

# Ancient Myths and the Construction of Regional Literary History

— *The General History of Sichuan Literature*

Kong Xuyou\*

**Abstract:** The literary study of ancient mythology is a rational and necessary prerequisite for the study of the general history of Sichuan literature in the Pre-Qin period, though it can go beyond the study of literature. Compared with other Chinese regional literatures such as Jing-Chu literature, the insufficiency of the literalization of the early Ba-Shu myth, to some extent, devalues the Ba-Shu literature in the Pre-Qin period and affects its consistence. When dealing with the influence of ancient mythology on the development of Chinese regional literature, including Sichuan literature, we need to analyze the inherent impact of regional mythology on the developing literature using a three-step process: restoring and summarizing the mythological pedigree, uncovering the “conceptual structure” of the mythology, and explaining the impact of the mythology on the developing literature. This paper uses this three-step process to construct the general history of Sichuan literature.

**Keywords:** ancient Ba-Shu mythology; the general history of Sichuan literature; writing; conceptual structure

The successful construction of any regional literature’s general history is based on the region’s unique process of literary evolution. It is the uniqueness of this evolutionary process that defines the region’s literature history. Thus, the adjective “general” in “general history of literature” does not mean full coverage of all relevant literary phenomena (which is actually almost impossible, though a small region’s general history of literature is supposed to be as comprehensive as possible). Instead, it refers to the complete construction of the basic literary developments

---

\* Kong Xuyou, Litt. D. and associate researcher, Institute of Literature and Art, Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences, Chengdu, Sichuan, 610071

\* Foundation item: This paper is a staged research result of “Cultural Traditions and the Regional Literary History” (16ZD02) — a key program funded by Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences, and “Studies on the Writing Systems in the Pre-Qin Period” (14CZW017), a youth program founded by National Social Sciences Fund.

during the evolutionary process. Sichuan literature's general history is worthy of its name because there is a great number of literary phenomena throughout its history, and because these phenomena display a unique evolutionary process even though there have been constant interactions with the literature of other regions. When did the evolution of Sichuan literature begin? Such as Yang Shimin's *History of Ba-Shu Literature* and Tan Xingguo's *Sichuan Literature Second to None—Draft of Ba-Shu Literature History*, the existing writing practices make a consensus that the evolution can be traced to the Pre-Qin period. Although this origin is not self-evident, it is significant because of the theoretical and technical challenges Sichuan literature faced in the Pre-Qin period. These challenges are the subject of this paper.

## 1. Understanding the relationship between mythology and literature

A prerequisite for tracing the general history of Sichuan literature is the examination of the written and oral literary phenomena developed in the Ba-Shu region (current Sichuan) during the Pre-Qin period and passed down in text form. The texts that satisfy this prerequisite are mainly myths and legends.<sup>①</sup> The reason academic circles regard “Ba-Shu literature from the Pre-Qin period” as an obviously historical literacy treasure is that a substantial number of these myths and legends share the unique cultural character that emerged in the Ba-Shu region during this period, and provide the foundation upon which the then Ba-Shu literature is based according to the existing written practices. The prevailing impression that the discussion of mythology is a discussion of literature, and that mythology is a part of literature, or even a literary genre, has been a long-established view in domestic academic circles. At the beginning of the 20th century, Hu Shi and other scholars categorized mythology and ballads as “popular literature” or “folk literature.” *The Introduction to Folk Literature*, a textbook for college students of liberal arts edited by Zhong Jingwen and published in 1980, went further and directly defined mythology as a form of folk literature.<sup>②</sup> Yuan Ke, a renowned mythologist, advanced a “generalized theory of mythology,” according to which “the essence of myths always lies in the literature with positive romanticism.”<sup>③</sup>

Recently, this standpoint is being further examined in academic circles. According to some scholars, “The study of Chinese mythology, by overlooking the distinction between mythology and literature, has developed a literature-based view of myths, preventing any breakthroughs in mythological theories.”<sup>④</sup> There are also scholars tracing this issue through the history of academics and culture and holding that, “Chinese mythology has increasingly become the subject of literature studies.” They believe this has something to do with the introduction of Western learning to China during the late Ming Dynasty to the late Qing Dynasty and that foreign “myths” “cannot be tuned into the Chinese philosophy of heaven “nor can they reach the quintessence of the laws of nature; rather, they can only enlighten people and fall into the literature which is at the bottom of the Western learning hierarchy.”<sup>⑤</sup> Such views imply that the subordination of

① Few Ba-Shu literary works in the Pre-Qin period, except myths and legends, were mentioned and recorded in relevant documents. Duan Yu selected four poems from the “*Annals of Ba*” – the *Chronicles of Huayang* and included them into the “Ba Culture” chapter of his work *the General History of Sichuan (Pre-Qin volume)*. The four poems respectively concerned farming, sacrifice rite, code of ethics and traditions. According to Duan, these poems “feature the same style and rhythm as those in the Book of Songs; graceful and smooth, they may be created by the Gi clan of Ba people.” (See: Duan, 2010, p. 418). Yet, it remains to be verified whether those poems were created in the Pre-Qin period.

② “Mythology, as a form of folk literature, comprises highly imaginative stories created by ancient people to reflect nature, man-nature relationship and social form.” (See: Zhong, 1980, p. 166)

③ Yuan, 1993, p. 2

④ Zhao, 2012

⑤ Tan, 2013

mythology to literature is not necessarily correct and can blur the intellectual history.

Such a reflection makes some sense. However, in terms of the “literalization” of mythology studies there is a certain disconnection between theory and practice. For example, the Doubting Antiquity School, which has a far-reaching impact on the modern academic history of China, has compiled a large body of research on mythology. However, their primary purpose was to restore the original state of the myths that had been integrated into history, mainly the folklore and myths concerning mandates and emperors’ destinies, and to stop regarding them as a part of the trustworthy historical records. Although they categorized myths and legends as “folk literature,” there was no serious study of the myths from a literary perspective. The purpose of the studies determined their place in the scope of historiography. In the context of the current disciplinary establishment, most scholars engaged in mythology studies have an academic background in literature but this does not mean that literary perspectives dominate the contemporary study of Chinese mythology. In fact, the contemporary mainstream in this regard is to critically absorb the research findings of the Doubting Antiquity School, and thereby study ancient mythology from a cultural perspective. In terms of research methods, such studies are mainly guided by anthropological theories and are of an empirical and textual nature. Their basic premise lies in the fact that ancient myths are not a part of trusted history, but contain clues regarding the evolution of the ethos, beliefs and concepts of the people in ancient cultures. Indirectly, they also reflect many aspects of human history ranging from societies, politics, and ethnicities to religions. Moreover, even in the days of their creation, myths featured functions not yet fully recognized by contemporary academics. Fundamentally, contemporary studies attempt to comprehensively construct the historical and cultural context of ancient history and it is fair to say these studies are a negation-of-negation of the Doubting Antiquity School. Nevertheless, the practices of literary studies of mythology have been seriously marginalized, and many remain, to a large extent, at the stage of debate over their rationality, as well as the public communication and the general introduction of myths and legends.<sup>①</sup> This lends credence to the claim that the multi-disciplinary attribute of contemporary Chinese mythology studies has not been much disturbed by the “subordination of mythology to literature” concept in practice. When it comes to ideas, even Yuan Ke, who clearly holds that the essence of myths lies in literariness, does not deny the rationality and necessity of a multi-disciplinary approach to mythology studies.<sup>②</sup>

This brief examination of the “literalization” of mythology studies, from the view of study of the general history of Sichuan literature, is illuminating in the sense that the analysis of mythology should by no means be viewed as a literature discussion. Not all research findings of the Pre-Qin Ba-Shu myths are conducive to the construction of the general history of Sichuan literature, although indirect benefits do exist, and there is no necessity to include them all in the general history record. Indeed, literary history is also a part of historiography and writing the history of Sichuan literature in the Pre-Qin period should be supportive of the complete and objective construction of the historical and cultural context of ancient Chinese history. Still, the history of literature has its own focus and outlining the trajectory of literary development should be its top priority and the outline should be based on the “literariness” of literary works in different historical periods (though discussions of the non-literariness of such works are required sometimes). This is also true for the general history of literature, which should be as comprehensive as possible while at the same time staying as focused as possible to

① The highlight of relevant research achievements should arguably be the *Ancient Myths of China* by Yuan Ke. The book is a “literary work on myths.” “Featuring narration interspersed with comments, it is a collection of myths with research value and outlines a picture of ancient Chinese mythology in a systematic way.” (See: Yuan, 1993, p. 3). Through multiple revisions and reprints, the book was later renamed as *Chinese Myths and Legends: From Pangu to Qin Shi Huang*.

② “The generalized mythological theory... does not at all exclude the multi-disciplinary and multi-layered research in myths from multi-angle back in their creation days. Rather, it is precisely the hard and fruitful research that has enriched this theory.” (See: Yuan, 1993, p. 2).

avoid being reduced to a hodgepodge of literary phenomena.<sup>①</sup> It is in this sense that the writings of literature history belong in the category of literature studies as well as historiography. As for the “essence” of myths, whether they are part of literature remains open for debate, as long as the “literariness” of myths is acknowledged. This has become a basic consensus among scholars in this area. Even those who are against the “literalization” of mythology studies do not deny that ancient Chinese mythology can be approached from a literary perspective. For writing the general history of Sichuan literature, the real issues are how to understand and express the literariness of the ancient Ba-Shu myths and their evolution, and how to assess their status in the evolutionary *history of Ba-Shu literature*.

## 2. The insufficient early-stage literalization of ancient Ba-Shu mythology

Writing the general history of literature (particularly the history of “small region”-specific literature) tends to feature an unnoticed misconception, i.e. the writer improperly exaggerates the literary phenomena in the underdeveloped literary periods in order to deliberately create a representation of consistent and coherent literary evolution. In fact, literary evolution undergoes ups and downs, which is quite normal. The low ebb periods may not affect the consistency of the overall process. In terms of writing techniques, deliberately screening better works, or unduly praising literary achievements created during “low ebbs” should be avoided while objectively concluding the characteristics of the works and analyzing their contributing factors should be adopted. During its evolution, Sichuan literature has also experienced relatively “low ebbs.” This applies to the overall achievements of Sichuan literature in the Yuan and Ming dynasties (1271 AD-1644 AD) that were relatively low, and its overall achievements in the Pre-Qin period should not be overestimated.

As mentioned above, Ba-Shu literature in the Pre-Qin period was dominated by mythology. Even Yuan Ke, who considers the essence of mythology to be literature, has pointed out that the overall “literariness” of mythology has fluctuated throughout history. More specifically, during the stage of the “living creature theory” (*huowu lun*), which was in the early period of the Primitive Society, “the ‘literariness’ of mythology was profound,” when it came to the stage of “Animism,” the “literary glamor of mythology became less highlighted and more hidden,” in spite of that, “mythology continued to developing” and would eventually “restore its inherent literariness.”<sup>②</sup> In fact, few Chinese myths created during the stage of the “living creature theory” have come down and survived, and it is very difficult to distinguish myths of that stage from the limited remaining Ba-Shu myths. Thus, the Ba-Shu myths available today should belong to those “whose literary glamor of myths became less highlighted and more hidden.” The reason for their “becoming less highlighted and more hidden,” according to Yuan, was the “tight combination of myths with various disciplines” (particularly when combined with religions) at that time.<sup>③</sup> Of course, this only applies to the general circumstances of the

① This inevitably involves a basic prerequisite for the construction of literature history, i.e. what “literature” and “literariness” are. Restricted by the topic and space, this paper cannot elaborate this complicated issue here. And it can only present the following statement: it is understood that the concept of “literature” has varied tremendously with the elapse of time. For example, in the Pre-Qin period, “literature” generally referred to the study of literature and classics; while “literature” in the modern sense originates in Western learning and is in nature a concept primarily concerning linguistic aesthetics. The “literature” in the “general history of regional literature” discussed by this paper mainly refers to this “literature” in general sense. In recent years, such a concept of “literature” has evoked reflection in academic circles. A more general perception of “literature” is preferred by many scholars. This is believed to be the starting point for a possible fundamental change in the landscape of “literature history.” It is fair to say that reflection like this is of enlightening significance. In particular, it helps place literature in a broader perspective for examination. The problem is, if it is necessary to retain literature as a relatively independent research area (which is also a prerequisite for any “literature” history to be valid), there will be an inevitable need to conclude a commanding definition for “literary” phenomena (or “literariness”). Yet, the existing research failed to find any aspects with better commanding effect apart from linguistic aesthetics, although “aesthetics” itself is also a notion covering vast referential space. From this perspective, this paper holds that current writing of literature history still cannot abandon the historical summarization of linguistic aesthetics as its core task. Of course, it is necessary to actively absorb all perspectives and views indirectly related to the core. The degree and scope of this absorption is determined by the expected uniqueness of different categories of literature history. For the category of general history, the perspective of such an absorption can be further expanded but should be under certain restrictions.

② Yuan, 1993, pp. 1-2

③ Yuan, 1993, p. 28

evolution of mythology itself. How should Pre-Qin Ba-Shu mythology be viewed when placed horizontally in the whole picture of ancient Chinese mythology?

It is universally acknowledged that compared with Greek mythology, Chinese mythology is more fragmentary and disordered, and as such is not viewed in a well-developed aesthetic form. This is exactly the core expression of its literariness being “less highlighted and more hidden”. Nevertheless, Greek mythology is not necessarily complete and ordered. It is matched with a relatively complete aesthetic form thanks to a group of classical poets and philosophers’ efforts in sorting-out and processing myths, rather than its natural development. Parts of Chinese mythology, although significantly historicized, was still absorbed and adapted by “intellectuals” in the early stages of human history in a variety of ways. Such absorption and adaptation allowed these myths to be recorded in written form and even undergo literalization at a high degree. Outstanding representative works should be the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*) and, more importantly, *the Songs of Chu* (*Chuci*). Both have been valued by scholars of mythology.<sup>①</sup> This is mainly due to the fact that they are among the earliest works that mentioned and included myths and therefore retained many of the original myth features. Scholars of mythology prefer their documental value to literary value. From the perspective of literary history, works such as the *Book of Songs* and *the Songs of Chu* are of particular significance to the transmutation of ancient Chinese mythology from a “latent literature” to a “real literature.” This transmutation can also be understood as the promotion of mythology’s literariness. As pointed out by a scholar, the myths in the works of Qu Yuan (c. 340–278 BC), when compared with their original versions, represent “changes in mythological characteristics, form and function, and internal constitution and regeneration mechanisms.”<sup>②</sup> Not many scholars of mythology today would like to witness such changes, as they mean the transformation and deformation of original mythological connotations. Instead, they would prefer Qu Yuan to have stayed as true as contemporary anthropologists when he recorded the myths he had discovered and studied. In the eyes of researchers in literary history, however, the changes are nothing but literary fortune, because they made the storylines more coherent and plausible. With pure mystery figures transforming to flesh-and-blood figures with inner spirits, temperaments and an emotional vitality, the irregular changes in life forms no longer directly rely on the primitive mythological thinking featuring life integrations; rather, they are guided by aesthetic rationality and are supposed to serve poetic imaging, shaping and textual theme enhancements. Under such circumstances, the mysterious interactions between mythological figures and the outside world are replaced by the emotional connections between the figures and their environments.<sup>③</sup>

As mythological literature, Ba-Shu mythology, with its unique charm, has carried a big weight in the history of ancient Chinese mythology. Some scholars even consider it the “only regional mythology that can rival the Central Plains mythology.”<sup>④</sup> By contrast, in terms of literalization, ancient Ba-Shu mythology as a whole was obviously inferior to the Central Plains mythology in north China and the Jing-Chu mythology in central China. This is because ancient Ba-Shu myths in the Pre-Qin period were not well sorted or recorded in written form.<sup>⑤</sup> There are debates in the academic circles

① It is true that the *Songs of Chu* was not developed until the late Warring States period (c. 475–221 BC). Yet, the myths included by Qu Yuan in the book, to a large extent, retained the original style of the myths in the primitive Yuan–Xiang region (Yuan River basin and Xiang River basin).

② He, 1994

③ He, 1994

④ Yuan & Yue, 1996

⑤ Some scholars hold that there must be historical documents on the deeds and lives of the line of kings of the ancient Shu Kingdom, which, however, remains to be confirmed. The documentation of ancient Ba–Shu myths saw significant progress in the Han Dynasty (202 BC–9 AD & 25–220 AD). According to “*Annals of Ba*” – the *Chronicles of Huayang* by Chang Qu, in the Western Han Dynasty (202 BC–9 AD), there were basic annals of Shu Kings respectively compiled by Sima Xiangru, Yan Junping, Yang Ziyun, Yangcheng Zixuan, Zheng Boyi, Yin Pengcheng, Qiao Zhou and Ren Xi. None of these annals have survived. Yet, it can be inferred from relevant quotes in other books that these annals included many ancient myths. From another perspective, their failure to be passed down also suggests their under–appreciation by the then people to some degree.

over whether there was any mature writing system in the ancient Shu Kingdom and Ba Kingdom. Of all the remaining Pre-Qin works, the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (Shan Hai Jing) was the one that included a large number of Ba-Shu myths.<sup>①</sup> However, it is generally believed that the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* falls into the category of “witch-book.” This book consists of two volumes, namely, the Classic of Mountains (a guidance to the worship of mountains) and the Classic of Seas (a record of clans in surrounding countries).<sup>②</sup> The text itself does not have much literary value. Of course, this is not to say that ancient myths can only be endowed with literary significance via writing. It is just difficult to truly represent the original texts of the word-of-mouth Ba-Shu myths scattered throughout a variety of ancient official historical documents, unofficial historical accounts, local chronicles and notes. There are multiple contributing factors. First, in the context of changing social and living conditions, oral texts themselves were prone to variations and re-combinations. Second, written records could not realistically be 100% faithful to the original and likely contained adaptations of existing oral texts and more ancient written records for different purposes. Third, some adaptations might be given literary considerations, resulting in a mix of literariness of the original oral texts with literariness of the written texts. The textual research of mythology may help restore the original images and plot-elements of some oral texts but cannot truly represent how those stories were told by ancient people. As Shi Changyu put it, “What can be restored is only the content of myths, not their original style.”<sup>③</sup> From the theoretical perspective of literature, however, its significance should be embodied in a specific way of story-telling (complete linguistic form) which perhaps once existed in history, rather than in a conclusive description. This is of course a common dilemma facing all literary studies on original myths.

Given that ancient Ba-Shu mythology did not develop into a sound and complete form in the Pre-Qin period, when it comes to writing the general history of Sichuan literature, the Pre-Qin part is a challenge, which may be evaded by changing the subject. When aesthetic form must be mentioned, there can only be a simple, general approach to the mystique, grotesque and exaggeration of all the imaginations in myths. Under such circumstances, aesthetic analysis may be replaced by documentation and textual research, or by reflectionism-based analysis of cultural connotations. This is the replacement of literature study with mythology study. In the writing of literary history, documentation and textual research belongs to foundation work and should not be the main content. Cultural connotations are not irrelevant to literary attributes if they are placed in the overall aesthetic considerations compatible to a text’s linguistic form. The usual approach to mythology study, however, is analyzing the cultural connotations of mythological texts as cultural samples, notwithstanding their aesthetic form. Thus, mythological texts’ linguistic form still exists on the surface, but is dismantled or disguised in nature.

When it comes to writing the general history of Sichuan literature, ancient Ba-Shu mythology underwent a low-level literalization in the Pre-Qin period, which directly affected the consistency of the overall process of regional literature evolution. There is a certain gap between the myths-dominated Ba-Shu literature in the Pre-Qin period and the Ba-Shu literature in the Han Dynasty. It is generally accepted that Ba-Shu literature reached its first peak in the Han Dynasty, with men of letters emerging one after another, among whom were Sima Xiangru, Wang Bao and Yang Xiong. Even so, the

---

① According to Yuan Ke, of all chapters in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, the “Classic of the Great Wilderness” (four chapters) and the “Classic of Regions within the Seas” (one chapter) can be traced back to the early or mid-stage of the Warring States period; the “Classic of the Mountains” (five chapters) and the “Classic of Regions Beyond the Seas” (four chapters) were created in the mid to late-stage of the Warring States period; the “Classic of Regions within the Seas” (four chapters) was not created until the early Han Dynasty. (See: Yuan, 1982, pp. 1–25). According to Meng Wentong, of all chapters in the *Classics of Mountains and Seas*, the “Classic of Regions within the Seas” might have been created in the ancient Shu Kingdom, the “Classic of the Great Wilderness” in the ancient Ba Kingdom; the nine chapters of the “Classic of the Mountains” and “Classic of Regions Beyond the Seas” in the ancient Chu Kingdom, which was under the influence of the ancient Ba-Shu culture. (See: Meng, 1981, pp. 146–184). By contrast, Yuan Ke believes all the authors of the *Classics of Mountains and Seas* were natives of the ancient Chu Kingdom. (See: Yuan, 1982, pp. 1–25)

② There are controversies over the nature of the *Classics of Mountains and Seas*. This paper is based on the view of Zhao Peilin. (See: Zhao, 2002, pp. 264–276)

③ Shi, 1994, p. 55

Ba-Shu cifu (a literary form, often rhymed) emerging in the Han Dynasty was not much nourished by Ba-Shu mythology in the Pre-Qin period. Instead, it became a continuation of the ancient Chinese literary traditions derived from the *Book of Songs* and the *Songs of Chu*. Academic circles tend to attribute the emergence of such a gap to external changes in politics and culture, specifically, after the Qin Kingdom conquered the Shu and Ba kingdoms, “the Qin King managed to integrate Ba-Shu culture with the Central Plains culture in a variety of approaches (dispatching officials, migration, recruiting Ba-Shu locals for expeditions, etc.)”<sup>①</sup> In the Western Han Dynasty, thanks to the education campaign launched by Wen Weng, the Ba-Shu region was further civilized and was dominated by the Confucian culture from the Central Plains. For the Ba-Shu culture, this “campaign resulted in abandonment as well as improvement; the oppressiveness in its mythological tradition is part of what was abandoned.”<sup>②</sup> Against a macro-backdrop, such an analysis makes sense. Considering the development of the literature itself, however, it is the incomplete aesthetic form that should be a direct contributing factor. In comparison, the Chu Kingdom was also subjugated by the Qin Kingdom and the Chu culture was also incorporated into the Central Plains culture in Qin and Han dynasties. Yet, outstanding Chu works such as *the Songs of Chu* and the *Zhuangzi*, which represented the best of Jing-Chu culture and literary achievements and absorbed substantial elements of Jing-Chu mythology, occupied a prominent position in the discourse system of the new mainstream culture, and subsequently enabled Pre-Qin Chu literature to exert its huge impact on a wider region and ensure better regional continuity. Due to its low degree of “literalization,” ancient Ba-Shu mythology remained suppressed and marginalized in the discourse of the new mainstream literature and could not play a more direct role in the later development of Ba-Shu literature.

The fundamental reason for the low literary degree of ancient Ba-Shu literature probably lies in the influence of the political system on the culture and literature. First, the theocracy of the ancient Shu Kingdom and Ba Kingdom, under a strong religion-magical influence, prevented the aesthetic consciousness of literature and the emergence of literary elites. Second, both the ancient Shu Kingdom and Ba Kingdom were among the first to be subjugated by the Qin Kingdom. They were conquered in 316 BC, which was some 100 years before the unification of China by Qin Shi Huang (first Emperor of Qin). With “legalism” (*Fa* philosophy) being the dominant political ideology, the Qin Dynasty exercised a highly centralized political system, which revolved around a warfare-oriented farming policy. Such a system worked well for military power enhancement, but was to the detriment of cultural development. Consequently, the Ba-Shu region, under the century-long reign of the Qin, managed to abandon the established theocracy and incorporated part of the Central Plain’s culture. Still, it failed to give rise to the cultural elites capable of completing high-level literalization of myths. In the *Sichuan Literature Second to None – Draft of Ba-Shu Literature History*, Tan Xingguo said, “Should Homer be resurrected in the land of Ba-Shu and sort out local myths and legends, a great epic with Ba-Shu characteristics would not have been something impossible.”<sup>③</sup> His words unveiled the key obstacle to the literalization of Ba-Shu myths and legends – the lack of Homer or Qu Yuan-like influential men of letters in the Ba-Shu region during the Pre-Qin period, which was not entirely accidental.

### 3. Approaches to writing the literary history of ancient Chinese mythology

Although featuring insufficient literalization, ancient Ba-Shu mythology remains an indispensable part of the construction of general history of Sichuan literature. Now that the inherent literariness of ancient myths (especially that

① Tan, 2001, p. 14

② Tan, 2001, p. 4

③ Tan, 2001, p. 4

of the original ancient myths), is widely acknowledged, ancient mythology, even without the cultural elites' aesthetic reshaping, can be regarded as a special literary form. How should ancient mythology including ancient Ba-Shu mythology be placed in literature history, and represented in the writing practices of regional literary histories? This paper proposes three steps.

First, improvements should be made in restoring and cataloguing the various mythological pedigrees. At present, the cataloguing of ancient mythology is restricted to a horizontal motif or a content classification in academic circles. For example, according to their motif, ancient Ba-Shu myths can fall into the categories of a big stone motif, a water harnessing motif, a silkworm god motif, etc. According to the nature of their content, there are nature-themed myths, hero-themed myths and origin-themed myths. By contrast, the work of vertical cataloguing is insufficient because Ba-Shu myths were mainly passed down from generation to generation in an oral tradition. Yet, those in written form are preferred as research materials. Many of the text-based myths were set in ancient times but were in fact adapted by later generations under the influence of the mythology and ideologies, and other uncertain elements at the time. It is therefore necessary to utilize contemporary mythological theories and textual research methods to, as accurately as possible, restore the origins of the myths mentioned in the historical records, trace the trajectory of their evolution and draw a complete picture of ancient Ba-Shu mythology. The purpose is to lay a solid and reliable textual basis for further studies. For example, there is a famous myth about five men with unusual strength in Ba-Shu mythology. This myth was recorded in many ancient works, each of which featured a different plot. Li Cheng, through a contrastive study of the different versions of this myth, has outlined its complicated evolution throughout history. The core of this story, however, has remained unchanged, namely, "men with unusual strength moving the Shu mountains and erecting huge stones." As time went by, this myth was somehow integrated with a stone-bull myth originating elsewhere, thus preliminarily forming the storyline of "five men with unusual strength carving out a way with the help of stone bulls. Later, this myth was further enriched with plots from a story of five women and its derivative story of a Shu princess."<sup>①</sup> Thus, this myth was also endowed with certain connotations of political ethics while being historicized. This "endowment," however, could not be possible until the Qin Dynasty perished.

Second, the "conceptual structure" of ancient myths should be investigated. The original literary forms of ancient myths are almost beyond the scope of discussion, and thus how to conduct aesthetic analyses is a critical challenge facing the writings of literary history. In this regard, Shi Changyu offered an illuminating view. According to Shi, the influence of myths on Chinese novels "mainly lies in their conceptual structure", which refers to the "framework of plot conception." This can be exemplified by a myth about the fight between the Yellow Emperor and a tribal leader Chiyou, which was recorded in the chapter of the *Classic of the Great Wilderness: North, Classic of Mountains and Seas*. In this myth, the Yellow Emperor stood for justice and wisdom, while Chiyou symbolized evil and rebellion. Each side tried desperately to win the fight. In the beginning, the Yellow Emperor was at a disadvantage; then he secured help from a heavenly maiden and eventually turned the tide. "This plot was stereotyped as a model of conceptual structure, which was repeatedly adopted in later Chinese novels."<sup>②</sup> This paper maintains that overall, the analysis of such a "conceptual structure" can be deemed an aesthetic analysis of Chinese mythological ontology, a concept put forward from the perspective of Chinese mythology's influence on narrative literature. Nevertheless, mythology contains inherent literariness, whose fundamental basis is precisely mythological narrativity. Renowned Sinologist Andrew H. Plaks had

---

① Li, 1996, pp. 96-102

② Shi, 1994, p. 55



an insightful view that the ancient Greek myths were formed over time, during which they attached great importance to the process and became adept at storytelling; while Chinese myths were based on space, for which they placed much emphasis on ontology and were adept at drawing illustrations.<sup>①</sup> But this is only relative. Both Greek myths and Chinese myths, are in nature narrative. In this sense, the correspondence of the Chinese term “*shenhua*” (falling into the “text of a story” category) to the English word “mythology” is acceptable.

The “conceptual structure” of mythology is a topic worth further exploration. When discussing the relationship between Chinese mythology and the archetype generation of Chinese narrative literature, Cheng Jincheng made further developments. Inspired by Ernst Cassirer’s mythical thought, Cheng considered mythology’s perceptual structure, notional structure and thinking patterns to be the basic dimensions of the relationship discussion. These dimensions can be deemed as added interpretations of the “conceptual structure.” The “perceptual structure” here roughly refers to mythology’s physiognomic approach to perceiving the external world and universe, concerning a range of related matters, such as Chinese mythology’s special relationships with geography and natural history, and the uniqueness of gods’ images. The notional structure of mythology contains “theories and philosophies of everything” abstracted from myths, which are reflected in Chinese mythology as ancient ancestors’ various ideas and philosophies like “transcending natural bondage,” “calling for super-human strength,” as well as the notions of direction and position, four seasons and hell. With the proceeding of mythology historicization, rational consciousness, through secularization and moralization were included in the notional structure. In fact, the thinking pattern of mythology is a prerequisite for the perceptual and notional structures.<sup>②</sup> In terms of conceptual structure, ancient Ba-Shu mythology shared some common features with other ancient Chinese mythologies while existing differences. Although their intrinsic homology determined commonness to be the dominant side, for the construction of regional literary history, analyzing and describing their differences and highlighting the uniqueness of ancient Ba-Shu mythology should be at the core of relevant research. Such uniqueness probably resulted from a special way of thinking and the personalities of the ancient Ba-Shu ancestors who lived in a well-defined geographical environment, political space and lifestyle.

Third, in what way and under what mechanisms ancient mythology influences later literature should be analyzed and concluded. The impact of mythology on later Chinese literature is a much talked-about topic by relevant Chinese scholars. Such an impact is exerted in two approaches. One is later literature’s borrowing of myth motifs and images, which is frequently seen in poetry and prose. Such borrowing has also been accompanied with connotation renewals. The second suggested approach concerns the impact of the “conceptual structure” mentioned above. It is noteworthy that the “conceptual structure” of ancient Chinese mythology has not only influenced later Chinese novels, but also Chinese poetry, which is generally placed in the category of lyric literature. In fact, Chinese poetry also features narrative elements, more importantly, their simple skeleton and romantic charm agrees with the style of ancient Chinese mythology in a subliminal way. According to Lu Xun (a leading figure of modern Chinese literature), Chinese mythology’s significance to later Chinese literature is no more than “decorations in poems and prose, or signs and indications in novels,”<sup>③</sup> which is an unfair understatement. Of course, the frequent borrowing of motifs and images from mythology and the extensive permeation of “conceptual structure” have formed an essential impact of ancient mythological culture and philosophy on later literature. Regarding the writing of the general history of Sichuan literature, more importance

① Plaks, 1996, pp. 42–43

② Cheng, 2009

③ Lu, 2012, p. 12



should be attached to the impacts of ancient Ba-Shu mythology on later Ba-Shu literature in two major approaches. The first approach is focusing on the representation and evolution of a list of motifs, images and conceptual structures on later Ba-Shu literature. For example, a scholar is already exploring the application of “Du Yu's transforming into a cuckoo” myth as a motif and allusion to ancient and contemporary Ba-Shu literature and seeking to document a trajectory of change.<sup>①</sup> The second approach is the discussion of such an impact through individual case studies of writers, such as the relationship between Li Bai's poems and Ba-Shu mythology.

In the real practice of writing, these three steps (especially the latter two steps) should be fully combined, as the first step concerns early-stage basic work, the second step is the main body, and the third step can be an extended discussion.

## REFERENCES

- Cheng Jincheng. (2009). The influence of Chinese mythology on the formulation of narrative archetypes. *Journal of Lanzhou University (Social Sciences)*, (5).
- Duan Yu. (2010). *The general history of Sichuan* (Vol. 1 Pre-Qin). Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House.
- He Wei. (1994). On the transformation of myths in Qufu (Chuci) to literature. *Journal of Sichuan Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, (2).
- Li Cheng. (1996). *A brief review of Ba-Shu myths and legends*. Chengdu: UESTCP.
- Lu Xun. (2012). *A brief history of Chinese fiction*. Beijing: People's Oriental Publishing & Media.
- Meng Wentong. (1981). A tentative discussion on the times and places for the creation of the classics of mountains and seas. In Meng Wentong (Ed.), *On the ancient history of Ba-Shu region* (pp. 146-184). Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House.
- Plaks, Andrew H. (1996). *Chinese narratology*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Shi Changyu. (1994). *The origin and development of Chinese Xiaoshuo*. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company.
- Tan Jia. (2013). Why does mythology belong to literary study? – Taking the classification of Western learning in the late Ming and late Qing dynasties the starting point. *Journal of Baise University*, (6).
- Tan Xingguo. (2001). *Sichuan literature second to none – Draft of Ba-Shu literature history*. Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House.
- Yan Tonglin. (2013). The myth of Du Yu's transforming to a cuckoo and Ba-Shu literature. *Journal of Guo Moruo Studies*, (2).
- Yuan Ke & Yue Zhen. (1996). A brief study on Ba-Shu mythology. *Forum on Chinese Culture*, (3).
- Yuan Ke. (1982). Textual research in the times and places for the creation of the classic of mountains and seas and its contents. In Yuan Ke (Ed.), *Collection of essays on mythology* (pp. 1-25). Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press.
- Yuan Ke. (1993). *General introduction to the Chinese myths*. Chengdu: Bashu Book Society.
- Zhao Peilin. (2002). *On the history of mythology in the Pre-Qin period*. Beijing: Xueyuan Press.
- Zhao Xin. (2012). Reflection of the “literalization movement” in the study of Chinese mythology. *Journal of Yanshan University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)*, (3).
- Zhong Jingwen (Ed.). (1980). *Introduction to folk literature*. Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House.

(Translator: Wu Lingwei; Editor: Xiong Xianwei)

This paper has been translated and reprinted with the permission of *Social Science Research*, Feb, 2017.

① Yan, 2013