the most comprehensive catalogue of flood myths and legends at the time from ancient Babylon to Israel, Greece, Asia, Australia, and America. Frazer argued

[I]t is certain that legends of a great flood are found dispersed among many diverse peoples in distant regions of the earth, and so far as demonstration in such matters is possible, it can be demonstrated that the similarities which undoubtedly exist between many of these legends are due partly to direct transmission from one people to another, and partly to similar but quite independent, experiences either of great floods or of phenomena which suggested the occurrence of great floods, in many different parts of the world. (p.107)

As an example of the diverse origins of flood myths, Frazer recounted a conversation between a Tang Dynasty Emperor and an Arab traveller, Ibn-Wahab, about diluvian traditions. In response to Ibn-Wahab's proposition that the story of Nuh is universal, the Tang Emperor stated

The flood occupied only a part of the globe and did not reach our country. Your traditions are correct, as far as that part of the earth is concerned which you inhabit; but we, the inhabitants of China, of India, of es-Sind, and other nations, do not agree with your account; nor have our forefathers left us a tradition agreeing with yours on this head. (p.216)

Frazer briefly recorded two Chinese flood myths in his collection, that of the Lolo's who live in today's Yunan, and that of the Han's. He argued that the Chinese flood myths clearly do not belong to the Noachian tradition as these stories record "merely a local, though widespread, inundation, not a universal cataclysm" (p. 215).

Today, Chinese scholars have recorded 568 flood myths from a wide range of geographical locations and ethnical traditions in China (Chen, 2005). These stories show distinct characteristics compared to the diluvian accounts of the Abrahamic tradition. A comparative analysis of these differing traditions will demonstrate that in response to catastrophic natural disaster, the Abrahamic flood myths separate divine power from the power of the patriarch and attribute means of survival to the patriarch's submission to divine ordinance. The Chinese tradition, on the other hand, depicts the patriarch as a superior being whose power is comparable to that of the divine, and the means of survival depends on the wise leadership and self-sacrifice of the patriarch. This paper argues that the differing flood myths traditions reveal different conceptualization of power and domination. The Abrahamic tradition leads to the supremacy of law, whereas the Chinese tradition allows absolute power to be concentrated in the hands of the ruler.

2. The Abrahamic Flood Tradition

The Abrahamic flood myths describe a world-destroying flood raised by God as a punishment of mankind's sinful behaviour. The hero, Noah (Biblical), or Nur (Islamic), who survived the Flood was chosen by God because of his exemplary morality. God instructs the hero to build a giant boat and save his own family (Biblical), or those who have been obedient to God (Islamic), and rescue animals in pairs for rejuvenation of the earth. After the flood, God establishes a covenant that promises the world will never again be destroyed by Flood.

Frazer (1919) compared the Abrahamic Flood myth with its precursors in the Sumerian and Babylonian tradition and argued that the similarities of these narratives suggest the Hebrew account of the flood is likely derived from the Babylonian narrative (p. 334). Frazer's argument is affirmed by the Assyriologist Irving Finkel. In his book *The Ark Before Noah* (2014), Finkel pinpointed the Hebrew account of the flood as likely being formed during the Babylonian domination of the Judeans in 597-539BC. "The Judeans were directly exposed to a new world, new beliefs and cuneiform writing and literature. It was also at this curtail time that they became familiar with the Babylonian story of the Flood, the boatbuilder and his Ark" (p.388).

The Abrahamic flood tradition preserved some of the most distinctive features of the earlier versions, one of which is the prioritization of life over property. The importance of life is emphasised in the earliest versions of this story. In five different versions of the flood myths

recorded in cuneiform, the god Enki warns the flood hero Atra-hasis, “Pay heed to my advice, /That you may live forever! /Destroy your house, build a boat; Spurn possessions and save life” (Finkel, 2014, p. 204-205). This heavy emphasis on the necessity to destroy property in order to preserve life makes the flood myths in this tradition distinctly different from that of the Han Chinese myths, which typically prioritize the preservation of land, rather than the lives of human or animals.

Another distinct feature of this tradition is the emphasis on promise or covenant. In the Akkadian account of the story, the decision to raise a flood was made at the assembly of the gods and was to be kept a secret from mankind. Enki, the creator and saviour of man, needed to issue his warning to Atra-hasis through a reed wall so as to not violate his promise to the other gods. After the flood, the god(s) who decreed the annihilation of mankind regret their decision and promise that there will never again be a world-destroying flood. These narratives show that the behaviour of the gods is governed by agreements and promises made publicly, and that their divine power is exercised within the limits of honouring promises.

The Abrahamic Flood tradition is distinct from its predecessors in terms of theology and moral responsibility. The Babylonian and Sumerian Flood myths depict a world populated by numerous gods each with a differing set of values and priorities. Enlil is tired of the noises made by mankind and decides to wipe out the entire human race with a catastrophic flood. Enki, on the other hand, pities mankind and decides to save the seed of man. In contrast to the Sumerian and Babylonian traditions, the Abrahamic flood is raised by God as punishment for mankind’s sins. Unlike Atra-hasis, who is saved because of his personal connection to Enki, the Abrahamic flood hero Noah is saved because of his moral superiority. This emphasis on personal moral conduct of the flood hero is even more important in the Islamic version of the story. Nur is not able to save his own son when the later failed to follow the Lord’s decree.

Both Frazer and Finkel attributed the common features in the Flood myths in Mesopotamia to the frequent and devastating flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers that sometimes drowned entire cities. However, apart from geography, these narratives were also heavily shaped by the lifestyle of the tribes that told them. The Biblical story of Cain and Abel depicts Cain the farmer as the sinful murderer of his own brother, Abel the shepherd. This story suggests that nomadic lifestyle of shepherding was more dominate in this region compared to the settled lives of farmers. Cain and his clan are labelled as the sinful “other” rather than

God's chosen people. Thus the emphasis on the preservation of life over land and property in the flood survival myths of Mesopotamia is in part determined by the nomadic lifestyle of its peoples.

Similarly, the emphasis on the sacred status of promises and covenants is another reflection of the lifestyle of the Mesopotamian peoples. Ancient Mesopotamia was a major trade centre, and people, regardless of ethnicity or social status, needed to behave according to the agreements and promises reached by all parties for trade to operate smoothly. In the Abrahamic tradition, though God is understood as being all mighty and powerful, His behaviour is, nonetheless, regulated by the need to honour promises.

3. The Chinese Flood Myths and Traditions

In *Folk-lore in the Old Testament* (1919), Frazer recorded two flood myths from China. One is that of the Lolos (Yi people) residing in today's Yunnan area. The myth tells of a great flood raised by the deity Tse-gu-dzih as a punishment of mankind's sins. The survivor, Dumu, is a devoted follower of the deity. He and his four sons were saved by a hollow log. Frazer attributed the similarities between this myth and the Abrahamic flood myth to the influence of Nestorian missionaries who first arrived in this region in 635 AD (p. 214). Similar accounts of flood survival by a floating device can be found in a wide range of ethnicities residing in Southwest China, including Yunan, Guizhou, Guangxi, Sichuan, and Hunan. For example, the Miao, Kam, Zhuang, and Mo-so peoples all preserved written or oral stories of a world-destroying flood where the only survivors were saved by a floating device.

Chinese flood myths where the hero survives by a floating device may have been influenced by early missionaries; these stories, however, are highly distinct from the Abrahamic tradition in terms of theology and morality. For example, in the Miao, Kam, and Zhuang flood stories, the flood is raised by the thunder god after the deity loses a contest with a powerful human being (Tao et al, 1984). The hero captures and beats the deity, and the deity manages to narrowly escape with the help of innocent children. The flood comes as a revenge for the deity's defeat and humiliation. The children are saved for their innocence, and the hero who challenged the deity sacrifices his own life in attempt to subdue the deity again.

Most flood myths of this type do not depict the deity that raises the flood as a mighty and all-powerful God whose rules must be obeyed, as in the Abrahamic tradition. The Mo-so flood is one among a rare few that suggest a moral dimension. In the Mo-so myth, the flood

is caused by incestual sibling marriages (Li, 1980). Though this story suggest that the flood is a punishment for sinful behaviour, the deity who brought the flood is similarly captured and beaten by a human being. These stories thus promote a morality not of obedience, but of dauntlessness; the heroes who dare to challenge the power of the deities become tragic heroes whose courage is memorialized.

The very different morality of these myths shows that the Chinese imagination of the divine is completely different from that of the Abrahamic tradition. In the Chinese myths, the deity is unreliable and does not hesitate to lie and take advantage of ordinary people. The heavenly bureaucracy mimics the bureaucratic and corrupt governments on earth. The heroes therefore are not venerated for obedience but instead for their courage to defy authority. In the post-flood re-construction of the world, these myths tend to depict a new world order that is not centred on God's decree, but on the elevation of man. For example, the Lolo peoples' flood song ends with "the sky and the earth are nameless without the people who name them, the sky and earth are not great, human beings are greater than the earth and sky" (Tao et al, 1984, p.90).

Another Chinese flood myth recorded by Frazer is that of the best-known Han flood myth which praises the great king Yu who successfully controlled a devastating flood after years of diligent work. Frazer used this story to argue that the Chinese flood myths depict merely regional floods caused by the tumultuous Yellow River and is completely different from the universal flood in the Abrahamic tradition. Apart from the difference in scale of the flood, the more important difference is the moral value embedded in the story of Yu.

Yu is born from his dead father Khwan whose body did not decay three years after he was executed for his failure to control the flood. After Yu was born from Khawn's body, Khawn becomes a yellow dragon and flies away. The unusual birth of Yu distinguishes him from ordinary people. He is said to possess unusual powers, including the ability to shapeshift into a bear. One of the best-known stories of Yu is his self-sacrifice. Yu devoted every minute of his life to flood control. During the nine years of his project, he walked past his own home three times without entering. After he successfully conquered the flood, he became a beloved king.

The most noticeable difference between this myth and the Abrahamic myth is that Yu is devoted to saving the land, rather than people, from the flood. The land is seen as the source of life and human lives are secondary in importance compared to the safety of the land. Yu's

father Khwan, for example, is executed for his failure to control the flood. This tendency to value land over people is likely a reflection of the fact that China has long been an agricultural nation, with large areas of fertile land that supported the lives of settled farmers. Settled farming led to higher population growth and the increasing scarcity of cultivatable land. Fertility of the land is directly linked to the survival of the people, whereas the loss of individual lives in a populated community does not threaten the survival of the collective community.

The Chinese flood myths centre on the restoration of the land itself without which the community cannot survive, in contrast to the Abrahamic flood myths, where the hero preserves the lives of his people and animals so as to rebuild life on a new land. This difference is partly due to the differing lifestyles of the storytellers. The Mesopotamian nomads' life depended on the prosperity of the tribe and the size of its livestock. Their economic wealth relied heavily on trade. Their physical mobility made them relatively detached from the land. Settled farmers in China, on the other hand, were largely self-sufficient economically and did not rely heavily on trade. The agricultural economy of China made its inhabitants value the security of settled life more than freedom of mobility. Yu, the mystical hero, becomes the rightful king whose power is unlimited because of his proven ability to restore the land. The Chinese flood myth of the great king Yu therefore reflects the rise of authoritarian state power in ancient China, as compared to societies where the power of the law is supreme.

4 Conclusion

Chinese flood myths emphasize the hero's self-abnegation for the benefit of the community, and the protection of land over life. In contrast, Abrahamic flood myths highlight the survivor's individual virtue demonstrated by obedience to a greater power external to themselves (the divine), prioritize life over land, and stress the importance of establishing a covenant between the divine and the human. The Chinese flood myths emphasize the moral and physical superiority of the leader and therefore generates a form of dominance in which the leader's centralized hold on power is rarely questioned, as long as the leader shows willingness to sacrifice him/herself in the face of disaster. Abrahamic flood myths emphasize the supremacy of divinely ordained law before the human patriarch and therefore produce a form of dominance based on social contract.

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