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**Ming images of Nanyang: some stories from
Haiyu (Words on the sea) [1536]**

This work – which develops previous studies –¹ is a result of a mainly historical research on South–East Asian countries as described by Ming and Qing writers. In particular, through several stories in which the protagonists are travellers from the Celestial Empire in the Nanyang region, I have tried to single out images of these regions that have been passed down to Chinese readers, and by comparing them with local legends, I have tried to determine to what extent they represent a faithful account of events or rather a simple literary transposition of suggestions and convictions in fact entirely Chinese.

No literary or philological analysis has been carried out, since I preferred to focus on the historical and mythological aspects, as signs of the Chinese popular view of the southern regions, i.e. not only proper Southeast Asia but the southern provinces as well, Yunnan, Guangxi and Guangdong, recently acquired in Ming times, that in fact share the same heritage of legends, myths and fantastic stories. It is not difficult to figure out why: the spirit of that area really is closer to the southern and insular – therefore aquatic – cultures of the Indochinese peninsula than to the northern, inland cultures of the continent. This is due to the fact that to this day, after centuries of more or less forced colonisation first by the empire then by the Communist government, those regions are inhabited by southern ethnic groups that constitute a majority – the so-called “minorities” –, groups that in their physical features and customs are clearly different from the *han*. Some folk elements however, that are still alive and perfectly working today, are common to all of Asia and therefore also in both cultures in question; among these, an element that deserves a place of honour is the dragon, a creature linked to the water – in the form of rain as well as springs, rivers and seas, that reminds one not only of the crucial problem of water control, but they are also inevitably symbolic of life and death that water can give – and, like water, is capable of transforming itself and taking on any form. As I am not able to discuss here the

¹ See D. Guida, “Il fantastico nella trattatistica di viaggio cinese: miti e simboli di *Haiyu*”, *Asia Orientale*, 10/11, 1992, pp. 37–53 and the paper presented at the IX Conference of the European Association of Chinese Studies, held in Paris, September 1992.

infinite implications that this fascinating topic brings up,² I am limited to examining just a few of the most emblematic stories, taken from a historiographic work from the sixteenth-century China, and compared with legends from China and from Southeast Asia, and with later literary works that bear witness to the vitality of such beliefs. However, it is also true that travel treatises, telling about the unknown that only few people had the chance to get close to, usually describe distant countries by mixing elements belonging to the writer's culture with local beliefs, transforming both personally-experienced episodes and stories reported by others. Therefore, the legendary heritage of each culture plays an important role as key of interpretation to this kind of sources.

The sea, boundless and inscrutable expanse, calm or stormy, generous and cruel god, is the subject of a myriad of myths and legends, which in the tradition of many peoples raise around gods, heroes and monsters.

It is not a coincidence that *Haiyu*'s author, Huang Zhong, is a native of Guangdong: the last section (*wuguai*, "Curiosities") of his *Words on the Sea*, completed in 1536, is devoted to the fantastic accounts collected by the writer from his long years as an official. When he retired, he went back to Nanhai, not far from modern Zhuhai; there, he certainly enriched his knowledge of southern countries through the tales of seamen and travellers, who were well acquainted with the sea and the countries beyond.³ Relating episodes that happened to seamen and merchants, the author narrates sometimes briefly, sometimes in wealth of detail, the mysterious encounters one may have while travelling on certain courses.⁴

The first episode relates to a "sea monk", which has nothing to do with his earthly colleagues:

The sea monk has a human head and the body of a turtle, [but] its feet are shorter and has no shell. The ships that happen to meet it, should not expect any good.

During the first years of the Hongzhi reign, the Education-supervising Great Assistant of Guangdong Province, Mr. Wei Yanzhi of Huaiyang,⁵ intended to preside over the examination at Qiongzhou.⁶ He set out on a journey by land as far as Xuwen,⁷ then continued by ship.

[Suddenly] this creature [i.e. the so-called "monk"] emerged from the sea and the ship bow bent down [as it was scared].⁸ As they raised the ship, the whole crew wept, for they believed they would be thrown to the fish. They discussed [of the opportunity] to make a sacrifice to

² For further reading see the most interesting and well documented dissertation *A Study of Dragonology, East and West*, by Qiguang Zhao, University of Massachusetts, 1988.

³ For further reading see: D. Guida, "I Paesi del Sud-est Asiatico nella Cina Ming: le fonti non-ufficiali", *Cina*, 23, 1991, pp. 117-8.

⁴ *Haiyu* has been translated from the chinese text in the *Fenxing congshu*. The order of the passages is the same as the original. Other versions can be found in the following collections: *Siku quanshu*, *Baoyantang miji*, *Lingnan yishu* and *Xuejin taoyuan*.

⁵ A prefecture of Eastern Henan.

⁶ Town of Guangdong, on the island of Hainan.

⁷ Town of the Leizhou peninsula, in the Guangdong province.

⁸ *yishou*: head of the *yi*, a fabulous bird that, placed on the bow of the boat as a figure-head, was supposed to drive away evil spirits. The word *yishou* even today is used generically for "bow".

the demon, but, the official being a strict and severe man, the crew did not dare to speak of it [openly].

At dawn, they landed at Qiongzhou, where they stayed more than ten days. When the examinations finished, they returned on the sea, calm and flat as dry land.

Afterwards, this official was moved to Fujian as Vice Guardian of the Customs and Laws⁹ and then went back to his home, where he died.

It is generally said that “Demons can not triumph over virtue”.

The mysterious creature, called “monk” (*heshang*) because of its round bald head and hairless body, is to be identified as the *dugong dugong* or with the *manatus manatus*, herbivorous mammals of the Sirenia order, that live along the tropical shores of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. (It is probably the same recorded in Columbus’ log-book as a siren!)

This animal, that can easily be three and a half metres long, totally harmless, is thought by the sailors of Wei Yanzhi’s to be an evil spirit, who came to disturb their journey and to demand the due sacrifices. The focal point on which the attention of both characters and readers is concentrated is certainly the doubt as to whether the “sea monk” is a spirit or a beast. Superstition, myth and legendary tales handed down by generations of seamen, struck the mind of the sailors, who, even though they are not far out at sea, fear that the apparition would cause them a mysterious death. Even the ship bow, bird headed to turn away the evil spirits, gives up.

The “strict and severe” official, native of a continental province (Henan), does not pay any attention to the animal, because in his eyes it is only a sea creature, that can do no harm to the imperial ship. The writer, instead, who had been listening to such tales since his childhood, ambiguously names it “*wu*”, which means both “animal” and “thing”, rendering the shade of mystery. It is not the Confucian severity of an imperial official in the exercise of his duties to produce Mr. Wei’s behaviour, but the ignorance of local beliefs. Huang Zhong, on the contrary, ending the tale with a popular saying about demons, that can do nothing against virtuous men, definitely puts the encounter on a supernatural level.

The “sea monks” described by Yuan Mei (1716–1797) in his famous work *Zi Bu Yu* (What the Master Did Not Say) appear completely different: they are real men on a small scale, who, captured by chance in a net, speak an incomprehensible tongue. The fishermen set them free and they disappear in the waves.¹⁰

After two short paragraphs about the Sea Spirit (*haishen*) and the Ghost Ship (*guibo*), Huang Zhong narrates the story of the “Flying-head Barbarian”, already reported by previous sources such as Wang Dayuan’s *Daoyi zhilüe* (Treatise on the Barbarian Islands) and Ma Huan’s *Yingyai Shenglan* (The Overall

⁹ *xianfu*: this title is not properly written, it could be *fu**xian*, unofficial reference to a Vice Censor-in-chief (*fudu yushi*) in the Censorate or, in all probability, an abbreviation for *fengxian*, Guardian of the Customs and Laws, member of the Censorate Provincial Surveillance Commission.

¹⁰ Yuan Mei, *Zi Bu Yu*, juan 18, cit. in Yuan Ke, ed., *Zhongguo shenhua chuanshuo cidian*, Shanghai, Cishu chubanshe, 1985, p. 334.

Survey of the Ocean's Shores) in the Champa section,¹¹ while oddly enough Huang refers it to Thailand. It seems to be the only episode that the author derives from the extensive literature on Southeast Asia, which he surely examined before starting his own work. Some new details have been added, probably due to the testimony of travellers who went overseas and heard this tale themselves: it tells of several Thai women who are actually demons; although they are normal during the day, at night their heads detached themselves from their bodies and fly off to feed on other people's faeces, at times severely injuring people. A thin scar on the neck alone reveals their true nature. To get rid of them – often their own family, once the discovery is made, want to kill them because they are held responsible by the entire community – it is necessary to move the headless body so that the head cannot reconnect with the neck, and in some cases exorcisms must be performed to prevent the demon's reincarnation.

The following paragraph deals with the fish-man, an ancient myth common to many civilisations, mentioned in China since the *Shanhaijing* and reported in later times in various ways and under different names, such as the “four-feet fish”¹² and the *lingyu*, which has human face, hands and feet and a fish body.¹³ The *Taiping Guangji*'s sea creatures are, instead, very similar to the mermaids of Greek tradition: “they have eyebrows, eyes, lips, nose, hands, nails and head like beautiful girls have, but no feet.”¹⁴ Once again, Huang Zhong's characters are somewhat original:

The fish-men are more than four *chi* long; bodies and hair are [different] between males and females, just like with human beings, yet they have short fins on their backs and little red ears. They emerge from sand banks and can be very attractive.

The ships that happen to meet them must perform sacrifices and exorcisms to repel their evil influence.

Long ago, some ambassadors sent to Korea, approached by chance a certain harbour where they happened to see some ladies lying near the shore, with short and dishevelled hair, waving their hands and feet. The ambassadors recognised them, and told the people around that they were fish-women. Making sure that no one would hurt them, the ambassadors ordered to help them reach the open sea with a rowing-boat.

The “mermaids” (*renyu* also here) in *Jinghuayuan* (Destinies of the Flowers in the Mirror, 1828) are also saved from a sad fate by the protagonist Tang Ao, aspiring immortal. Captured in a net, they

cried like children, under their bellies they had four long feet; in the upper part of their bodies they were like beautiful women, but the lower part was like a fish.¹⁵

¹¹ See Wang Dayuan, *Daoyi zhitüe jiaoshi*, [1350] Su Jiqing ed., Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1981, p. 63, that refers to this phenomenon the term *shitouman* (“corpse-head barbarian”); Ma Huan, *Yingyai shenglan jiaozhu*, [1433] Feng Chengjun ed., Zhonghua shuju, 1954, p. 5 (translated in J.V.G. Mills, *Yingyai Shenglan. The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores*, London, Cambridge U.P., 1970, p. 84); See also Yan Congjian, *Shuyu zhouzilu*, [1574], Gugong Bowuguan, 1930, 7:16a.

¹² See Yuan Ke, ed., *Shanghaijing jiaoyi*, Shanghai, Guji chubanshe, 1985, 3:66.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13:240.

¹⁴ *Taiping Guangji*, Siku quanshu, repr. Shanghai, Guji chubanshe, 1990, 464:IV-424.

¹⁵ Li Ruzhen, *Jinghuayuan*, Beijing, Renminwenxue chubanshe, 1957, 15:103.

After they are freed, they re-emerge and nod in gratitude a number of times, to then disappear into the sea. Shortly after, they begin to follow their saviour's ship, and it is in the sailors' reaction that we find an interesting comparison with the Guangdong official's crew faced with a "sea-monk": frightened or at least annoyed by the closeness of these strange creatures – as always it is the "unknown" that is feared– the sailors shoot them with a musket, injuring one. Only the reproaches of Tang, a man of letters – yet again a person not used to the sea and therefore immune to its influence– prevents them from firing again. Later, it is the mermaids who, salvaging the ship from a serious fire on board,¹⁶ show they are capable of experiencing gratitude and human feelings. The physical appearance of these mermaids, with a woman's head and breasts, fish tail and four feet, is surprisingly similar to the mammalians of the Sirenia order, whose verses still today are compared to a child weeping or a woman's song.

The next episode was certainly narrated to the author by a seaman who might have been in that crew himself.

The strange phenomenon of the snake

[During] the Hongzhi reign [1488–1505], there was a vessel[’s crew] who wished to trade with the Chams. One day, it was decided that twenty men [of this crew] would go ashore the following morning to gather firewood. That very night, the captain dreamt of some spirits, who told him: "The people who will go tomorrow to chop wood must bring a great amount of salt." When he woke up, he thought that [the dream] was very strange and told everybody. Among the men who were going to gather firewood, some laughed, some did not believe it. "What would it matter if everyone of you brought ten *jin* or more?" said the captain. The crew agreed. Then they mounted twenty¹⁷ fast horses and headed for the mountain.

At the mountain slope there was a small lake,¹⁸ so deep that it would have been impossible to measure it. The twenty men split up into groups to cut the trees. At sunset, the mountain slopes roared with a strong crash like a thunder. Many people thought that on such a limpid day it couldn't really be [a coming thunder-storm], therefore, it had to be some extraordinary phenomenon. They climbed some trees and watched.

Suddenly, a huge snake showed up, black as night, with two eyes [that shone] like torches. It went forward, furtively, for about five *bu*. From the summit of the mountain it descended, fast as a streak of lightning,¹⁹ to plunge in the lake. The thunder-like crash was caused by the rocks shattered at its passing.

There was a centipede too, about seven *chi* long, that followed him. [The centipede] started to run incessantly around the lake, which seethed with the poison it poured from its tail's end: the water got oily. At dusk, the flames on the lake's surface were more than a *chi* high. The seamen watched all this carefully and for a long time. [The fire] had been emitted from the chinks of the centipede's body segments. At nightfall, it quietly went back to the mountain.

The flaming brightness lit the mountain and the valley. At dawn, [the seamen] went down and saw that the snake was dead, rolled up under the lake. They were greatly astonished and said happily: "The dream about the salt was a heavenly gift indeed!"

Then, with a rattan cable and a huge iron hook they pulled the snake ashore. They cut its skin, thick as an ox's; its vertebrae were big as mortars; they pickled its flesh.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26:185.

¹⁷ A character is most likely missing from the text; indeed it does not make sense that twenty men should ride only two horses.

¹⁸ *tan*, wrongly printed in the whole passage.

¹⁹ Also in this case the character is wrongly printed.

Since the boat was almost full, the group stopped gathering firewood, and, carrying the snake, they set the boat out at [sea] again.

An indigenous vessel passing by saw that skin: they asked where it came from and how much it cost. The captain answered at random fifty silver bars. The foreigners paid without bargaining, and asked how much the meat cost. They were told one hundred silver bars. Once again, they paid without a word. After exchanging silver and goods, the foreigners were about to go away, when the captain asked them why they struck that bargain so quickly.

The Cham said smiling: "Chinese people do not know how precious this is. It is actually a dragon. The sound of the drums made with its skin can be heard at twenty *li*. One of the seven drums I shall make out of this skin is already worth the price [I just paid]. It's so easy! As far as the meat is concerned, it is sold in our country as [in yours] salted fish is. I do not know precisely how much it costs, but certainly many times [what I paid]."

The captain, full of regrets, began to believe to be a very bad merchant.

The gentleman of the Iron Bridge [i.e. the author] comments that if one deals with goods of unknown price, he cannot complain later. People say that the flying snake [i.e. the dragon] wandered about in the fog; [when he descended on the mountain] he found himself in danger: these two facts have the same meaning indeed.

In Chinese symbolism,²⁰ the centipede is the natural enemy of the snake. Countless legendary episodes propose the struggle between these two animals; among them, the most famous is the story of Ji Gong, an incarnation of Maha Kasyapa, the monk with the long eyebrows (*Changmei Chanshi*), one of the first patriarchs of Indian Buddhism. Ji Gong, in order to rid the inhabitants of the Lianyuanshan district of a terrible snake, which had devoured many people, tossed into the air a paper fan and it was changed into an enormous centipede which immediately attacked the snake. When it was going to be killed, the snake begged Ji Gong to spare his life, and the request was granted, provided that it would keep itself in a hole in the ground, and cease from troubling the people.²¹

In ancient times, the terms "snake" and "dragon" were synonymous: the dragon, a royal and divine symbol in many civilisations, is generally represented as a snake with feet and claws; on its head it bears stag horns and ox's ears. Actually in almost every Asian country there are myths related to dragons and sea snakes: having clear affinities with Chinese symbolism, however, in Vietnam we must distinguish between *Long-vuong* or *Thuy-tê* (the Dragon King), that, according to the Jade Emperor's supreme orders rules over the water from his palace, deep beneath the sea or rivers, and the plain dragon, lord of the rain and symbol of royalty. In his honour the capital Hanoi is given the name Thang-long, the Ascent of the Dragon.²² Furthermore, Lac Long Quan, the Dragon King, is said to have civilised the Vietnamese people, "from this spirit's union with queen Ao Co came the line of lords who, according to the tradition, first ruled the Hong

²⁰ Also in Egyptian mythology a mythical centipede named Sep was invoked against dangerous animals and enemies of the gods. See Manfred Lurker, *Dictionary of Gods and Goddesses, Devils and Demons*, London and New York, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987, p. 317.

²¹ See E.T.C. Werner, *Dictionary of Chinese Mythology*, Shanghai, Kelly and Walsh, 1932, pp. 52-3.

²² Yves Bonnefoy, *Mythologies*, prep. and trans. under the direction of Wendy Doniger, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1991, II:1000-1.

(red) River area.”²³ Emblem of power and strength, the dragon is, in sharp contrast to Western images, a positive creature, which represents the supreme manifestation of the yang forces; later on, due to Buddhism, the idea of evil and dangerous dragons, became widespread.

E. Schafer remarks that “indeed ‘dragon’ serves as a convenient general cover for every sort of water monster”,²⁴ it doesn’t matter whether they are crocodiles, whales or snakes.

A dragon can assume any shape, and therefore the Chinese seamen in our tale did not recognise it immediately, as they were scared by the clash between titans they saw at their feet. Once it dies, the snake–dragon ceases to be a spirit and fully recovers, in the sunlight, its simple animal nature: Wang Chong in his *Lunheng*²⁵ asserted that dragons are neither supernatural creatures nor spirits, but simply reptiles, and therefore people should not be so afraid of them, and even before, in the *Lüshi Chunqiu*, a certain Cifei who is to defeat and kill two dragons claims that “they are only some rotten meat and bones”.²⁶ Peaceful and happy, our Chinese seamen do not lose heart: after skilfully skinning and pickling it, they embark the snake on their ship.

The final comparison is subtle and witty: Huang Zhong compares the captain, who sells unknown goods for a price fixed at random, to the dragon, that, being tired of flying in the clouds, incautiously descends upon an unknown mountain: the former, gets a much lower sum than the real value of the articles he sold; the latter, although it plunged in the protective waters of the lake, where no one could reach it, is killed by its natural enemy. Never venture on unexplored land, otherwise you will regret it.

Some elements in this story can be found in an ancient legend belonging to the Bai population of Yunnan province, that tells of an enormous python²⁷ that often brought on calamities and vast damages around lake Erhai; casting itself into its waters, it created huge waves that flooded and devastated the surrounding villages. A certain Duan Chicheng, seeing the pain felt by the parents of the children sacrificed every year to the monster, drowned in the lake’s dark waters, decided to slay it, and threw himself into the water, armed with four swords tied to his back, one in his mouth and two in each hand. “Once the dragon is dead, cut his gut open and pull me out” he asked, before diving in. Suddenly, great waves rose from the lake’s surface, until a blade appeared in the python’s back and the waters turned red. Shortly afterwards, the waters receded, and in the centre of the lake the dragon’s lifeless body appeared. The men, full of happiness,

²³ *The Cambridge History of South–East Asia*, Cambridge U.P., 1992, 1:284.

²⁴ Edward H. Schafer, *The Vermilion Bird, T’ang Images of the South*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1967, p. 218.

²⁵ Alfred Forke, *Lun Heng: Wang Chung’s Essays*, New York, Paragon Book Gallery, 1962, 1, pp. 352–4.

²⁶ *Lüshi Chunqiu*, 20:6b, quoted in Zhao, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

²⁷ Python and dragon are often identified: the ceremonial wedding dress worn by kings and emperors is called also *mangchen*, “python robe”. See, for instance, *Jinghuayuan*, 34:242.

set out in a boat and pulled the corpse onto the beach. However, cutting open its belly according to the hero's instructions, they found him dead. They could do nothing but bury him with great ceremony and erect him a mausoleum in which they kept also the dragon's skin, that in the meantime they had cut up and burned.²⁸

The hero is therefore also a victim at the same time; in this sense he takes the place of the children sacrificed year after year, kills the monster but perishes. In fact this is the subject of a folk ritual performed by the Jing population belonging to the Zhuang peoples of Guangxi, that lives by the Vietnam border near the sea: when they stage the battle between two ships that symbolise dragons, one of the participants must be the slayer-victim whose ritualistic function is to appease the sea that otherwise would swell and flood the coast. He impersonates the centipede, –another element of the *Haiyu* story– that, once the dragon are slain, is in turn killed through some strategy and cut into pieces.²⁹

Sea-serpents are also very popular in Vietnamese mythology, and they are often responsible for many catastrophes. The most dangerous one is the *thuông-luông*, reported to be one hundred feet long, covered with scales and endowed with a red crest. It kidnaps the women who happen to venture on the waters he presides to force them to become his wives.³⁰

Luckily for them, not all dragons meet centipedes on their way: let's deal with one more apparition, once again a python.

The transformation of a dragon

Gang[zhou]³¹ is very close to the sea, where high peaks rise.³² Many people in this district are wood-cutters. Once, more than thirty wood-cutters crossed the sea in two white boats to gather firewood. At noon, as they were about to land, they saw in the distance an enormous black-greenish beast, similar to a snake, whose horned head waved on the top of the mountain. The surprised men called each other, saying that the python had devoured a deer. "A deer was its prey, the python will be ours!" the men exclaimed, and singing happily went on rowing to the shore.

After mooring the boats at the mountain slope, armed with sticks and knives the men started to run, screaming, and everyone wanted to be the first [to get the top].

²⁸ Li Xinghua, *Hakuzoku minkan koji seitsu shū*, trans. by Kimishima Isako, 1980, 153–7, cit. in Kimishima Isako, "Ryūjin satsuwa no nimensen" (The Two Aspects of Stories Related to Dragons), *Shiratori Yoshirō kyōju koki kinen ronsō, Ajia shominzoku no rekishi to bunka*, 1990, p. 24. The author also relates other versions of the legend, one of which narrates of two dragons, named the Great Black Dragon and the Small Yellow Dragon, a version quite common in the Dali area, *ibidem*, p. 25–6. See also Zhang Wenxun, ed., *Baizu wenxue shi*, Kunming, Yunnan Renmin chubanshe, 1983, pp. 30–34. The Miao population of Guangxi also celebrates the struggle between two dragons, slain afterwards by a hero who frees the world from the destruction caused by this event. Also in *Chunqiu Zuochuan* Duke Zhao XIX (trans. by J. Legge, repr. Taipei, SMC publishing 1991, V:675) a similar episode is mentioned, but, asked by the population to make a sacrifice to the dragon that fight in the lake Wei's waters, Zi Cheng refuses.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁰ *Mythologies*, p. 1001.

³¹ My hypothesis is that one character is missing and gang ("ridge", "crest") was actually Gangzhou, town of Guangdong in the prefecture of Xinhui.

³² That is, seamounts, whose peaks emerge from the sea.

When they were half way up, black clouds gathered all around them, thunder and lightning caused a dreadful hailstorm, whose hailstones, big as rocks, fell on the wood-cutters. Since they were not acquainted with the place, [and they did not know where to find shelter] they parted.

After a while it stopped raining, the sky cleared up and the sun shone again. The cliff had collapsed, uprooting the trees and filling up the valley. [Many] wood-cutters bled from their forehead and broke their feet. They gathered again and saw, turning their head, that the two white boats were now on the trees. Then, they climbed up there and found out that – though [the boats] were full of hailstones – rice, salt, clothes and blankets had not suffered any damage. They took rice and pots to make a soup, which they ate.

After some days, other boats came, and thus they could get back to their homes.

The gentleman of the Iron Bridge says that in this story what in the beginning seemed to be a stroke of luck showed itself to be a disaster afterwards. How could the wood-cutters know? Spirits play with men, undoubtedly we could quote many other examples like this.

Once again a dragon, which at the beginning appears as a horned snake and then changes itself into a dreadful thunderstorm to mock the men who dared to challenge it. In fact, divine dragons (*shenlong*) live in the heavy, rainy clouds,³³ and have the power to control the atmospheric elements, to transform themselves in rain and hail and even to become invisible. It is on a dragon that Huangdi ascended to Heaven, and it is a dragon that sends beneficial rain for human welfare.³⁴ Yet, once again mortals do not recognise in it a celestial creature, but only a dangerous, uncommonly large beast, that can be a means of glory and wealth. The spirit, always kindly disposed to humans, doesn't kill them, merely giving them a severe rebuke.

The author's unflinching moral comment this time focuses on earthly life's mutability and supernatural creatures who, from Olympus to Immortals' Heaven, make fun of us.

The last paragraph of the *wuguai* section of the *Haiyu* deals with a recurrent theme of Chinese literature: the evil spirit that takes the shape of a beautiful woman to deceive someone and marry him. From the Tang *chuanqi* to Pu Songling's tales, hundreds of stories have been written on this theme; nevertheless, here the scenography is completely transformed: the scene is set in a Vietnamese island, and the main character is a Chinese merchant.

The rock demon

The demon showed itself at Kuntunshan [i.e. Poulo Condore] and I suspect it is an evil spirit. Long ago, a Zhangzhou³⁵ merchant went to a mountain to gather firewood with dozens of mates.

The cliff rock wall [was so smooth] that one could look at himself as in a mirror; the Zhangzhou man undressed and leaned his back against the rock. Suddenly, the stone shattered and a woman came out. She had a beautiful face and a graceful carriage; such a beauty can

³³ This characteristic of dragon-snakes is very common in Asian tradition: see A.De Gubernatis, *Zoological Mythology*, London, Trübner & Co., 1872, II, p. 400–401.

³⁴ See the famous episode in the *Xiyouji* (Journey to the West) Beijing, Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1985, 9:120 where the dragon King receives an Imperial Decree from Heaven "to travel with thunder and lightning and succour the city of Chang'an with rain."

³⁵ Zhangzhou is an important town of Fujian province.

hardly be found in the barbarian islands. The Zhangzhou man began talking to her and got [so] bewitched as to grow confused and forget his home. They got married. Every day the woman presented him various kinds of fruit and vegetables, strangely coloured and shaped, yet sweet and appetising, that kept him from suffering³⁶ either hunger or thirst. Moreover, she induced the man to build a thatched house, and plant beautiful bamboos all around it. After a while, these became a high and luxuriant little forest, where neither the cold winter nor the hot summer could get in.

The man often climbed the mountain with his spouse to seek food, and every time they met fierce wild beasts or strange animals, [two] wings stuck out of the woman's body, to protect her husband. Since he was used seeing this [phenomenon], the man did not consider it weird, nor was he afraid. The woman taught him to examine the plants' [annual cycle], from the blossoming of flowers to the falling of leaves and thus to recognise seasons and years.

They gave birth to two children. The man did not realize that he lived lost in foreign islands. After they had picked the plants, the flowers had blossomed and the leaves had fallen for five times, [one day] while the woman was out, the man, alone in the house, heard someone cutting the bamboos: he went to look and saw that they were people from a [Chinese] ship. There were two of his old mates among them, and so [the Zhangzhou man] felt terribly homesick. He told them his story and begged to let him leave with them. So the seamen hid him on board. [At this point] the woman arrived, running to the beach; she was carrying the children in her arms. Insulting and scolding him in a foreign language, she threw the children in the water and, screaming and crying at the same time, went away. The Zhangzhou man, who was on board, speechless with dismay, did not know what to say.

Fox-women, snake-women: nearly all of them fall in love with their husbands and are converted to a "normal" life. Their sons often become important personalities, officials, magistrates, poets. Yet, at a certain moment something betrays them, and the past returns under the form of a Taoist monk, determined to chase the spirit away: the poor woman's complaints are of no avail. She is forced to go back where she came from and abandon what until then had been her rightful home.

The "rock demon" undergoes a different fate, yet with similar results: although they spent five long years together, in which the woman fed, defended, cured, taught him many things and gave birth to two children, all of a sudden, seeing his old companions, the man lets himself be caught by homesickness, that he apparently had never felt before, and he would be ready to go without a word. It is as if he suddenly woke up after a dream and blotted in one stroke the present to return to a forgotten reality. We do not know whether he also had a family in his motherland to wait for him, still, it is only at the tragic epilogue, when the woman, mad with sorrow, throws the children in the water, that he remembers his present family again. And in the ensuing silence he hides his pain, embarrassment and horror for a decision by now irrevocable for both of them.

Yet, the whole story may be a justification for the Chinese merchant's sullen behaviour. He obviously has no intention to take the beautiful foreign wife with him to China: therefore he tells everybody it was just a demon's spell, so that no one will blame him.

A woman who knows nature and its secrets, that masters science, is

³⁶ *si*, wrongly printed for *yi*, used here as a verb.

certainly to be feared: a Western reader inevitably thinks of Medea, scientist and sorceress of Colchis, who, always considered a foreigner in Athens, has the same reaction after being abandoned, killing her own two children.

Many female figures – goddesses, fairies, nymphs – populate the Indonesian tradition as well, that tells of fatal marriages between humans and supernatural female creatures who are then forced to return to their own world by the curiosity and stupidity of husbands who break the rules established for these unions.³⁷

These stories of merchants and seamen, which are said to happen between Guangdong and the Indo–Chinese peninsula, repropose, as I have tried to show, symbols of Chinese mythology, that can be found only in local legends. Whether these similarities are due simply to the strong influence that in remote epochs China had on the regions in question,³⁸ or whether they derive from an indigenous mythology – most of which is buried by the different cultural and religious influences coming from not only China, but India and the Arab world – we cannot say with certainty. Some elements from this heritage have survived in the oral popular tradition; the legends and rituals practised today in Southern China are an example. In the case of *Haiyu*, I believe the cultural heritage inevitably acted as a filter, both for the people who told, and perhaps lived, these adventures, and for the writer, who took on himself the task of handing them down to posterity. The stories, experienced directly or heard from others, change according to fixed outlines and patterns: outside of China's borders we find the same dragons, snakes, demon–women, sea gods and different spirits, that we encounter in the motherland. Chinese writers, in dealing with foreign lands, whether they describe them in an apparently “realistic” fashion, or they relate fantastic encounters with mythological creatures said to inhabit them, draw extensively on their own literary and documentary tradition. This is done both by transposing Chinese tales in foreign settings, and by enriching travel accounts and treatises with material drawn from pre-existing sources.

³⁷ Cfr. the famous legend of the neverending rice, “Aryo Menak and his wife”, see *Folk Tales from Indonesia* retold by Dra. S.D.B.Aman, Penerbit Djambatan, 1991, pp. 101–5. In fact, Indonesian myths involving rice are often tied to female figures; of these the goddess Sri is undoubtedly the most important. See also *ibid.*, pp. 27–31.

³⁸ Already in the IX century in Indonesia it is evident that there is an obvious alteration of religious decorative motifs present on arches and temples, previously of Indian origin, in favour of the Chinese morphology. The Indian *makara* are transformed into Chinese dragons. Cfr. G. de Coral–Remusat, “Animaux fantastiques de l’Indochine, de l’Insulinde et de la Chine”, *B.E.F.E.O.*, 36, 1936, pp. 427–435.