

Constructing “Superstitious Myth(s)”: The Transcultural Practice of Mythological Knowledge in China from the 1920s to the 1930s

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Abstract:

This paper traces the origin of modern China’s conception of myth as superstition by addressing the transcultural practice of mythological knowledge in 1920s-1930s China. In the 1920s, Chinese intellectuals devoted to folklore studies constructed a body of knowledge related to myth and superstition through appropriating Western and Japanese modern scholarship. They borrowed the methodology and ideas of textual research on myth from the West and Japan but further developed their original interpretation by equating mythical belief with superstition. This transformation of knowledge made myth into the target of anti-superstition movements in modern China and even laid the foundation for the political regulation of literature and arts (especially in traditional Chinese opera) featuring magical content that was initiated by the Nanjing KMT government. The transcultural practice revealed in this research made us reconsider the suppressed mythical and supernatural experience in modern Chinese thought and literature.

Keywords: superstitious myth(s), transcultural practice, literary and artistic governance

Introduction

In China during the early 1950s lasting and influential debates on literary expressions of myth and superstition took place, and these involved famous writers and artists such as Tian Han 田汉, Zhou Yang 周扬, Huang Zhigang 黄芝冈, and Ma Shaobo 马少波. The essential question of these debates lay in how to deal with the supernatural content present in literature and the arts (especially in traditional Chinese operas) in order to create anti-superstition new works. Most maintained that myth should be distinguished from superstition; however, they were also clearly aware of the difficulty in properly defining and tackling the magical element and transcendental beliefs embodied in myth.¹ The issues put forward in these debates were fundamental in shaping the contemporary Chinese literary and artistic experience. Myths that made references to the story of gods with supernatural and religious beliefs were inevitably questioned from a modern scientific discourse and in turn became entangled with the concept of superstition.

The debates and topics above were so important that they have drawn attention from current scholars. Most studies put them in the framework of socialist ideological structure in order to regard them as a cultural practice exclusive to PRC culture after 1949.² My paper intends to intervene in the discussion of mythical

- 1 For debates on myth and superstition in literature and the arts, see Tian Han. "Fight for the People's New Opera of Patriotism" (Wei aiguo zhuyi de renmin xin xiqu er fendou 为爱国主义的人民新戏曲而奋斗), *People's Daily* 人民日报, January 21st, 1951, 5th edition; Zhou Yang. "Reform and Development of National Opera Arts" (Gai ge he fazhan minzu xiqu yishu 改革和发展民族戏曲艺术), *Journal of Literature and Art* 文艺报, (24) 1952; Ma Shaobo 马少波. "The Essential Difference Between Superstition and Myth" (Mixin yu shenhua de benzhi qubie 迷信与神话的本质区别), *Reference Materials On Opera Reform*, Volume 2 (Xiqu gai ge lun ji 戏曲改革论集), pp. 46-49; Huang Zhigang 黄芝冈. "On 'Mythological Operas' and 'Superstitious Operas'" (Lun "Shenhua ju" yu "Mixin xi" 论 "神话剧" 与 "迷信戏"), Huang Zhigang. *From Yangko to Local Operas (Cong yangge dao difangxi 从秧歌到地方戏)*, Shanghai: Zhonghua Book Company, 1951, pp. 51-71.
- 2 The representative research focused on the reform of ghost operas in the PRC includes works such as Zhang Lianhong 张炼红. *Cultivation of the Soul: Research on the Reform of Chinese Traditional Operas in the People's Republic of China (Lilian jinghun: Xinzhongguo xiqu gaizao kaolun 历练精魂: 新中国戏曲改造考论)*, Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2013; Wang Ying 王英. "The Nation without Ghosts: Debates on the Ghostly Operas in the CCP Party and Province of Shaanxi (1949-1966)" (Wugui zhi guo: Zhonggong yu Shaanxi diqu de "Guixi" zhi zheng 无鬼之国: 中共与陕西地区的"鬼戏"之争), *The Journal of Twenty-First Century*, December 2016, pp. 51-66; Margaret Caroline Greene. "The Sound of Ghosts: Ghost Opera, Reformed Drama, and the Staging of A New China, 1949-1979", UC San Diego Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2013.

and superstitious experience entangled in modern Chinese cultural and literary practice, but contrary to the mainstream discourse and perspective, I take this 1950s historical event as a sequel and echo of earlier Chinese anti-superstition discourses dating back to the 1920s and 1930s, when traditional Chinese myths clearly became the target of anti-superstition enlightenment movements and were criticized by modern intellectuals and the KMT government. Some academic intellectuals at that time, especially those who studied folklore, established systematic knowledge of myth to support or even construct anti-superstition discourse. They appropriated the research methodology Western and Japanese scholars developed from the late 19th to early 20th centuries in order to deconstruct mythical belief and look down on folk magic as superstition. Their knowledge affected the political governance of social customs initiated by the Nanjing KMT government, which took measures to ban performances involving deities and ghosts.

The historical perspective leads my paper to center on the period from the 1920s to 1930s in China, when the epistemic framework of “superstitious myth(s)” was constructed and the political governance of mythical literature and arts developed. In terms of the specific research objects and scope, my paper focuses on the academic practice of modern Chinese folklore scholars in the late 1920s and the KMT governmental regulation of traditional operas around the same time. The academic knowledge of myths was converted into political discourse at the level of the KMT government’s cultural governance. In this sense, this research emphasizes two signs of interaction: on the one hand, there was transcultural interaction among the West, Japan, and China that produced the knowledge of “superstitious myth(s)”; on the other hand, the new knowledge that was formed from transcultural contact interacted with the political practice conducted by state authority in China. By combining the two signs, my paper goes beyond common influence studies or parallel studies and combines various flexible transcultural connections and trends. China’s modern conception of myth was not only constructed in cross-cultural ideas but also spanned and crossed multiple boundaries, such as knowledge/politics, scholarly research/social practice, and cultural thought/literary experience. This transcultural study leads my research to depict a contact “site” or “zone,” in which various elements, including knowledge, thoughts, literature and politics from

different nations, collided, merged and transformed.³ The concept of contact sites or contact zones inspired this research to break out of the linear and simplified relationship of “influence/acceptance” between China and the world by revealing more complex connections and practices.

1. Background: Faces of Mythological Conception in Modern China

China’s perception of myth was inseparable from contact with Western anthropological and ethnographic knowledge since the first emergence of the concept of Shenhua (Myth 神话) in the late Qing Dynasty. Liang Qichao 梁启超 first used the Chinese word for myth (Liu 19) and mentioned the term “Greek mythology” in his article “Relationship Between History and Race” (Lishi yu renzhong zhi guanxi 历史与人种之关系) published in *Xin Min Cong Bao* 新民丛报 in 1902: “The Semite was the source of the world religions, from which Judaism, Christianity and Islam originated. The Ancient Greek myths and the names of gods and their sacrifices all came from Assyria and Phoenicia.” (Liang 21) Here, Liang showed awareness that the myths were about names and stories of gods as the products of religion. He talked about the origin, evolution and distribution of Western myths and related the mythical phenomenon to races of the world. Liang’s understanding demonstrated the thinking pattern of comparative mythological study popular in Europe since the 19th century. Comparative mythology aimed to redraw the evolutionary history of human civilization by investigating the origin and evolution of myth around the world, which closely overlapped with modern disciplines of anthropology, archeology, geology, and ethnography.

Like many contemporary Chinese intellectuals, Liang Qichao was exposed to Western knowledge and ideas through Japan, which acted as an intermediary, and in fact, the modern Chinese word for myth was also derived from modern Japanese kanji. During the same period, the terms “myth” and “comparative mythology” clearly appeared in popular Japanese works *History of Chinese Civilization* by Shirakawa Jiro 白河次郎 (Shirakawa 8) and *History of World Civilization* by Takayama Jiro 高山林次郎 (Takayama 21), and these two books were translated and published in China in 1903. Shirakawa and Takayama introduced myth and mythology by redrawing the origin, distribution and blood relationship of races, a method that was inherited and displayed in Liang Qichao’s article. These two

3 The concept of contact site or zone is borrowed from Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. In this book, Pratt used “contact zone” to describe cultural contacts and translations from different cultural regions in the context of imperialism and colonialism.

Japanese scholars referred to the prevailing framework of the history of human civilization that labeled human history and the world under the dichotomy of barbarism or civilization, a presented advancement through a linear and hierarchical theory of evolution theory, something which represented anthropological and ethnographic discourse popular in the late 19th century in Europe (Shirakawa 1-27; Takayama 11-131).

Modern knowledge of anthropology, ethnography and comparative mythology primarily influenced Chinese intellectuals in regard to how to understand the meaning of myth in the late Qing dynasty and the early Republican China. They tended to define myth as the product of magic belief at a primitive stage of human history within the perspective of civilizational evolution. However, myth was not belittled by most Chinese intellectuals for being the opposite of “civilization,” and in contrast, it was always regarded as a useful resource in order to renew Chinese culture and national identity owing to its essentialist character. For example, Liang Qichao’s peer Jiang Guanyun 蒋观云 deemed that myth had the value of the genius’ imagination and the power of inspiring a people’s ambition, although he was conscious that it was looked down upon by the intelligentsia in 1903 (Guanyun 18-19). Jiang’s idea was echoed in Lu Xun’s 鲁迅 famous 1908 article “Break Through the Voices of Evil” (Po e’sheng lun 破恶声论), in which Lu Xun spoke highly of myths created by primitive societies and regarded them as a demonstration of magnificent spirits and human nature (Lu 35-36). Jiang Guanyun and Lu Xun did not intend to develop a systematic and academic discourse on myth but integrated the ideas of myth popular in modern European and Japanese disciplines into China’s enterprise of cultural enlightenment. For cultural reformers, the academic discourses on primitive myth were their narrative resources in building new national spirits.

The 1920s represented an obvious turning point as Chinese intellectuals paved the way for the acceptance of mythological knowledge, which was manifested mainly in two aspects. First, academic writings imitating or adapting European and American mythological and anthropological studies gradually began appearing in China beginning in the 1920s. For an increasing number of Chinese intellectuals, myth became the object of research and not merely a source of cultural ideas. Mao Dun 茅盾, Xie Liuyi 谢六逸, Lin Huixiang 林惠祥, Huang Shi 黄石, Zhao Jingshen 赵景深, Zheng Zhenduo 郑振铎, amongst others, were all representative scholars who made achievements in mythological studies in the span of the 1920s and 1930s. They followed different Western scholars and developed different interpretations of myth, but most of them were inherited from the British and American schools

of cultural anthropology and traced the historical evolution of human civilization and took myth to be a “survival”, an element of the primitive.⁴ Second, and related to the previous point, these scholars emphasized the irrational and barbaric traits of myth when they adopted the academic system of British and American cultural anthropology.⁵ Compared with the cultural enlightenment intellectuals who preached the power of myth in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic, the scholars above subscribed more to the view of cultural hierarchy confirmed in Western evolutionary theory. In this context, the “backward” and “savage” myth gradually merged into the concept of superstition.

The claim that clearly articulated that both myth and legend should be considered superstition came from a group of folklore researchers at Sun Yat-sen University in the late 1920s. The term “folklore” was originally established by the British scholar W.J. Thoms in the mid-19th century and was later developed as a subject, the research objects and methodology of which were closely related to cultural anthropology. Folklore was introduced to China around the 1920s and was mainly led by Zhou Zuoren 周作人, Gu Jiegang 顾颉刚, Zhong Jingwen 钟敬文, Chang Hui 常惠, Rong Zhaozu 容肇祖 and others at Peking University. After the Northern Expedition in 1926, a number of scholars at Peking University went south to Sun Yat-sen University in order to rebuild the subject of folklore.⁶ Rong Zhaozu’s book *Superstition and Legend (Mixin yu chuanshuo 迷信与传说)* was amongst one of the most typical works in the folklorist group to insist that myth and legend were superstition. When *Superstition and Legend* was published in 1929, Rong was actively taking part in the construction of folklore studies in Guangzhou, and his book belonged to the “Folklore Society Series” (Minsuxuehui congshu 民俗学会丛书) at Sun Yat-sen University. The work was a compilation of articles written

4 The theory of survivals was originally put forward by the British anthropologist E.B. Tylor. In his book *The Primitive Culture*, Tylor pointed out that some ancient customs lost their utility and integrated rituals but partly continued in modern society. He claimed these continuing customs as survivals. Tylor’s theory of survivals was based on the framework of linear evolutionism and the division of the civilized stage and the primitive stage of human history.

5 For example, Huang Shi. *Mythological Studies (Shenhua yanjiu 神话研究)*, Kaiming Bookstore, 1927, pp.2-9; Xie Liuyi 谢六逸. *Mythology ABC (Shenhuaxue ABC 神话学 ABC)*, The World Publishing Company, 1928, pp.32-59; Lin Huixiang. *Mythology (Shenhua lun 神话论)*, The Commercial Press, 1933, pp.1-20.

6 On the construction of Chinese modern folklore, see Shi Aidong 施爱东. *Initiatives for Creating a New Discipline: Advocacy, Management, and Decline of Modern Chinese Folkloristics (Changli yimen xinxueke: Zhongguo xiandai Minsuxue de guchui, jingying he zhongluo 倡立一门新学科：中国现代民俗学的鼓吹、经营和中落)*, Beijing: China Social Science Press, 2011.

in different periods, but the title of "superstition and legend" demonstrated the general theme of the author's discussion. In *Superstition and Legend*, Rong defined folk legends as superstition in a clear manner. He declared that the purpose of his writing was to break mythical superstitions through professional research: "We should study folklore when facing various bodies of knowledge, and we should focus more on the study of superstitions in folklore. Specifically, we should pay attention to Chinese superstition because of the convenience of materials." (Rong 3) This "convenience of materials" urged Rong Zhaozu to turn his eyes to myth and legend recorded in classical Chinese and folk literature. As far as he was concerned, his duty was to break the superstitious elements contained in Chinese myth and contribute to modern China's anti-superstition enterprise.

Why did Rong Zhaozu take myth and legend as superstition? How did he achieve the goals of breaking mythical superstition via academic research? Rong's article "Analysis of Legends" (Chuanshuo de fenxi 传说的分析) in the book clearly revealed his understanding. He wrote as follows:

After myth and legend formed, people would take the attached meaning in growth and evolution as the origin of things. If you denied him, he would ask you in turn, 'Why did it exist, exactly?' If you could not answer him, you failed to break his superstitious belief, and people would insist that the attached meaning was hard evidence. (Rong 139)

The paragraph above actually exposed two meanings in Rong's understanding of myth and superstition. First, in his opinion, it was due to superstition that people believed in "attached meanings" in the formation of myth and legend. The attached meanings he mentioned particularly referred to the stories of gods and miracles that gradually appeared in the circulation and growth of stories. Rong criticized that most people were so convinced of the supernatural figures and magic conveyed in myth that they were not aware that the objects they worshiped were fictitious and accrued throughout generations. Second, Rong Zhaozu pointed out the way to break free from the mythical superstition popular with the people. He claimed to expose the origins and evolution of myth and legend to people in order to debunk the sacred gods in stories. He proposed in the preface of his book that intellectuals should "seek gods' sources and histories, and honestly describe their original and true faces." (Rong 2) Here, Rong emphasized the responsibility of scholars and hoped that academic practices would play crucial roles in anti-superstition political and cultural movements.

Rong Zhaozu's perception of mythical superstition was once representative and prevailing in folklore studies. Like Rong, a majority of folklore scholars consciously resorted to modern research methods as the way to debunk mythical superstition.⁷ Here, we should not take the modern academic practice conducted by Chinese intellectuals merely as their weapon of choice to eliminate existing mythical superstitions, but more as the fundamental way to construct the meaning of myth and superstition in modern China. In other words, the modern methodology that folklore intellectuals adopted led them to regard myth as superstition and to destroy the mythical belief which was popular amidst the people.

Chinese intellectuals' construction of mythological knowledge was not completely invented by themselves but was the product of transcultural contact with the West and Japan in the 1920s. Chinese scholars, including Rong Zhaozu, locally appropriated the modern philology approach established in European and American disciplines. Some of them had direct exposure to Western knowledge, and some used Japan as an intermediary. In this atmosphere, deconstructing supernatural miracles in myth based on textual research that connected Western and East Asian scholarship became a global trend. This transcultural practice urged China to construct a significant conception of the myth and anti-superstition discourses. The next section of this paper elaborates on the transcultural experience in the China of the 1920s.

2. Evidential Research in the Transcultural Context: The Construction of Mythological and Superstitious Knowledge in Modern China

As mentioned in the previous section, Rong Zhaozu claimed to “describe the original and true faces of gods in various myths and legends” via academic research. Specifically, he resorted to the method of evidential research (kaozheng 考证) to analyze texts recording myth and legend, in the process of which he revealed the historical evolution of gods and miracles to tell people how they were fabricated and added in throughout generations.

Take Rong Zhaozu's article “Evidential Research of the God of Erlang” (Erlang shen kao 二郎神考) as an example. Rong compiled various ancient Chinese records on the God of Erlang and traced the historical development of how the image of the god was formed. Based on textual research, he asserted that the archetype of the God of Erlang was the historical figure named Li Bing 李冰, the guardian of Shu (Shu Shou 蜀守), originally recorded in *The Historical Records* (*Shi Ji* 史记) and *Books*

7 The scholars will be discussed in Section 2.

of the Later Han Dynasty (*Houhan Shu* 后汉书). Over time, there were different myths and legends about Li Bing killing the god of the river before the Southern and Northern Dynasties, which began to mold Li Bing into a god (Rong 141-171). It was Rong's own opinion that the God of Erlang could be traced to the historical records of Li Bing, which contradicted other scholars' related research. For instance, Hu Shi 胡适 disagreed with Rong's conclusion and advocated that the historical figure Yang Ji 杨戩 was the prototype of the God of Erlang (Hu *Correspondence* 32-33). Although Hu Shi and Rong Zhaozu did not reach an agreement on any specific conclusion, the methodology of textual research and the intention to reveal the historical origin of the Erlang God were common points for them. Both of them attempted to deconstruct the sacredness of the god Erlang that was worshipped by the people.

The method of evidential research or textual research practiced by Rong Zhaozu and Hu Shi was widely popular amongst folklore scholars centered around Sun Yat-Sen University in the late 1920s. They regarded the research methodology as an effective way to construct anti-superstition discourse. Rong Zhaozu's practice completely followed Gu Jiegang, who was the central researcher and organizer in the subject of folklore at that time. Rong had studied under Gu at Peking University before he engaged in folklore research at Sun Yat-sen University.

As Rong Zhaozu's teacher, Gu Jiegang showed a more prominent tendency for historical textual research since he published in 1924 his famous article "The Transformation of the Story of Lady Meng Jiang" (*Mengjiangnv gushi de zhuanbian* 孟姜女故事的转变) in *The Ballad Weekly* (*Geyao zhoukan* 歌谣周刊). This publication was a sensation in folklore academia and encouraged Gu to continue a series of studies on the historical legends of Lady Meng Jiang in the next few years, which were finally compiled as *Lady Meng Jiang Story Research Collection* (*Mengjiangnv gushi yanjiuji* 孟姜女故事研究集) and published as one of the Folklore Society's book series of Sun Yat-sen University. In the study of Lady Meng Jiang legends, Gu Jiegang quoted extensive materials and a solid body of literary knowledge in order to verify how the legendary figure of Lady Meng Jiang originated from Qiliang's 杞梁 wife recorded in the *Chronicle of Zuo* (*Zuo zhuan* 左传) (Gu *Mengjiang* 1). He emphasized that the historical evolution and geographical spread of the historical figure's story promoted the formation of the transcendental myth and the custom of worship in the Lady Meng Jiang Temple. Gu Jiegang denied the essential existence of the folk goddess of Lady Meng Jiang by tracing her origin and evolution, which achieved a similar purpose of debunking mythical superstitions, just as Rong Zhaozu clearly advocated later.

Gu Jiegang's research on mythology and legend had a great impact, especially after he went to Sun Yat-sen University. He made use of the periodical *Folklore Weekly* (*Minsu zhoukan* 民俗周刊), founded in 1928, in order to inspire numerous colleagues to follow him. Beyond those by Rong Zhaozu, many other articles imitating Gu Jiegang's research style appeared in *Folklore Weekly*. For example, the article titled "Textual Research of Fujian Three Gods" (Fujian sanshen kao 福建三神考) by Wei Yinglin 魏应麟 was a distinguished achievement among contemporaneous articles, and it was also compiled into a monograph and included in the book series of the Folklore Society together with Gu Jiegang's and Rong Zhaozu's books. In his book, Wei performed textual research on the mythical figures of Lady Linshui 临水夫人, King Guo Sheng 郭胜王, and the Queen of Heaven 天后, who all originated in the Five Dynasties in Fujian (Wei 1-3). He emphasized the imaginary and fictitious components that were added to the mythical gods through multiple generations by analyzing historical documents. For example, Wei collected ancient records and folk stories to compare Lady Linshui's different names, birthdates, birthplaces, ties of consanguinity and life legends found across different materials in order to reveal how the goddess was constructed throughout generations (Wei 6-26). This demonstration of historical evolution was consistent with Rong's research of the God of Erlang and Gu's research of Lady Meng Jiang.

Jiang Shaoyuan 江绍原 was another noteworthy intellectual working at Sun-Yat-sen University in the late 1920s. Differing from most scholars, who consciously followed Gu Jiegang's scholarly advocacy, Jiang had no direct association with Gu or the scholarly subject of folklore, but worked in the study of English; however, he went on to have abundant achievements in folklore and mythological studies. He began to publish articles on Chinese rituals and customs in modern Chinese journals, including *Yu Si* 语丝, *Morning Supplement* 晨报副刊, *Meng Jin* 猛进, *New Women* 新女性, *Literature Weekly* 文学周报, and others, since he went to the University of Chicago to study comparative religions in the early 1920s. His article "The Ninth Ministry of Etiquette Document: Hairs and Claws" (Libu wenjian zhi jiu: fa, xu, zhua 礼部文件之九: 发、须、爪), which was completed after discussions with Zhou Zuoren in 1926, was the original copy of his famous work *Hairs and Claws—The Superstition Surrounding Them* (*Fa , Xu , Zhua: Guanyu tamen de mixin* 发须爪——关于它们的迷信). In addition, books such as *Study on Ancient Chinese Travel* (*Zhongguo gudai luxing zhi yanjiu* 中国古代旅行之研究) and *Chinese Customs and Superstitions* (*Zhongguo lisu mixin* 中国礼俗迷信) were his representative achievements on superstitious studies; the former was the monograph

first published by Shanghai Commercial Press in 1935, and the latter was compiled by the contemporary folklorist Wang Wenbao 王文宝 based on Jiang's syllabus in the 1920s (Jiang established courses on superstitious studies at Sun Yat-sen and Peking University). Compared with Gu Jiegang's historiographic and folkloric propositions, Jiang's mythological research was embodied in his general framework of superstitious study and more directly related to anti-superstition discourse. He wished to eradicate superstition in modern China by establishing systematic knowledge of superstition.

Jiang Shaoyuan adopted social customs and rituals as his research objects, which included extensive phenomena such as wedding activities, fertility, healing of diseases, exorcising evil spirits, and ancient adult rituals. His research was basically limited to collecting and summarizing traditional Chinese literature rather than direct fieldwork, which inevitably involved various myths recorded in Chinese historical documents. For example, in the book *Study on Ancient Chinese Travel*, Jiang analyzed the historical meanings of Chinese myths recorded in *Shanhaijing* 山海经, *Huainanzi* 淮南子, *Baopuzi* 抱朴子, and *Taiping Yulan* 太平御览 to verify how jade worn by ancient Chinese people before the Han Dynasty served as a travel amulet during journeys (Jiang *Travel* 1-32). This reflected his typical evidential research concentrated on his religious study, in which Jiang sketched the historical evolution of mythical gods in religions. For instance, Jiang's monograph *The Death of Gautama* (*Qiaodamo di si* 乔答摩底死) was based on textual research on historical documents recording the Buddha Shakyamuni to reveal the deification of Shakyamuni that occurred in later generations. He intended to erase the religious mystery of experience and to destroy people's "superstition" of Buddhism. This method was similar to that of Gu Jiegang (Jiang *Gautama*-II).

Chinese intellectuals' textual research on myth mentioned above was constructed in the scholarly convergence of the West and East Asia. The evidential research of historical literature dominated in the modern disciplines of anthropology, comparative mythology, and religious studies since the late 19th century in Europe and America, and came to China in the 1920s and motivated Chinese intellectuals to compile local mythical and religious literature. This cross-regional philological flow merged with the well-known academic movement of compiling information about national heritage (Zhengli guogu 整理国故) vigorously promoted by Hu Shi, Gu Jiegang, Fu Sinian 傅斯年, and others in China at the same time. Scholars from this group attempted to modernize the Chinese scholarly tradition of textual research by combining local and Western philology. Most of them had close contact with scholars who performed mythological and

religious studies because of their common interest in ancient Chinese literature. Like Gu, who typically showed the confluence of the two practices of compiling studies on national heritage and mythology. For Jiang, although he did not exactly promote compiling information about national heritage, he kept communicating with the group and received recognition from the movement's leader Hu Shi, who wrote the preface for Jiang's *The Death of Gautama*.

Starting from the trend of compiling information about national heritage, Chinese intellectuals' connection with overseas philology and mythology represented a global network of textual research that linked different cultural areas together. In this context, Chinese intellectuals' mythological study became a part of the global trend, although their writings and materials seemed extremely local and traditional. Precisely due to being placed within this common global trend, Chinese intellectuals always demonstrated the similarity of scholarly practice. Similar to Gu Jiegang and Jiang Shaoyuan, they had scarce direct mutual contact or common learning experiences with the others, but showed a consistent tendency for textual research on myth and the construction of anti-superstition discourse during the 1920s. My paper focuses next on the two representative scholars Gu and Jiang in order to present their respective transcultural practices. They were on specifically different cross-cultural paths in their construction of "superstitious myth(s)".

Jiang Shaoyuan was directly exposed to British and American philological scholarship by studying comparative religion in the United States and translating relevant works as part of his major. Before going to the United States, he began to translate and introduce famous Western scholarship on Asian religions, the most important of which was William Rhys Davids's *Early Buddhism*.⁸ Perhaps Davids is little known today, but at the end of the 19th century, he was famous in the fields of Oriental Studies and comparative religion in the UK. He was not only skillful at Indian religious studies, with mastery of Sanskrit and Pali, but also participated in the founding of institutions at The British Academy and the London School for Oriental Studies (Wickremeratne 143-160). More importantly, Davids's associate colleague Max Muller was one of the founders of comparative religion, and established textual research of religious documents with the principle of historical evolutionism. In his representative work *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, Muller claimed that textual research of religious documents was a scientific practice, which was regarded by him as the way to revolt against orthodox theology (Muller 26-27).

8 The translation of *Early Buddhism* was published on *Journal of New Tide* (*Xinchao* 新潮) in issue 5, vol. 2 in 1920 and issue 1, vol. 3 in 1921.

Jiang Shaoyuan's translation led him to have knowledge of Davids's and even Muller's philology. He largely followed Davids's research pattern and studied Pali and Sanskrit at the University of Chicago. The original topic of his research proposal was, "What is the relationship between the Ahambu Sutra in the Chinese Tripitaka (Xiaocheng 小乘) and the Pali Tripitaka?" However, the thesis title was finally changed to "Comparative Study of the Nirvana Sutra" after he discovered that the Japanese modernist scholar Masaharu Azizakizi 姉崎正治 had already completed a similar research project (Geng 46-47). While training in textual research from Asian and comparative religious studies, Jiang Shaoyuan emphasized the historical evolution of Buddhism to deconstruct the absolute doctrine of religious belief and even more radically claimed Buddhism to be a superstition. He clearly mentioned "superstitious" Buddhism in a letter to Hu Shi and Jiang Menglin 蒋梦麟 when he was in Chicago, in which he said: "I could not help but realize the heavy responsibility on the shoulders of modern scholars who have a slight historical and critical vision! I should work hard to help ordinary Chinese people who are superstitious of Buddhism and contribute to the Chinese academics that have just become more prominent." (Geng 47) The idea of "superstitious Buddhism" encouraged Jiang to complete his writing *The Death of Gautama* mentioned above, and his understanding of myth was based on his religious study.

Jiang Shaoyuan defined religion and myth as superstition, taking inspiration from scholarship in the United Kingdom and the United States; however, he made a distinct transformation of Muller's and Davids's discourse during his learning and imitation. For example, in *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, Muller emphasized the study of original documents to establish the subject of "Science of Religion": "A Science of Religion, based on impartial and truly scientific comparison of all, or at all events, of the most important religions of mankind, is now only a question of time... It becomes therefore the duty of those who have devoted their life to the study of the principal religions of the world in their original documents, and who value religion and revere it in whatever form it may present itself." (Muller 26-27) However, Muller's Science of Religion was aimed at renewing the methodology of theology by taking historical philology as the modern scientific approach; he did not directly equate religion with superstition, which was similar to Davids's academic practice. Jiang Shaoyuan absorbed their research pattern into his grand plan on the construction of anti-superstition discourse to participate in the enterprise of modern cultural enlightenment in China. He further developed the "scientific" standpoint claimed by Muller and Davids to shape the dualistic framework of "science versus superstition", thereby defining his research

objects (religion and myth) as superstition. Jiang's reinterpretation and radical ideas even astonished the professors at his university, as he recalled in a letter: "When I was in Chicago, I once wrote an essay that surprised our chief faculty. In this essay, I said that the clergymen from no matter which school would have no job one day. At that time or even before, we would gather scientists, philosophers, sociologists, and artists together to discuss how to beautify, develop, and adjust our personal and social lives." (Sun 3) Jiang's adaptation of the comparative religious concept contributed to the construction of knowledge of the "superstitious myth(s)" in modern China.

Gu Jiegang presented two different points from Jiang Shaoyuan in regard to the knowledge framework and transcultural experience of myth. First, Gu and his followers paid attention to mythological studies in the historiographical framework of discernment of ancient history (*Gushi bian* 古史辨), but not religious studies. Taking Wei Yinglin as mentioned above as an example, he conducted his textual research "Fujian Three Gods" mainly for the purpose of compiling the history of the Five Dynasties in Fujian (Wei 1). Gu's idea of historiography inherited the "New Historiography" (*Xin shixue* 新史学) advocated by Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 in the late Qing Dynasty, which followed the general principle of questioning the authenticity of the events recorded in ancient history. Gu Jiegang elaborated upon the meaning of "discernment of ancient history" in his first volume of *Discernment of Ancient History* published in 1926:

[On the discernment of ancient history] First, it was necessary to evidentially study where the facts in the false historiography came from and how they changed. Second, it was necessary to evidentially study how the historical events were talked about by various individuals and list all their words to compare just like a lawsuit trial. This would reveal people's lies. Third, although the historiographical counterfeiters held different opinions from each other, they followed the same method. The stories in the plays were different, but the rules of the plays were the same. We could also determine their cases of counterfeiting (Gu *Discernment* 43).

In the process of discerning false historiography, the practice of "discernment of ancient history" included the discernment of myth that were often mixed in ancient history. One of Gu's most famous studies involved textual research on the Chinese historical ancestor "Yu" 禹. He boldly proposed that Yu, who was widely known in the myth of Dayu 大禹's water management, was actually an animal cast on nine

tripods (Jiu Ding 九鼎). Gu asserted that it was gradually depicted as a person in the later legends and was incorporated in the pedigree of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors (Gu *Discernment* 118-127).

Second, Gu Jiegang had no direct contact with Western academia like Jiang Shaoyuan but was involved with the more complicated and abundant West-East interactive network. Gu never studied abroad or translated Western works, and he was reluctant to acknowledge the influence of Western Sinology or Japan's Chinese Studies,⁹ which made his connection to European and American scholarship to be vaguer and more indirect. Nevertheless, as a junior student deeply impacted by Zhang Taiyan and as a positive responder to Hu Shi's call for compiling information on national heritage, Gu's textual research inevitably included features from the West and Japan: Zhang Taiyan's creation of national studies was based on the academic system of Chinese Studies established in Japan in the late 19th century, while Hu Shi's advocacy of compiling information about national heritage was directly inspired by his sixteen days of immersion in Dunhuang literature compiled by French sinologists (Hu *Heritage* 117).

The School of Chinese Studies of the Research Institute (Yanjiusuo guoxuemen 研究所国学门) at Peking University, where Gu Jiegang participated in building the subject of folklore in the early 1920s, was built in the entanglement between national studies and overseas Sinology. The institution situated Gu Jiegang in a network of knowledge connecting Europe, Japan and China. A majority of the leading figures in the school were the disciples of Zhang Taiyan, including Shen Yinmo 沈尹默, Qian Xuanton 钱玄同, Shen Jianshi 沈兼士, Zhu Xizu 朱希祖, Zhou Zuoren 周作人, and Huang Kan 黄侃, who formed a scholarly group that could not disentangle itself from the existant Japanese style of historically textual research. Additionally, Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, who strongly supported the School of Chinese Studies, was directly interested in Europe, especially French Sinology. Cai had already pointed out the popular phenomenon in Western countries a year before the establishment of the School of Chinese Studies, and he said, "For the ancient civilization of China, Western countries are now engaged in collecting classical Chinese literature for their research. On the one hand, we should pay attention to the import of Western civilization; on the other hand, we should attach importance to the export of our civilization." (Cai 423) In 1931, a course guide for the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at Peking University summarized the achievements of the School of Chinese Studies at Peking University since the 1920s. The course guide

9 In the first volume of *Discernment of Ancient History*, Gu only provided Chinese scholarly resources for his historiography of doubting antiquity.

indicated that modern Chinese intellectuals' historical textual research was directly influenced by European Sinology and Japan's Chinese studies:

In recent decades, there have been so-called sinologists in many countries who study the knowledge of our country with a new vision and have made great contributions. Japan's achievements in so-called "Chinese Studies" based on the fields of writing, history, and geography have been particularly impressive during the past two to three decades. To be honest, in recent years, the promotion of the trend to compile our national heritage is somewhat inspired by this kind of Sinology or "Chinese Studies". (Li 329).

The School of Chinese Studies at Peking University set up five branches, namely, the "Ballad Research Association" (Geyao yanjiuhui 歌谣研究会), the "Ming and Qing Historical Materials Collection Association" (Mingqing Shiliao Zhenglihui 明清史料整理会), the "Archaeology Association" (Kaoguxuehui 考古学会), the "Customs Investigation Association" (Fengsu diaochahui 风俗调查会), and the "Dialect Investigation Society" (Fangyan diaochahui 方言调查会), all of which echoed the popular research fields of Sinology in the West and Japan. The school attracted eight world-renowned sinologists as the school's correspondent members around the 1920s, including Paul Pelliot, Marcel Granet, Ryu Imanishi, Sentaro Sawamura, K. Wulff, Therese P. Arnould, Richard Wilhelm, and Tanabe Hisao (Chen 83). Most of them were famous for their philological achievements with classical Chinese documents. Among them, the two French scholars Paul Pelliot and Marcel Granet are better known today, as they learned from the world-leading sinologist Emmanuel-Edouard Chavannes and published their many research achievements in France, Japan, and China. Compared with Granet, who subscribed more to the social theory of the Durkheim School, Pelliot inherited Chavannes's research style and published outstanding Dunhuang textual studies that spanned across extensive subjects in linguistics, geography, archaeology, and religion. Pelliot bestowed twenty papers to the School of Chinese Studies through Luo Zhenyu 罗振玉 in 1922,¹⁰ and one of his articles on Oriental paleolinguistics

10 "Donation of Books by Pelliot" (Boxihe xiansheng zengshu 伯希和先生赠书), *Peking University Daily Journal* (*Beijingdaxue rikan* 北京大学日刊), March 11th, 1922.

and history was translated by Wang Guowei 王国维 in 1923.¹¹ When Gu Jiegang took part in folklore studies during his Peking University period, he did not fully focus on the Ballad Research Association or any certain branch. Instead, he served as an assistant and secretary of the school to take the responsibility of publication and organization for all the branches (Chen 121). This experience equipped Gu with easy access to scholarly resources.

Although Gu Jiegang never definitely admitted to his contact with European and Japanese sinologists' research, he expressed familiarity with mainstream Sinology in Europe in the preface he wrote for Henri Maspero's *Mythological Legends in Shangshu* (*Légendes Mythologiques Dans le Chou King* 书经中的神话), which was translated into Chinese by Feng Yuanjun 冯沅君 in 1939 (Maspero 1-2). Maspero was another famous student of Chavannes and mainly engaged in Chinese historical research. In *Mythological Legends in Shangshu*, Maspero distinguished myth and legend in ancient Chinese history by tracing textual evolution and pointed out various fictitious figures, such as Yu 禹, Yi He 义和, and Gong Gong 共工. His methodology and research objects (especially about Yu) were highly consistent with Gu Jiegang's assertion of "Discernment of Ancient History" and his representative research on the Chinese figure of Yu. Gu Jiegang's textual research on ancient Chinese myth not only showed similarities to Maspero's and the corresponding sinologists at Peking University but also echoed other overseas orientalist who performed philological research on Yu. As early as the mid-19th century, James Legge tended to deny the historical existence of the three emperors Yao, Shun and Yu in ancient Chinese history in his translation of *Shangshu* 尚书. Afterward, an increasing number of sinologists proposed elaborating on the mythical and fictitious essence of the Three Emperors, particularly Yu, with the basic idea that myth and legend were mixed up with Chinese history. The noted sinologists Thomas W. Kingsmill, Chavanne, and Fryer joined in this relevant discussion (Wagner 457-461).

Japanese scholar Shiratori Kurakichi 白鸟库吉 was a crucial link between Gu Jiegang and Western sinologists. Shiratori was one of Japan's most foundational scholars devoted to Oriental historiography in the early 20th century and established the Tokyo School of Philology. He studied the mythology, linguistics, religions, and folklore of ancient China through the methodology of textual

11 Pelliot. "Recent Inventions and Conclusions in Eastern Palaeo-linguistics and History" (Jinri dongfang guyanyuxue ji shixue shang zhi faming yu qi jielun 近日东方古言语学及史学上之发明与其结论), trans., Wang Guowei, *Peking University Daily Journal* (*Beijingdaxue rikan* 北京大学日刊), March 16th, 17th, 19th, 20th, 1923.

research under the influence of his teacher Ludwig Riess, who followed the well-known German Oriental historian Leopold von Ranke (Tanaka 25). In this sense, Shiratori's research showed obvious imprints from Western sinologists. One of his most famous research aims was to propose that Yao, Shun, and Yu were fabricated after the Warring States period to propagate Confucianism (Shiratori 2-8). Gu Jiegang himself strongly denied having any connection with Shiratori; however, Hu Qiuyuan 胡秋原, a scholar from the generation after Gu Jiegang's, claimed that Gu's research and conclusion on Yu were influenced by Shiratori thanks to methodological introduction and inspiration by Qian Xuantong's 钱玄同 (Hu *Outline* 84). Actually, Gu Jiegang was inextricably linked with Shiratori in the scholarly context. Except for Qian Xuantong, who had read Shiratori while studying in Japan, the corresponding member in the School of Chinese Studies at Peking University, Ryu Imanishi, was a student of Shiratori (Tanaka 235).

Similar to Jiang Shaoyuan's transcultural practice, Gu Jiegang also shifted his approach on textual research. Gu did not directly construct the framework of superstitious studies or point to myth as superstition as Jiang did, but he emphasized the "fake" nature of the myth. This standpoint made him distinct from European sinologists, who mainly focused on the process of historical evolution without criticizing the myth as an untrue story. For example, in *Mythological Legends in Shangshu*, Maspero distinguished six flood myths in Shangshu, while Gu appealed for doubting the truth of Shangshu in his preface to the book. He said, "In the two to three thousand years from the Spring and Autumn Period to the Qing Dynasty, who had not regarded the book of Shangshu as the supreme bible? And who had not read the book of Shangshu as the true ancient history? [...] It proves that the book of Shangshu was a sacred book that should not be doubted. Unfortunately, in the hands of my generation, this dream can no longer be maintained. The surging trend of the times fills the world and strikes down any authoritative idol." (Maspero 1) Gu Jiegang's attitude toward the book of Shangshu obviously showed an awareness of the suspicion and rebellion that had been popular since the May Fourth New Culture Movement. He attached a fake nature to the myth recorded in the classics of ancient China, thereby overthrowing the sacred status of traditional idols. Gu Jiegang's transformation of European philology finally converged with the anti-superstition discourse of modern China. By defining Chinese myth as fake and false, Gu and his followers advised the people not to have faith in mythical gods or miracles.

3. Transcultural Politics: From Anti-superstition Knowledge to Political Regulation of Arts

Gu Jiegang's denial of Shiratori's influence reflected an interesting phenomenon in China's transcultural practice. Gu's vague attitudes toward Western and Japanese mythological knowledge not only stemmed from the transformation of knowledge or the intricate network of transcultural connections but also, more importantly, involved the politics of power across different nations.

The evolutionary principle of modern Western mythology originally emerged in the context of imperial colonial expansion in the 19th century. Johannes Fabian has revealed the colonial politics of the evolutionary framework used in European cultural anthropology in the 19th century—a subject that closely intersected with mythology—and assumed that the “universal time” constructed in linear evolutionary theory regarded non-European central regions or ethnic groups as the primitive and backward stage opposed to European patterns (Fabian 2-11). A similar idea of civilizational hierarchy in Western mythological scholarship also supported the ideology of politics, and it was further developed and modified in Japan. Shiratori adapted European colonial discourse into Japan's colonial system in East Asia in the early 20th century by appropriating Western methodology to establish historical knowledge of China.¹² The imperial ideology of Western and Japanese academia exposed Chinese intellectuals to political incorrectness when they were faced with knowledge. In this context, even though Chinese intellectuals attempted to modify colonial discourse in order to serve the national goal of self-enlightenment, they still risked being criticized once it was found to be related to imperial colonial knowledge. Liao Mingchun 廖名春 pointed out that Gu Jiegang denied his association with Shiratori out of worry over political incorrectness because Shiratori's debunking of Yao, Shun and Yu was a part of a knowledge system originating in Japan that sought to justify its invasion and destruction of China (Liao 127-128). This is one of the crucial reasons why Gu Jiegang and his disciples were resistant to admitting connections with Shiratori.

Gu Jiegang's case pushed us to rethink the limitation of the influence-acceptance study mode, which was ineffective in revealing the network of

12 Shiratori's textual philology made him take part in the historical and geographical surveys organized by Japan's South Manchuria Railway Co., Ltd. (南滿州鐵道株式會社) from 1908. The institution and its activities aimed to support Japan's colonial invasion in China and Korea by providing historical and geographical knowledge. (South Manchuria Railway Co., Ltd. *Historical Survey Report, Volume 1* 歷史調查報告第1卷. Maruzen 丸善株式會社, 1940, preface.)

knowledge construction in the 1920s in China. First, transcultural contact did not follow a single or linear path but rather presented entangled and sinuous links. The transcultural experience was full of misappropriation and deformation within the politics of power. These were the key reasons why some contemporary scholars emphasized the term transcultural or translingual practice instead of influence-acceptance study.¹³ Here, it is not so important for us to trace or criticize modern Chinese intellectuals' "original sin" rooted in the mythological knowledge in the West and Japan, but instead to pay attention to the transformation and reconstruction of imperial colonial knowledge when it came to China. Chinese intellectuals integrated mythological knowledge into the enterprise of national scientific enlightenment rather than coping with the idea of civilizational hierarchy. This process reshaped the discourse of colonial power and imperial ideology.

In fact, China's transcultural practice of Western mythological scholarship went far beyond Chinese intellectuals' academic achievements. Since the late 1920s, knowledge of "superstitious myth(s)" has intervened in the political control of Chinese literature and arts by the KMT government. With the establishment of the Nanjing KMT government in 1927, the government began to intensify the "political training" and regulation of social order throughout the country. In this atmosphere, the KMT government sought cooperation with folklore scholars at Sun Yat-sen University to renovate traditional Chinese culture and customs, in which local religions and mythical beliefs were attacked as superstitions that undermined social development. As Rebecca Nedostup pointed out, the Nanjing KMT government sought "nationalist secularism" through campaigns to destroy superstitions such as eradication or reforming of wealth-gathering temples, wasteful rituals, and parasitic clergy (Nedostup 4-16). In this anti-superstition context, the government's censure was aimed not only at social affairs such as ancestral temple customs but also at literary and artistic works that featured ghosts and gods. The academic knowledge that took myth as a superstition was appropriated by the government as political discourse for cultural and artistic control.

The folklore scholars at Sun Yat-sen University became involved in the practice of social regulation initiated by the Nanjing KMT government through the institution of the "Custom Reform Committee" (Fengsu gaige weiyuanhui 风俗改革委员会) established in 1929 in Guangzhou. The Custom Reform Committee was the official institution to implement the KMT's "political training," the core task of which was to "reform customs and break superstitions." (Custom Reform

13 As is put forward in Footnote 3.

Committee 3) It forbade and reformed various social customs in Guangzhou, including burning clothes and worshiping immortals on Chinese Valentine's Day, temple activities, the old calendar system, and divination and astrology. Although the committee's actions were mainly concentrated in the area of Guangzhou, its reform measures were widely carried out throughout the country at the same time. The Ministry of the Interior of the Nanjing KMT government formulated the "Outline of Customs Survey" and distributed it to all provinces in 1929 as the guide to investigate and improve social customs.¹⁴ All provinces responded to the call of the Ministry of the Interior. For example, Shanghai also managed temples and divination by issuing relevant legal documents such as "Measures for the Elimination of Superstition" (Pochu mixin banfa 破除迷信办法, 1928) and "Regulations of Registration of Divination and Astrology in Shanghai Special City" (Shanghai tebieshi bushi xingxiang dengji zhangcheng 上海特别市卜噬星相登记章程, 1929).¹⁵ In this context, the Folklore Society centered around Sun Yat-sen University was enticed to participate in political and social work and apply their academic research to governmental regulation. On its second regular meeting in 1929, the Folklore Society officially selected three scholars, Huang Weifu 黄伟夫, Rong Zhaozu, and Wei Yinglin, to attend the Custom Reform Committee and agreed on the anti-superstition work of banning fortune-telling and divination.¹⁶ Rong and Wei were the scholars contributing to the construction of mythological knowledge mentioned in the previous sections. Rong supported the cooperation between folklore studies and social reform. He published the article "Custom Reform and Folklore Research" (Gaijie fengsu yu minsu yanjiu 改革风俗与民俗研究) in the official municipal anthology *Custom Reform Series* (Fengsu gaijie congkan 风俗改革丛刊), which emphasized that folklore study could both promote and benefit from the social practice of reforming customs (Rong 26). In the political practice of renovating customs and breaking superstitions from the late 1920s, the

14 "Improvement of Morals and Manners" (Fenghua zhi gailiang 风化之改良), *Statistics of Political Achievements under the Guidance of the Chinese Kuomintang (Zhongguo Guomindang zhidao xia zhi zhengzhi chengji tongji 中国国民党指导下之政治成绩统计)*, (3)1933, p.31.

15 "Regulations of Registration of Divination and Astrology in Shanghai Special City", *Compilation of Municipal Regulations of Shanghai Special City, Vol. Two (Shanghai Tebieshi shizheng fagui huibian, Vol. 2 上海特别市市政法规汇编·第2卷)*, Shanghai Municipal Government, 1929, pp.160-161.

16 *Overview of the Institute of Linguistics and History at National Sun Yat-sen University (Guoli Zhongshandaxue yuyan lishi yanjiusuo gailan 国立中山大学语言历史学研究所概览)*, The Institute of Linguistics and History at National Sun Yat-sen University, 1930, pp. 81-82.

Nanjing KMT government also included literary and artistic works as regulating objects. Compared with other artistic forms, traditional Chinese operas were more closely related to supernatural and mythical thoughts and stories due to their historical origin of the village ceremony for community sacrifice. The wizards in the villages used witchcraft rituals to invite the gods to come down to earth, the process of which integrated various elements such as dance, singing, etiquette, and dialogue, and gradually formed the entertainment performance and operas.¹⁷ Due to the tradition of deity worship and temple sacrifices, various local operas in China frequently expressed mythical stories or ideas, which led them to be regarded as superstitious activities that should be strictly censored and reformed by the government.

It is worth noting that although Chinese folklore scholars constructed the discourse of “superstitious myth(s)”, they had not simply equated the literary and artistic works that expressed myth to superstitious activities. Scholars such as Rong Zhaozu, who directly took part in governmental reform work, did not target the literature or the arts; nevertheless, the Nanjing KMT government applied their academic knowledge to the political policy of forbidding operas. It had been a long historical tradition for Chinese officials to enforce the political regulation of “dangerous” operas because of the social effects of gathering a crowd and inciting strong emotions. In the early years of the Republic of China, the Beiyang government partly continued the practice of forbidding operas before modern times and took it as an effective measure to control social order. However, the Beiyang government mainly focused on pornographic performances and did not list operas with supernatural and mythical elements as superstitious performances that should be banned.¹⁸ It was not until the formation of the knowledge of myth in the late

17 On the relation between Chinese traditional operas and Rural Ceremony for Sacrifice, see Tanaka Issei. *History of Chinese Operas* (Zhongguo xiju shi 中国戏剧史), trans., Yun Guibin 云贵彬, Yu Yun 于允, Beijing: Beijing Broadcasting Institute Press, 2002; *Patriarchal Clans and Operas of China* (Zhongguo de zongzu yu xiju 中国的宗族与戏剧), trans., Qian Hang 钱杭, Ren Yubai 任余白, Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 1992.

18 Before the 1920s, the Beiyang government barely paid attention to the theatrical performance of ghosts and gods in their governance of operas but mainly focused on pornographic operas and activities. For example, the Ministry of Education and Peking police banned the performance of traditional Chinese operas with pornographic and violent content and forbade actors and actresses from performing on the same stage in the years 1916, 1917, and 1920. Refer to: Second Historical Archives of China (Zhongguo di'er lishi dang'an guan 中国第二历史档案馆), ed., *Collection of Archives and Materials of the History of the Republic of China, Part 1, Vol.5 Culture* (Zhonghua minguoshi dang'an ziliao huibian 中华民国史档案史料汇编·第五辑), pp. 150-174.

1920s that the Nanjing government began to expand the scope of censorship and to forbid a large number of mythical operas.

Soon after the Nanjing KMT government was established, a majority of provinces throughout the nation set up institutions of opera censorship to echo the trend of custom reform. Under this system of surveillance, theatrical performances, including a wide range of opera types such as the national opera in Peking and various local operas, had to be registered for monitoring. Forbidden operas that were considered superstitious were often adapted from the myths recorded in ancient Chinese literature. Not only did they have prominent images of ghosts and immortals, but they also more or less implied the meaning of folk religious beliefs. Take the province of Zhejiang, for example. The Zhejiang Provincial Committee requested suspending the performance of sixteen Zhejiang Peking operas in 1928, which were criticized as “popular old operas that slandered and advocated superstitions, which hindered the progress of revolutionary construction.”¹⁹ Among the sixteen operas, there were six pieces that presented obviously mythical stories, including *Split Mountain to Save Mother* (Pishan jiumu 劈山救母), *New Bull Palace* (Xin douniu gong 新斗牛宫), *River Yinyang* (Yinyanghe 阴阳河), *Steal Immortal Grass* (Dao xiancao 盗仙草), *Explore Mountain Yin* (Tan Yinshan 探阴山) and *Seven Star Light* (Qixing Deng 七星灯). For instance, in the opera *River Yinyang*, Shanxi businessman Zhang Maoshen 张茂深 and his wife offended the Moon Palace due to their having sex while drunk during the Mid-Autumn Festival, which caused Zhang’s wife to lose her life. Zhang sought for his wife in the netherworld, and they finally encountered each other by River Yinyang. The opera featured folk Daoist mythical gods and elements (Tao 301).

A majority of the banned operas mentioned above were banned again in 1934 when the New Life Movement was launched. In this national trend propagating discipline and social order, the governmental regulation of traditional Chinese operas was further intensified. The Nanjing Opera Committee forbade 108 pieces of Ping opera as soon as it started censoring work,²⁰ and the bans on mythical operas affected PRC cultural policy after 1949. The opera *Red Plum Pavilion* (Hongmei ge 红梅阁) on the banned list was a typical case. The traditional Chinese opera *Red Plum Pavilion* originated from the legend of the same title written by Zhou Chaojun 周朝俊 in the Ming Dynasty, and later, the story became popular in various types

19 “Banned Opera in Zhejiang” (Zhejiang jinyan zhi jümü 浙江禁演之剧目), *Small Daily* (*Xiao Ribao* 小日报), August 9th, 1928.

20 “List of Banned Operas in the Capital” (Shoudu jinxi yilan 首都禁戏一览), *Film and Opera* (*Ying yu xi* 影与戏), Vol.1, (10)1937, p.158.

of operas with different titles, such as “Red Plum Notes” (Hongmei Ji 红梅记, Sichuan Opera), “Li Hui Niang” (李慧娘, Henan Opera), and “You Hu Yin Pei” (游湖阴配, Peking Opera). The opera combined the two storylines of the female ghost Li and the student Pei Yuchun 裴禹春. After Li was killed by her powerful husband Jia Sidao 贾似道, she turned into a ghost to help Pei escape from Jia’s persecution (Wang 496-497). The story expressed the folk desire to redress an injustice by means of ghostly magic, which went beyond the meaning of mythical and magical beliefs, although it still maintained a mythical prototype such as revival from Yin 阴 to Yang 阳. However, the *Red Plum Pavilion* did not escape the fate of being banned in the severe atmosphere of social purification by the KMT party, and it was still illegal after 1949. In the construction of socialist literature and art in the PRC in the 1950s, various operas of the *Red Plum Pavilion* with ghost images were regarded as superstitious, and transcendent or supernatural elements were required to be cut out in performances.²¹ Thus, this knowledge regarding “superstitious myth(s)” constructed by Chinese intellectuals in the 1920s was continuously appropriated and modified within the political discourse and governmental practice of the times.

Conclusion

This paper traces the origin of modern China’s conception of myth as a superstition by addressing the transcultural experience of mythological knowledge in the 1920s-1930s. The modern Western disciplines featuring textual research established a new understanding of myth at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. In the practice of disciplines, information on the historical formation and evolution of the myth was compiled, and the power of mythical beliefs was revealed. Modern mythological knowledge from the West quickly spread to Asian academia, and Chinese intellectuals also participated in the practice of mythological study in this global wave of textual research. Chinese modern folklore scholars further developed the conception of myth in Western scholarship and directly equated myth to superstition in the context of a new national cultural enlightenment. The transformation of knowledge led myth to be the target of anti-superstition

21 For the fate and reform of ghost drama *Li Huiniang* in the 1950s PRC, please refer to: Lianhong Zhang. *Cultivation of the Soul: Research on the Reform of Chinese Traditional Operas in New China*, Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2013, pp.133-171; Maggie Greene. *Resisting Spirits: Drama Reform and Cultural Transformation in the People’s Republic of China*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2019, pp.47-84.

movements and even laid a foundation for the governmental regulation of literature and the arts in modern China. With the conception of myth as a superstition, the Nanjing KMT government began to censor and ban traditional operas featuring mythical performances as a significant way to reform social customs in the late 1920s.

The transcultural itinerary outlined in this research involved multiple interactions and transformations, including from the West to China and from academic practice to governmental politics. This process not only generated the modification of mythological concepts but also accompanied changes in political ideology. Chinese scholars weakened the meaning of the civilizational hierarchy conveyed from European mythological study, and they converted Western imperial discourse into a national cultural resource that benefited scientific enlightenment. However, with the establishment of the Nanjing KMT government, mythological knowledge of cultural enlightenment became part of a political discourse for national governance and control. The transcultural practice revealed in this research led us to reconsider the suppressed mythical experience in modern Chinese literature and the arts.

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