

Descendant of Gilgamesh: Ancient Mesopotamia and China

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Once, Otto Mänchen-Helfen in his paper “Herakles in China” (*Archiv Orientalni* 7, 1935, 29-34) pointed out that heroic deeds of Yi (Hou Yi, I Yi) mentioned in various scattered passages of *the Chuci* and *the Classics of Mountains and Seas (the Shanhai jing)* and tales about Herakles in Greek mythology are very similar to minute details. He then concluded that “Yi is a Herakles brought in China from Greece via Scythians, i.e. Herakles in China”.

I am very skeptical about this view. Rather, I think Yi’s life and deeds are better compared with those of Gilgamesh of Ancient Mesopotamia. Documents concerning Yi are heterogeneous and often contradictory. They become comprehensible only when compared with Gilgamesh’s life and deeds.

I divide their stories into several elements and show the similarities. I think the Epic of Gilgamesh, Sumerian origin and told in Babylonia and the Assyrian Empire, after arriving China, fused with the hero Yi of the myth of Ten Suns (Yi the Archer shot down nine suns when ten suns appeared together and troubled the people), thus produced an “Epic of Hou Yi”. Ancient Mesopotamian myths disseminated much widely from the time much older than hitherto believed. There is no doubt that those went westward produced stories about Herakles (or Achilles or Odysseus) and those went eastward produced stories about Yi (or Ling Jun).