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Myth or Fairy Tale?

Adaptations and Interpretations of “Jing Wei Tian Hai”

“Fairy Tales” was introduced to China as a western concept and genre of literature during the New Culture movement in the early 20th century when other western ideas and concepts such as science and democracy were imported from overseas for the purpose of modernizing China. It was perceived as a means to educate children and develop ethnography and folklore studies in the spirit of cherishing and flourishing national culture. *Tong Hua* (童话), a name given for the Chinese counterpart of fairy tales was first used in 1909 when Sun Suxiu (孙毓修 1871–1922), a literati and librarian in the late Qing dynasty edited a series of western fairy tales translated into Chinese. For the first time Sun used the phrase *Tong Hua* to define the genre. By drawing on the English “fairy tales” and the German “Marchen”, Sun created the phrase *Tong Hua* and added it to the Chinese Library cataloging a new bibliographic category. He was thus honored as the father of Chinese *Tong Hua*. In the meantime, Zhou Zuoren (周作人 1885–1967), the renowned writer and literary critic in the Republic of China, translated the works of Oscar Wilde, Hans Christian Andersen and Green Brothers into Chinese and published related articles, making fairy tales known and popular in China.

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Although fairy tales was introduced to China as an exotic genre of literature in the early 20s, it does not mean there are no “fairy tales” in Chinese antiquity. According to Zhou Zuoren, “there are no classical fairy tales in China in name, but there are fairy tales in reality. They exist in the fiction of Jin and Tang dynasties, especially in various strange and supernatural stories though hardly distinguishable.”¹ Zhou Zuoren’s observation fairly mapped out the landscape of Chinese fairy tales which are closely related to Chinese mythologies and popular fiction.

Mythologies have very close affinity with fairy tales and children’s literature. This is universal and especially true in the Chinese case. Highly imaginative and romantic, mythologies provide rich resources and blueprints for the creation of fairy tales and folklores. While Greek and Roman mythology and the Holy Bible provide abundant archetypes for western literature including fairy Tales, Chinese mythologies, fragmented as they seem to be, are the springheads of folklores and fairy tales.²

Although there are no fairy tales in early modern China in the European sense of the word, stories of supernatural and fairy nature scattered in geo-historical manuscripts, folklores, legendary fiction such as *Shan Hai Jing* (《山海经》 *The Books of Mountains and Seas*), *Sou Shen Ji* (《搜神记》 *Legends of Demigods*), *Shu Yi Ji* (《述异记》, *Accounts of Miracles*), *Shen Xian Zhuan* (《神仙传》 *Biographies of Immortals*), *Liao Zai Zhi Yi* (《聊斋志异》 *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*), *Jing Hua Yuan* (《镜花缘》 *Flowers in the Mirror*), *Xi You Ji* (《西游记》 *Journey to the West*), etc. These works constitute the classical canon of Chinese fairy tales and have great impact on later writers and readers. They provide an inexhaustible resources for folktales, fables, stage drama and popular fiction. Fragmentary and scattered as they are, these classical texts provide not only rich resources but also a large space for later writers to recreate and rewrite them into tales that are widely accessible and enjoyed by readers in the modern time.

“Jing Wei Tian Hai” (精卫填海 *Jingwei Fills up the Sea*) is one of the best examples. It is based on a passage about Fajiu Mountain (to the west of the present Zhangzi county, Shanxi province 山西长子县西) in *Shan Hai Jing*, a Pre-Qing dynasty classic of Chinese mythology and geographical encyclopedia. In the passage, there is a brief account of Emperor Yandi’s (炎帝 one of the two greatest rulers of primitive China) daughter drowned in the Eastern Sea and turned herself into a bird

1 “中国虽无古童话之名，然实固有成文之童话，见晋唐小说，特多归诸志怪之中，莫为辨别耳。”周作人，《古童话释义》(1913)，收入《儿童文学小论》商务印书馆，2018 [Zhou Zuoren. “Interpretations of Ancient Fairy Tales” (1913), collected in *A Preliminary Study of Children’s Literature*, From Zhou Zuoren, “Interpretations of Ancient Fairy Tales” (1913), collected in *A Preliminary Study of Children’s Literature*, The Commercial Press, 2018 Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2018].

2 Some sinologists such as Andrew H. Plaks, Saburou Morimiki have observed the lack of narrative length and completion in Chinese mythology. See 浦安迪《中国叙事学》第二版，北京：北京大学出版社，2019 [Plaks, A. H. *Chinese Narratology*, 2nd edition Beijing: Peking University Press, 2019]; 森三树三郎：《中国古代神话》，东京：弘文堂书房，1969 [Saburou Morimiki, *Chinese Ancient Mythology*. Tokyo: Koubundou, 1969].

ceaselessly carrying twigs and pebbles in an attempt to fill the Sea who swallows her up. The account was adapted to folklores and legendary tales in later dynasties and handed down to the present as “Jing Wei Tian Hai” (Jingwei Fills up the Sea) – a model and a Chinese idiom of people whose will and efforts are extraordinary firm and indomitable in reaching their goals, usually in wrestling with natural disasters such as flood and drought;

As a book of peculiarity, the author or authors of *Shan Hai Jing* are unknown and the original text long lost. The short passage that contains the legend of Jingwei is in *The Book of Northern Mountains of Shan Hai Jing*. Several classics starting from the Jin Dynasty kept a record of the legend. These will include *Bao Pu Zi* (西晋, 葛洪《抱朴子·内篇》卷二), *Bo Wu Zhi* (西晋, 张华《博物志》卷三), *The Annotated Shan Hai Jing by Guo Pu* (东晋, 郭璞注山海经), *Shu Yi Ji* (南朝任昉《述异记》), *Yue Li Quan Shu* (明朝, 朱载堉《乐律全书》) and *Gu Tinglin Shi Jian Shi* (清朝, 《顾亭林诗笺释》) among which the annotated copy made by Guo Pu (郭璞 276–324) of East Jin Dynasty (东晋) becomes a substitutive text that later readers usually rely on. The passage is as follows.

又北二百里曰发鸠之山其上多柘木有鸟焉其状如乌文首白喙赤足名曰精卫其鸣自詠是炎帝之少女名曰女娃女娃遊于东海溺而不返故为精卫常衔西山之木石以堙于东海漳水出焉东流注于河

---《郭璞注《山海经》·北山经

200 li towards the north, there lies a mountain named Fajiu where grows many silkworm thorn trees. A bird in the resemblance of a crow with colorful head, white beak and red claws cried out her own name “Jingwei”. She was the youngest daughter of Yandi (Ruler Yan) named

Nüwa. One day, on a journey to the Eastern Sea, she drowned herself and never returned.

She then transformed herself into a bird who was often seen carrying a twig or a pebble and dropping it into the Eastern Sea. Zhuzhang River originate in Fajiu Mountain which flows to the east into the Yellow River.

--- Guo Pu Annotated *Shan Hai Jing*• *The Book of Northern Mountains*.

Guo Pu’s annotated version becomes the authoritative text which provides the primary framework of the Jingwei myth. The short and fragmentary nature of the narrative provides plenty of space for later writers to interpret and develop the myth according to their own imagination and understanding. Below are three best-known examples in the order of time.

Tao Qian (Tao Yuanmin), a great poet of East Jin Dynasty (东晋) noted in his reading of *Shan Hai Jing*,

精卫衔微木，将以填沧海。刑天舞干戚，猛志故常在。

---陶潜《读山海经诗》：

Jingwei carried twigs to fill up the huge sea, while Xintian waved axe and shield to charge
Against Emperor Huangdi (黄帝), their valiant ambitions never subside.

---Tao Qian "Poem Composed on Reading *Shan Hai Jing*"

In Tao Qian's reading, Jingwei is compared to Xintian (刑天), a Satanic giant who would not accept his defeat by Emperor Huangdi (one of the two greatest rulers of primitive China) in their fight for the chair of Heaven. Beheaded by Huangdi, Xintian wielded his broad ax in defiance. Hence the name Xiantian which means killing the Ruler who claimed to be the Son of Heaven (天子).

The theme of ambition and defiance was carried on by Ren Fang (任昉) of the Southern Dynasties (南朝, 420—589 AD) who rewrote the myth in *Shuyi Ji* (述异记 Accounts of Marvels) as follows.

昔炎帝女溺死东海中化为精卫其名自呼每衔西山之木石填东海偶海燕而生子生雌状如精卫生雄如海燕今东海精卫誓水处犹存曾溺于此川誓不饮其水一名鸟誓一名冤禽又名志鸟俗呼帝女雀。

----任昉 《述异记》

Long long time ago, Emperor Yandi's daughter was drowned in the Eastern Sea and transformed herself to a bird by the name of Jingwei which she called herself. She carried twigs and pebbles from the Western Mountain to fill up the Eastern Sea. Later on she married a sea swallow. They gave birth to female Jinweis and male swallows. The place where Jingwei swears her determination to fill up the sea still exists. Because she died in this river, she swears never to drink any water from it. She was thus called a bird of oath. She is also called a wronged fowl, an ambitious bird and a bird-princess of the Emperor.

---- Ren Fang *Accounts of Miracles*

One important scene or action is added to the myth in Ren Fang's account: the marriage of Jingwei to a sea swallow and the production of children – the offspring who would carry on their mother's oath and ambition. In addition, new names and titles such as a bird of oath, a wronged fowl, an ambitious bird and a bird-princess of the Emperor were given to Jingwei establishing her as a prototype of bird-totem with a lifelong self-appointed mission to fulfill. This underpinning of a heroic Jingwei has great influence on later generations of writers and scholars including contemporary ones such as Mao Dun (茅盾), Guo Moruo (郭沫若), Lu Xun (鲁迅), and Yuan Ke (袁珂) who all upheld Jingwei as a brave and tragic female hero comparable to the male hero in another Chinese legendary tale by the name of Yugong (愚公) who led his children to labor everyday in an attempt to move two huge mountains in front of his house and succeeded in the end with the help of the Emperor of Heaven.

The largest impact of the myth of Jingwei, however, is on the making of folklores in the country. The story of Jingwei filling the sea was widely spread in China and the most well-known version becomes a type of fairy tale that is carried on in various regions from Shanxi province where lies the Faju Mountain to the rest of the country. One of the most popular renditions of Jingwei among country folks reads like this.

From *Baidu Baike*



Long long time ago, there lived a little princess named Nüwa (女娃) who was the youngest daughter of Emperor Yandi.* y6 y6 e2 c* I

The little princess loved watching the sunrise, admiring the spectacle of nature. She once asked her father where the sun rises. Her father said it was in the Eastern Sea and promised to take her there to see sunrise on a boat, but he had been too busy to do that. : w4 One day, the little princess got a boat behind her father's back, sailing to the Eastern Sea. When she was away from the shore, unfortunately, a strong wind rose and overthrew her boat. She was buried by the surging waves, being drowned quickly. After her death, her spirit turned her into a beautiful bird with white beak and red claws. Since it often stood on a branch, mourning herself sadly in the sound "jingwei, jingwei," folks called it "Jingwei". Jingwei hated the sea very much for taking her life. In order to revenge and keep other girls from being drown, the small bird decided to fill up the roaring sea. From then on, Jingwei flew to and fro between the Western Mountain and the Eastern Sea, carrying a twig or a pebble and dropping it into the sea. Day after day, she never stopped.

Puzzled by her behaviors, the sea said to Jingwei, "Stop doing that, poor little bird, it is totally meaningless! You'll never fill me up."

To it, Jing Wei replied firmly, "I'll fill you up no doubt! I will, even if it'll take me thousands of years! I'll fight on until doomsday!"

The brave little bird kept carrying twigs and pebbles from the Western Mountain to the Eastern Sea without taking a rest. Later on a sea swallow saw Jingwei when flying by. He was puzzle by her deeds at first but soon was touched by her bravery upon learning her story, They became a couple and gave birth to many small birds. The females look like Jingwei while the males look like the sea swallow. The small Jingweis followed their mother's suit carrying twigs and pebbles without rest until the present day.³

3 Cf. Yu ke Zhong Guo Gu Dai Shen Hua (Ancient Chines Mythology). Beijing: People's Literature Press 1958. 袁珂 . 中国古代神话: 人民文学出版社, 1958. The translation is from *Baidu Wenku* with some modifications, available at. <https://wenku.baidu.com/view/f12733b3aa00b52acec7ca58.html>

In the above folk version, the theme of revenge and sacrifice is added. The motivation of filling the sea is both a revenge and a nobler drive of saving other girls and later generations from drowning. Made into a vernacular version and listed as one of the recommended readings for school children, the tale is often read as an allegory of determination for fighting against natural disasters. And Jingwei's story is often compared to *Nü Wa Bu Tian* (女娲补天 Nu Wa Patches up the Sky) and *Da Yu Zhi Shui* (大禹治水 Yu the Great Subdues the Flood), both are recorded in *Shan Hai Jing*.

In another folk version, the sea is personified as the son of the Dragon King who bullied small children and was exposed and beat down by Nüwa. To avenge himself, he gathered the waves of the Eastern Sea and capsized Nüwa's boat.

As an archetype of Chinese mythology, the interpretation of Jingwei is rather unified over the time. In almost all the classical records and folktales of Jingwei, she was appraised unanimously as a tragic hero of strong and indomitable will. Her metamorphosis is taken as prototypes of resurrection and immortality. However, contemporary scholars would read new meanings into the story.

One of such readings is from the point of view of female subjectivity. Fighting against hostile forces of nature is a common theme in Chinese legends. The Chinese archetypal legendary figure of fighting the flood is Dayu, a male offspring of Emperor Huangdi (Emperor Yandi's brother and rival). Dayu succeeded in combating the flood by leading his people to control the big waters in the region by way of irrigation. Jingwei as a female fighter whose deeds to fight the flood is rather futile and solitary, it was even understood as a personal revenge in some folktales. However, when read in the light of an allegory of female determination in fighting against patriarchal hostility, revenge can become a gesture and a strategy of resistance against a patriarchal power structure where gender conflicts between men and women is epitomized in the combat between Nüwa and the son of the Dragon King as imagined in the folktale.

Another reading is cultural-anthropological with a focus on the central scene of the myth which is about the drowning of a princess during a journey to the Eastern Sea. Such a reading will ask the question: what is the journey for? Lin Meimao, professor of philosophy in Renmin University did a research in this light. He argues, that the journey is rather a ritualistic parade for productive purpose. According to Lin, evidence and supportive arguments can be found in a number of historical and cultural documents including *Confucian Analects* (论语), Lao-tzu (老子), *Book of Songs* (诗经), *History of Jin Kingdom* (国语·晋语), *Book of Later Han* (后汉书), and *Origins of Chinese Characters* (说文解字).

These texts would support an anthropological reading that "the true meaning of 'Nüwa Parades on the Eastern Sea' should be understood in light of some kind of ancient witchcraft and reproductive worship festival that tribal maidens participated at a waterside. The myth of 'Drowning without retuning', a maiden's death, might implicate a farewell to a maiden body through a baptism, to become a woman who has reached the age of reproduction. Lin comes to the conclusion that

the myth of “Jingwei Fills up the Sea” is based on a grown-up witchcraft rite taken by young females in Emperor Yandi’s time.⁴

Readings and interpretations of this kind reveal the imaginative space that the fragmentariness of Chinese mythology provides for later readers and writers alike. In the long history of Chinese classical literature, several literary genres such as Pre-Qin Prose (先秦散文), Han Rhyme Prose (汉赋), Tang and Song Poetry (唐诗宋词), Yuan Opera (元曲), and Ming and Qing Novel (明清小说) all prospered and exceeded, but there is not a single writer who wrote deliberately for children. This may be attributed to the mental seriousness of Chinese literati who believes that literature should bear maturely moralistic weight. This is why little humor of a conspicuous kind is found in Chinese classical literature. However, along with the occurrence of literary revolution and the vernacular movement in the early twentieth century, professional writers of children’s literature started to accumulate. Modern and contemporary writers such as Ye Shengtao (叶圣陶), Yan Wenjing (严文井), Zhang Tianyi (张天翼), Cao Wenxuan (曹文轩), Zheng Yuanji (郑渊洁) have created works of artistic value with Chinese characteristics by drawing on mythologies, folktales as well as modern experiences. With the support of UNESCO, *Collections of Chinese Folktales* (《中国民间故事集成》) in a series of provincial volumes are getting published in recent years as a project of reviving and disseminating Chinese civilization and cultural heritage.

Mythological stories and fairy tales are forms of narrative through which people express and share their beliefs and feelings. Such narratives can be nostalgic and forward looking at the same time. As means of resisting and overcoming hardships or chaos, they give meaning to the mundane and tuff life of human existence. As they continue to bear cultural memories of a particular time and space, fairy tales with national imagination and regional characteristics will survive and prosper along with the pace of human civilization no matter if it is in China or other parts of the world.

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