

THOSE FISH-MEN WHO GAVE US WRITING

The common origin of writing in Chinese legends coming from Babylonia

By Alessandro Demontis

A strong yet almost completely forgotten scholarship existed in the late XIX century about the derivation of Chinese writing, but not only, from SW Asia. It had been suggested at that time that the corridor for this derivation was the NW Chinese border of Asia, and the mean of it should be recognized in the arrival of the Bak tribes in the western Chinese territory, invading and mingling with the aboriginal tribes of former China.

In the endings of the XIX century and in the first years of the XX century this subject, mainly in the linguistic aspect, had been developed by authors like Terrien de Lacouperie[1], professor of Indo-Chinese philology at the University College in London, and Charles James Ball[2], professor of semitic languages at the Merchant Taylor's School of London (now in Northwood).

Long before, though, ancient Chinese legends were already known, and it is in these legends that one can find the origin of both Chinese people and language.

According to the legends about the semi-mythical Shun (the main protagonist of the Shun-King record – approx reign date in the XXII century BC or XX century BC), he decided to ride with his men from his capital city Puban down to the extreme bound of the territory where the Yellow River did not allow further crossing, in a region where his predecessor Yao had dislodged and expelled the natives. This was the territory where the Bak tribe had settled much earlier, coming from the Hindukush settlements.

The Bak tribe invaded inner China from that place, but contrary to other invaders, which were brutal, uneducated warriors, the Baks were remembered as 'educated and civilized' people.

It was widely known at the end of the XIX century that the Baks were under influence of the Susiana people (Elamites) while living in the Hindukush, and they were of almost certain SW Asian / Middle Eastern origin, as stated by deLacouperie in his books and papers. The mixing of Baks by mean of prolonged interbreeding with the aboriginal tribes of China must have provided the latter with an improvement in civilization. This must have lead, with time, to a sharing of knowledge like writing, hystorical background and legends, and so on.

This may be the reason why some of the fundamental legends in China, and their protagonists as well, have so many similarities with those coming from the Middle East and specifically of Akkadian and Old Babilonian origin.

In this article I would like to point out the similarity between the 2 legends of the 'Gift of Writing', as they were written in Old Babylonian and passed orally among the ancient Chinese tribes.

One of the legends of Babylonia attributed the introduction of writing to the arrival of a group of divine beings, Fish-Men (half fish and half man) coming from the Persan Gulf. They were a group of 'amphibious' human-like creatures who spoke an intelegible language; their chief's name was Oannes. The story is preserved in some fragments coming from the Babylonian History of Berossus, and was quoted by some later scholars and writers so we have a bunch of quotations and original fragments that allowed some modern scholars to restore the legend almost completely.

The main researcher in this field was without doubt prof. Francois Lenormant[3] (the first to recognize the non-semitic origin of the Sumerian cuneiform, at that time called 'Assyrian'), who dedicated his best years to the topic, and was able to establish that the timing of the legendary 'Fish-Men' correspond to that of the first 7 of the 10 mythological antediluvian rulers of ancient Babilonia.

Oannes was described as a man having a head of fish, and, underneath, another head, this being human-like. The body resembled that of a Fish, but vertically developed, and although he had a pendind fish-tail, he had human feet.

At day, this strange reasonable being used to meet the aboriginal people and teach them about art,

science, and writing, then returning to the sea at dusk.

The record of these antediluvian rulers, during whose reigns the Fish-Men appeared, can be reconstructed as:

- First King: Aloros the Chaldean who ruled for 10 sar - in the first year of his reign appears Oannes.
- Second King: Alaparos who ruled for 3 sar.
- Third King : Amillaros who ruled 13 sar.
- Fourth King: Ammenon, the Chaldean, who ruled 12 sar.
- Fifth King : Amegalaros, or Megalaros who ruled for 18 sar.
- Sixth King: Daonos who ruled for 10 sar.
- Seventh King : Euedoreskhos who ruled for 18 sar.

It was believed, then, that Oannes taught 'the basics' during Aloro's reign, and in the following reigns the other fish-men developed the subjects he had summarized.

With time, this legend became a founding record in babylonians' memory, and it is viable that, when moving outwards, these babylonians and the neighbor populations which grew with this mythological background, would have spreaded it.

It is peculiar that the ancient Chinese legends tell us the same strange story of 'fishes' coming out from the Ho and the Lo rivers, to donate writings to the rulers. Not only writing, in reality, but also maps and knowledge of various kinds. The legend is told in some steps, that can be summarized like this (here using the reconstruction of the Annals of the Bamboo Books):

- I. When the mists were removed, the emperor Nakhunte made an excursion on the Loh river and saw a great fish. He sacrificed to it with five victims, whereupon torrents of rain came down for seven days and seven nights, when the fish floated off the sea and the emperor obtained the map writing. The dragon writing came forth from the Ho river and the Kwai writing from the Loh river.
- II. One morning the dragon came with a writing which was the description of the future emperor Yao.
- III. When Yao had been on the throne 70 years, on the second, when the day began to decline, a glorious light came forth from the Ho river. Then a dragon-horse the Lung-Ma) appeared, bearing in his mouth a scaly cuirass, with red lines on a green ground, ascended the altar, laid down the scheme, and went away.
- IV. Two years afterwards, on the banks of the Loh, at the decline of the day a red light appeared: a tortoise rose from the waters, with a writing in red lines on its back, and rested on the altar.
- V. In his 14th year Shun raised an altar at the Ho. When the day declined, there came a fine and glorious light; and a yellow dragon issued and came to the altar, bearing a scheme on his back, in lines of red and green intermingled.
- VI. In the time of Yao, Shun brought Yii forward. As he was looking at the Ho river, a tall man, with a white face and fish's body came out. Having spoken, he gave Yii a chart of the Ho, containing all about the regulating of the waters: and returned into the deep."

This legend spreaded in ancient times in China and was imitated in many regions of the reign, with some variations, but keeping the same structure and peculiar references. To name one, we can remember the version where the main characters are Wuh Wang and Liu Shang. In this version of the story, they repeatedly meet men, not fishes, and the same coloured dragons of the original

source. Fish-Men donating knowledge are also mentioned in the classical Shan Hai Jing[4], the first cultural geographical record of China; they are mentioned as the descendant of ShenNung, whose personal story resembles that of Sargon of Agade.

It seems viable, not to say evident, that the Chinese legend of the passing of writing from Fish-Men to the mythological rulers has an almost certain Old Babylonian origin, having spread in ancient China via the Bak tribes who were, substantially, a population of Elamites and/or Babylonians who moved eastwards.

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- [1] T.deLacouperie - "Western origin of the early Chinese civilisation from 2300 B.C. to 200 A.D" (1894) - "The Old Babylonian Characters and their Chinese derivatives" (1888) - "The languages of China before Chinese" (1887)
- [2] C.J.Ball - "Sumerian and Chinese" (1913)
- [3] F.Lenormant - "Essai de commentaire des fragments cosmogoniques de Berosus" (1832)
- [4] C.Shan - "Domain of Deities, Spirits, Monsters, and Beasts –Related Collections of Images from the Shan Hai Jing"

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