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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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20th Century Exploration of the "Issue of the Chinese Epic"

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Abstract The paper explores the question of the Chinese language epic, a topic frequently discussed in academic circles throughout the 20th century. Over the past century, many academics of an older generation have put forward ideas for resolving this issue, which arose from the perspective of the origins of Western literature. But careful examination indicates that all the hypotheses and explanations do not faithfully or fully adhere to the facts themselves. This academic affair arose in the course of eastward spread of Western influences when numerous scholars tried to explain the origins of Chinese literature by transplanting to Chinese soil a model of the origins of Western literature. The author doubts the logic of taking such a model as a universal interpretative framework for the historical development of literature or using epic poetry to explain the sources of Chinese literature. Underlying the fact that their academic consciousness was not based on a profound understanding of the facts and materials was a blind and unreflective pursuit of Western discourse; there are lessons to be learned from this.

Keywords epic, issue of epic, history of literature, origin, Western discourse

Introduction

In the early 20th century, with the spread of Western influences to the East, the Western ideas of literary history came into China, giving rise to compilation and

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revision of literary history. Greek literature, the primogenitor of Western literature and philosophy, originated from Geek mythology and epics. Greek epics elaborate Greek myths, sagas and remote antiquity, integrating imagination and reality in grand narratives. Their themes, characters, rhetoric, styles and narration all exerted extensive impacts on the later literature. Doubtlessly, Western literature is conceived in its great epics. Consequently, it has been stereotypical to begin with myths and epics in Western literature class.

However, the stereotype won't work for Chinese literature: China does not have its national epic, and its mythology is very scattered and unsystematic. Neither of the diversity nor integrity of Chinese mythology can come up to the standard of Greek or Norse mythology. How can we explain the fact? It really perplexes many scholars studying Chinese literary history based on the Western literary conception. The academic issue, called "Issue of Chinese Epic" in the paper, has been discussed since the early 20th century. The discussion might not be hot, but it never ceased. After Wang Guowei 王国维 had noticed the different origins of Chinese and Western literature, Lu Xun 鲁迅, Hu Shi 胡适, Mao Dun 茅盾, Lu Kanru 陆侃如, Feng Yuanjun 冯沅君, Zheng Zhenduo 郑振铎 and Zhong Jingwen 钟敬文 all put forward some hypotheses to explain the issue. After the 1950s, Rao Zongyi 饶宗颐 and Zhang Songru 张松如 specially wrote some treatises to explore it. Throughout the 20th century, the "Issue of the Chinese Epic" could not be steered clear of provided that ancient literature was involved, and it became the focus of studying the origination of Chinese literature. The paper is not intended to provide more elaborate and rigorous hypotheses based on the previous ones; instead, it tries to rake up the academic studies during the last century, in the hope of checking the rationality of the "Issue of the Chinese Epic" itself. Undoubtedly, the purpose of the "Issue of the Chinese Epic" is to explain the origin of Chinese literature. Thus the question here is: is the issue itself rational for studying the origin of Chinese literature? Were there any non-academic ideologies which caused the perplexity in studying ancient Chinese literature? By raking up the "Issue of the Chinese Epic", we may find the answers which may suggest new ways to study the origin of Chinese literature.

Revision of "Issue of the Chinese Epic"

After 1898 Reform (Wuxu bianfa 戊戌变法), Liang Qichao 梁启超 escaped to Japan. Influenced by the literature of Meiji Restoration (1868) which spread Western learning, Liang advocated "Revolution in the Fiction Circles". Gradually, Western literature spread to China, which came to an unprecedented crisis and needed reform urgently. Therefore, the comparative studies of Chinese and

Western literature naturally aroused public attention. Jiang Zhiyou 蒋智由, one of the "Three Prominent Poets in Pre-modern Period", probably read history of Denmark and knew something of Norse mythology. He wrote an article in *Xinmin congbao* 新民丛报 (*Xinmin Series Newspaper*), saying that compared with Norse myths, Chinese myths, such as "Pan Gu Makes the World", were "simple and dull rather than grand and charming"[1], but he did not give any explanations for this quite intuitive opinion. His words "simple and dull" probably refer to that Chinese mythology lacks long and elaborate narrative. Chinese myths are no more than some outlines of stories and they lack elaboration. Jiang's opinion brought about anxiety to Chinese scholars: compared with European mythology, the Chinese mythology was too unsystematic and insignificant.

Before turning to archeology and history, Wang Guowei studied Western literature and history voraciously for years. Therefoere, compared with Jiang Zhiyou's superficial opinion, Wang Guowei's opinion, which was put forward in1906, was obviously deliberate. The fourteenth item of *Wenxue xiaoyan* 文学小言 (*Laconic Literary Criticism*) is as follows:

> The narrative literature (narrative poetry, epic and drama etc., excluding prose) in China is still in its infancy. Admittedly, *zaju* 杂剧 (variety show) in the Yuan dynasty is beautiful in language, but its characterization is not mature. Mature characterization did not appear until *Taohua shan* 桃花扇 (*The Peach Fan*) was written in the Qing dynasty. Furthermore, except *Taohua shan*, the other plays are still immature in characterization. In the final analysis, they are no more than some systematic *ci*-like things without the essence of *ci*. As a giant of Eastern literature, China's narrative literature is unable to compete against Western literature; this is really the responsibility of later writers.[2]

Obviously, Wang Guowei compared Chinese and Western narrative literature based on his knowledge of Greek epics and verse drama, although this was unspoken. According to the Western literary theory, Wang Guowei classified literature into lyric and narrative literature. Although he spoke highly of Chinese lyric tradition, he believed Chinese narrative was still "in its infancy", and Chinese narrative poetry, epic and drama were scarcely comparable to the masterpieces of Western Europe.

Lu Xun grew up when backward China badly needed to learn from the advanced Western countries. In 1908 he marveled at the Western mythology in his "Po esheng lun" 破恶声论 ("Breaking the Evil Voice") in the monthly

[1] Ma Changyi 马昌仪, 1994, p. 19.
[2] Wang Guowei, volume 5, 1983, p. 30.

magazine *Henan* 河南. He said that "Western mythology not only nurtured Western literature but also rendered Western culture grand and brilliant." He then felt "ashamed of the ancient Chinese people's poor and scanty imagination"[3], indicating he proceeded with the opinion that neither of the diversity nor complexity of Chinese mythology could rival that of Western mythology. In 1923, Lu Xun published his far-reaching *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe* 中国小说史略 (*A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*), in which he expounded Chinese myths and legends with a whole chapter. He said, "We haven't known any Chinese myths which are as monumental as Greek epics. Chinese myths were only employed as ornaments in poetry or allusions in fiction."[4] Myths and legends were the most important sources of epics. Without epics which integrated them into a monumental work, the myths and legends were reduced to "ornaments" of poetry or "allusions" of fiction. Lu Xun did not simply point out the fact; he also attempted to explain it for the first time:

> Somebody said that two factors made Chinese mythology incomplete and unsystematic. First, ancient Chinese people lived in the Yellow River Valley. In such an unfavorable environment, they had to work hard, so they usually stressed practicability and belittled imagination. As a result, they did not integrate the ancient myths into a monumental work. Second, Kongzi 孔子 (Confucius) always advocated the practical learning such as cultivating the moral self, regulating the family, maintaining the state rightly and making all peaceful. Besides, he was opposed to talk of supernatural phenomena, so the grotesque stories of remote antiquity were repulsive to Confucians, and consequently they were scattered and even lost.
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> But on thinking it over, the real reason actually lies in the little distinction between Chinese deities, men and ghosts. Ancient Chinese believed that sometimes men and ghosts also could ascend to deities. Due to the blurring boundaries between deities, men and ghosts, the primitive beliefs would never disappear, so the new legendary deities emerged endlessly and the old ones died gradually. However, the new deities did not have enough divinity at all.[5]

Here Lu Xun both quoted other people's opinion and put forward his own. He did not comment on the quoted opinion directly; however, if we study his words carefully, it can be induced that Lu Xun agreed with it in a way, but he also held that it did not come to the point. In the sentence "somebody said that two

[3] Lu Xun, volume 8, 1981, pp. 30–31.
[4] Ibid., volume 9, p. 21.
[5] Ibid., pp. 21–22.

factors…", "somebody" is very likely to refer to Japanese scholar shiotani (盐谷温)[6]. Shiotani published his work on history of Chinese literature in 1919, in which he held that the geographical conditions and Confucianism made Chinese mythology incomplete and unsystematic. His opinion inspired many later scholars and was widely accepted. Lu Xun retailed Shiotani's opinion, but he held that it was more reasonable to explore the issue on the basis of national cultural tradition. In Chinese folk tradition, there was no striking distinction between deities, men and ghosts. The men became ghosts after their death, but the ghosts could ascend to deities, and vice verse. Therefore, during the long period of primitive beliefs, the new deities emerged endlessly, and the old ones died gradually. Due to the little distinction between deities, men and ghosts, the new deities often lacked their divinity, and they were forgotten as time went by. It should be said that, in that era, Lu Xun's opinion was quite unique and insightful. Lu Xun always stuck to his opinion. In 1924, when he gave his lecture *Zhongguo xiaoshuo de lishi de bianqian* 中国小说的历史的变迁 (*The Historical Change of Chinese Novels*) in Northwest University, he reiterated it as well as Shiotani's opinion. He summarized that the unfavorable environment and "forgettable deities" (due to Chinese folk tradition) made Chinese mythology incomplete and unsystematic.[7]

Actually, Lu Xun did not assert whether there was a monumental mythical work in ancient China. He just objectively stated that "we haven't known any myths". Thus all his statements were based on the fact that "we haven't known any myths". However, sooner or later, a verdict would be needed to relieve the anxiety on the rising issue. In 1928, five years after *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilue* was published, Hu Shi's masterpiece, *Baihua wenxueshi* 白话文学史 (*History of Vernacular Literature*) came out, and Hu at least put forward some clear verdicts:

> Epics appeared very late in China, which is quite rare in history of world literature. It is hard to explain this, though. In my opinion, it is likely that there

[6] *Zhina wenxue gailun jianghua* 支那文学概论讲话 (*Lectures on Introduction to Chinese Literature*) , written by the early Japanese sinologist, Yangu Wen, is a book on history of Chinese literature. It was published by Tokyo Committee for the Studies of the Tun-huang Manuscripts in 1919. In the 1920s, Chen Yuan 陈源 rebuked Lu Xun for plagiarizing this book and Lu Xun refuted him. Lu Xun said the he did consult the book, especially the second lecture, but his opinions were quite different. The second lecture is right on myths and legends. See "Bushixin" 不是信 ("Not a Letter") in *Huagaiji xubian* 华盖集续编 (*Sequence to the Huagai Collection*). See volume 3 of *Lu Xun quanji.*

[7] *Zhongguo xiaoshuo de lishi de bianqian* 中国小说的历史的变迁 (*The Historical Change of Chinese Novels*) is anthologized in volume 9 of *Lu Xun quanji*. Lu Xun came up with two reasons: "the hardships of life" and "the forgettable deities". The former is related to environment, and the latter is related to national character. It was published in Renmin wenxue chubanshe in 1981.

> were only some songs and religious songs in ancient Chinese literature; it is also likely that there had been some epics, but they were not written down due to the difficulty of writing, so only short lyric poems were handed down. Between the two possibilities, I agree more with the former one. Some titles in *Daya* 大雅 (*Refinement*) of *Shijing* 诗经 (*Book of Songs*), such as "Shengmin" 生民 ("Creation of Mankind"), "Shangsong" 商颂 ("Ode to Shang"), "Xuanniao" 玄鸟 ("Black Bird") etc., are very suitable for epics. However, epics never occurred in ancient China, showing that Chinese people were practical but not imaginative. Living between the temperate and tropical areas, they did not have the rich natural resources as southerners did, so they had to fight against the nature, and it was impossible for them to daydream comfortably under the palm trees…Therefore, it is safe to say that ancient Chinese people had no epics but folk and religious songs.[8]

Hu Shi used the word "show" to assume the cause-and-effect relationship between the fact that "epic never occurred" and the conclusion that "Chinese people were practical but not imaginative". Actually, there is neither logic nor empirical relationship between them. In this rough conclusion we can see the shades of Shiotani and Lu Xun. As a matter of fact, Hu Shi's statement was qualified. He was inclined to agree that ancient China had no epics, but this was true only of the north. As for the south, he noticed many deities in *Lisao* 离骚 (*The Lament*), but he said "there's no way to testify whether the deities had their epics."[9] Except for the descriptive details, the opinions of Wang Guowei, Lu Xun and Hu Shi could represented those of many later scholars, such as Zheng Dekun 郑德坤, Wei Juxian 卫聚贤 and Ma Xueliang 马学良 etc.[10]

As for Hu Shi's another rough conclusion—there had been epics, but they were not written down due to the difficulty of writing—it indicates the significant revolution of "Issue of the Chinese Epic". After 1930s or so, the scholars tended to believe ancient China had had its epics, but they were scattered and lost later. Inadvertently, Hu Shi put forward the idea for the first time, although he did not tend to approve of it. Due to his academic status, Hu

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[8] Hushi, 1999, p. 47.

[9] Ibid., p. 48.

[10] Zheng Dekun 郑德坤 said in "Shanhaijing jiqi shenhua" 山海经及其神话 ("Classic of Mountains and Rivers and Its Myths") published in 1932, "*Shanhaijing* is a geographical and fragmentary record, so it is not as vivid and colorful as *Homer's Epic*, *Lijufeituo* 黎俱吠陀 (*RigVeda*) and *Jiasasi* 加撒司 (*Gathas*) in India or *Old Testament* of Hebrews. It is really inferior in art, but in essence, the readers may feel the beauty of it if they can exercise their imagination and trace the ancients' imagination. (Ma Changyi, volume I, pp. 182–183.) Wei Juxian admitted "Chinese people emphasized practicality and lacked imagination." (Ibid, p. 240.) Ma Xueliang agreed agreed more with Mao Dun on the opinion that the main reason for the loss of Chinese mythology is the historicization of Chinese myths. (Ibid.)

Shi's words were always considered to be very authoritative then.

In 1929, Mao Dun published his *Zhongguo shenhua yanjiu ABC* 中国神话研究 ABC (*The Initial Studies on Chinese Mythology*), the first treatise on Chinese mythology. In the first chapter "Jige genben wenti" 几个根本问题 ("Several Fundamental Issues"), he refuted Hu Shi and said Chinese epics did exist in the north but they were lost later: "Undoubtedly ancient Chinese people (in the north) had had their own rich myths (This will be discussed later). The problem is why they were lost in the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE)."[11] He did not agree that Chinese were unimaginative due to their unfavorable environment and diligent character, nor did he agree that the practical learning which Kongzi advocated led to the loss of Chinese myths. Mao Dun put forward two different explanations: "There must be some other reasons for the loss of Chinese myths. Personally, the first reason is the historicization of the myths, and the second is there were no earthshaking events then which could bring about the epics."[12] Years later, Mao Dun wrote an article to introduce Greek, West Asian and Indian epics. He thought readers might ask him about the origin of Chinese epic, so he transplanted his main ideas about Chinese myths to Chinese epic and redeemed that ancient China had had its own epic. He said: "The two volumes of *Chiyou* 蚩尤 in *Hanshu* "Yiwenzhi" 汉书・艺文志 ("Record of Literature and Arts" [with reference to] *Book of Han*) were probably an epic. Pitifully they were not mentioned in the later books, and perhaps they had already been lost." Accordingly, "It is quite believable that China had had its epic. Its subject might be the War of Zhuolu 涿鹿之战 and the characters included Huangdi 黄帝, Chiyou and Xuannü 玄女 etc., but it was long lost, and even the legends became very fragmentary. Why did they disappear? I think the reasons are the same as those of loss of Chinese myths."[13]

Mao Dun's bold hypothesis was cheered by some folklorists. In 1933 Zhong Jingwen said:

> For some reasons, only some fragmentary and brief myths and legends were retained in ancient Chinese documents. Consequently, some European and Oriental scholars reached the agreement that China hadn't have myths and legends as systematic and integrated as Greek, Roman and Norse ones. I am very suspicious of the accuracy of it. It is undeniable that the existent Chinese myths are scattered and fragmentary, but if we judged that China had never had systematic and integrated myths merely by this, I'm afraid it is quite unconvincing.[14]

[11] Mao Dun, 1999, p. 8.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Mao Dun, 2001, *Mao Dun quanji*, volume 30, p. 37.
[14] Zhong Jingwen, 1985, p. 494.

Undoubtedly, it is very hard to judge whether some vanished things existed in the history, and the scholars can give their positive or negative hypotheses. Different hypotheses can bring about different statements and inferences, which are helpful to know more. Zhong Jingwen thought that the negative hypothesis was "unconvincing", indicating his deep love for Chinese mythology. These words, which were written to American scholar Eberhardt, were with a tone of conjecture and discussion. Zhong was opposed to the statement that Chinese mythology itself was incomplete and unsystematic. In his opinion, Chinese mythology was incomplete and unsystematic just because it had been scattered and lost. In his advanced old age, Zhong mentioned this letter again, and he said the sixty years' academic research proved his idea.[15] Zhong enjoyed a high status in the field of folklore and mythology, so his opinion became prevailing, and it was also accepted in some works on history of literature.[16]

After the 1980s and 1990s, the hypothesis that ancient China had no epic was in the ascendancy. For example, Rao Zongyi held that there had not been any Chinese epic. He also explained why no Chinese epics were handed down:

> The ancient Chinese epics were very few and underdeveloped. In my opinion, the reasons are as follows. First, the syntax of ancient Chinese language was too brief for epics. Second, ancient Chinese language was non-narrative. Despite this, the oral literature was still rich in the folk. However, the limitation of the writing tools and the artistic trend of ancient Chinese language forced the records of the legends very brief when they were inscribed in oracle bones or bronze vessels. Even if they were written down on bamboo slips, it was still inconvenient to write lengthy sentences. The Semites, however, were quite different, for they could write on large parchments. In China it was only after silk and paper were invented that the lengthy sentences could be written down easily.[17]

Zhang Songru also held that there were no Chinese epic, but his arguments were quite different. Rao Zongyi obtained his conclusion on the basis of documents, while Zhang applied Carl Marx's theory of "Asian Mode of Production" to the same issue.[18] He concluded that it was not that Chinese epic was scattered and lost, but there had never been Chinese epic at all. This opinion

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[15] Preface to *Zhongguo shenhuaxue wenlun xuancui*.
[16] Liu Dajie, 1982.
[17] Rao Zongyi, 1996, p. 38.
[18] Zhang Songru, 1994, No. 1. The more detailed article is in Zhang's "Shishi yu shiju: jianlun suowei shimin shige" 史诗与剧诗—兼论所谓市民诗歌 ("Epic and Verse Drama and on So-called Folk Literature") in *Zhongguo shige shilun* 中国诗歌史论 (*On History of Chinese Poetry*), 1985.

has become more and more prevalent.[19]

To the effect, Zhang Songru's inference is as follows. According to Carl Marx, epic was cultivated in the "bellicose and slaveholding" life of city states when "polis-economy and democracy developed". However, in the Chinese slavery society, the Xia (2070–1600 BCE) and Shang (1600–1046 BCE) dynasties had strong traces of primitive society. The productive forces were very low, and the commodity production and exchange were rather underdeveloped. There were no individual private economy, and the class of yeomen was weak. Municipal town and rural parish were not thoroughly separated, and there were no cities acted as economy centers." In addition, the level of division of intellectual production was quite low. "All in all, Chinese slavery society is not typical, determining that Chinese slavery society did not break away from the primitive tradition of "combination of men and deities"'.[20] Therefore, ancient China had only religious songs and odes, such as *Odes* and *Daya* in *Shijing*, while there were no poems like Greek epics or verse drama.

Beside these negative hypotheses, we have to refer to a positive hypothesis triggered by the anxiety to explain the "Issue of the Chinese Epic". Different from the negative hypotheses which were intended to provide some explanations to relieve the anxiety caused by the "Issue of the Chinese Epic", the positive hypothesis assumed that ancient China always had its epic, and the origin of Chinese literature, just like the origin of other literatures, also conformed to the general rules. Thus the positive hypothesis directly eliminated the anxiety.

Among the scholars who held the positive hypothesis, the most influential ones included Lu Kanru and Feng Yuanjun. According to the second edition of "Zixu" 自序 ("Preface"), Lu Kanru and Feng Yuanjun's *Zhongguo shishi* 中国诗史 (*History of Chinese Poetry*) was written between 1925 and 1930, when the views on Chinese mythology and epic put forward by Lu Xun, Hu Shi and Mao Dun were popular and influential. Evidently, Lu and Feng did not approve of the views which devalued the great Chinese poetry tradition. However, the "Issue of the Chinese Epic" was undeniable, so they wrote the following meaningful words in Chapter Two of *Zhongguo shishi*:

> "Shengmin" 生民 ("Birth of People"), "Gongliu" 公刘 ("Duke Liu"), "Mian" 緜 ("In Long Trains"), "Huangyi" 皇矣 ("Greatness") and Daming 大明 ("Illustration")…The five chapters actually could be integrated into a brief but noticeable "Epic of the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE)". They

[19] Cheng Xiangzhan, 1996, No.5. See also Liu Junyang, 2004, No.4. However, generally speaking, the modern essays on "Issue of the Chinese Epic" have become stale. They just reiterate that China has no epics.

[20] Zhang Songru, 1994, volume 1.

> described the golden age of King Wen (1152–1056 BCE), King Wu (1134–1156 BCE), King Cheng (1115–1079 BCE) and King Kang (1078–1053 BCE), the declining period after the 10th century BCE, and the restoration of King Xuan (827–782 BCE) period in the late 19th century BC. In addition, some articles on history of King Xuan are fragmentary epics. Such articles include "Songgao" 菘高 telling of the story of Shenbo 申伯, "Zhengmin" 烝民 telling of the story of Zhongshanfu 仲山甫, "Hanyi" 韩奕 telling of the story of Hanhou 韩侯, "Jianghan" 江汉 telling of the story of Zhaohu 召虎, and "Changwu" 常武 telling of the story of Nanzhong 南仲 etc. The ten articles describe the major events of the Zhou dynasty before it was moved to the east. We tend to blame that there are not any Chinese epics in ancient China, but actually the ten articles are very important epics. It is very likely that the author planned to organize them into a lengthy epic but he did not finish it. The author is likely to be Jifu 吉甫, and he might have written them in the early 8th century BCE.[21]

Although Lu Kanru and Feng Yuanjun put the term "Epic of the Zhou Dynasty" into quotation marks to show their uncertainty, it is obvious that their words were intended to refute Hu Shi and Mao Dun's views. In Lu Kanru and Feng Yuanjun's understanding, epic was just a kind of grand narrative poetry. Some articles in *Daya* of *Shijing*, which was the beginning of Chinese poetry, were narrative poems. Compared with the Western epics, they were relatively short, but if we integrated them into an epic, then it would differ little from the Western ones although they were not grand enough. The scholars "blame that there are no Chinese epics in ancient China" just because they were obsessed with the fact that ancient China "differed from the other countries in poetry development". As for how to treat the "Issue of the Chinese Epic", Lu Kanru and Feng Yuanjun redeemed that some scholars were just worried about troubles of their own imagination.

Lu and Feng expanded the connotation of epic, thus bringing the origin of Chinese literature into the modeling system of world literature. In this way, their hypothesis achieved the same satisfactory purpose as the negative hypothesis did. However, in this hypothesis, the connotation of "epic" is quite different from that of the "epic" in general use. Apart from the little rhetoric similarities, actually they are not the same thing. Despite all this, since Lu and Feng were both well-known masters of sinology in their times, their hypothesis did relieve the scholars from the anxiety caused by the "Issue of the Chinese Epic". Therefore, their hypothesis was immediately hailed as the opposing theory to the prevailing

[21] Lu Kanru and Feng Yuanjun, 1956, p. 48.

negative hypotheses.[22]

Examination of Theories of the "Issue of the Chinese Epic"

The "Issue of the Chinese Epic", which perplexed Chinese scholars in the field of comparison of Chinese and Western cultures, lasted for a century. The preceding scholars put forward various hypotheses, such as "poor imagination", "combination of men and deities", "difficulty of writing", "Asian mode of production" and "historicization of mythology" etc. Apart from the hypothesis of "Epic of the Zhou dynasty" which expanded the connotation of epic, we should first ask such a question about them, "What is the rationality of the hypotheses? Are they the real appropriate solutions to the 'Issue of the Chinese Epic'? Perhaps it is quite significant and helpful to explore the accuracy of the hypotheses. Only in this way can we find out the problem and obtain some revelation to solve the issue.

The hypothesis that Chinese people's simplicity and poor imagination resulted in the incomplete and unsystematic myths and epics was firstly put forward by a Japanese scholar and approved of by Hu Shi, as is mentioned above. The major defect of it is that it uses national character to a specific issue. Specific questions, such as whether ancient myths were unsystematic and whether the epics narrating the myths existed, need specific evidence to testify, and only this way can we find the truth. The big and abstract "national character" is not specific enough to testify the hypothesis. Using such big and abstract words to testify the specific issues, one can only get some conjectural and specious conclusions. In other words, this is a superficial observation rather than an academic exploration. As is known, Japan has its systematic mythology. *Gushiji* 古事记 (*The Events in Ancient Times*) and *Riben shuji* 日本书记 (*Chronicles of Japan*), which were written in the 6th and 7th centuries, describe the systematic Japanese mythology. Learning of Chinese mythology, Japanese scholars found it unbelievable that China, with such a long history, had no systematic mythology except some scattered myths in *Shanhaijing* 山海经 (*Classic of Mountains and Rivers*) and some pre-Qin philosophers' books. Myth was regarded as the ancient people's imaginative fiction of the nature and men. Therefore, since Chinese mythology

[22] The modern scholars Wang Yonghao 汪涌豪 and Luo Yuming 骆玉明 once entitled an article on *Shijing* "Grand Epic of the Zhou dynasty". This indicates that they adopted Lu and Feng's ideas, although Wang and Luo noted that "they poems did not develop into real epics, and they were still songs and sacrificial songs." Therefore, the word "epic" in the title is only figurative. (Shanghai dongfang chubanshe, p. 12). Although the theory of "Epic of the Zhou dynasty" was handed down, but generally speaking, it did not contribute much to academic research.

was unsystematic, naturally they concluded that ancient Chinese must have been too practical to be imaginative. But the question is: is the integrity of mythology invariably linked with the imagination of the people? Even if myths do reflect the imagination of the people, we should evaluate the people's imagination based on their mythical stories rather than on the integrity of their mythology, for perhaps the integrity of mythology is only a matter of record and has nothing to do with the people's imagination. Based on the mythical narratives, one can find Chinese mythology is very imaginative. Besides the obviously imaginative myths in the south, the myths in the north also show their fantastic imagination. The imagination tradition, which originated from mythology, has always nurtured Chinese literature, from Qu Yuan 屈原 to Li Bai 李白 and Wu Chengen 吴承恩. It is really unreasonable to conclude that the Chinese people's poor imagination led to the unsystematic Chinese mythology and epics.

As a hypothesis, Lu Xun's theory of "combination of men and deities", is very creative. However, its rationality lies in that it points out Chinese deities' lack of divinity rather than that it explains the loss of Chinese myths and epics. As a matter of fact, deities' lack of divinity does not necessarily lead to unsystematic mythology and epics. For example, due to the influences of Shamanism or Witch Religion, the mythology of East and Central Asia also features "combination of men and deities". The deities are usually closely interacted with men, which is quite different from Greek ones. Living on Mount Olympus, Greek deities stand aloof from men. Despite their human shapes, human desires and the troubles they make in the human world, they are by no means human beings, for they are not born from human beings and free from the laws which human beings cannot resist. The immortal Greek deities really have pure divinity, and there is an impassable gulf separating them from human beings. Lu Xun once addicted himself to Greek mythology when studying in Japan, and years later, he put forward the theory of "combination of men and deities". It is very likely that Lu's early reading about Greek mythology led to his conclusion that Chinese deities lacked pure divinity. However, strictly speaking, the East Asian mythology and Greek mythology belong to different systems. Greek mythology, which features obvious distinction between men and deities, developed systematic myths, while Shamanism or Witch Religion, which features combination of men and deities, also developed its systematic myths. Chinese mythology is merely an exception.

In China, modern folklore studies did not start until in Lu Xun's times, so it was impossible for the researchers then to study the myths and epics of the neighboring ethnic groups. Owing to the limitation, Lu Xun concluded that Shamanism or Witch Religion tradition impeded the development of myths and epics after he compared Chinese mythology with Greek mythology. Today, we must take the myths and epic s of neighboring ethnic groups and even of the whole East Asia into consideration, for they are quite helpful for us to see the

"Issue of the Chinese Epic" more clearly. In fact, except the Hans, the neighboring ethnic groups in vast East Asia all had their systematic and integrated oral mythology, and most of them even have their epics coming down to us. For instance, An Wanlü 安万侶 (Ō no Yasumaro), the author of *Gushiji*, claimed that he wrote the book according to the dictation of Baitian Ali 稗田阿礼 (Hieda no Are).[23] Besides, *Jianggeer* 江格尔 (*Jianggar*) of the Mongolians, *Gesaer* 格萨尔 (*Gesar*) of the Tibetans, and *Manasi* 玛纳斯 (*Manas*) of the Kirgiz people are called the "Three Major Epics of China".[24] Some of them have been collated, and some are still being collated. They are still sung in the folk. They are not only the written documents, but also the vigorous folk literature. The heroes of them are all demigods, and the epics are really grand and majestic. It is said that *Gesaer*, known as the "Oriental *Iliad*"[25], is the known longest epic in the world, consisting of more than 120 volumes, 1000 thousand lines. These epics were sung in the areas where Shamanism or Witch Religion prevailed, indicating that Lu Xun's view that the tradition of "combination of men and deities" impeded the development of myths and epics is not true. It is seemingly right in Chinese regions, but not if viewed from a larger perspective.

Among the various hypotheses, Rao Zongyi's is the most academic. Whether one agrees or not, his arguments can be proved by contradiction. He attributed the loss of Chinese myths to the features of ancient Chinese language. First, ancient Chinese sentences were too brief to elaborate the details. Second, the writing media were too inconvenient to write the lengthy stories on. In short, the language and the writing media brought out the unsystematic Chinese myths and epics. Admittedly, language does influence the record of epics. Writing down the same epic in ancient Chinese 1000 years ago is quite different from writing it down in modern Chinese now. However, the record of an epic is only a link in the long process of its coming down to us. More commonly, epics' spread does not depend on written media. As the product of oral tradition, an epic has little to do with the written language before it is written down. Myths, legends and historical national events provide the subjects of epics, and the singing activities in the folk conceive epics. The epics orally narrate the myths, legends and national events and gradually develop into a monumental works. Epics have already matured and circulated before they are written down, and they can further develop even after they are written down. Only after the singing activities in the folk stops will the epics come down as written documents. Take Greek epics as an example. Mycenaean civilization perished in the early 12th century BC. After the so-called Trojan War, it entered the "Dark Age". In the 8th century

[23] An Wanlü, 1982, p. 14.
[24] Qian Mingzi, 1986, p. 1.
[25] Li Fang, 2004, *People's Daily*, July 9.

BC, Greek civilization, surrounded by the Aegean Sea, witnessed its strong renaissance and Homer's brilliant achievements. However, the first recorded creative poet, Archilochus[26], was active around 605 BCE, and he had only some short elegies and lyrics coming down to us, while Homer's epic was not written until in 5th century BC. This is also true of the epics of neighboring ethnic groups of Hans: as the oral literature in the folk, they were irrelevant with the simplicity or complexity of their written languages. They just complied with the laws of oral literature and had nothing to do with the written language. Therefore, it is unreasonable to conclude that the written Chinese impeded the development of Chinese epics. It is the oral narration that promotes the elaboration of the epics. If the syntax of the written language is too simple to record the elaborated narrative, the narrative can be simplified or reorganized. In either case, the singing activities in the folk will continue, and the syntax of written language can not influence the development of epics.

Were the writing media inconvenient for the record of the lengthy stories? This involves the use of the bamboo slips and silk, which were important writing media in ancient China. Before the Eastern Jin dynasty (CE 317–420), both bamboo slips and silk were the main writing media, but paper was not widely used then. Thus the books in the Warring States Period, Qin (221–207 BCE) and Han (206 BCE–CE 220) dynasties were mostly written on bamboo slips or silk. However, it seems that Rao Zongyi held bamboo slips occurred prior to silk, and silk prior to paper. Accordingly, since bamboo slips were inconvenient to write on, the lengthy works were not written down until silk and paper occurred.

In fact, it is in the Warring States Period and Qin and Han dynasties that Chinese private and official writings sprang up. All of the existent ancient documents were written or complied in the period. If there had been epics then, they would have been written down too. As the writing media, bamboo slips and silk were both widely used then, but bamboo slips were used more widely because they were cheaper and easier to get. The fact that traditional Chinese books were categorized into "*pian*" 篇 (sections) or "*juan*" 卷 (fascicles) reflects the use of bamboo slips and silk, for "*pian*" was originated from the use of bamboo slips and "*juan*" the use of silk. Thus, according to the category of "*pian*" or "*juan*", it may be reasonably inferred the media that were written on.[27] For example, *Hanshu*·"Yiwenzhi" was classified according to Liu Xiang's 刘向 classification system called *Qilüe* 七略 (Seven Summaries). Except the summery of synopsis, the other summaries, such as Six Arts, Hundred Schools, Poetry and Prose-poetry, Military Strategies, Divination and Medicine were categorized into either "*pian*" or "*juan*". Among the compiled 660 ancient books,

[26] G. S. Kirk, 1976, p. 1.
[27] Wei Yinru, 1988, p. 18; Yu Jiaxi, 1963, p. 643.

458 were called '"*pian*", accounting for more than two thirds; 202 were called "*juan*", accounting for less than one third. However, among the six summaries, the bamboo slips and silk books are unbalanced. Among the 160 books in the summery of Six Arts, there are 101 "*pian*" and 58 "*juan*". Among the 192 book in the summery of Hundred Schools, there is only one "*juan*", and the others are all called "*pian*". All the 106 books in summery of Poetry and Prose-poetry are called "*pian*". Among the 56 books in the summery of Military Strategies, only one is called "*juan*". But among the 110 books in the summery of Divination, only four are called "*pian*", and the others are all called "*juan*". Among the 36 books in the summery of Medicine, only one is called "*pian*". According to the classification system of *sibu* 四部 (four-part section), Hundred Schools, Poetry and Prose-poetry and Military Strategies all belong to Philosophy Section or Collected Works Section, which collects private writings in ancient times. Most of them are written on bamboo slips, perhaps because silk was more expensive than bamboo slips then. Firstly, the private writers were limited by their economic conditions; secondly, the people then relatively despised the value of the private books. Therefore, the private writers preferred bamboo slips. As for Divination and Medicine, although they are regarded as superstition today, ancient people attached much importance to them. Astronomy, calendar calculation, geomantic omen doctrine, divination and medicine were closely related to the fates ad life, and the writers usually were rich and noble people, so it was natural that they wrote on silk.

Could the writing media, bamboo slips or silk, influence the length of works? It is hard to tell. Sima Qian's 司马迁 lengthy *Shiji* 史记 (*Historical Records*), which consists of 130 volumes, 520 thousand characters, was right written on bamboo slips, and it was handed down now. In *Hanshu*·"Yiwenzhi", many books consist of more than 30 to 50 volumes. According to "The Fictionists" section, *Baijia* 百家 (*Miscellaneous Stories*), a collection of fiction, consists of 139 volumes, probably as long as *Shiji*. In addition, few national epics were written down exactly according to their original oral narrative. Generally speaking, only the main plots were written down, and the singers would add or abridge them according to the listeners' taste. Therefore, the oral versions are usually several times longer than the written ones. Had Chinese epic existed, probably it would not be so difficult as we imagined to write them down on bamboo slips or silk. It seems that writing media are irrelevant with the preservation of epics.

The defects of "Asian Mode of Production" and "Historicization of Myths" are obvious, too. Zhang Songru expounded the relationship between Greek city-state system and epics and verse drama. Actually, verse drama may have some relationship with city-state life, but epics are quite another thing. Epics were conceived far before the city-state system was formed. For example, in Homer's prime time, Greek city-state system was still immature. Besides, there is no

historical evidence to show how Greek city-state system conceived epics. More importantly, in the vast area of Central and East Asia where "Asian Mode of Production" was typical, all the ethnic groups, except the Hans, have their national epics; their economic and political development was much inferior to that of Hans, though. It indicates that social division of production, material or mental, can not ensure the occurrence of epics. It is unreasonable to apply the principles of political economy to inferring the occurrence of epics, for political economy and epics are in two quite different categories. This is also true of the theory of "Historicization of Myths". Even it is admitted that Confucianism did historicize some myths, it is still doubtful how much it could influence the spread of them. A great civilization is supposed to be tolerant and broad-minded. Take Greece as an example. Plato, who represented academic tradition, did not like epics. For example, he even wanted to drive poets out of "The Republic", and he was always acid and biting about Homer. However, could Plato impede the spread of epics just because he did not like them? Obviously not. A philosopher's ideas and preferences belong to the high class's spiritual taste, and they could not impede the singing activities of epics in the folk, for they belong to different categories. Even if they have some contradictory values and tastes, they will not exclude each other. Without a doubt, the history shows Confucianism was opposed to grotesque myths and legends, but does it mean that myths and legends would extinguish? Obviously not. Likewise, had Chinese people had epics, it can be sure that no matter how Confucianism resisted and historicized them, the singing activities in the folk would continue, for the Confucianism and singing of the epics in the folk belong to different categories. Despite the discords between them, they are compatible with each other in social development. Although the theory of "Historicization of Myths" is widely spread[28], actually it is quite groundless.

Revelation of the "Issue of the Chinese Epic"

Chinese classical literary theory has its self-awareness. It oriented itself as "*lun*" 论 (comments), ranking after "*zuo*" 作 (creation) and "*shu*" 述 (transmission). "*Zuo*" means great creative writing, like the constitution and statues created by the Duke of Zhou (?–1105 BCE), and even the sages such as Kongzi claimed that they could only "transmit but not create". As Wang Chong 王充 put it, " '*Lun*' is neither creation nor transmission. It is inferior to transmission." What is "lun"? It

[28] This opinion was firstly put forward by Japanese scholars and gradually accepted widely by Chinese scholars, and it is also accepted by the Japanese scholars who study Chinese myths. See Yiteng Qingsi, 1979, p. 35.

means "appraising the existent books."[29] It emphasizes textual analysis rather than exploration of origination. *Shijing* is the existent earliest text, so all the principles, tastes and criticism standards about poetry were set based on it. It is interesting that none of the "lun" on *Shijing* involves the exploration of origination[30], as if *Shijing* existed naturally as the origin of the subsequent poems, and it was unnecessary to explore its own origin. This tradition had an innate carelessness for origination. It can be assumed that the tradition has not changed through the two thousand years.

In the modern period, such factors as the disintegration of traditional ideology and the spread of Western learning aroused the "Crisis of Chinese Consciousness"[31], as described by Lin Yusheng 林毓生. The old discourse system could not play an active role in explaining the global world, so it gradually declined and even disintegrated. The old Chinese discourse had never foreseen that one day it would face such an unknown larger world, so it was quite perplexed and thus suffered from aphasia. The "Crisis of Chinese Consciousness", which occurred in late Qing dynasty and the early years of the Republic of China, was quite meaningful. The old generations who could not change their old discourse flinched in the modern forums. Regarding themselves as survivals of the past ages and regarded as being against the historical trends, they gradually faded into oblivion, while the more flexible youths turned to Western learning to expound the new world. In literary criticism circles, the new critics gave up the traditional historical viewpoint which ignored the origination and they accepted the apocalyptic historical viewpoint which emphasized the origination. This was a big turn in academic research. Whether they realized it or not, they had to keep pace with the times when Western learning exerted a strong impact. The scholars, the same as the laymen, had to rely on and even stretch the Western learning to obtain authorization. As an invisible presence, the Western discourse made the people without self-consciousness obsessive with it and the people with self-consciousness obedient to it. In 1929 Zhu Ziqing 朱自清 said, "Needless to say, 'literary criticism' is an exotic term. The modern scholars tend to study the Chinese issues with Western concepts (such as literary criticism). For better or worse, it has been unavoidable now."[32] Interestingly, it was "unavoidable" before "for better or worse" was still known. In another article, Zhu Ziqing sighed sadly when referring to that the old term *shiwenping* 诗文评 (criticism of poetry and essays) had been replaced with the new one *wenxue*

[29] Wang Chong, 1974, p. 443.
[30] It is worth noting that "*Maoshi* xu" 毛诗序 ("Preface to *Book of Songs* Complied by Mao Heng") , the most important interpretation to *Shijing*, does not refer to anything about origination of poetry.
[31] Lin Yusheng, 1986.
[32] Zhu Ziqing, 1981, p. 541.

piping 文学批评 (literary criticism): "The old term represents dependency and humility."[33] His unease and helplessness are obviously embodied in his words. Luo Genze 罗根泽 made it more clearly when he referred to that Confucians in the Han dynasty annotated poetic essays with poems: "Chinese literary arts are quite different from Western literary arts. However, the modern Chinese scholars have to apply Western concepts to Chinese literary arts, because poetry used to be the authority then, but Western literary concepts are the authority now."[34] But why?

> We should know that different stages have different academic authorities. Academic authority is just like the scales, measuring literary arts' value. Thus to take a position in academic circles, the literary arts have to cater to the academic authority, willingly or unwillingly.[35]

The "academic authority" here refers to the interpretation framework. In Luo's times, Western learning had become the academic scales. Any scholars who wanted to put forward some theories had to use the interpretation framework and made their theories conform to it, otherwise it would be difficult to obtain a niche in academic circles.

The "Issue of the Chinese Epic" was the product of the academic turn. It implies a self-evident presupposition: literature has its universal and uniform origination, which is suited to both Western and Chinese literature. Since Chinese literature does not conform to it, then it is necessary to explain it. Why did the scholars in the early 20th century get into exploring myths and epics? Why did they begin lecturing on Chinese literature with the unheard-of "decisive beginning"? What anxiety was behind the academic care? Obviously, they wanted to endow Chinese literature with global significance and bring it to the universal world. Thus Chinese literature could break away from its locality and become cosmopolitan. In the scholars' eyes, Chinese literature had been isolated from the world too long, and it was time to enter the world, just as an orphan should go back to the society to get an identity. The embarrassment that studies of literary history confronted was not that China lacked literature, but that Chinese literature could not show its cosmopolitan significance in the interpretation framework of ancient literary criticism. The mission of modern scholars is to endow it with the unprecedented cosmopolitan significance. Greek and European literature was conceived in their myths and epics, which has become a universal criterion. If Chinese literature is cosmopolitan, it must have

[33] Ibid., p. 543.
[34] Luo Genze, 2003, p. 100.
[35] Ibid, p. 99.

the same origin as Western literature. The tradition was subverted in the modern interpretation which was intended to bestow the cosmopolitan significance on Chinese literature. *Shijing*, the classical texts, the catch-all criterion and the paragon of tastes and critic standards, was reduced to a collection of ancient ballads. It was no longer the paragon of critic standards, and it was no longer the beginning text. Consequently, the researchers of literary history had to turn to the unknown and humble myths and epics for the "decisive beginning". Myths and epics suddenly obtained the extraordinary status, and the historians of Chinese literature had to get along with them. The ignorance of myths and epics was equal to ignorance of origination of literature. Due to the ignorance of such important "decisive beginning", the interpretation of literary history surely would not be cosmopolitan enough. In the new interpretation framework, myths and epics were more than a literary fact; they also offered a cosmopolitan criterion. Greek and European literature was conceived in their myths and epics, so Chinese literature would be no exception. In *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe*, Lu Xun said, "Myths are not only the origin of religion and arts, but also the origin of literature."[36] The conclusion was very doubtful; however, it was widely accepted then. If Chinese literature wanted to obtain the cosmopolitan significance, it had to comply with it: this is how Chinese literature acquired its validity in the new era.

However, we must judge all horses as individuals. Although the cosmopolitan interpretation framework of literary history conquered Chinese scholars and the "decisive beginning" of literature was accepted by both Chinese and Western scholars, the literary facts appeared as counterevidence. To solve the problem, the scholars came up with various hypotheses to make the counterevidence not counteractive enough to subvert the cosmopolitan interpretation framework. The positive significance was that they tried to explain the counterevidence in order to maintain the authority of the interpretation framework, for sometimes the counterevidence could lead to very disturbing results. For example, if we accepted that myths and epics were the origin of literature, the origin of Chinese literature would be very perplexing. If we stuck to the interpretation, the origin of Chinese literature would be too pale. This could not be mentally accepted by the scholars, for it would be too devastating and surely damage their self-esteem. Moreover, it was incompatible with the later great Chinese literature tradition (probably it was because of this that although the evidence was almost groundless, Zhong Jingwen still inferred that China had had its complete and systematic myths). For this reason various hypotheses were put forward to bridge the gap between the interpretation framework and the literary facts in order to relieve the ensuing anxiety. Among various hypotheses, the cleverest must be the

[36] Lu Xun, 1981, volume 9. p. 17.

theory of "Lost Myths and Epics". It assumes that China had had complete and systematic myths and epics, but they were scattered and lost, leaving no traces. Being totally devoid of evidence, the rebutters did not know where to start to refute them. Perhaps it was just because of this reason that the theory was not refutable, and it not only preserved our self-respect but also defended the cosmopolitan literary history view. Since the myths and epics were scattered and lost, then there must have been reasons. This aroused a subsequent issue—the reasons of the loss of myths and epics. It was understandable why the blame was fastened on Confucianism. Just like national character, Confucianism was regarded as the cause of the unsystematic myths and epics, which was the product of critical trends in the May 4th New Culture Movement. Transforming national character was a very important issue then, while Confucianism was always the main object of criticism. The poverty of the country, the conservativeness of the society, and even the ignorance of the people were all attributed to it. Compared with these, the loss of myths and epics were only a minor crime, and naturally it was also attributed to Confucianism.

Under the influence of the "academic authority" that myths and epics are the cosmopolitan origin of literature, another interpretation strategy is to state shamelessly that China has its own epics: some poems in *Shijing* are "Epics of the Zhou Dynasty". This strategy is very simple: it firstly transforms the connotation of epic to a lengthy story of ancients' events, and then finds out some similar poems from ancient Chinese poetry as epics. Without any question, this is not rigorous academic research, but it saves the trouble of the theory of ""Lost Myths and Epics" and makes the Western academic authority more cosmopolitan: not only the origination of Greek and European literature, but also that of Chinese literature conform to the same rule. It seems that the theory of "Epic of the Zhou Dynasty" and the theory of "Lost Myths and Epics" academically contradictory, but in fact, both of their purposes are to maintain the Western views on origination of literature. In the early 20th century, Western learning, with its fresh, scientific and progressive look, was introduced into China as the authority, and the Chinese scholars had to cling to the Western learning and the Western views on origination of literature, resulting in the "Issue of the Chinese Epic" which lasted for a century. Chen Yinque 陈寅恪 once discussed the phenomenon of *geyi* 格义 (matching concepts), i.e., when Buddhism was introduced into China, the monks usually "applied the foreign concepts to interpreting the Chinese classics"[37]. Likewise, to solve the "Issue of the Chinese Epic" actually is to apply the Western views on origination of literature to Chinese literature, so it can be regarded as another phenomenon of "*geyi*".

In reality, the "Issue of the Chinese Epic" resulted from the introduction of

[37] Chen Yinque, 1980, p. 153.

overwhelming Western discourse. Although the earlier scholars did not have any attitude problem in academic research, but academic research is by no means any individual's interest and career. However, the academic researchers will inevitably be influenced by his social milieu, consciously or unconsciously, so they should always be alert to it. After all, historically, the influences are not necessarily positive. It is true that myths and epics are the origin of Western literature, but because it was introduced into China when Western learning was pervading, the Chinese scholars tended to regard it not only as a fact but also a cosmopolitan rule, so they tried to apply it to Chinese literature. For modern scholars, "the West" not only refereed to the geographical and cultural "West", but also "the World"; the Western discourse was not only a part of Western culture, but also the truth, authority and power of discourse. It was we ourselves who regarded the provincial West as the cosmopolitan West. Consequently, China was automatically excluded out of "the World", and Chinese culture naturally lost its truth, authority and power of discourse. Therefore, Chinese scholars suffered from thirst for entering the world and the anxiety of linking up to "the World", so they assumed that the Western discourse meant the truth, authority and power of discourse. In a way, the thirst, anxiety and assumption did promote academic research, but they also led it astray, so in the long run, the academic activities they triggered are meaningless.

The instructive inspiration obtained from the examination of the "Issue of the Chinese Epic" is that we should treat Western discourse soberly and reasonably. More importantly, we should make it clear its original meaning and the additional meaning imbued when it was introduced into China. This does not mean to resist the Western learning, but to reveal Western learning in its true colors, because we find that in the 20th century, Western learning was often regarded as the unquestionable "academic scales", which led to severe "colonial mentality" of Chinese people. Due to the limited conditions, the previous academic researchers did not reflect on Western discourse enough, and now it is high time we changed the situation.

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