

Chinese Creation

Heaven and Earth and Man

A Chinese myth
Retold by CYRIL BIRCH

Earth with its mountains, rivers, and seas, Sky with its sun, moon, and stars: in the beginning all these were one, and the one was Chaos. Nothing had taken shape, all was a dark swirling confusion, over and under, round and round. For countless ages this was the way of the universe, unformed and unilluminated, until from the midst of Chaos came P'an Ku. Slowly, slowly, he grew into being, feeding on the elements, eyes closed, sleeping a sleep of eighteen thousand years. At last the moment came when he woke from his sleeping. He opened his eyes: nothing could he see, nothing but darkness, nothing but confusion. In his anger he raised his great arm and struck out blindly in the face of the murk, and with one great crashing blow he scattered the elements of Chaos.

The swirling ceased, and in its place came a new kind of movement. No longer confined, all those things which were light in weight and pure in nature rose upward; all those things which were heavy and gross sank down. With his one mighty blow P'an Ku had freed sky from earth.

Now P'an Ku stood with his feet on earth, and the sky rested on his head. So long as he stood between the two they could not come together again. And as he stood, the rising and the sinking went on. With each day that passed earth grew thicker by ten feet and the sky rose higher by ten feet, thrust ever farther from the earth by P'an Ku's body which daily grew in height by ten feet also. For eighteen thousand years more P'an Ku continued to grow until his own body was gigantic, and until earth was formed of massive thickness and the sky

had risen far above. Thousands of miles tall he stood, a great pillar separating earth from sky so that the two might never again come together to dissolve once more into a single Chaos. Throughout long ages he stood, until the time when he could be sure that earth and sky were fixed and firm in their places.

When this time came P'an Ku, his task achieved, lay down on earth to rest, and resting died. And now he, who in his life had brought shape to the universe, by his death gave his body to make it rich and beautiful. He gave the breath from his body to form the winds and clouds; his voice to be the rolling thunder, his two eyes to be the sun and moon, the hairs of his head and beard to be the stars, the sweat of his brow to be the rain and dew. To the earth he gave his body for the mountains and his hands and feet for the two poles and the extremes of east and west. His blood flowed as the rivers of earth and his veins ran as the roads which cover the land. His flesh became the soil of the fields and the hairs of his body grew on as the flowers and trees. As for his bones and teeth, these sank deep below the surface of earth to enrich it as precious metals.

And so P'an Ku brought out of Chaos the heavens in all their glory and the earth with all its splendors.

But although the earth could now present its lovely landscapes, although beasts ran in its forests and fish swam in its rivers, still it seemed to lack something, something which would make it less empty and dull for the gods who came down from Heaven to roam over its surface. One day the goddess Nu-kua, whose body was that of a dragon but whose head was of human form, grew weary of the loneliness of earth. After long thought she stooped and took from the ground a lump of clay. From this she fashioned with her dragon claws a tiny creature. The head she shaped after the pattern of her own, but to the body she gave two arms and two legs. She set the little thing back on the ground: and the first human being came to life and danced and made sounds of joy to delight the eyes and ears of the goddess. Quickly she made many more of these charming humans, and felt lonely no longer as they danced together all about her.

Then, as she rested a while from her task and watched the sons and daughters of her own creation go off together across the earth, a new thought came to her. What would become of the world when all these humans she had made grew old and died? They were fine beings, well fitted to rule over the beasts of the earth; but they would not live forever. To fill the earth with humans, then when these had gone to make

more to take their place, this would mean an endless task for the goddess. And so to solve this problem Nu-kua brought together man and woman and taught them the ways of marriage. Now they could create for themselves their own sons and daughters, and these in turn could continue to people the earth throughout time.

After this gift of marriage from Nu-kua, further blessings came to man from her husband, the great god Fu-hsi. He again had a human head but the body of a dragon. He taught men how to weave ropes to make nets for fishing, and he made the lute from which men first drew music. His also was the priceless gift of fire. Men had seen and feared the fire which was struck from the forest trees by the passing of the Lord of the Thunderstorm. But Fu-hsi, who was the son of this same lord, taught men to drill wood against wood and make fire for their own use, for warmth and for cooking.

Already the creatures of Nu-kua's making could speak their thoughts to one another, but Fu-hsi now drew for them the eight precious symbols with which they could begin to make records for those who were to come after. He drew three strokes ≡ to represent Heaven; the three strokes broken ≡≡ represented earth. That symbol whose middle stroke was solid ≡≡ represented water, that whose middle stroke was broken ≡≡ represented fire. A solid stroke above ≡≡ gave the sign for mountains, a solid stroke beneath ≡≡ the sign for storm; a broken line below ≡≡ showed wind; a broken line on top ≡≡ showed marshland. With these eight powerful symbols man could begin to record all he observed of the world about him.

For long years men lived their lives in a world at peace. Then, suddenly, there spread from Heaven to earth a conflict which threatened to put an end to all creation. This was the battle between the Spirit of Water, Kung-kung, and the Spirit of Fire, Chu-jung. Down to earth came the turbulent, willful Kung-kung to whip up huge waves on river and lake and lead his scaly hordes against his arch-enemy, Fire. Chu-jung fought back with tongues of flame and scorching breath and halted the rebel Water in his path. Kung-kung's armies dispersed and he, their leader, turned and fled. But his flight brought with it a peril greater yet. For, dashing blindly off to the west, Kung-kung struck his head against the mountain Pu-chou-shan, which was none other than the pillar that in the western corner held up the sky.

Kung-kung made good his escape, but he left the world in a disastrous state. Great holes appeared in the sky, while the earth tilted up in the west. In that region deep cracks and fissures appeared which

are still to be seen to this day. All the rivers and lakes spilled out their waters, which ran off and still run eastward: off to the southeast, where the earth had slipped down low, ran the waters together to form a vast ocean there. Meanwhile, out of the shaken mountain forests fire still raged forth, and wild beasts of every kind left their lairs to maraud through the world of helpless, terrified men.

It was left to the goddess Nu-kua to bring back order to the world, to quell the fire and flood and tame the wandering beasts. She it was also who selected from the beds of rivers stones of the most perfect coloring. These she heated until they could be moulded, then with these stones, block by block, she patched the holes in the sky. Lastly, she killed a giant turtle; and cut off its powerful legs to make pillars between which the sky is firmly held over the earth, never again to fall.

So the peace of the world was restored. But the mountains still rise in the west, and it is to there that the sun, moon, and stars still run down the tilted sky; whilst to the east, the waters of the earth still gather into the restless ocean.

What aspects of creation in this myth are the same as in the previous Greek myth?

What aspects of creation are different?

How does this myth humanize the world of nature?

Knowing all the different things that different people can do with their imaginations, are you surprised that these myths, from two different cultures, are so alike? What might account for their similarity?