

# **MYTHS OF CHINA AND JAPAN**

*By*  
***DONALD A. MACKENZIE***

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THE GOD OF THUNDER

*From a Chinese picture in the John Rylands Library, Manchester*

## PREFACE

This volume deals with the myths of China and Japan, and it is shown that these throw light on the origin and growth of civilization and the widespread dissemination of complex ideas associated with certain modes of life. The Far East does not appear to have remained immune to outside cultural influences in ancient times. Modern research has established that the old school of opinions which insisted on the complete isolation of China can no longer obtain. As Laufer says: "It cannot be strongly enough emphasized on every occasion that Chinese civilization, as it appears now, is not a unit and not the exclusive production of the Chinese, but the final result of the cultural efforts of a vast conglomeration of the most varied tribes, an amalgamation of ideas accumulated from manifold quarters and widely differentiated in space and time.... No graver error can hence be committed than to attribute any culture idea at the outset to the Chinese, for no other reason than because it appears within the precincts of their empire."

Even the Chinese records have to be regarded with caution. It is impossible nowadays to accept as serious contributions to history the inflated chronology and the obvious fables compiled and invented by Chinese scholars for political and other purposes during the Han and later dynasties. These scholars had really little knowledge of the early history of their country and people. They were puzzled even by certain existing customs and religious practices, and provided ingenious "secondary explanations" which, like their accounts

of the early dynasties, do not accord with the data accumulated by archæologists and other workers in the scientific field. The complex religious ideas of the Chinese were obviously not of spontaneous generation. Many of these resemble too closely the complexes found elsewhere, and their history cannot be traced within the limits of the Chinese empire. Indeed, as is shown, some of them are undoubtedly products of human experiences obtained elsewhere, and they reveal traces of the influences to which they were subjected during the process of gradual transmission from areas of origin. Nor, would it appear, was Chinese civilization nearly as ancient as the native scholars would have us believe.

When the early Chinese entered China, they found non-Chinese peoples in different parts of that vast area which they ultimately welded into an empire. They were an inland people and did not invent boats; they did not originate the agricultural mode of life but adopted it, using the seeds and implements they had acquired; nor did they invent the potter's wheel with which they were familiar from the earliest times in China, having evidently become possessed of it, along with the complex culture associated with it, before they migrated into the province of Shensi. Nor could an agrarian people like the Chinese have been the originators of the belief in the existence of "Isles of the Blest" in the Eastern Ocean; they were not alone in Asia in believing in a Western Paradise situated among the mountains.

The Chinese, as Laufer demonstrates in his *Jade*, did not pass through in China that culture stage called the "Neolithic". When they first settled in Shensi, they searched for and found jade, as

did the carriers of bronze who first entered Europe. There was obviously an acquired psychological motive for the search for jade, and the evidence of Chinese jade symbolism demonstrates to the full that it had been acquired from those who had transferred to jade the earlier symbolism of shells, pearls, and precious metals. In the chapter devoted to jade it is shown that this view is confirmed by the evidence afforded by Chinese customs connected with jade, shells, pearls, &c.

In no country in the world are the processes of culture drifting and culture mixing made more manifest than in China. The Chinese dragon is, as Professor Elliot Smith puts it, a "composite wonder beast". Throughout this volume it is shown to yield, when dissected, remarkable evidence regarding the varied influences under which it acquired its highly complex character. The fact that a Chinese dragon charm closely resembles a Scottish serpent charm is of special interest in this connection. When, however, it is found that China obtained certain myths and practices from the area called by its writers "Fu-lin" (the Byzantine Empire), and that not only Byzantine but Ægean influences are traceable in the Celtic field, the charm-link between Gaelic Scotland and China may not, after all, be regarded as "far-fetched". The same may be said regarding the curious similarity between the myths and practices connected with shells, and especially cockle-shells, in Japan and the Scottish Hebrides. Although the West Highlanders and the inhabitants of the Land of the Rising Sun were never brought into contact, it may be that similar cultural influences drifted east and west from their area of origin, and that the carriers were the ancient mariners who introduced the same type of vessel into far-separated oceans.

As in China, we do not in Japan find a culture of purely native origin, but rather one which has grown up from a mass of imported elements as varied as the racial types that compose the present-day population. Both in China and Japan these imported elements have been subjected to the influences of time and locality and infused with national ideas and ideals. The processes of growth and change have not, however, concealed the sources from which certain of the early ideas emanated in varying degrees of development.

The early native history of Japan is, like that of China, no more worthy of acceptance than are the long-discarded English and Scottish fables regarding Brute and Scota.

The data accumulated in this volume tend to show, although we have no direct evidence of systematic missionary enterprise earlier than that of the Buddhists, that the influential religious cults of ancient times that flourished in Mesopotamia and in the Egyptian Empire (which included part of Western Asia) appear to have left their impress on the intellectual life of even far-distant peoples. Apparently modes of thought were transmitted along direct and indirect avenues of intercourse by groups of traders. Even before trade routes were opened, religious beliefs and practices appear to have been introduced into distant lands by prospectors and by settlers who founded colonies from which later colonies "budded". When the same set of complexes are found in widely separated areas, it is difficult to accept the view that they originated from the same particular experiences and the same set of circumstances, especially when it is made manifest that the complexes in the older centre of culture reflect strictly local



physical conditions, and even the local political conditions that resulted in a fusion of peoples and of their myths, symbols, and religious beliefs and practices.

DONALD A. MACKENZIE.

MYTHS OF  
CHINA AND JAPAN

# CHAPTER I

## THE DAWN OF CIVILIZATION

Chinese Culture—Had it Independent Origin?—Evolution in Human Affairs—Stratification Theory—The Mystery of Mind—Man's First Philosophy of Life—Influences exercised by Ancient Civilizations—Culture Mixing—The Idea of Progress—Art in the Pleistocene Age—Introduction of Agriculture—Birth of Osirian Civilization—The "Water of Greenness" as "Water of Life"—How Commerce Began—Introduction of Copper-working—The Oldest Calendar in the World—The "Kings of Mankind"—Ancient Man and Modern Man.

The destinies of a people are shaped by their modes of thought, and their real history is therefore the history of their culture. The Chinese frame of mind has made the Chinese the people they are and China the country it is. Every section of society has been swayed by this far-reaching and enduring influence, the sources of which lie in remote antiquity. It is the force that has even been shaping public opinion and directing political movements. Emperors and leaders of thought have been uplifted by it or cast down by it.

To understand China, it is necessary that we should inquire into its inner history—the history of its culture— so as to get at the Chinese point of view and look at things through Chinese eyes. That inner history is in part a record of its early experiences among the nations of the earth. There was a time when China was "in the making", when the little leaven that leavened the whole lump began to move, when that culture which spread over a vast area was confined to a small centre and to a comparatively small group of people. Who were this people, where were they situated, what influences were at

work to stir them and shape their ambitions, and what secret did they learn which gave them power over the minds and bodies of about a third of the inhabitants of the globe? In short, how and where did Chinese culture originate, and how did it spread and become firmly established? Was it a thing of purely local growth? Did it begin to be quite independently of all other cultures? Does it owe its virility and distinctiveness among the cultures of ancient and modern times to the influence of the locality in which it had "independent origin"? Had it an independent origin?

These queries open up the larger problem as to the origin of civilization in the world. At this point, therefore, we must decide whether or not we are to accept the idea of evolution in human affairs. Can the principles of biological evolution be applied to the problems of ethnology (using the term in its widest sense to include the physical and cultural history of mankind)? Can we accept the theory that in isolated quarters of the globe separated communities were stirred by natural laws to make progress in adapting themselves to their environments, and that, once a beginning was made, separated communities developed on similar lines? Did each ancient civilization have its natural periods of growth and decay? Were separated communities uninfluenced during these periods by human minds and wills? Were their destinies shaped by natural laws, or by the cumulative force of public opinion? Was it a natural law that made men abandon the hunting and adopt the agricultural mode of life? Did certain communities of men, influenced by natural laws in ancient times, begin to shape their religious systems by first worshipping groups of spirits and ultimately, having passed through a sequence of well-

defined stages, find themselves elevated by these natural laws to the stage of monotheism? Is it because certain races have, for some mysterious reason, been prompted to pass through these stages more quickly than others, that they are deserving of the term “progressive” while others must be characterized as “backward”?

If these questions are answered in the affirmative, we must assume that we have solved the riddle of Mind. Those who apply the principles of biological evolution to human affairs are in the habit of referring to laws that control the workings of the human mind. But what do we really know about the workings of the human mind? This question has only to be asked so that the hazardous character of the fashion of thinking adopted by extreme exponents of the Evolution School may be emphasized. It cannot but be admitted that we know little or nothing regarding the human mind. What happens when we think? How are memories stored in the brain? How are emotions caused? What is Consciousness? How does the Will operate? Grave psychological problems have to be solved before we can undertake the responsibility of discussing with any degree of confidence the laws that are supposed to govern human thought and action.

The researches into the early history of man, of about a generation ago, were believed by some to “have revealed the essential similarity with which, under many superficial differences, the human mind has elaborated its first crude philosophy of life”. It was found that similar beliefs and practices obtained among widely separated communities, and it was not suspected that the influence exercised by direct and

indirect cultural contact between “progressive” and “backward” communities extended to such great distances as has since been found to be the case. Prospecting routes by land and sea were the avenues along which cultural influences “drifted”. Early man was much more enterprising as a trader and explorer than was believed in Tylor’s day. The evidence accumulated of late years tends to show that almost no part of the globe remained immune to the influences exercised by the great ancient civilizations, and that these civilizations were never in a state of “splendid isolation” at any period in their histories. In the light of this knowledge it is becoming more and more clear that Victorian ethnologists were inclined to make too much of resemblances, and failed to take into account the differences that a more intensive study of local cultures have revealed. There were, of course, resemblances, which suggest the influence of cultural contact and the settlement among backward peoples of colonists from progressive communities, but there were also differences of beliefs and customs which were of local origin and can hardly be characterized as “superficial”. One of the results of contact was the process of “culture mixing”. Customs and fashions of thinking were introduced into a country and blended with local customs and local modes of thought. In early China, as will be shown, there was “culture mixing”. The Chinese frame of mind is the result of compromises effected in remote times.

How, then, did the idea of progress originate? Is there in the human mind an instinct which stirs mankind to achieve progress? If so, how does it come about that some peoples have failed to move until brought into contact with progressive races? Why did the Melanesians, for instance, remain in the

Stone Age until reached by the missionary and the sandalwood trader? The missionaries and the traders caused them to advance in a brief period from the Stone Age to the Age of Steel and Machinery. Can it be maintained that in ancient days no sudden changes took place? Did the people, for instance, who introduced bronze-working into a country introduce nothing else? Did they leave behind their beliefs, their myths, their customs, and their stories?

When it is asked how progress originated, we can only turn to such evidence as is available regarding the early history of "Modern Man". At a remote period, dating back in Europe to the Pleistocene Age, men lived in organized communities and pursued the hunting mode of life. Their culture is revealed by their pictorial art in the prehistoric cave-dwellings of France and Spain, and their decorative art by their finely engraved implements and weapons.<sup>1</sup> This art reached a high state of perfection. In some aspects it compares favourably with modern art.<sup>2</sup> Evidently it had a long history, and was practised by those who were endowed with the artistic faculty and had received a training. These early men, who belonged to the Cro-Magnon races, were traders as well as hunters. In some of their "inland stations" have been found shells that had been imported from the Mediterranean coast.

The hunting mode of life prevailed also among the proto-Egyptians in the Nile valley, an area which was less capable in remote times of maintaining a large population than were the wide and fertile plains of Europe. Egypt was thinly peopled until the agricultural mode of life was introduced. Someone discovered how to make use of the barley that grew wild in the

Nile valley and western Asia. In time the seeds were cultivated, and some little community thus provided itself with an abundant food-supply. Men's minds were afterwards engaged in solving the problem how to extend the area available for cultivation in the narrow Nile valley. Nature was at hand to make suggestions to them. Each year the River Nile came down in flood and fertilized the parched and sun-burnt wastes. The waters caused the desert to "blossom like the rose". Intelligent observers perceived that if the process of water-fertilization were maintained, as in the Delta region, they could extend their little farms and form new ones. The art of irrigation was discovered and gradually adopted, with the result that the narrow river valley, which had been thinly peopled during the Hunting Period, became capable of maintaining a large population.

In what particular area the agricultural mode of life was first introduced, it is impossible to say. Some favour southern Palestine and some southern Mesopotamia. Those who favour Egypt<sup>3</sup> can refer to interesting and important evidence in support of their view. It is the only ancient country, for instance, in which there are traditions regarding the man<sup>4</sup> who introduced the agricultural mode of life. This was Osiris, a priest-king<sup>5</sup> who was deified, or a god to whom was credited the discovery, made by a man or group of men, of how to grow corn. Plutarch's version of the Egyptian legend states: "Osiris, being now become King of Egypt, applied himself towards civilizing his countrymen, by turning them from their former indigent and barbarous course of life; he moreover taught them how to cultivate and improve the fruits of the earth". Evidence has been forthcoming that the pre-Dynastic



Egyptians were agriculturists. The bodies of many of them have been found preserved in their graves in the hot dry sands of Upper Egypt. "From the stomachs and intestines of these prehistoric people", writes Professor G. Elliot Smith, "I was able to recover large quantities of food materials, in fact, the last meals eaten before death." Careful examination was made of the contents of the stomachs. "Almost every sample contained husks of barley, and in about 10 per cent of the specimens husks of millet could be identified with certainty." The millet found in these bodies is nearly related to the variety "which is now cultivated in the East Indies".<sup>6</sup>

Here we have proof that the agricultural mode of life obtained in the Nile valley over sixty centuries ago, and that the seeds of the cultivated variety of millet, which grows wild in North Africa and southern Asia, were carried to far-distant areas by ancient traders and colonists. These facts have, as will be found, an important bearing on the early history of Chinese civilization.

Our immediate concern, however, is with the history of early civilization. In the Nile valley man made progress when he was able to provide something which he required, by the intelligent utilization of means at his disposal. No natural law prompted him to cultivate corn and irrigate the sun-parched soil. He did not become an agriculturist by instinct. He conducted observations, exercised his reasoning faculty, made experiments, and a great discovery was forthcoming. The man whose memory is enshrined in that of Osiris was one of the great benefactors of the human race. When he solved the problem of how to provide an abundant supply of food, he

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