Pangu and Ancient China (2011)

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At the beginning of every civilization, many stories which passed down from generation to generation over hundreds of years, tell us how the earth and man were created. However, each culture is rooted in myths that describe their origins in different ways. Western culture believes that Adam and Eve were the original father and mother of all created human beings; Some Indian tribes’ cultures believe that everything comes from nature that has no beginning and no end. As all cultures have their own stories, Chinese culture is no exception. When I was a child, I felt impressed by the Chinese myth about Pangu and its creation myth. In almost every ancient culture, the creation myths are used to describe how the earth and man were created. However, the creation myth about Pangu not only contains an explanation for Chinese origin, but also demonstrates something distinctive about the unique Chinese culture.

In Chinese mythology, the story of the creation of man can be dated back thousands of years. At that time, everywhere was in chaos. The first being, named Pangu, had been sleeping for eighteen thousand years. One day, when he woke up, he found himself in a “cosmic egg” surrounded by chaos. Not being able to move anymore, and not even able to breathe, Pangu thought it was time to come out of the egg. Therefore, he decided to break open the egg and began to bring order to the earth. The first thing he needed to do was to separate the heaven and the earth. Because the sky and heaven were stuck together, there was no way to separate them. Then Pangu lifted the light part of the egg which formed the heaven and the sky. Meanwhile, he sank the heavy part of the egg which formed the earth. These two parts became Yin (the earth) and Yang (heaven and sky) respectively. Thus Pangu became the pillar of the world, separating Yin and Yang.

Afterwards, because Pangu was the only being in the world then, the different attributes in his character caused different changes in the world. The sky was clear when he was pleased; the sky was overcast when he was angry; when he cried, rain would fall on the ground, forming rivers and lakes; when he sighed, the winds would blow across the land; as he winked his eyes, the sky would be full of lightning; as he snored, the sky would rumble with thunder. As Pangu grew ten feet every day, the heaven and the earth moved ten feet far away from each other every day. Day by day, Pangu became taller and taller which caused the earth to sink lower and lower below the
sky and the sky rose higher and higher above the earth. Finally, when Pangu felt that the distance between the two parts was great enough after standing on the earth and holding up the sky for eighteen thousand years, he got tired and fell asleep. He was too tired that he died in his sleep ultimately.

After Pangu’s death, his body then formed various parts of the earth. His last breath turned into the winds and the clouds. His voice became the thunder and lightning. The sweat from his body created rain and dew. From his two eyes, one became the sun; the other one became the moon. His head, torso and arms formed mountains in all directions—his head formed the mountains of the east while his feet formed the mountains of the west; his right arm became the mountains of the north while his left the mountains of the south; his torso became the mountains of the center. The flesh of his body formed the soil and his blood became the oceans and rivers. Rocks, minerals, and gems were formed from his veins, muscles, teeth and bones. Hair from his body became all kinds of plants. At the same time, all of the little creatures that lived on his body became all animals. Finally, from the soul of his life came human beings.

The use of the egg in Chinese creation myth gives us a visual idea of creation, and helps us to well define Chinese culture and the idea of Yin and Yang, which is the most popular theory in Chinese culture early in the myth of Pangu. It symbolizes the process when Pangu came out of the egg, the heavy part sank to form the earth and the other light part rose to form the heaven and sky. In Chinese culture, Yin, the heavy part, represents the earth and dark; while Yang, the light part, represents the heaven and bright. Yin and Yang are two opposite force but also independent of each other. The Chinese classified everything into these two categories. Therefore, in addition, the connection between Chinese myth and culture reflects the roles of men and women in Chinese family. In Chinese family, Yin is thought of female and submissive to her husband; while Yang is thought of male and dominant the family. This concept just meets the theory in old Chinese culture, because women played an inferior role in a dominantly patriarchal society and women were responsible for domestic matters and raising children. It creates a collective idea about the subordinate role that women have played in the Chinese traditions. Thereby the men in family always play a dominant and aggressive role. These two ideas formed the basic family structure in ancient Chinese culture. This is also why the first being in China is Pangu—a man, not a woman.

In addition, the Yin and Yang theory also provides the basic idea for the Chinese religions. Many religions began to follow the concept of the Yin and Yang as their belief, such as Confucianism, which was the first religion to use the Yin and Yang concept in their religious beliefs. Besides, Yin can also represent death while Yang represents life. As a result, for the religion of Taoism, life is cyclical and always takes turns of Yin and Yang. This concept has come
to be a big and important part of the Chinese beliefs. With this belief, all life and existence forms come from the force of Yin and Yang. The two forces are said to be “interdependent partners.” They believed that one couldn’t exist without the other. The idea of good and evil came from this concept also.

The Chinese have great respect for the earth and this can be seen from the story, Pangu has devoted his whole life to make a perfect “home” for us—his offspring. From this prospective, Pangu is just like “Corn Mother”—sacrificed himself/herself and left endless treasures for us after his death. So, what we need to do is to cherish and appreciate what we possess. Above all, the creation of myth is not necessarily real and Pangu may not really exist, but to some extent which reflects the higher level of “truth” telling us what is good and bad, what is beautiful and ugly, what we should do and what we shouldn’t. Therefore, the Chinese creation myth of Pangu does not only tell us how our ancestors understand the composition of the universe, the origin of mankind, the creation of all things, but also helps us to well define the Chinese culture.

As all cultures have their own stories, I feel that Chinese myths are very consistent with Chinese Culture. From this myth, I learn the real truths behind the myth and begin to realize something of worth. It is also a representation of humans today. So the next time you read a myth of your country, think about how your culture believes the world began. I think it means a lot to you.