

The quest for archetypes: a review of Gao Lifen's research in mythology

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Abstract: Gao Lifen's early research primarily focused on Chinese classical poetry and ancient rhymed prose. Subsequently, her research shifted towards examining the relationship between mythological legends, folk culture, and classical literary creation during the Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties periods, exploring literary archetypes and symbolism. In recent years, the study of the Queen Mother of the West myth has become the central focus of her research. Benefiting from her background and methodological training in classical Chinese poetry and prose, Gao Lifen's approach to mythological research is grounded in the meticulous organization and close reading of transmitted texts, focusing on the examination of imagery and symbolism, as well as a comprehensive and holistic reflection on mythological thinking. Drawing from both the foundations of traditional classical poetics and insights from literary theories and methodologies in mythology and literary anthropology, her work demonstrates robust scholarly rigor, innovative energy, and prolific research output.

Keywords: Classical poetry and rhymed prose, Classical mythology, Imagery, Transmitted texts, Fieldwork

1. Introduction

Gao Lifen was originally a scholar of classical literature. We have known each other for many years, and in my earlier recollection, she was highly regarded in academia for her research on classical poetry and rhymed prose. Gao Lifen is talented and possesses a literary flair, having established herself as an expert in the interpretation of literary imagery, with her profound knowledge of classical literature widely acknowledged. When I mention her talent and literary skill, it is not an exaggerated compliment from a close acquaintance, as she naturally transitioned to the study of classical mythology, moving from literary imagery to mythological imagery. She made a remarkable entrance with her work, and her paper "Sacred Order: The Creation Myth and Cosmology in the Chu Silk Manuscript, Part A" has remained a focal point of discussion. I even heard the esteemed scholar Qiu Xigui praise it during one of his lectures. In the afterword of her book *Penglai Mythology: The Sacred Narrative of Divine Mountains, Seas, and Islands*, Gao Lifen remarked that scholarly research is akin to the Muse bestowing the fruit of wisdom. I would also like to say that she must be a mythologist beloved by the Muse.

2. From classical poetry and rhymed prose to classical mythology

2.1. Foundational period in the study of Chinese classical poetry and rhymed prose

Gao Lifen's early research primarily focused on Chinese classical poetry and ancient rhymed prose. Her master's and doctoral theses were respectively "Poetry as an Expression of Grievance: A Study of Resentment Poetry in the Han and Wei Dynasties" and "A Study of Allusion Usage in Yuanjia Poets." Subsequently, she published several related research papers on poetry and rhymed prose, such as "Entering the Spring Mulberry Grove: Ritual and Space in Song Yu's 'Dengtuzi Hao Se Fu' and the Encounter with the Mulberry-Picking Girl," "Archetype and Symbol: The Mulberry-Picking Girl in Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties Poetry and Her Multiple Cultural Connotations," and "The Perspective of Seasonal Phenology and Temporal Thinking in Medieval Literature." In 2008, she published the monograph *The Last Song: The Anthropology of Han Dynasty Yuefu Poetry*, which integrated cultural anthropology and abundant archaeological findings, moving beyond the criticism of "written poetry" to return to the musical, dance, and

performance contexts in which Han Dynasty Yuefu poetry was created, analyzing its transition from collective entertainment and oral tradition to self-expressive lyrical creation.

2.2. Exploratory period on the relationship between myth, folklore, and literature

Subsequently, Gao Lifen shifted her research focus to exploring the relationship between mythological legends, folk culture, and classical literary creation during the Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties periods, delving into literary archetypes and symbolism. She published a series of papers, including "The Sacred Realm of Water: Archetype and Symbol in Jin Dynasty River and Sea Rhymed Prose," "Space and Symbol: A Study of Penglai Mythology and Its Cultural Significance," "The Maritime Thinking and Cosmology of Penglai Mythology," "Pot Imagery, Cosmos, and Mythical Paradise: The Three-Pot Myth of Penglai and Its Cosmological Thinking," "Sacred Order: The Creation Myth and Cosmology in the Chu Silk Manuscript, Part A," and "Depicting the Sacred: Wang Yanshou's 'Rhymed Prose on the Lingguang Palace of Lu' and the Transformation of Palace Descriptions in Rhymed Prose." Later, building on some of these achievements, she systematically elaborated on the theme of Penglai mythology and published the book *Penglai Mythology: The Sacred Narrative of Divine Mountains, Seas, and Islands*.

2.3. In-Depth research phase on the queen mother of the west mythological system

In recent years, the study of the Queen Mother of the West mythology has become the central focus of Gao Lifen's research. Related papers include: "Vertical and Horizontal: Images of Sacred Mountains in Han Dynasty Stone Reliefs," "Meeting the Queen Mother of the West: The Queen Mother of the West and the Banquet at the Jade Pool in The Biography of King Mu," "The Medicine-Pounding Rabbit: An Investigation of the Queen Mother of the West and Her Associated Animal Imagery in Han Dynasty Stone Reliefs (Part 1)," "The Goddess and the Divine Healer: An Examination of the Queen Mother of the West and Her Bird-Shaped Bian Que Imagery in Han Dynasty Stone Reliefs," "The Nine-Tailed Fox: An Investigation of the Queen Mother of the West's Associated Animal Imagery and Symbolism in Han Dynasty Art," "The Goddess on the Tomb Door: A Study of the Queen Mother of the West Imagery and Symbolism in Northern Shaanxi Han Dynasty Stone Reliefs," "Life and Transformation: An Examination of Toad Imagery and Symbolism in the Queen Mother of the West Iconographic System of Han Art," "The Sacred Center: The Throne Imagery of the Queen Mother of the West in Han Art and Its Religious Significance," "The Queen Mother and the Sacred Mountain: Kunlun Mythology and the Sacred Space of the Queen Mother of the West in Han Art," and "The Enlightened One and the Divine Revelation Ritual: A Symbolic Examination of the Queen Mother of the West Narrative at the Jade Pool in The Biography of King Mu." These works collectively investigate the relationship between the Queen Mother of the West and mythological narratives, symbolic thinking, and religious beliefs. With relevant publications released annually, a substantial body of achievements has been accumulated.

3. Thinking through imagery: Gao Lifen's research approach

3.1. Integration of poetic foundations and mythological research

Benefiting from her research background and methodological training in classical Chinese poetry and prose, Gao Lifen's approach to mythological studies is grounded in the meticulous organization and close reading of transmitted texts, focusing on the examination of imagery and symbolism as well as a holistic and comprehensive reflection on mythological thinking. This research approach is also closely related to her early work in classical poetry and prose, where she concentrated on literary allusions and imagery in classical literature. Interpreting the underlying meanings and sentiments embedded in literary imagery is an important critical method in traditional poetics—understanding the author, discussing the era, and then discerning the aspirations and expressions conveyed in their poetry. Her attention to the imagery of the "mulberry-picking maiden" and the literary theme of "encountering the mulberry-picking maiden" stems from her extension of research topics from the classical literary tradition. Moving beyond the interpretive frameworks of allegorical expression and the political relationship between ruler and subject, she incorporates the research perspective of mythological archetype criticism to analyze and explore the deep cultural symbolic meanings hidden behind literary imagery. In her paper "Archetype and Symbol: The

Mulberry-Picking Maiden in Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties Poetry and Her Multiple Cultural Connotations," she seizes upon the recurring literary image of the "mulberry-picking maiden" in Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties poetry, offering a multi-directional interpretation of its cultural symbolic meanings in the classical context. This includes examining the mulberry-picking myth and the Gao Mei sacrificial ceremony, mulberry-picking rituals and spring festivals, taboos in the mulberry groves and the politics of desire, life cycles and the fading of beauty, as well as spring outings, nostalgia, and the aesthetics of the mulberry-picking maiden's body. These analyses reveal the multiple cultural symbolic meanings of the "mulberry-picking maiden" in classical culture, encompassing prayers for life, the arousal of desire, the practice of rituals, the pursuit of goodness, and the longing for beauty. Additionally, papers such as "Entering the Spring Mulberry Grove: Ritual and Space in Song Yu's 'Dengtuzi Hao Se Fu' and the Encounter with the Mulberry-Picking Girl" and "The Perspective of Seasonal Phenology and Temporal Thinking in Medieval Literature" all adopt research perspectives from literary anthropology and folklore. Methodologically, while drawing on traditional poetic criticism, these works also reference literary anthropology, archetype criticism theory, and the mythological-ritual school, supplemented with evidence from Han dynasty pictorial data. Within a comprehensive cultural framework, they analyze and interpret the folk psychology and cultural structures embedded in Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties poetry and prose. Thus, classical poetry and prose are re-evaluated from the perspective of individual emotions and intentions to collective psyche and behavior, returning to the ancient mythological imagination and the vibrant atmosphere of seasonal celebrations in which they were chanted and written. This reveals the folkloric life context in which literary works were created—where authors lived, died, sorrowed, and rejoiced. Consequently, classical literary studies are shifted from purely linguistic and literary criticism into the domain of literary anthropology, allowing readers to see the profound connections between classical literature and myth-telling, sacrificial rituals, and seasonal festivals, beyond its role in expressing emotions, conveying ideals, and pursuing aesthetic beauty in language.

3.2. The deepening of mythological imagery and cosmic thinking

Gao Lifan focuses on classical literary imagery and literary archetypes, with particular attention to mythological imagery in classical poetry and rhymed prose. The imagery of "Penglai" in Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties poetry and rhymed prose became her central research theme. Around this theme, she has published papers such as "The Sacred Realm of Water: Archetype and Symbol in Jin Dynasty River and Sea Rhymed Prose," "Space and Symbol: A Study of Penglai Mythology and Its Cultural Significance," "The Maritime Thinking and Cosmology of Penglai Mythology," and "Pot Imagery, Cosmos, and Mythical Paradise: The Three-Pot Myth of Penglai and Its Cosmological Thinking." All of these works depart from the imagery of "Penglai," not only delving deeply into its cultural symbolic meanings but also striving to uncover the underlying cosmic thinking embedded within it.

Gao Lifan seeks to decipher the deep-seated cognitive structures contained within surface-level literary writing and even discursive transmission. In this pursuit, she further traces back to pre-Qin and Han dynasty texts, exploring the origins and development of Chinese civilization, leading to her research on the creation myth in the "Chu Silk Manuscript, Part A." The paper "Sacred Order: The Creation Myth and Cosmology in the Chu Silk Manuscript, Part A" is an interpretation of the mythological structural types contained in the manuscript and the order-based thinking inherent in its cosmology. From the perspective of comparative mythology, it analyzes and points out that the "Chu Silk Manuscript, Part A" encompasses three types of world creation myths: "chaos creation," "paired gods procreative creation," and "earth-diver creation." It clarifies that the creation myth in the manuscript constructs a cosmic model of order establishment and reconstruction, reflecting the order of "numbers." By examining the relationship between creation myth narratives and funeral rituals among other ethnic groups worldwide, it demonstrates the sacred narrative quality of the "Chu Silk Manuscript, Part A." Finally, it further notes that the cosmogony of paired gods procreative creation in the manuscript, compared to the philosophical speculations of qi-based cosmologies in pre-Qin and Han times, represents a more primitive theistic view of cosmic creation. The writing of all these papers already reveals the traces and trajectory of Gao Lifan's progression from the study of mythological imagery toward the study of mythological thinking.

3.3. The practice of mythology-centered approach and multifaceted methodologies

The book *Penglai Mythology: The Sacred Narrative of Divine Mountains, Oceans, and Islands* can be regarded as a significant turning point in her research, shifting from mythological imagery in literature to a mythology-centered approach. This work is characterized by its rigorous structure and detailed, meticulous argumentation. From the perspectives of comparative mythology, motif analysis, and etymological investigation, supplemented by evidence from Han Dynasty pictorial data and excavated texts, it meticulously disentangles the chaotic and disordered linguistic narrative surface of Penglai mythology, extracting the underlying structural patterns of the mythological narrative. This elevates the status of Penglai mythology and highlights its inherent cosmic thinking and order. Through this book, one can perceive her academic "ambition": whether approaching Penglai mythology from rituals, etymological Textual Criticism, or the exploration of "pot imagery," she consistently ascends to the level of cosmology and cosmic thinking. Her study of the excavated text *Chu Silk Manuscript, Part A* also transcends the confines of purely textual and philological Textual Criticism, rising to a discourse on the cosmic order in creation myths. This reflects Gao Lifan's profound contemplation and relentless exploration of mythology itself. It is also worth mentioning that, in addition to employing comparative cultural perspectives and motif analysis, Gao extensively references pictorial data such as stone reliefs in her arguments. In discussions of transmitted texts, ethnographic materials and excavated documents frequently appear, demonstrating the flexible application of Ye Shuxian's "fourfold evidence" method. Through meticulous textual interpretation and argumentation, Gao Lifan guides readers to understand how ancient people thought through myths and how contemporary people, in turn, use myths to contemplate how ancient people thought through myths. The research papers listed above represent not only the outcomes of Gao Lifan's years of foundational analysis based on the reading of primary texts, developed through the research perspectives of literary anthropology, mythology, and folklore in her studies of medieval literature and culture, but also her endeavor to provide deep cultural interpretations of classical poetry, prose, and mythological narratives from a macro perspective of cultural symbolic systems. By connecting mythological thinking with literary writing and symbolic representation, she contemplates myths through imagery and explores the human psyche and behavior through myths. It can be said that the origins of her early research in classical poetry and prose have endowed her with this unique mode of thinking and research approach.

4. From text to field: Gao Lifan's queen mother mythology research

4.1. Sacred mountain schema and queen mother research continuation

In recent years, Gao Lifan has focused on the study of the Queen Mother of the West mythology, which follows her earlier research on Penglai mythology. In her article "Vertical and Horizontal: The Imagery of Sacred Mountains in Han Dynasty Stone Reliefs," she points out that the "sacred mountain images" in Han Dynasty stone reliefs exhibit two spatial forms: one is the vertical, hierarchical sacred mountain, and the other is the horizontal, juxtaposed sacred mountain. The former is primarily represented by the Kunlun three-peak sacred mountain system, while the latter is dominated by the Penglai three-mountain sacred mountain system. The former is characterized by sharp, upward "hill" forms, whereas the latter features flat-topped sacred mountains and jar vessels. Thus, after ascending Penglai and journeying to Kunlun, she turned her attention to the Queen Mother of the West, the most important deity on Kunlun Mountain. The Queen Mother of the West evolved from a primitive, half-human, half-beast deity in ancient mythology to the beautiful and noble leader of female immortals in Taoism. The Han Dynasty was a crucial period for the mythology and worship of the Queen Mother of the West, and excavated Han Dynasty artworks contain a wealth of images related to her.

4.2. Iconography and symbolic interpretation of attendant animals

Gao Lifan extensively utilizes excavated Han Dynasty artworks, including stone reliefs, brick paintings, and tomb murals, to study the attendant animals in the imagery of the Queen Mother of the West's paradise, such as the nine-tailed fox, toad, three-legged crow, and medicine-pounding rabbit. By combining traditional textual analysis with iconographic methods, she examines the different representations of these sacred animals in transmitted texts and visual data, as well as their narrative functions in funerary art. For

example, in her article "The Medicine-Pounding Rabbit: An Investigation of the Queen Mother of the West and Her Attendant Animal Imagery in Han Dynasty Stone Reliefs (Part 1)," she notes that among the attendant animals of the Queen Mother of the West, the rabbit is a significant companion frequently depicted alongside her. However, rabbits in Han Dynasty stone reliefs appear in two systems: one is the rabbit in the moon disk, and the other is the rabbit beside the Queen Mother of the West. The rabbit in the moon disk may appear alone or paired with a toad, and the act of pounding medicine is not a necessary feature. In contrast, the attendant rabbit beside the Queen Mother of the West consistently and reliably portrays the act of pounding medicine, symbolizing the elixir of immortality. This forms the most crucial link between the Queen Mother of the West and the rabbit. In the imagery, the medicine-pounding rabbit beside the Queen Mother of the West is always depicted with a pestle and mortar, highlighting the specific sacred task of pounding medicine. This medicine is none other than the elixir of immortality, and "immortality" is the most prominent divine attribute and duty of the Queen Mother of the West in her paradise imagery. The "medicine-pounding rabbit" constitutes a stable visual unit in Han Dynasty stone reliefs depicting the Queen Mother of the West's paradise. As an attendant animal, the medicine-pounding rabbit signifies the Queen Mother of the West's divine immortality and her power over life regeneration and cosmic renewal. It serves an explanatory function for her divinity, becoming a sacred symbol of the immortal goddess. Within the iconographic system of the Queen Mother of the West, the medicine-pounding white rabbit, rather than the jade rabbit, is the most important core image in her iconography.

4.3. Construction of sacred imagery and the system of life-death healing

Another example is the article "The Nine-Tailed Fox: An Examination of the Imagery and Symbolism of the Queen Mother of the West's Attendant Animal in Han Dynasty Art." This study critically reflects on the traditional interpretation of the nine-tailed fox in Han Dynasty art as a political auspice, returning to the visual context to consider the unique narrative function of the nine-tailed fox as a key compositional element in depictions of the Queen Mother of the West's paradise. Centering on the funerary space of Han Dynasty pictorial art, the essay explores the symbolic meanings of this imagery. It points out that the nine-tailed fox's connection to the death space of the tomb chamber and burial mound, its characteristic of "returning to its origins" (as in the saying "a fox dies with its head toward its den"), and its symbolic association with reproductive function are all crucial factors enabling its entry into the paradisiacal space of the Queen Mother of the West. Additionally, the article "The Goddess and the Divine Physician: An Examination of the Queen Mother of the West and Her Bird-Shaped Bian Que Imagery in Han Dynasty Art" takes the human-headed, bird-bodied divine creature found in Shandong-region Han Dynasty depictions of the Queen Mother of the West as its research subject. It argues that the Queen Mother of the West and the divine bird Bian Que in Han art symbolize an otherworldly medical and healing system where there is healing for the living and healing for the dead. The bird-shaped divine physician Bian Que serves precisely as an attendant image to the goddess Queen Mother of the West, who presides over the elixir of immortality. This highlights the Queen Mother's sacred function, making her a symbol of immortality and simultaneously an eternal force that heals life.

4.4. Tracing texts and interpreting sacred space

In addition to incorporating excavated archaeological materials, Gao Lifen's research places great emphasis on the reading and analysis of transmitted texts and original source materials. Returning to the examination of texts related to the Queen Mother of the West, such as *The Biography of King Mu*, she also notes another sacred space associated with the Queen Mother beyond the "Kunlun" space long focused on by scholars: the "Jade Pool" (Yaochi). In her article "Meeting the Queen Mother of the West: The Queen Mother of the West and the Banquet at the Jade Pool in *The Biography of King Mu*," she centers on the narrative of King Mu meeting the Queen Mother of the West at the Jade Pool in *The Biography of King Mu*. She investigates the geography of the Jade Pool and the narratives related to the banquet there, analyzing their spatial symbolism and ritual functions to discern the original imagery of the Jade Pool banquet. The Queen Mother of the West of "Kunlun" and the Queen Mother of the West of the "Jade Pool" belong to two distinct image systems. As a fusion of real and imagined geography, the Jade Pool in *The Biography of King Mu* is no longer merely a clear pool of water on Kunlun Mountain, a geographical "space." It is a "place"

where events occur, the venue for the banquet ritual between King Mu of Zhou and the Queen Mother of the West, and thus the Jade Pool acquires a sacred nature. The secular human emperor's desire for eternal sovereignty and his fear of death find spiritual catharsis and sublimation through the ritual activity of the banquet and the Queen Mother's blessings. From political praise to religious metaphor, the motif of "meeting the Queen Mother of the West" becomes concretized and Taoist-immortalized in Six Dynasties religious narratives, transforming into a ritual for obtaining divine revelation and celestial messages. The Queen Mother of the West also evolves from a politically conceived "Western Emperor's Daughter" into the "Supreme Saint" whom enlightened immortals pilgrimage to meet—an eternal religious enlightener.

4.5. Construction of multiple evidence and a three-dimensional context

All these research achievements demonstrate that Gao Lifan's studies on the Queen Mother of the West mythology are grounded in transmitted texts, extend to physical materials such as archaeological images of the Queen Mother, and further connect to Han Dynasty burial spaces, ritual activities, and even real and imagined geographies. Through multiple lines of evidence, she situates the study of the Queen Mother of the West mythology within a dynamic and multi-dimensional Han cultural context. This allows her to analyze and interpret the diverse manifestations of the Queen Mother of the West mythology across different regions, transmission contexts, and narrative or written traditions, as well as the collective emotions and thought patterns of the Han people reflected therein.

4.6. Fieldwork expansion and attention to faith realities

In addition to utilizing transmitted textual materials, Gao Lifan also engages in relevant fieldwork for her research on the Queen Mother of the West mythology. To study Han Dynasty images of the Queen Mother, she has collected visual data from museums, collections, and cultural heritage preservation institutions in Sichuan, Shandong, Liaoning, Henan, Inner Mongolia, and other regions housing Han Dynasty artifacts. Recently, she has begun to focus on the Queen Mother of the West faith in Taiwan, conducting fieldwork on the "Mother Goddess" belief within Taiwan's Cihui Temple. From ancient texts to field sites, from visual texts to oral traditions, from excavated Han Dynasty images to today's incense-filled temples in Taiwan, these perspectives and directions of inquiry represent her multifaceted attention to the Queen Mother of the West mythology in recent years. As faith continues and incense burns unceasingly, the passion and dedication of the researcher continue to burn brightly within this endeavor.

5. Conclusion

From her early research on classical poetry and prose to her current studies on the Queen Mother of the West mythology, it is evident that Gao Lifan has benefited from both the training of traditional classical poetics and the inspiration derived from literary theories and research methods in mythology and literary anthropology. This has enabled her to demonstrate a robust foundation alongside innovative energy and prolific research output. Gao Lifan's transition from classical poetry and prose to mythology is not accidental but rather the inevitable convergence of various factors. Every phase of academic research follows its own life trajectory. A researcher's evolving ideas, themes, and methodologies are often deeply or subtly imprinted in the research papers and reports written during different periods. These works are organically interconnected, representing the research landscape carved out by the researcher's personality, talent, and life attitude along the winding path of knowledge.

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