

Natural Disaster and Religion/Mythology

Tuesday, June 5, 2018 | 13:00~18:00

Organizers: Hitoshi Yamada and Toshiaki Kimura (Tohoku University)

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Destructions and Reconstructions of the World: Natural Disasters in Chinese Mythology

Lihui Yang

Beijing Normal University

Myths about universal disasters in remote past are abundant, multiform, and widely spread in China even today. Among them, the most popular disaster myths include the goddess Nüwa repairing the broken sky, the semigod and cultural hero Yü controlling the flood, the hero Yi shooting down the surplus suns, as well as the brother-sister ancestors recreating humans after a world flood, and so on. The main natural disasters happened in these myths primarily refer to flood, collapse of the sky and the earth, falling down of the sky pillar(s), multiple suns or moons appearing in the sky, earthquake, drought, fire, severe winter and hot wind, and so forth. Like in many myths of other counties, the reasons of the disasters in Chinese mythology are often attributed to battles between gods, divine animals' turning over under the earth, and especially, the punishments of god(s) or Heaven to the wicked human being. However, different from the well-known flood myths of Greek and Hebrew in which the re-establishment of the universal order and recreation of humans were achieved by obeying the god(s) and following their directives, the narrative core of Chinese disaster myths usually focuses on conquering the disasters by making tremendous efforts. All the gods, goddesses, semigods and human ancestors had to work very hard to control the flood, mending the broken sky, even finally sacrificed their own lives. This ethics of disaster still deeply influences people's world view and their conception of disaster in contemporary China.

Based on examining *Motif Index of Chinese Mythology* (composed by Lihui Yang and Chengfu Zhang, Shaanxi Normal University Press, 2013) as well as the author's ethnographic field research in Northern China, this paper will depict the primary natural disasters happened in Chinese mythology, describe their causes, presages, the ways of escapes and conquests, as well as the reconstructions of the world(s) and the restarts of new universal order. In addition, it will reveal how the ethics of disaster existed in mythology greatly shape people's conception of disaster in China today.

Versions of the Flood Myth

Michael Witzel

Harvard University

A myth about a general flood covering large parts or all of the earth is well known in many cultures. The best known ones are those from ancient Mesopotamia (in Sumerian and Babylonian) and in the Bible (Noah's flood). A very similar one is transmitted in the Vedic texts of India (Manu's flood).

These kinds of flood myth are portrayed as punishment of humans (Noah), or due to humans simply annoying the gods (Mesopotamia), or as occurring, though predicted, without any particular reason (India).

These myths are actually found worldwide (Witzel 2010), though this fact has been denied by some folklorists such as A. Dundes (1988), who maintain that they are not found in Africa and Australia.

The latter is manifestly wrong: the flood myth is universal. It is another question why this is so and why the myth has sprung up in the first place.

However, there are some areas where this flooding does not occur by a rising of the ocean, a big rain or similar, but as the result of draining a lake. This version is prominent in the Himalayan area, from ancient Khotan (in S.W. Xinjiang) to the Kashmir Valley and to the Kathmandu Valley, as well as in smaller scale draining stories in the eastern Himalayas. (N. Allen). There are some indications that the range of these myths extends into China and maybe to Japan, where it occurs, not in the oldest mythologies (Kojiki and Nihon Shoki) but in a fairy tale.

It is clear both from Kashmir and Nepal that a large lake indeed existed in both valleys that eventually drained (3 times attested geologically, in the case of Nepal). In all cases the breach of the lake ascribed to the intervention of a deity.

However historical records indicate that the Khotanese version is the oldest and has influenced the other myths. The question remains why this is so, and whether the myths from eastern Nepal are based on these written accounts or whether they are independent and original. Finally, the myth of a primordial flooding in Chinese myth and the Japanese case have to be investigated, and a conclusion be drawn as to why we have this special version in Central and Eastern Asia.

The A.D. 536 Event and the Folklore/Mythological Links between Fennoscandia and the Caucasus

Yuri Berezkin

European University

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The extreme weather event of 535-536 probably caused by a large volcanic eruption in the tropics followed by twenty years of cooling had catastrophic consequences for agricultural societies in the northern half of the circum-Baltic region. A massive depopulation had to trigger both large-scale movement of people and profound cultural changes. Such a process looks like the most plausible explanation for a large set of folklore episodes and mythological ideas shared by Scandinavian and Baltic-Finnish people, on the one hand, and the natives of the Caucasus, on the other hand. The source of the shared elements should be searched for in the Iranian- and Germanic-speaking population of the present day Ukraine who could influence the inhabitants of both the circum-Baltic and the Caucasian regions. The exclusive and largely unrecognized Caucasian – Celtic folklore parallels as well as the Migration Period art of British Isles (with possible Eurasian Steppe roots) can also be related to the same set of trans-European cultural links.

Tsunami, Volcano and Ominous Star: Mythicizations of Disaster in Hawai'i (Polynesia) and Japanese Archipelago

Akira Goto

Nanzan University

In this presentation, I will discuss folk belief and legends concerning aquatic animal and disaster (e.g. flood, *tsunami*, etc) in northern Japan (Miyagi Prefecture) and Okinawa (Ryukyu Islands). I will also briefly refer to Polynesian legends of tsunami and volcano as a comparison with Japanese examples.

Part 1: I examine the symbolic role of whale and eel as sacred animals in folk belief of Miyagi Prefecture, and discuss *tsunami* and flood legend in relation to the sacredness of these animals.

I also mention that there are *shinto* shrines and Buddhistic temples whose main statue or sacred objects were said to have been drifted on flood or tsunami. I further refer to “fishing-up-shrine” and “wave-dividing shrine” in relation to *tsunami* in this area.

Part 2: I will examine *tsunami* legend in Okinawa as a possible proto-type of maritime belief on disaster and sacred animals in both Japan and Oceania. *Tsunami* myths in Okinawa are said to be caused by the impolite behavior to the sacred animal called “*yona-tama*” (e.g. jugon), and that animal made a punishment to humans. For comparison, I will further discuss Polynesian examples. In that analysis, I will examine *tsunami* myth that contains Hainuwele-type motif (e.g. the origin of coconut), and also volcano legends in Hawai'i as a parallel thought between disaster of water and that of fire.

References

[1] Goto, Akira (1999) *Speaking Fish: Mythology of Eels and Snakes in Southern Islands*.

Shogaku-kan, Tokyo (In Japanese)

[2] Goto, Akira (2007) “Mythicization of Tsunami in the Ryukyu Islands: A Process of Seascape Formation in Island Societies.” *Gotland Papers*, pp. 365-471. Gotland University.

Water, Wind and Earth. Motives of Natural Disaster in Folk Tales in Poland

Marcin Lisiecki

Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, Poland

The main purpose of this paper is to describe the Polish folk tales about the natural disaster in Poland. There are reasons behind the choice of the topic of this essay. First of all, climate, as well as the geographical location of Poland make it possible for a dangerous situation to occur, as eg.: floods, hurricanes or avalanches, etc. Secondly, this topic is not popular in Polish folk tales. Thirdly, the natural disaster motives present in folk tales are extremely important, because they are not only educational goals, but also related to Slavic beliefs and myths. And lately these topics appear in a variety of ways in different regions of Poland. In order to analysis Polish folk tales more accurately the content of the lecture will be divided into the following four points:

- Description of natural threats presents in different regions of Poland;
- Reasons for lack of popularity these motives in Polish fairy tales;
- Description of cultural specific of natural disaster motives in regions of Poland, such as: Pomerania (Pol. *Pomorze*), Masuria (Pol. *Mazury*), Silesia (Pol. *Śląsk*), Podhale (Tatra Mountains), Bieszczady Mountains and Sudetes (Pol. *Sudety*);
- Analysis of these motives sources, meaning and goals.

How the End and the Renewal Were Envisioned among the Indo-Europeans

Kazuo Matsumura

Wako University

Among several branches of the Indo-Europeans, the concept of cyclical ages is observed. The beginning is the Golden Age, but the ages gradually deteriorate until the final one, which is the worst of all. At this final age, the world is destroyed first by fire and then by water. The world then revives and a new Golden Age begins again. Traces of this myth of the destruction and renewal of the world can be found, as we will see, in ancient India, in ancient Greece, in medieval Iceland, and in ancient Iran. Ancestors of the Indo-Europeans might have held to a myth that foretells that natural disasters by fire and water are inevitable, but that they also signified the beginning of a new Golden Age.

Interpreting and Approaching the Disaster with Symbolization: Belief and Ritual Practice of Praying for Rain in Villages at Tianshui, Northwest China

Deming An

Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

As a natural disaster frequently occurred historically, the drought has been bedeviling people in Tianshui Prefecture at Gansu Province, Northwest China for thousand years. It not only damages the agricultural crops and produces multiple difficulties in human daily life, but also causes severe panic psychologically as well as socially, and thus breaks the regular order of life and disturbs social relationship. It is therefore crucial for local people to make various efforts to avert or reduce the destructive effect of this disaster, among which the belief and ritual practice of rain request is at a central position.

The belief and ritual practice of praying for rain has been transmitted among villagers in Tianshui for many generations, and is still influential and prevailing nowadays in different villages whoever encountered the dry weather. Based on the beliefs that the world is ruled by various gods, who are mainly from the Taoism, Buddhism and local religious beliefs, and are generally systemized with a loose hierarchy headed by the supreme sovereign, the Jade Emperor, people in villages interpret the cause of the drought as a consequence of the gods' penalty towards human improper behaviors, and hence conduct the related rituals to avert the disaster. Those kinds of improper behaviors include the waste of foodstuffs, not accordance with filial piety, impiety to the gods, or the moral corrupts of the society in general, and so on. They all caused drought as a punishment from the gods, and the ritual of averting the disaster is accordingly conducted by confessing and correcting those human mistakes. When the ritual is held, people in concerning villages will act for many days as a group in close cooperation, with centering upon praying for the Local Deity that is worshiped as specific protector of the vicinity, and taking a series of religious or miraculous actions concerned. By interpreting and approaching the natural disaster with religious symbolization, the belief and ritual practice of rain request reframes an enormous and uncontrolled challenge into a familiar framework, which is therefore understandable, easily explained, and possibly being approached, and thus leads a relief of mental pressure and an alleviation of social tension for local people.

Can Mythoi Tell Us About Past Earthquakes and Tsunamis?

Masataka Ando

Shizuoka University

Center for Integrated Research and Education of Natural Hazards

Destructive earthquakes and tsunamis recur at intervals of centuries to millennia, but the instrumental record can extend only for a century. To reduce the risk from the natural disasters and prepare proper mitigation plans, we need a much longer record to cover several repeated intervals. Evidence in the historical, archaeological, geomorphological, geological records is the key to solve the problem. Among them, folktales and mythoi are included. An interesting correlation between paleotsunami evidence and mythoi are found in the Ryukyu arc (over 1200 km), the southernmost islands of Japan, where seismic activity is high.

In the southern segment of the Ryukyu arc, a huge tsunami occurred in 1771 with a max tsunami height of 30 m, and caused 1,200 fatalities on the surrounding islands. On the shore of the islands, there are a number of large boulders, which were cast from the seafloor. Detail studies of the large boulders revealed that they were all carried by several different paleotsunamis. A recent study concluded that high paleotsunamis recurred with an interval of ca. 600 yr for the past 2000 yr along the southern segment. Similarly, a number of mythoi about high sea waves were found on these islands, which were devastated by the 1771 tsunami.

In contrast, in the northern segment of the Ryukyu arc, neither historical documents of high tsunamis nor tsunami boulders on the shore have been identified. In addition, only a few mythoi of high sea waves have been collected unlike the southern segment. These observations may suggest that tsunami or high-sea-wave mythoi have reflected the natural phenomena that really happened in the past. Consequently, mythoi or folktales possibly provide a long record of earthquakes and tsunamis. In this study, we will discuss another example of mythoi and paleotsunamis that occurred on the east coast of Taiwan.

Memo

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