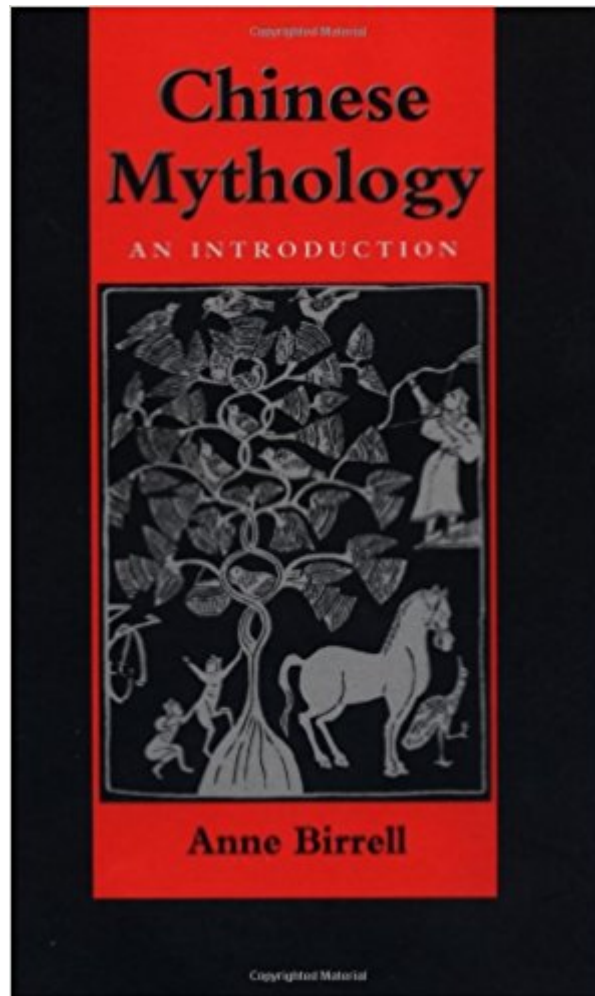




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# Chinese Mythology: An Introduction



## Synopsis

In *Chinese Mythology*, Anne Birrell provides English translations of some 300 representative myth narratives selected from over 100 classical texts, many of which have never before been translated into any Western language. Organizing the narratives according to themes and motifs common to world mythology, Birrell addresses issues of source, dating, attribution, textual variants, multiforms, and context. Drawing on exhaustive work in comparative mythology, she surveys the development of Chinese myth studies, summarizes the contribution of Chinese and Japanese scholars to the study of Chinese myth since the 1920s, and examines special aspects of traditional approaches to Chinese myth. The result is an unprecedented guide to the study of Chinese myth for specialists and nonspecialists alike.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The first serious and comprehensive introduction to Chinese mythology aimed at both the specialist and general reader. It is splendidly organized with well-chosen texts, lucid commentary, and useful supplementary matter... Sets new standards in the presentation of Chinese mythology." (Asian Affairs)"We must all thank Professor Birrell for providing an incredibly bountiful source, containing all manner of practical and fascinating information within its framework of myths. This book should find many uses and readers— it is a superb resource for teaching about Chinese myth, literature, history, religion, culture, and thought." (Suzanne Cahill *Journal of Asian Studies*)"One can safely expect to see this volume in all libraries that serve educated general readers as well as even the

most modest academic libraries. Anne Birrell is to be congratulated for bringing this arcane subject matter into the grasp of a wide variety of readers outside the China-studies area." (Robert E. Hegel Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews)"Goes far beyond anything in or out of print on this subject. Nothing remotely of this stimulating nature and high quality exists in English. It will be very much sought after by sinologists, but especially by non-sinologist comparativists. Birrell has singlehandedly saved the scholarly world at least a decade in its attempts to come to grips with this fragmented, refractory body of narratives... [A] marvelous work of humanistic scholarship." (Victor H. Mair, University of Pennsylvania)

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I selected this book for a class on myth, mainly after reading reviews discussing how well the stories were told compared to other resources. All I can assume is that other resources include almost incomprehensible stories. Birrell has obviously done a great deal of research, and she is trying to compile hundreds of sources into some sort of meaningful whole, but the result is very difficult to read. Her introductions to the stories are more meaningful than the tiny tales themselves, and I fear I will use this text only sparingly in the coming semester, giving more time to books explaining other mythic systems, not because I dislike Chinese myth, but because this text does little to clarify it. My students will have a hard time with these readings, and I will need to supplement them as much as possible so that the students can see what's at work within each story and understand the sociological and historical context. I know trying to tackle all of Chinese myth is hard in itself--much harder than Greek or Norse myth--but after reading this, I am not sure I have a better sense of Chinese myth than I did before I opened the book. As an introduction, it may tend to be more daunting than it should be, and less accessible to a student course.

It's an academic nonfiction work, perfect for a serious college student or professor.

I feel that this is an upper level college course text book. The stories are arranged by category, and

no attempt is made to place the collection of stories into a cultural context that would relate to how they would be told by a story teller to an audience.

B+

I purchased this book on the strength of the reviews I saw here, and was seriously misled by the title, the self description, and the reviews. This is by no means a survey of the extant Chinese mythology, nor even a readable book. It concerns itself exclusively with the earliest strata of Chinese myth, which are preserved in very fragmentary form in later sources. It does quote liberally from these, but the references are, even in full, so short as to be nearly useless. They are snippets and bare mentions of lost tales, not anything one could call full myths. The book is valuable as a reference work for those concerned with this early and almost entirely lost layer of Chinese literature, but the interest for the non-specialist in this byway of archaic Chinese religion and lit is hard to fathom. As for methodology, there is none. Birrell invokes Eliade and Dumezil (which is nice) and Levi Strauss (which is useless) among others, and cites many parallels from Greco-Roman myth. But there is nothing that could be called substantive analysis or insight. This is in fine just the sort of useful, diligent, careful and intellectually mediocre volume that wins the praise of captious academics. To recommend it to the intelligent general reader is an act of malice or stupidity.

This book brings you into the old folk tales and stories of the Chinese. To keep yourself in check with all the odd stories, draw out what's going on after each story. You'll have some very, very unusual pictures.

If you plan on ordering for college courses make sure you do well in advance. Otherwise good service, and condition of the book is near mint.

Anyone without a knowledge of Chinese who has tried to find out much about the myths and legends of early China -- as opposed to the abundant material from medieval and later times -- has certainly encountered many obstacles. Mythical and heroic narratives from before the Han Dynasty are rare, often incomplete, and usually frustratingly allusive; and often are not narratives, but applications of parts of presumably well-known stories to illustrate a point. And they usually have survived in a form considered "rational" by generations of Confucian editors. There have been a few useful, but all-too-brief, presentations by qualified Sinologists, notably Derk Bodde. Other serious

discussions by qualified Western scholars, however, often bog down in discussions of textual problems, the age and authority of sources, and other important issues, without ever explaining what a story is about. For this reason alone, Anne M. Birrell's "Chinese Mythology: An Introduction" is welcome. Actual translations of texts are provided, with useful discussions and annotations intelligible to non-Sinologists like this reader. In addition, the author/translator/editor writes with grace and clarity. One comes away feeling that the confusing nature of the source has not been amplified by the presentation, and that the cultural issues they seem to address have been identified with reasonable certainty. It is also an extremely interesting book, usually offering several versions of each of the stories, illustrating the various ways they have been told, and their persistence in Chinese culture. They are grouped thematically, and a myth which contains a variety of themes usually gets one major treatment, and relatively abbreviated consideration under other headings. A few get treated from different perspectives at somewhat greater length. Some readers will probably object to flipping back and forth, but the alternative was considerable repetition, which Birrell has gracefully avoided. As a result of reading this book with the attention it inspires, I have actually been able to appreciate the depth of learning and insight concealed in some of the earlier scholarship (such as that of Bernhard Karlgren and Wolfram Eberhard). Anne Birrell has also been responsible for some attractive translations of interesting, but so far obscure, Chinese literature, and this reader hopes to see more of them. This book should not be confused with Anne Birrell's short illustrated volume on "Chinese Myths," for the British Museum's "Legendary Past" series. (Reposted from my "anonymous" review of September 12, 2003.)

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