

## *Chinese Stories and Religion*

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Stories around the world deal with morality and religion. The parallels between Chinese story-telling and Western folk tales and classical literature are remarkable. In narrative form we find mythical explanations for origins, the celebration of mystery in the supernatural, the quest or yearning for justice in the face of oppression, and the extolling of moral virtues such as courage, compassion, fidelity, and perseverance.



Mythopoetic stories signal the struggle of the ancient Chinese against forces of nature, just as do the myths of Prometheus among the Greeks and Noah among the Hebrews. The ancient Chinese pictured the earth as a disc with the vault of heaven supported by pillars along the four borders of the earth. Trouble came when these pillars were broken. There were conflagrations in some parts and great floods in others. Wild animals played havoc with the people. Out of this chaos emerged a great heroine named Nüwa. She melted down stones of five colors to repair the vault of heaven. She cut off the legs of the great Tortoise to make pillars to support the sky. She put out the fires, subdued the floods, and killed the wild beasts. She was the wise Word that brought order out of chaos.

Nüwa is an example of the personification of courage and wisdom, showing the aspiration of ancient people to control the elements of nature. It is interesting that in China, as in ancient Greece, wisdom is personified as female. In Greece Athene is the goddess of wisdom and the hearth. So likewise the Hebrews personified wisdom as the first born of all creatures with at least feminine gender in grammar, although gender in grammar has no relation to sex.

Later another disaster shook the earth, and Gonggong, the god of water and thunder, in a fit of anger broke the pillars again so that heaven tilted to the northwest and earth sank to the southeast, causing a great flood. Once more misery visited the people, but a man named Gün tried to stop the flood by stealing ground from God to block up the water with a giant dam. He failed in this and God executed him for his offense, but after his death a son was born to him. His name was Yü. He carried on his father's task but, learning from his father's mistake, he subdued the flood by channeling and dredging. Instead of fighting the water he directed it so that it flowed away. Yü is the personification of wisdom, perseverance, and selfless devotion. The story of this Chinese Noah is told in the *Shu Ching* edited by Confucius. Of Yü it was said "How great was the achievement of Yü. But for Yü we should all have been fishes."

Notice, in spite of similarities, a basic difference between Chinese and classical Greek stories on the one hand and Christian biblical stories on the other. Christian stories after the expulsion from the garden have a historical ring. They do not personify. Instead of abstract ideas being given personal shape and narrative form, with ultimate reality resting in the abstractions, Christian revelation says that reality itself is the story of persons. The animism of Chinese and Greek myths may at first appear to be highly personal, but it is really only the contrived personification of impersonal forces of nature or abstract ideas of the mind.

Gonggong is the Chinese Poseidon or Neptune; Nüwa is Athene. Such personifications are symbols that point to impersonal forces or ideas as if the personifications were mere accommodations and were basically unreal while behind them stand the invisible, unchanging realities. Platonism and Buddhism are basically one here in sharp contrast to the Christian revelation of reality as the goodness of creation by the speech of a benevolent and suffering God. Judeo-Christian revelation does not personify, does not make personal pictures out of abstractions. It deals with real persons in the form of story. A living God speaks to living creatures, and the conversation works into a drama that passes through a climax to a denouement. A real God becomes a real man who triumphs through tragedy.

Chinese drama did not begin until the Mongols of the Yuan dynasty arrived in the 13th century. Here we find the begin-

nings of Chinese morality plays and tales about the triumph of virtue.

In the moralistic stories it is always the strong who oppress the weak, the rich who rob from the poor, and so the heroes reverse these wrongs. The stepchild is abused by the stepmother. China has a Cinderella story even with the lost slipper that fits only the poor but beautiful stepchild. In the Hangzhou West Lake tale called *The Peak That Flew Here*, a crazy old monk, like the pied piper of Hamelin, saves a village by leading the people to safety when a mountain from Sichuan flies over the town and lands on all the houses killing the wicked landlord who stayed behind.

*The Tears of Lady Meng* is a tale of protest against tyranny, with deep religious dimensions which can only be understood in terms of revelation. This is a story of love, not the natural love between men and women, children, parents and friends, but the suffering love of grace.

The time was during the reign of the wicked emperor Qin Shihuang, the tyrant who joined the segments of the Great Wall. He was afraid that the Mongols would break into his country from the north, so he built the wall as a defense. But no sooner was one section of the wall built than another fell down. The wall made no progress. Then a wise priest said: "A wall like this, which is ten thousand li long, can be built only if you immure a human being in every li of the wall. Then each li will have its guardian." It was easy for the emperor to follow this priestly advice. He regarded his subjects as so much grass and weeds, but all the people trembled. Plans were made for the great human sacrifice, but at the last minute an ingenious scholar said: "We do not need ten thousand men; we need only one man whose name is Wan, because in Chinese Wan means ten thousand." So they found a man named Wan who happened to be with his bride at their wedding feast. He was carried off, and his bride, Lady Meng, was left in tears. Dutifully she went across the mountains to the wall to get her husband's bones and give them a proper burial, but she did not know how to find them since they were inside the wall. There was nothing to be done. She sat down and wept. But her tears dissolved the mortar between the stones and the wall collapsed and gave up the bones of her husband. News of this came to the emperor and he commanded that she brought to him. When he saw her

he was smitten by her great beauty and he determined to make her his empress. She finally consented under three conditions: that forty-nine days be set aside in the realm to honor her husband, that the emperor and all his officials come to the burial, and that a tower forty-nine feet high be built beside a river where she could make a sacrifice for her husband. Quickly the emperor agreed. When the tower was built she climbed to the top, and there she jumped to her death. In a rage the emperor commanded his soldiers to cut her body into tiny pieces and grind her bones into powder and throw them into the river. When this was done the little pieces each became a silver fish in which the soul of the faithful Lady Meng lives forever.

This is a fascinating story. Notice how the wall kept tumbling down. The more the emperor sought national security the less he found it. This is the judgment of God in history. The more we spend to make ourselves strong and safe the more dangerous and insecure our life becomes. The emperor regarded his subjects as so much grass and weeds. Sacrifices must be made for national defense. People must expect to be trampled upon. The government cares not for them, only for its own survival. There was nothing to be done. Lady Meng wept. But tears are stronger than walls and weapons. Is it not irony that something built by humans that can be seen from outer space is a wall designed to divide people? But tears dissolved the wall. Through suffering love came triumph. In this story we have not only the *via dolorosa* that begins with the watery tears of baptism but also the triumph of resurrection in the life of the faithful wife who lives in the silver fish. Moreover this is the story of Bathsheba whose husband was killed so she could be David's queen. It has poignant, personal significance and powerful political implications, but most of all it is the story of the severity of divine love, and because it is beyond human comprehension it can be understood only through the power of revelation.

The medieval opera *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* is another story of the triumph of love. It is popularly called "The Butterfly Lovers." A young girl named Yingtai decided she wanted to go to school. In those dark days no females went to school. She pled with her father, however, who was very indulgent. She said she would dress like a boy and no one would know the difference. Finally her father relented and she was packed off to a boarding school. The incongruities which fol-

lowed made for hilarious humor on the Chinese stage, just as they did for Shakespeare in *As You Like It*. Yingtai had a roommate, Shanbo, with whom she promptly fell in love, but he could not reciprocate because he thought she was a boy. She tries every ruse to attract him without revealing her secret, but, of course, to no avail. Finally she invited him to visit her "twin sister" during a holiday. When he came he discovered that his roommate was indeed a girl and naturally fell in love with her. But tragically Yingtai's father had arranged a marriage according to custom with a rich playboy whom Yingtai despised. Shanbo was devastated and he pined away until he died of consumption. Yingtai now had no choice, but she consented to marry the playboy on the condition that she be allowed to visit her lover's grave on the way to the wedding. She was dressed in a beautiful red wedding garment and carried in a splendid sedan chair. When the procession came to the cemetery, Yingtai walked to Shanbo's grave and took off her wedding dress revealing underneath a white mourning cloak. Suddenly the grave opened wide in the stage performance, and as the lights went out, Yingtai jumped into the grave. Then just as suddenly the lights returned and from the closed grave two large butterflies emerge. They dance happily to joyful music as all the graves in the cemetery give up their dead in form of dancing butterflies.

The beautiful ballet of *Lantern Flower*, told by the Miao people in the valley of the Li, is a story of moral retribution combined with suffering love, but it has religious reverberations that intimate a profound revelation. The story is about a farmer, Du Lin, who marries a fairy princess, Lantern Flower. She is attracted to him because of his love for flowers and birds. He courts her with a reed flute. She returns his love and gives him a silver hoe that has magic power. They work in the fields and produce a beautiful garden, but an evil stone spirit covets the magic hoe and tempts the farmer to sell it. Also Du Lin becomes lazy and dissolute, playing with the birds all day instead of tending his garden. Finally the fairy, realizing the farmer is lost, changes the hoe into a hairpin and returns to the land of fairies. Now the peasant has lost his wife, his garden, and his hoe. He grieves and reminisces with the reed flute, hoping to bring back his love with the enchanting music. The fairies do come and dance in the village, and he looks for his lovely Lantern Flower. Finally she comes and they are reunited with a

great celebration in which all the people of the village share.

This is a beautiful tale, and it is interesting that in this ancient folk legend there is a work ethic, but the peasant must repent of his laziness, yet he is unable of his own effort to restore himself. He needs the celestial intervention and grace of the fairy.

The novel is another literary form introduced by the Mongols. Authors chose to write in this genre to escape the rigorous party-line demands required of them when they wrote official chronicles for the Imperial Court. The novel developed to classical perfection in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. This book has some moral connotations with the heroes always winning by cunning and cleverness, but with little religious or mystical intent. Reference to the supernatural is objectively treated by the author with a simple psychological explanation.

Unlike *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Journey to the West* is certainly about heaven with the chief character, Sun Wugong, the monkey king, playing havoc there.

The *Shui Hu Zhuan* or *Outlaws of the Marshes*, is quite different. This novel has parallels with the Robin Hood motif in English story-telling. The story is set in the 13th century when the Sung dynasty was falling into decadence under emperor Hung Chung. The plot brings thirty-six chieftain bandits and seventy-two lesser robbers, some of whom are women, to a Shandong mountain lair surrounded on all sides by a shallow lake with high reeds. These people are compelled for various reasons to flee from society and take refuge from unjust officials and evil governments. Here these fugitives gather and organize themselves into a complex society with their own laws of warfare, conduct, and courtesy. It is feudal and Confucian, but not rigidly filial in that it allows obedience to heaven to supersede obedience to the son of heaven. This tale may well be based on history. At the end of the Northern Sung dynasty thirty-six robber chiefs ravaged central China, defying the state soldiery but never hurting the common people.

The rule of the robbers was to redress wrongs perpetrated by greedy and licentious officials, capture their cities, take their treasures to the mountain lair, and divide the grain, giving most of it to the poor of the cities. Another pattern they followed was to invite their enemies, by offering clemency after defeating them, to join the robber community in the mountain lair.

Without question the most beloved of all Chinese stories is *Hong Lou Meng*, or *A Dream of Red Mansions*. This is a story within a story. According to the outer story, 4623 years ago the heavens were in disrepair and the Goddess of Works prepared 36,501 blocks of precious jade for the restoration, but she used only 36,500, casting aside the remaining block on a celestial peak. It became spiritualized. It could expand, contract, and move about. It was aware of an external world. It was hurt because it had not been used. It roamed the heavens until it came to a beautiful flower which it tended with loving care, moistening its roots daily with nectar from the sky, until one day the flower became a beautiful girl. The girl said, "Dear stone, the moisture you bestowed on me I will repay in our future state with tears!" One day a Buddhist and a Daoist priest found the stone, and the Buddhist sent the stone to earth to play its allotted part in the fortunes of a family that was expecting it. Ages later another priest in search of light saw this same stone in its old place, but with a record inscribed on it telling how the stone had not been used to repair the heavens, how it went instead to the world of mortals, and how it prospered and suffered there. The priest said, "Sir stone, your record tells no tale of heroism or valor. It is just a simple tale of the loves of maidens and youths, not important enough to attract attention in a busy world." "Yes," said the stone, "no rhetorical flourish or literary art either, but it may charm at a banquet or dispel the morning clouds which gather over last night's excess." Then the priest looked again and saw that the stone bore a plain tale of beauty and anguish walking hand in hand down the slope to death, telling how a woman's artless love had developed into deep, destroying passion, and how from the thrall of a lost love one soul had been raised to a sublimer, if not purer, conception of humanity's mission on earth. The priest therefore copied the record and so we have the inner story of Jia Bao Yu and Lin Dai Yu and all their extended families.

Two noble families were at their zenith of wealth and power when Dai Yu's mother died and she came to stay with her grandmother in the same household where Bao Yu lived with his parents and relatives. She was sickly but beautiful and bright beyond her years when she came. Bao Yu was her age. His name means precious jade, and he was born with a jade stone in his mouth with the inscription; "Lose me not, forget me not,

eternal life shall be thy lot." Bao Yu grew up a willful, wayward boy who cared nothing for manly things, only dallying in the company of pretty girls and writing clever poetry instead of studying books. He was brilliant, sensitive, and appreciative of feminine virtues. His father, a champion of Confucian virtue, harshly beat him for not being studious and strong. Bao Yu is tricked into marrying his cousin, Bao Chia, Precious Clasp, instead of his beloved Dai Yu, but he slowly and pragmatically accepts his marriage after the death of Dai Yu, and regaining his reason he studies for his Imperial examinations. In the end the family fortunes are restored, and Bao Yu passes the examinations. But instead of returning to his family he renounces the red dust of the world and passes through the gateway of the Great Void.

This magnificent novel may be read on various levels and understood from a variety of points of view. From the Confucian perspective the story is about the wealth and honor of a great and noble house and its self-destruction because it strayed from the values and virtues of Confucianism. The house is restored in the end by the intellectual and moral achievements of a son who had been considered degenerate, but when he passes the Imperial examination he fulfills his father's will and the Confucian ideal.

From a Buddhist and Daoist point of view it is the story of the gradual awakening, purification, and final transcendence of a soul originally sunk in the dust of temporal and material striving but which ultimately rises to mystical purification with a grand excursion into the empyrean.

From a Western point of view, such as that of Franz Kuhn, the translator, *Hong Lou Meng* is the case history of a highly gifted but degenerate young aristocrat, an asocial, effeminate, psychopathic weakling plagued by inferiority complexes and manic depression. Though capable of rallying his energies he founders among the demands of reality and slinks cravenly away from human society. The last stage of Bao Yu's development, according to Kuhn, simply goes beyond Western comprehension.

Finally it may be said that the novel is really about a spirit stone that symbolized the innate disposition, the spiritual nature, of a man who may not betray this nature without losing his essential self. Countless stones make up the world, some to



administer the state, some to serve as slaves, each has a role. Bao Yu was rejected as unfit to preserve society from the threat of anarchy, but he had been touched by the hand of the goddess. Although lazy and wishing to be an ordinary stone, he has a higher destiny which frees him and makes him conscious of his quality as "Precious Stone." Hence a second title is *The Story of the Stone*, and it is a better title.

Perhaps the greatness of a novel is the interweaving of all these elements and motifs. Fundamentally, it is a human story wrapped in the mystery that goes beyond the human which makes it possible for us to rise to at least partial fulfillment of what it is to be human. If our hermeneutic is to find the message in the story as if it were an illustration of an idea, then we must choose one of these perspectives according to our philosophical predilection. But if, on the other hand, reality is not an idea but a story, then *Hong Lou Meng* is not just an illustration but the direct exposition and revelation of reality itself. Reality is the stone that was rejected by the builders, the stone which is both a stumbling block and the keystone that holds up the building.

Now why should we observe these parallels and similarities in stories across various cultures? What is the point in discovering that the Chinese as well as the Hebrews wondered about the cosmic significance of floods? There are three points. First there are points of contact between cultures that make it possible for us to engage in meaningful exchange of ideas. And secondly there are points of contrast which make it possible for us to enrich each other with diverse indigenous contributions. Then there is another point of contrast, not the contrast between cultures, but the contrast that all cultures have with the unique revelation that comes from God in the story he has to tell to all the nations.

Cultures meet and compete. The stronger swallows the weaker. Yet the process is not so simple because cultures may be strong in technology and weak in moral fiber, or they may have an aesthetic sensitivity that is attractive to another culture that lacks an appreciation for beauty but has commercial prowess. Cultures have diversities of form, color, sound, fragrance, taste. They vary in what they value and develop among these sensory perceptions, but all cultures have the same human capacity to perceive through the senses. Because we differ in the

way we shape our societies we consider one another exotic, and for some with varying degrees of xenophobia this difference is fearful, but for others who are open and curious the difference is attractive. In any case the history of cultures shows a constant flow of patterns being shared, borrowed, enhanced or destroyed as cultures encounter one another. But underneath the shifting tectonics of cultural change we can discern a basic communality that undergirds all humanity. This communality makes it possible for us to find points of contact which enable us to enlarge our societal circles until we find ourselves happily belonging to a single family of people on the earth. As Paul said on Areopagus in Athens from one man God made every nation to dwell on the earth (Acts, 17:46). A study of stories shows that all people have in common fundamental and abiding concerns for love, evil, hope, goodness, meaning, and God or some kind of reality beyond our human capacities.

We have a longing for love. There are many kinds of love but all involve a binding relation between persons whether the attachment is romantic, faithful, filial, erotic, Platonic, or mystical. Sometimes there is the tension of love and hate in a relationship, often there is the paradox of joy and sadness with the pathos of unrequited love. Lantern Flower lost her love but then regained it, Bao Yu lost his love and pragmatically and ambiguously adjusted to his loss, Yingtai refused to accept her loss and triumphed over it through sacrifice, Lady Meng wept and her tears brought triumph. These variations on the theme of love are not peculiar to China. The poignancy and pathos, the triumph and tragedy, may be seen in love stories from Tristan and Iseult to Yuri Zhivago and Lara. Love is a many-splendored thing.

There is in all human beings a recognition, however reluctant, of our complicity with the evil we suffer. Christians openly confess their sin, but even non-Christians who think of their lives as being determined by some kind of karmic fate feel remorse over what they have done to deserve that fate. Du Lin lost his garden, his magic hoe, and his beloved fairy wife because of the evil of his dissolute and selfish laziness. He made his own hell because he stopped loving. Not until he repented was he redeemed and then not by any effort of his own but entirely by the grace of his fairy wife.

Human stories wrestle with the irony of the experienced fact

that we become victims of the evil we choose. Sun Wukong is a merry prankster who gets what he deserves; the Jia family in *A Dream of Red Mansions* sinks into humiliating degradation because they lived for luxury and the dust of this earth. It is the age-old story of families, nations, and civilizations that rise and fall into decay.

Hope springs eternal. In the midst of the stories we tell about our adversities and the evils we suffer there is a persistent hope that somehow in the end goodness will prevail and wrongs will be righted. Along with this hope there is the trust that goodness is stronger than evil. There may be in the narrative an expression of righteous indignation as in the tales about the outlaws of the marshes who rob the rich to feed the poor.

Some stories around the world are mythopoetic in their search for meaning. This may result in a purely secular scheme with no recourse to the supernatural as in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* or it may seek a variety of divine explanations for the mysteries of life ranging from the ribald humor of *The Journey to the West* to Bao Yu's crossing over into the Void in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. The search for God in his multitudinous names is universal.

Along with these points of contact between cultures there are significant and fundamental points of contrast. I am not referring to superficial differences in the form of various stories. Those differences occur and they are a delight. I am referring to the contrast between all these stories of human fabrication and the story of revelation that comes from God speaking to his creatures in both creation and redemption. The love we sing about in joy and sorrow must be contrasted with the love God gives us in his nurture of creation and his gracious sacrifice in redemption. The evil we lament in our human experience must be contrasted with the revelation to us that we are sinners in rebellion against the God we seek. Our human hope must be contrasted with the divinely inspired hope the Spirit gives us when he intercedes on our behalf. Our quest for justice and holiness must be contrasted with the eschatological mystery that God promises through the revelation of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. The contacts are a delight but the contrasts are totally transforming. They lift us into a new world in which "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9).