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## Mythical Animals as Representations of the Basic Ideas of Chinese Philosophy

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*This paper offers an original interpretation of the images of Chinese mythical animals selected from "The Book of Mountains and Seas". The author interprets the images as representations of the basic principles of Chinese philosophy and assumes that these supernatural creatures reconstitute a symbolic zoomorphic model of the world. The paper also analyzes the Chinese characters representing mythical animals. This analysis reveals the divine nature of these mythical animals, their ability to change form, and their close connection with the spirits of the dead.*

*Keywords: Chinese mythology, "The Book of Mountains and Seas", mythical animals, Chinese characters, graphic representations of mythical animals, symbolic model of the world.*

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At present, the research study of myth, a cultural phenomenon common to all mankind, mainly concerns the comprehension of its spiritual meaning. In the wide philosophical sense, myth is a mental reality, where the symbolic model of the world is reconstructed; and this model is defined as a product of the creative, spiritual activity of a human being. The significance of the research becomes evident if we accept the idea that myth as a method of modeling the world and, what is more important, the human being's attitude to the world reveals its universality, constant presence in the culture (human mind) since archaic times.

The main subject of this paper is the symbolic model of the world formed in ancient Chinese culture. The author touches upon particular elements of the model selected from the book called «山海经», «Shānhǎijīng», or «The Book of

Mountains and Seas» [8]. This is a not well known book whose creator (exact period about V<sup>th</sup> B.C.?) and the aim of the creating are still a mystery. It is usually characterized as a geographical work which represents a list of mountains, rivers, seas and lands; but, rich in content, it also provides information on mythical animals which inhabit the listed lands, magic herbs which grow there and wonderful minerals hidden deep in the listed mountains.

According to the recent interpretations, most of the mythical images of the book are identified with the natural objects and translated into scientific terms, zoological in particular [11]. We admit that such search for positive knowledge cannot give complete results and reveal the intentions of the ancient Chinese who composed «Shanghaijing». Apparently, the interpreting mind will find the

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book many-sided; depending on the viewpoint, it may be possible to disclose some of the facets, but not all of them at once.

This paper offers an original view on the mythical animals of «Shanghaijing» with relation to representation of philosophical concepts and ideas. The author takes into consideration that the Chinese “philosophical pattern”, which in essence has remained unchanged over two thousand years, is based on cosmological ideas [9]. These fundamental ideas are formulated in the paper in order to prove the substantial unity of the selected mythological forms.

Before illustrating these ideas by concrete examples, it should be noticed that we used a semiotic structural method, which allows regarding the figures of animals and birds (taken as a whole) as one of the symbolic strata of the myth system. By means of these animal characters an all-sufficient cosmological model can be constructed. The matter concerns the sacred, lofty model of the world, which, in accordance with the Chinese philosophy, is the great spiritualized Whole. Spirituality means that the space is filled with spirits of the dead. The spirits personify a flow of qi (气 qi), a vivifying cosmic substance which impregnates a universal nature. The ancients were in great need of feeling themselves a part of the Whole, in consequence, they yearned for being in touch with the spirits. The process of maintaining close contact with the spirits allowed them to overcome the limited nature of individual existence [5].

According to the Chinese idea of the spirits, the mentioned are devoid of constant corporeal form, and usually take the shape of animals. It follows from this that there is a kind of genetic relation between the animal figures and the representation of the dead. This relation has its traces in the attire of shamans who played a role of mediators in the ancient Chinese society: the attire included zoomorphous details such as horns,

feathers, tails and scales. The “half-human – half-animal” appearance showed the shamans inner transformation at the moment of contacting with the spirits. It can be illustrated by pictographic images of the shamans discovered among the oracle inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty (XVII<sup>th</sup> – XI<sup>th</sup> century B.C.), the divination writings made on tortoise-shells and animal bones [10]:



a man with a tail



a man wearing a feathered mask



a man in a fish-scaly attire



a man wearing an horned mask

Among the ornaments engraved on the pottery of the early Neolithic Age (about 5890 B.C.) archaeologists found out a sacral image of a shaman woman depicted as a fish with a human face whose mouth consists of two fish heads.



an anthropomorphic fish  
a ceramic dish of the Banpo Culture  
(5000 – 4500 B.C.)

The mysterious author, or authors, of “Shanghaijing” described a strange creature who is presumed to be a personification of the world in the primary stage of the creation. This sacciform creature named Hundun (混沌 hùndùn, chaos) represents the world as the entire living organism. The description says that Hundun is formless, its appearance is dim, it has no holes, but has wings and legs, which demonstrate the unity, inseparability of the Yang (陽 yáng) and the Yin (陰 yīn), the sky and the earth. Besides,

the ancient author emphasized Hundun's ability to sign and dance, this peculiarity implies creative power, action potency hidden inside the being. Hundun is an original formula of the universe, which expresses the idea of creating from within, but not from without, its own self. It seems that Hundun unrolls itself into an endless chain of zoomorphous creatures, which represent the multiformity of "the world of things".



Hundun,  
the bird-spirit

A crucial point of the cosmic process is the demarcation of the single Whole, the Great Absolute, and the origination of two creative forces – the Yang and the Yin. The polarity piercing through the world is symbolized by fish, snakes and birds, in view of the fact that they live in the opposite elements. Fish and snakes possess the yin qualities, they inhabit dark sea depths and are able to penetrate into the earth; birds possess the yang qualities, they belong to the element of air, the sky and the light. This archaic pair appears in the Neolithic paintings, for instance a bird holding a fish in its beak.

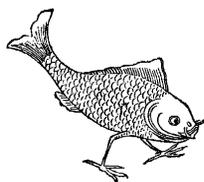


a bird and a fish  
a ceramic vessel of the Yangshao Culture  
(5000 – 3000 B.C.)

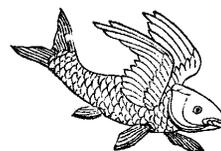
The mythical creatures, which combine distinguishing features of the described above natural beings, play the role of the interrelated yin-yang pair. For example, the following

supernatural agents have forms where the fish features are meshed with the bird features: a creature called Zao (𩺰) is a fish with bird claws and a creature called Hua (𩺰) is a fish with bird wings. Another curious creature named Ming (𩺰) is a four-winged snake. Their shapes each fix the principle of yin-yang metamorphoses, which in conformity with the Chinese philosophy rules over the creation.

The reciprocal conversion of two forces is defined as gradual and includes many intermediate stages forming a steady stream of metamorphoses of the world. This stream of metamorphoses is represented by the mythical animals, which contain elements of "the other". For example, a horned creature called Bo (駮) is characterized by the inclusion of tiger's features (paws and fangs) within the body of a horse. It is said that Bo uses tigers for food, thus it absorbs a part of its victim, which merges with its body. The idea of sacrifice is the essence of the world's motion, the essence of the conversion of the Yin into the Yang and the Yang into the Yin.



Zao,  
a fish with bird claws



Hua,  
a fish with wings



Ming,  
a four-winged snake



Bo,  
a horse with tiger paws

It seems that the idea of the balance (the harmonious merging) of two forces is illustrated by the dichotomous (bifurcated) creatures. One of them is a mythical bird Jian (鷦). It looks like

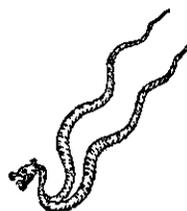
a wild duck, which consists of a green-feathered female and a red-feathered male; ducks each have one eye and one wing and can fly only together. Such creatures differ from androgynes, which represent the idea of the absolute merging.



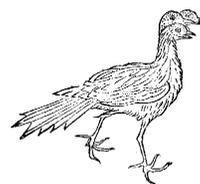
Jian,  
a bifurcated bird

The dual birth (双生 *shuāngshēng*) gives impetus to the creative process, which (in a quantitative sense) can be defined as a consecutive fission. In this case, a creature called Fei (蜚) with two bodies crowned by one head demonstrates the stage of “two” (二 *èr*, according to «道德经», «*Dàodéjīng*», or «*Taoteking*») and embodies the idea of splitting of the primeval Whole, which in the initial stage of the cosmic evolution is similar to a coiled up snake. After the stage of “two” goes the stage of “three” (三 *sān*), this number fixes the beginning of plurality and variety and correlates with a group of mythical creatures with triple parts of the body. For example, a bird named Qi (鶖) has three heads and six tails.

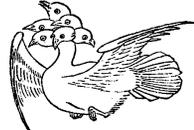
As the process of fission continues, the next stages can be identified with creatures such as a six-headed bird called Shu (鸙). Evidently, the finishing-point of the fission is represented by a fish named Luo (罗) with ten bodies crowned by one head; its monstrous look illustrates the moment of the creation which, according to Laotse (老子 *Laozi*), is called the birth of “ten thousand things” (万物 *wànwù*).



Fei,  
a snake with two bodies  
and one head



Qi,  
a bird with three heads  
and six tails



Shu,  
a six-headed bird



Luo,  
a fish with ten bodies  
but one head

Everything in the “unrolled” cosmos, as the Chinese perceive it, is organized in order, but at the same time a part of chaos lurks in this order and threatens with destruction, rolling the world back into the mixed Whole. It is possible to identify the idea of the chaos remains with the creatures with displaced parts of the body or the creatures missing some parts of the body. For example, a mythical ram Huan (羴) lacks a mouth (but it does not die of starvation), and the eyes of a mythical goat Bo (𪚗) are placed on the back.



Huan,  
a ram without a mouth



Bo,  
a goat with the eyes on the back

The zoo-anthropomorphic creatures of «*Shanhaijing*» denote a shaman who crossed a border of the material world and looked into the realm of spirits, a man who took part in “the great play of illusions” [4]. For example, a creature named crimson Ru (𪚗) has a creature with the fish features intertwined with the anthropomorphic features, that way it fixes the moment of integration of a human being and cosmic forces. It

is noticeable that Ru is analogous to the Neolithic anthropomorphic fish.



Ru,  
a fish with anthropomorphic features

This research leads to the conclusion that non-natural forms of the mythical animals reflect the course of nature, the peculiarities of their structures correlate with the principles of the universal structure.

The paper also formulates some ideas based on the analysis of the Chinese characters (logograms) representing the mythical animals. For the analysis, the author used the semiotic model offered by Charles Peirce [6]. As is well known, the Chinese characters reproduce the forms of the objects they designate. Taking into consideration the potentialities of representation of the selected characters, the author presumed that their graphic images should allude to the ideal nature of the denoted objects and, as a result, discovered the following representation patterns.

Pattern1. One mythical animal has more than one graphic representation. In that way, it is illustrated that a mythical creature cannot be put into a concrete single form. The Chinese dragon (龍 *lóng*) and the phoenix (鳳 *fèng*) are bright examples for this case. Each of the named creatures has its own pictograms (icons) found in the oracle bone inscriptions.



Long, the dragon  
with horns on its head, scales on its body  
and a long tail



Feng  
and a sailing vessel



Feng, the sun  
and the moon crescent



Feng, the phoenix  
with peacock-like feathers  
and a tuft

It seems that these pictograms were not enough for the ancient Chinese, who worshiped the animals and depicted them in many ways. The dragon is often accompanied with raindrops (龍 *lóng*). This complex image reveals the dragon's divine nature and refers to the idea of the master ruling over the clouds and the rain-water, which impregnates the earth, gives birth and makes the living things grow.



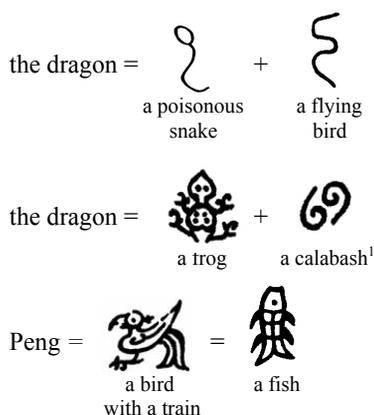
the dragon  
soaring under the raindrops

Some pictograms of Feng, the phoenix, include the image of a sailing vessel, which represents the wind. This mysterious picture has its explanation: according to the ancient beliefs, the wind originates from the flapping of this giant bird's wings. Feng is the spirit of the wind and it personifies the air, the breath, the life principle.

One character (鳳 *mǐng*) depicts the miraculous bird under the shining sun and the moon crescent, which are the total embodiments of the Yin and the Yang. Evidently, these images show the nature of Feng known as one of four first-born creatures, the symbol of the yin-yang harmony.

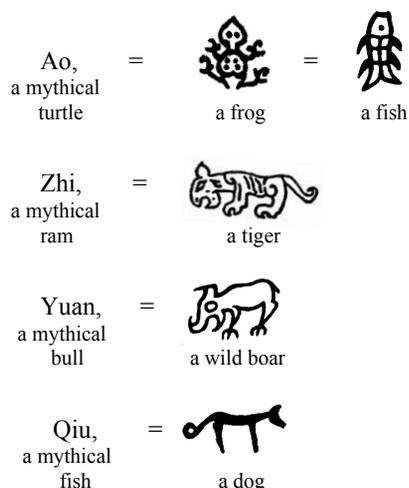
The explanation of creating so many graphic representations of a single mythical animal lies in the statement that a symbol inevitably bounds the denoted object and within the bounds distorts it (E. Cassirer). A symbol withdraws the object from the continuous stream of metamorphoses and gives its one-sided reflection.

Pattern 2. It was mentioned above, that all mythical animals taken together represent the stream of metamorphoses and one of their abilities is to change their form and turn into another creature. First of all, it is illustrated by fixing one creature with two or more logograms in which the role of the semantic index belongs to different real animals. For example, the dragon is represented by the “bird – snake” archaic complex (虬 qiú) or is depicted as a frog (鼃 qiú). A giant bird named Peng is depicted not only as a bird (鵬 péng), but also as a fish (魚朋), because it can turn into a fish named Kun.



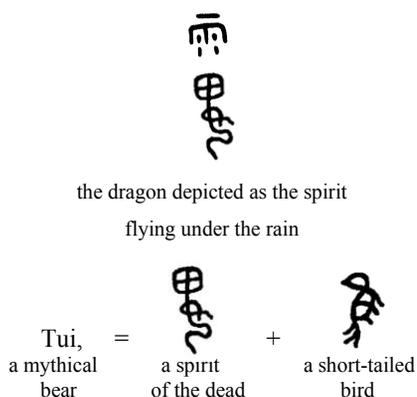
Secondly, the ability to change forms becomes evident, if a natural animal of the semantic index (usually taken as a model for a form of a mythical creature) does not agree with the shape of the mythical creature itself. For example, a mythical turtle Ao is represented

by the logogram where the semantic index is not a turtle, but a frog (鼃 áo) or a fish (鰲). The logogram, which fixes a mythical ram Zhi, depicts a tiger (虬 zhi). A mythical bull Yuan has the logogram, which reproduces the shape of a wild boar (獠 yuán). The logogram representing a mythical fish Qiu includes a dog shape (狃 qiú). Thus, ancient painters identified the forms, which have no similar features. This identity seems absurd, but it illustrates the philosophic formula, according to which everything that exists keeps the reverse shape within its own self and is ready to take this shape any time, following the stream of metamorphoses.



Pattern 3. A mythical animal, in essence, is a bright form of a spirit, and its demonic nature becomes visible in the case of substitution the “animal” marker for the “spirit” marker (鬼 gǔi). The immaterial agent is depicted as the shaman dancing in a ritual tailed mask. For example, the dragon is represented by the spirit flying under the rain (靈 líng). A mythical bear Tui (魍 túi) is represented by the complex image of the spirit and a short-tailed bird.

<sup>1</sup> In the Chinese culture, the image of calabash has a deep symbolic meaning. Traditionally it refers to the idea of Chaos, the source of “the world of things”, and is regarded as a personification of the maternal womb of the world.



The results of the analysis confirm the offered hypothesis that each figure of the mythical animal is the form with deep symbolic content related to the spirits, which represent qi, the cosmic substance. Evidently, it is not possible to reduce such content to a single form (M. Fuko). Besides, the grammar - logical analysis proves that there is the mythological model of the world constituted in the Chinese mind and depicted by the Chinese characters.

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