

THE MYTH OF EMPEROR YU: THE GREAT DAO FLOODS OVER

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*“Though flood waters pile up high to the sky,
he [the sage] will not drown.” — Zhuangzi*

In past writings, I’ve discussed the Chinese creation myth of Emperor Yu quelling the floods in relationship to the function of GV-20 and as a metaphor for the orientation of the inner tradition of medicine toward healing. Here, we’ll take a psychoanalytic view of this myth in the style of Erich Neumann, endeavoring to understand how it metaphorically embodies the imagery of the rise of individuating consciousness, the founding of China, and the function of acupuncture point GV-20.

In the myth, the flooding waters of chaos threaten to overwhelm civilization. Gun, the great-grandson of Huangdi, is appointed to control the flooding and restore order. To do so he steals magic earth from Huangdi to build dams to oppose the rising waters of chaos. But the dams repeatedly collapse under the weight of the flood despite his efforts. For failing in his mission, Gun is executed and condemned to the bottom of an abyss as a tortoise, sentenced to hold the world up and out of chaos.

Following Gun’s failure, his son Yu is then enlisted to complete the task. (*see infobox*). Yu works devotedly for thirteen years, cutting ditches and tunneling through mountains to provide a way (dao) for the water from the rivers to be channeled to the sea. During his journey, he passes his doorway three times but never enters his home. While Yu is busy channeling the waters, he becomes intimately familiar with the people, places, animals, and plants he encounters on his journey.

Whenever he comes to a famous mountain or a big swamp, Yu would summon its spirit and asks about the deep structure of the mountains and rivers, and about the kinds of precious stones, birds, beasts, and reptiles found there. He queries the spirits about the customs of the people in all eight directions and the boundaries, soil quality, and size of the various states. He then writes all this down and calls it the Shan Hai Jing (“The Scripture of the Mountains and Seas”), a seminal text of Chinese history.

With his mission fulfilled, Yu ascends Mount Mao in order to receive in audience the hundred spirits from the four directions and to inspect the feudal lords. All of Yu’s loyal subjects arrived on time except for one named Fang Feng, “Oppose-the-Wind” (防風), who attempts to disrupt the meeting and prevents Yu from ascending the throne. Yu beheads his enemy, in some myths depicted as a nine-headed snake, and displays his head to the multitudes in order to make clear that all under heaven belonged to him. He then holds held a great assembly to decide how to rule the state. Having fulfilled his contract with heaven by quelling the floods and ascending the throne, Yu then changes the name of Mount Mao to the Mountain of the Assembly of Accounts. After taming the floods, Yu founds the mythic Xia dynasty (2205–1766 B.C.E.), becoming China’s first emperor through the designation of nine provinces.

Note that in some versions of the myth, Yu is a grandson of Huang Di, the Yellow Emperor. This recalls acupuncture point Sp-4 (gongsun, 公孫, the family name of the Yellow Emperor, also meaning “grandfather-grandson”), the luo point on the spleen channel ascribed the function of “draining damp.”

— See Jarrett (2003), page 662.

Analysis

“If chaos is eternal, the order introduced into chaos of the universe has an end, as it has a beginning. This is because, slowly, names given cease to fit; political systems invented in simpler times cease to

function; old irrigation ditches get choked up with new vegetation; the waters of chaos begin to mount.”
— John Lagerwey

The legend of Emperor Yu can be understood as a metaphor for the rise of rationality out of the unconscious. Looking through the psychoanalytic perspective of Neumann, the Dao represents the archetype of the Great Mother, the infinite ocean of the unconscious, domain of the undifferentiated pleroma and uroboros. The flooding waters of chaos symbolize the overwhelming of the nascent ego by the unconscious as it rises to undermine the urge toward self-awareness, individuality, and the development of culture.

The dams built by Gun to hold back the floods are embodied as the diaphragm that we may understand as the internalization of “wall” as a mechanism of repression. Despite our best efforts to repress the contents of the unconscious, they will force their way into awareness as symbolic images in dreams and as symptoms.

The death of Gun, Yu’s father, replaces the father with the son in a fashion typical of Sigmund Freud’s Oedipal conflict. With the father out of the way, the son is free to have a relationship with the mother (the flood). However he will not repress the will of the Great Mother by building walls but, instead, will channel her will, thus civilizing her overwhelming nature. Yu’s ascension of Mount Mao is a metaphor for the ascent up the spine and the vertical trajectory of consciousness on the hero’s journey. In fact, some legends refer to Yu as a dragon, again pairing him with the ascension of yang.

Through the application of will he does not return home until his destiny (ming) is fulfilled. Convening the “hundred demons,” Yu simultaneously consolidates and civilizes the lower impulses within his own self and culture to unite the warring tribes. The Great Yu becomes the first individual as China becomes the *zhong gwo* (中國), or “Middle Nation.” The name “Middle Nation” can be taken as a metaphor for the centrifugal and synthesizing nature of the ego that sees itself as the center of the universe assimilating all experience into it. Slaying the forces that resist such unification in the form of the nine-headed serpent Fang Feng, is a metaphor for the ego successfully transcending the lower animal nature of the Typhon. Nine is the number of completion in the Chinese qualitative use of numbers. The killing of the nine-headed snake, commensurate with the designation of nine provinces, symbolizes the transition from the archaic, through the mythic, into the establishment of mythic rationality and Confucian culture.

Ascending Mount Mao (the head), to align himself with

the polestar (the heart of heaven), Yu became China’s first emperor, the Son of Heaven on earth. The acupuncture point in the center of the skull’s apex is GV-20, “bailui, one hundred meetings,” recalling Yu’s convocation. Slaying the beast Fang Feng, thus draining chaotic wind from the ceremony, is embodied in the function of GV-20 in draining wind and restoring order to the self. The location of GV-20 at the seventh chakra signifies it as the embodiment of the North Star and the portal between duality and the non-dual. As the North Star is the center of Heaven, GV-20 is the center of the head, Yu the Great is the center of the nation, and the nation (中國) the center of the earth. Having completed the hero’s journey, Yu gained his identity as an individual and China gained its identity as a nation.

Interesting etymologies to consider are the relationship between the characters for the emperor’s name Yu (禹), yu (遇), meaning “to meet”; yu (禹), meaning “to journey”; and yu (愚), denoting “monkey mind” as in a mind unsettled by wind. The character zhi (治) is used to denote Yu’s quelling of the floods. Zhi means to “govern” or “set in order,” but also means to “treat or heal an illness.” The character 俞, pronounced yu, was used by the emperor to affirm, “Yes!, agreed, approved.” Pronounced shu, it denotes the back shu “transport” points on the bladder (water) channel. The character 俞 depicts a canoe and means, “to cross a river.” Placing this character over the heart radical (心) yields the character yu (愈), meaning “to heal.” This recalls the plea of the Bodhisattva vow to be “A leader for those who journey, a boat, a bridge, a passage for those desiring the further shore.”

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