RATIONAL MYTHOS AND IRRATIONAL LOGOS: THE NARRATIVE FORMS OF CHINA'S 'SHE' PEOPLE

Yan SAI

Minzu University of China & Queen's University, Belfast

ABSTRACT: This article considers the myths of China's She people in the light of the distinction made by western mythographers between *mythos* and *logos*. In the analysis of ancient Greek myths, *mythos* and *logos* have been seen as standing for irrational and rational elements, respectively. Within the Chinese education system, however, myths and history are not rigorously separated, and people believe that myths tell of real events that happened in prehistoric times. By examining my collections of She narrative epics and graphic depictions of these stories, I will suggest that the association of *logos* with the rational and *mythos* with the irrational is reversed in the She case, and that the effective transmission of the epics down the generations has required the adoption of rational elements to the oral tradition or *mythos*, whilst the sacred or irrational component of the stories is preserved in the graphic depictions or *logos*.

Keywords: Myth, logo, she ethnic group, epic

INTRODUCTION

Although numerous scholars have discussed the meaning of myth (e.g. Cruz, L., & Frijhoff, W. Th. M., 2009:1), there is little agreement on a clear definition of the term. The origins and meanings of myths have generated heated debates in the fields of the humanities and social sciences throughout the world. Every country has their own epics and myths, and whilst some of them may have similarities in plot, structure and even in interpretation, most nations' myths have their own characteristics. Vernant (1979:186) however, has suggested that myths are of two fundamental natures, the 'unreal' which means opposed to everyday life, and the 'absurd' that stands for the irrational.

China has many myths with features that seem to fit Vernant's typology, from the ancient stories of 'The Bird Jingwei That Tried to Fill the Sea' (精卫填海) and 'The Foolish Old Man Who Wanted to Move the Mountains' (愚公移山), to stories from the end of the Qing Dynasty such as 'Journey to the West' (西游记) and 'The Story by the Water Margin' (水浒传). Whilst these well-known stories derive from the majority Han ethnic group, many other ethnic inhabitants have their own myths, and people in one place often cannot tell the stories of another. Some of these stories share commonalities with myths and legends in other parts of the world. Most Chinese people, however, seem to believe that these stories are based on fact rather than fabrication and they do not distinguish between true history and myth. In this paper, I use She narratives and copies of ancient graphics collected during fieldwork in 2014 to consider the applicability of the concepts of *mythos* and *logos* which have been important in western academic understandings of myth, to the research of Chinese mythology. Using the mythology of the 'She' ethnic group as an example, I demonstrate the unique ways that myth is used in China for the education of the younger generation.

1. *Mythos* and *logos*: their origin and usage in western countries

A general dictionary defines myth as: a traditional narrative usually involving supernatural or imaginary persons and often embodying popular ideas on natural or social phenomena. (Fowler and Fowler, 1995:900). In etymological terms, the origin of the English word 'myth' can be traced back to the Greek word μύθ·ος. (*mythos*). This word originally meant formulated speech, so it could include a narrative story, a communicative dialogue or the enunciation of a plan (Vernant, 1979:186), and it is clear that this term has a strong relationship with oral expression. Most of the Greek narrative stories that we know were passed down orally, so no original storyteller can be identified, and they may have been changed repeatedly in the telling, rendering the character as well as the plot of myth indeterminate.

Between the eighth and fourth centuries B.C., the Archaic period saw the rise of the *polis* (city-states), the founding of colonies, the annexations by the Persian empire, as well as the first inklings of classical philosophy, theatre in the form of tragedies performed during Dionysia, and written poetry, which appeared with the reintroduction of the written language. This cultural flowering caused a multiplicity of differentiation. There are breaks and internal tensions within the mental universe of Greece in the following Classical period as well, as the winners of power-struggles revised the historical myths which were responsible for distinguishing one domain from another (Vernant 1979, 187). During these centuries of dissemination, the narrative stories were finally recorded in written forms such as the *Homeric Hymns*, Hesiod's *Theogony*, *Works and Days* and other poems, dramas shows, historical and philosophical works. It is in and through written literature that this type of discourse reached later generations. However, when the authors of literature turn these narrative stories into written language, myths no longer communicate the viewpoints held by those who originally narrated them, but take on the ideas of the writers. Willcock, for example, suggest that Homer invented some of the details of the *Iliad* (Willcock, 1976:43) whilst even in terms of one author, Hesiod's two books contain quite different versions of the same story: Prometheus' theft of fire (Vernant, 1979:168-185). It seems, therefore, that the original plot and meaning of such myths may well have changed from the original oral tradition when the work was finally solidified in writing.

The concept of myth that we have inherited from the Greeks belongs, by reason of its origins and history to a tradition of thought peculiar to Western Civilisation in which myth is defined as fiction (Vernant, 1979, 186). The term *mythos* is usually paired with *logos*. In its current English form, logo, this word means abstract graphs or marks usually used for commercial purposes, but historically, the Greek word referred to stone cylinder seals or golden coins (Herodotus, 1987:I.94) which were associated with holiness and absolute power. The semantic significance of *logos*, then, includes a strong religious colour, signifying the communication to initiates of secret knowledge forbidden to the common crowd. According to Athanasius, the Great *Logos* refers to the God Word, and there is space in it for humans to gain access to the mercy of God (Prague, 2013), so this kind of *logos* should be understood as characteristic of written language. Since the works of God are seen to contain their own logic, We can conclude that *logos* is, at very beginning, set in opposition to the speech of *mythos,* both in form and in fundamental significance. It is important that *logos* is no longer simply speech written down, but has come to imply demonstrative rationality. Its philosophical abstractions differ from the divine powers whose dramatic adventures are the subject of myth, and *logos* acts upon the mind at a different level from an operation involving mimesis or emotional participation on the part of audience as well as speaker (Vernant, 1979, 187) .

To sum up, *mythos* and *logos* stand in two overlapping areas, but directed to different ends. Both are forms of expression and types of thought, but the former is narrated by speakers and if written, it follows the oral. It is usually understood as the stories that people use to make their own life and surroundings (Cruz, L., & Frijhoff, W. Th. M., 2009:1) and it can bring the story closer to the contemporary audience. *Logos*, in contrast, can be detected at very heart of religious tradition and the public who reads such texts will feel the content distanced from them. Even people who have a relationship with the *logos* are held in awe and veneration when the *logos* appear in front of them.

2. *Mythos* and *Logos* in the narratives of the She people

From the above examination of the origins and uses of the terms *mythos* and *logos* it is clear that they have been significant concepts in the study of ancient Greek myths by western scholars. These concepts are not well known in the study of Chinese mythology, however. In the last century, one of China's most eminent mythographers, Jingwen Zhong (钟敬文) asserted that, epic is a kind of ancient expression which has a large scale of length in Chinese folk narrative. It uses poetic language to describe every Chinese ethnic group, how their people came into being and migrated from one place to another, their historical heroes and the valiant battles they fought against their enemies, the epics growing together with the ethnic group's history (Jingwen Zhong, 1990, 581-586) . In Chinese mythography, most scholars analyse myth in opposition to history, and the distinction of *mythos* and *logos* are totally new to the Chinese field. In this paper, I will use these concepts to consider the epics of the She (畲) ethnic group: perhaps the only tribe in China which has concepts analogous to the western theoretical distinction between *mythos* and *logos*.

The She people form one of the 56 ethnic groups officially recognized by the People's Republic of China in 1956, although their history extends back centuries earlier. The earliest genealogical booklet recorded that She people revolted against their oppressor as early as the Tang Dynasty in the 7th century. (Zhejiang Ethnic Affairs Commission. 1992, Intro.) The name 'She' is a Chinese Han appellation meaning 'slash and burn', specially referring to their mode of horticultural production. The She invariably designate themselves as Sanhak (山哈) which means 'the guest of the mountain'. Their view of the mountain as their host accords with Ellen's (1986:9) and Milton's (1996:115) assertions that different societies, regard Nature in their own image, sometimes benignly, sometimes with hostility, but rarely with indifference. By their own account, the She were forced to migrate to the hills to escape from the discrimination of other tribes and to protect themselves by geographic isolation. Now they occupy the mountain areas in the southeast part of China, mainly consist of south of Zhejiang Province, west of Fujian Province and northern part of Canton Province. (See map below.)

Map 1. Ethnic Groups Within China

The She group is not the only ethnic group who has their own epics in China, but it is unique in being the only one to create graphic depictions matched with the narratives they tell. The She people regard these two cultural forms in very distinct ways: whilst narratives may be flexible, the pictures seem more sacred in the eyes of She people. I suggest that the former resembles the western concept of *mythos*, while the latter can be treated as *logos*. Before presenting evidence to support this claim; it is first necessary to outline the central narrative of She mythology: the Song of Gao Guang or *Gao Guang Ge*.

The *Gao Guang Ge* describes the origins of the She people's ancestors.

The myth begins in the time of the God-Emperor Gao Xin, whose wife had a severe pain in her ear. The emperor summoned doctors who discovered a bloody ball in the queen's ear. The doctors plucked out the ball, which grew rapidly into a beast with the head of a dragon and the body of a unicorn, named Panhu. Years later, invaders attacked the kingdom, overcoming all resistance. Emperor Gao Xin promised that the person who could protect the homeland against these enemies could marry the princess. The dragon-unicorn took up the challenge and defeated the invaders. After his return, Panhu married the emperor's daughter and became his successor. Panhu and the princess had four babies, which were given different surnames by the emperor. As their father migrated from one area of southeastern China to another, they each settled in a different area where they started their own families, which are the ancestors of the present-day She groups in these provinces. Panhu was appointed to rule Canton Province, before finally going to study under a Taoist priest.

The following group of pictures, now held by Zhejiang Museum, portray scenes from this myth.

Fig. 1. The Emperor Gao Xin Had A Queen Who Was Called Liu

Fig 2. The Queen Suffered Pain In Her Ear. Doctors Were Called And Extracted A Bloody Ball. The Blood Ball Started To Grow, And In A Sudden Flash, Turned Into A Dragon-Unicorn, Named Panhu

Fig. 3. When Invaders Entered The Kingdom, Nobody Dared To Resist, But The Dragon-Unicorn Promised To Defend The Kingdom Against Its Enemies

Fig. 4. Panhu Did Not Use Any Armies; Instead, He Entered The Camp Of The Invaders Alone And Gained The Trust Of Their Leader. Panhu Then Killed The Invader's Leader By Biting His Neck While He Was Sleeping. The Invaders Were Defeated Without Any Soldiers And Weapons

Fig. 5. Panhu Took The Head Of The Leader, And Returned To Present It To The Emperor

Fig. 6. Gao Xin Rewarded The Dragon-Unicorn With By Giving Him His Third Daughter In Marriage. The Day Before The Wedding, Panhu Transformed Into A Man, Crowned By A Large Bell

4-7、招为驸马

Fig. 7. The Marriage Was Celebrated With A Large Party, And Panhu Became The Prince Of The Kingdom

4-8、讨姓受封

Fig. 8. Panhu Was Given Surnames For His Four Children By The Emperor Gao Xin

4-9、封府广东

Fig. 9. Panhu Was Made Ruler Of Canton Province, And Moved His Whole Family To This Area
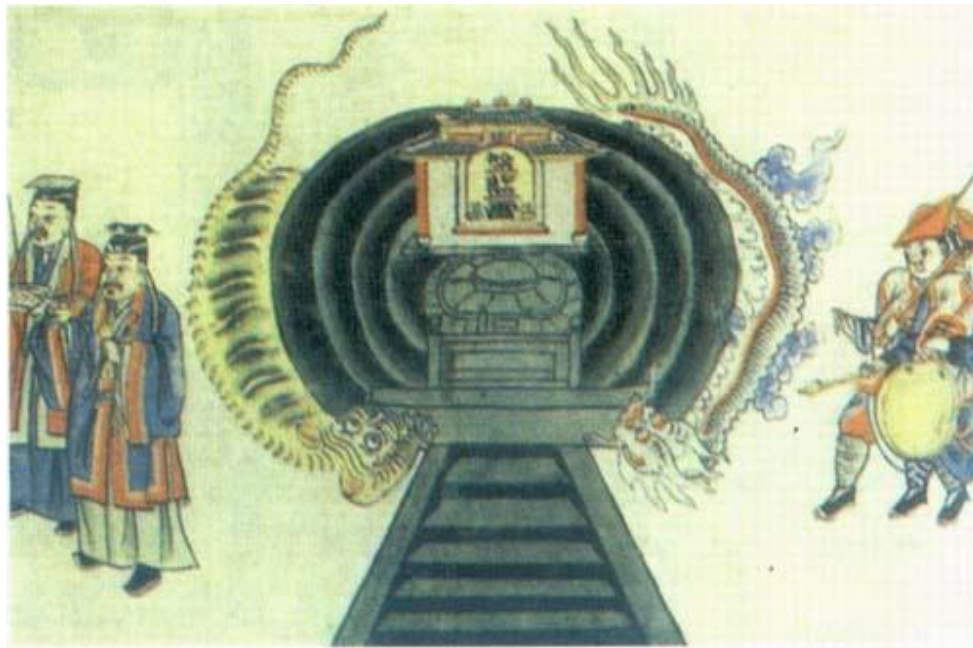
4－10、闾山学法

Fig. 10. Later, Panhu Went To The Mountains To Learn Skills From A Taoist Priest

4－11、打猎殉身

Fig. 11. Panhu Was Killed Accidentally When Hunting

Fig. 12. His Offspring Buried His Body And Built A Tomb For Him In Canton Province

The story of Panhu is an origin myth memorialising the heroic ancestor of the She, but the group presents the story in two different ways: orally and pictorially. I will now illustrate the ways that these two forms are used by the She in order to teach the story to their young people in ways that make it meaningful for them.

Epics such as the story of Panhu are most frequently passed on through oral narrative, but some of them can be found recorded in illustrations in family pedigree books or inscriptions on stones as well. From this point of view they share similarity with myth in form and characters. For example, the epics are usually told during rituals offering sacrifices to the ancestors. As such rituals are organised every year in every family during the Spring Festival, they various from area to area. I Will take a ritual in Zhejiang Province as a case study, which has been categorised as part of the province's intangible cultural heritage. Almost all of rituals hosted by She people in Zhejiang area move through three stages: first proposing a toast to the ancestor, then bowing to Heaven and Earth, after which the oldest person, respected as the most knowledgeable in the group, will sing the epic. Not only the rituals, but also the epics narrated by elders vary significantly from one area to another. It is becoming a concern that there are fewer elders left who can sing the epics required in sacrifice ceremonies, and although the plot-lines and lyrics are recorded in archival literature, there is a fear that the oral rhythm of the epics may not be passed on to future generations.

The images associated with epics take a variety of forms. Most of the versions presented here were painted on white cotton cloths which were either inserted at the beginning of genealogical-tree books, or used in ancestral temples for decoration. The core character in these pictures is the hero-figure of the dragon-unicorn, regarded by She people as divine. Fig. 13 shows a carved wand, of a type which is invariably enshrined at the center of ancestral temples. The figure of the dragon-unicorn is carved at the top of the wand. The dragon-unicorn, then, has come to be seen as a logo of the She people: a symbol referring to their historical roots.

Fig. 13. Carved Wand Featuring Dragon-Unicorn. (Photo By Author: 27 January 2014)

In the final part of this paper, I will examine the transmission processes of She epics, and show that the roles of *logos* and *mythos* as rational and irrational components of culture, are reversed in comparison to the western context within which these concepts were originally applied.

3. Rational myths and irrational logos

When exploring the transmission processes by which She epics are passed from one generation to another, I interviewed, a young She man, who told me that for most of his generation, myths are not learnt orally from elders, but from descriptive books produced by Han Chinese people. The She, then, recognise themselves first from the descriptions of others. This is not a new phenomenon, since She myths appear to have been based on Han narratives produced during the period from the Han to the Qing Dynasties, and reconstructed by the She. By comparing stories I have collected from She areas with those recorded in Han classical literature, I will suggest that the She have engaged in a process of transformation and re-evaluation of the kind described by Lévi-Strauss (1963, Vol.1, 219-228). This process can be seen through three aspects of these epics.
The first of these aspects is the rational modification of the myths. According to Boas (1898, 18) "it would seem that mythological worlds have been built up only to be shattered again, and that new worlds were built from the fragments". This idea of myth as composed of discrete elements which could be combined and recombined in different ways to produce different meanings was developed by Lévi-Strauss (1963 Vol.1, 210-11), who regarded myths as analogous to language, with its discrete elements of phonemes, morphemes and sememes, asserting that "there are gross constituent units in a higher and more complex order in the myth, and more specifically they are bundles of relations". Lévi-Strauss (1978, 3) suggested, therefore, that "Its basic structure is the same, but the content of the cell is not the same and can vary". The Han classical work on which the epic of Panhu appears to be based, *Fengsutongyi* (General Discussion about Customs), published about 189AD during the Han Dynasty, describes the origin of the She people and mentions an emperor who raised a dog with colourful fur. The dog was named Panhu (Ying, 2010, 489). Over several hundred years following the publication of *Fengsutongyi,* stories of Panhu appeared in books, using Han Chinese characters, which were produced by She people themselves.In the She versions of the story, however, the dog was transformed into a dragon-unicorn. Whilst the dog is seen by the Han as a mundane and humble animal, the dragon and unicorn are both mythical creatures regarded as highly prestigious. The transformation of the humble dog into the prestigious dragon-unicorn may be seen as a rational move which makes the content of the epic more acceptable to younger generations of She. In Lévi-Strauss's (1973, 79) words, the notion of 'myth' can include everything we are thinking, as we use this word randomly to refer to natural phenomena, products of oral literature, philosophical speculation, and other cases through which we can realize linguistic processes. The She, then, adapted the Han version of the legend of Panhu to be compatible with their own imaginings of their history and daily life.
Another example of rational modifications to the *mythos* is in relation to migration routes. In each area, She people would add their own migration route to the end of the story, so the epic would make sense to their children. According to Lévi-Strauss (1963, Vol. 1, 231), the kind of logic in mythical thought is as rigorous as modern science. The She people modify their myths in rational ways, therefore, so that the fantastical elements

set in ancient times connect to the known history of more recent periods.

The second aspect of She mythology in which transformations may be observed is in the graphical depictions of the myths. Whilst orally told epics are modified in rational ways to connect to the known history and lived experience of particular groups, the graphical depictions: the group's *logos,* are regarded as sacred and are not subject to modification. Nevertheless, there is evidence that transformations have taken place in the past. The most meaningful figure depicted is that of the dragon-unicorn, venerated as a symbol of the She people. I have showed how the She people transformed the animal from dog to dragon-unicorn, regarded as a more dignified creature by the dominant Han group. Why, however, did the She choose this specific animal rather than others? Lévi-Strauss notes that that there is no direct relationship, based on contiguity, between man and totem. The only possible relationship must be 'masked', and thus metaphorical (Lévi-Strauss, 1973, 87-8). From this metaphorical perspective, we can offer an explanation for the choice of the dragon- unicorn as the crucial character of their *logos*. Since neither dragon nor unicorn are actually existing creatures, their extraordinary rarity makes them creatures of high-status, and the dragon is the symbol of the dominant Han group in China. The choice of the dragon merged with the unicorn suggests that the She are asserting a status equal or greater than that of the Han. A similar explanation may be advanced for the frequent use of another non-existent creature, the phoenix, in She embroidery and women's hair accessories (see Fig. 14). The phoenix is a mythical bird which is widely known in many cultures, its crucial feature being that does not die, but is reborn in fire, more beautiful than before. In China, the phoenix has the same status as the dragon, but represents the female principle, in contrast to the masculinity of the dragon. As the She were traditionally a matrilineal society, the phoenix is particularly important to them, and is paired with the male dragon-unicorn as a symbol of She female identity (Pangjin, 2007).
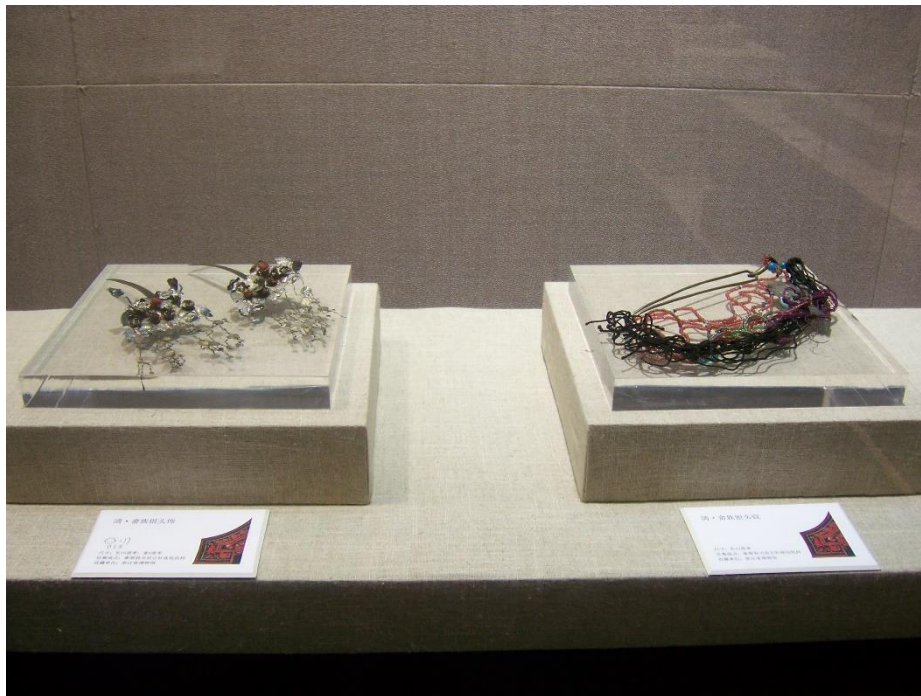

Fig. 14. Women's Ornaments Featuring The Phoenix. (Photo By Author: 27 January 2014)

What then, of the dog, which featured in the classical Chinese references to the She? In fact, whilst the Han regard the dog as a humble animal, it is respected by the She, who see it as a symbol of loyalty and honesty, and its status amongst the group is no less than that of the dragon-unicorn. Statues in the ancestral temple pictured below (Fig. 15) portray She men accompanied by dogs, and most of the She villages I visited in Zhejiang Province prohibit the eating of dog meat, as do many of the She villages do in parts of Canton Province.

Fig. 15. Statue Of She Man Accompanied By Dog In Ancestral Temple (Photo By Author: 27 January 2014)

The English trader and interpreter Long, speaking of the Ojibwa at the end of the eighteenth century, declared that there was confusion between clan-names and beliefs concerning guardian spirits (Levi Strauss, 87, 1973). Similarly, in this case, the dragon-unicorn, like the phoenix, could be seen as symbols of the She group, and the dog could be seen as a guardian animal. These differences may not have been apparent to outsiders such as the Han, however, who may have seen these animals venerated at festivals and rituals, without fully understanding the meanings attached to each.

The third aspect of She mythology in which transformation and re-evaluation are evident is in the process of narration. When recounted by others, such as the Han, She epic stories may seem strange and unbelievable, but when narrated by the She themselves, the stories take on a greater power due to the storyteller's ability to fill the tale with emotion and relate it to his audience. Although the structure of the story may be fundamentally the same, the meaning and emotional content is reconstructed from their own perspective, as is apparent in the position of the narrator. In Han narratives, the third person is always used. The narrator is thus situated as an outside observer, looking at, and sometimes looking down on, the lives of other ethnic groups. When the materials created by the Han writers are reused by the She, however, the subject is shifted from the third to the first person, so the stories are told from their own standpoint. "The substance of myth", Lévi-Strauss observes, "does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the story which it tells" (Levi Strauss, 210, 1963 Vol.1). I suggest that the content of the story, on which Lévi-Strauss focuses, includes not only the plot, but also the emotion that the narrator conveys to the audience. She storytellers, then, add what seems rational to them, and leave out what seems meaningless or absurd. Lévi-Strauss (1963 Vol. 2, 224) also notes "that a fairy tale is nothing more than a narrative that puts into words a limited number of functions in a constant order of succession . . . nothing prevents the making up of tales where fairies have a role, without the narrative's conforming to the rules". Myths, then, have to be made. She people draw from the epic narrations they have heard told by the older generation in ceremonies, in records in their own family books, and in the artefacts and rituals in the ancestral temples, in reconstructing these myths for themselves. Even though the stories were originally based on Han classical literature, and today's She may learn them first in Han schools, She renditions are based on their own sources, rather than the versions told by the Han. It is due to the rational adaptation of narratives so that they continue to make sense in the modern world that I associate the She *mythos* with rationality, and due to the veneration of graphic depictions as sacred objects that I associate the She *logos* with irrationality.

CONCLUSION

The She people have a long history of oppression and migration, and their *mythos* and *logos* are seen as a realistic reflection of their experience. All the She to whom I spoke regarded these epics as precious treasures, although their recreation is a continual process and not an overnight work. Mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution. (Levi Strauss, 1963, Vol.1 224). Hundreds of years

have seen the transformation of the stories from an outsider's view of the She to their own perspective, from shattered fragments to integrated stories, and from rational modification to irrational veneration.

The She way of educating their younger generations differs from the practices of modern society in that it is largely conducted through oral tradition and ritual, as well as graphic imagery. Although very different from scientific conceptions of education, She practices have their own rationality, which seeks to prepare their children for life as part of the particular social group into which history has delivered them.

In seeking to apply western concepts to understand Chinese material, this essay has faced complexities and difficulties. Yet if anthropological concepts are to be useful, they should be capable of being applied cross-culturally. The concepts of *mythos* and *logos* can open up new ways to think about the cultural manifestations of the She, and at the same time, the way the She think about their own cultural manifestations may shed new light on the concepts of *mythos* and *logos*.

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