

# A Brief Comparison on the Images of "Gods" in Chinese and Greek Mythology and the Social Background

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## ABSTRACT

Greek mythology is the soil for European societies, and the Chinese translation of ancient Greek mythology began in 1907 by the Commercial Press. As the cornerstone of Western civilization, Greek mythology is famous and influential for its self-formed system, complete preservation and wide dissemination. Chinese mythology, on the other hand, also has a long history and far-reaching influence. This paper compares Chinese mythology with Greek mythology through three aspects, and tries to uncover the social background of the differences, so as to improve mutual understanding of the two countries with their cultures.

*Keywords: comparison, god, Chinese mythology, Greek mythology*

## I. INTRODUCTION

China and Greece are both famous nations with a long history and rich ancient culture. Just as the basis of the western civilization lies in Greece, the foundation of eastern civilization lies in China. As literary treasures shared by the world, Chinese mythology and Greek mythology have occupied pivotal positions in the history and culture of the world. Although these two ancient civilizations are different in terms of national characters, mentality, psychology and value orientation, their cultures share certain commonalities in human thinking. Just as Gorky, the famous former Soviet Union writer and critic, said that mythology is the reflection of struggles against nature and the social life, Chinese and Greek mythology are also based on real life and are not entirely the product of whims of people from the two nations. Because Chinese and Greek mythology reflect the process of early human life and people's thoughts, they share many similarities. For instance, "the Greek key", a meander pattern and symbol used widely by ancient Greeks in their clothes, pottery, and architecture during the Geometric period, was also used in China and can be observed as decoration on daily objects and buildings in China. Meanwhile, there are many differences between Chinese mythology and Greek mythology due to their distinguished geographical locations and historical evolution.

## II. GODS IN CHINESE AND GREEK MYTHOLOGY

Gods in both Chinese and Greek mythology originated as symbols of natural objects, i.e., personified natural forces and natural objects. The ancient Greeks created their own images of gods according to their understanding. And gods in Greek mythology were highly personalized: not only were their images often identical with those of human beings, they had similar characters and emotions as those of human beings. However, Chinese believed that gods were distinct from human beings, so early images of Chinese gods were very different from those of humans, e.g. Nüwa, the mother goddess who created humanity and repaired the Pillar of Heaven according to the Chinese mythology, was described as having a human head and a snake body.

### A. Pedigree of gods

Greek mythology was originally disseminated in the form of oral literature, and the ancient Greeks believed that the gods appeared in the universe before humans. Based on The Theogony, which was completed by the ancient Greek writer Hesiod, the ancient Greeks believed that "Chaos" was the very first being. It was the dark, silent abyss of formless matter from which the cosmos was created and all things came into existence. Chaos brought in life Gaia (earth), Eros and Tartarus. Following them are Erebus (darkness) and Nyx (Night). Another theory believes Night brings life in an egg, from that egg god Eros aroused and formed Gaia and Uranus (sky). Ancient Greeks believed that the establishers of the world were Uranus and Gaia who had several children including the Hecatoncheires,

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Cyclopes and Titans. As a result, Greek mythology has a clear genealogy of gods.

Whereas the ancient Chinese believed that the universe was a mere chaos of darkness like an egg, a mixture of yin and yang. Inside this cosmic egg Pan Gu, the creator of the world, was sleeping for thousands of years. After Pan Gu created the world, Nüwa, the mother goddess, woke up. However, in Chinese mythology, every mountain and river has its corresponding god. Therefore, it is difficult to count the number of gods in Chinese mythology and it seems that there is not a complete system of gods in Chinese mythology. The Chinese mythology has almost all the relevant divine positions (gods) in Greek mythology, and the number of Chinese gods far exceeds the number of gods in Greek mythology.

The reason why there are so many gods in Chinese mythology is inseparable from the national characteristics of China. China is a multi-ethnic country, and in the process of development each ethnic group has produced its own mythology. During the long period of integration, myths of different ethnic groups have continuously influenced those of other ethnic groups, finally a common myth was formed in the process of mutual integration. In contrast, the slavery city-states of ancient Greece were generally smaller in size, and their economies were mainly based on handicrafts and overseas trade, which not only provided rich materials for Greek mythology, but also established the imaginative and adventurous nature of the ancient Greeks. As a result, the Chinese mythology, whose culture was mainly an agricultural one, reflected the relationship between human and nature, while the Greek mythology was more a reflection of human beings.

#### *B. Relationship between human and god*

Chinese and Greece people constructed their own human-god relationship based on the respective modes of production and lifestyles. In Greek mythology, the status of God is innate and cannot be earned no matter how hard human beings try; in Chinese mythology, however, the status of God can be obtained through human efforts, and the status of human beings and Gods can be transformed. In other words, in Chinese mythology, a god is not necessarily born; as long as a man is sincere and determined, he can become a god. Moreover, while human beings can be kind and simple, weak and timid, upright and noble, God is always the representative of integrity and nobleness. They are neither lusty nor wealthy, have no emotions, are not to be disturbed by mundane things, and lead a life completely different from that of the mortal.

In Greek mythology, gods live “the same” life as those of men on the earth. They possess seven passions and love and hate like humans. They love beauty and

could get angry or jealous, they fight for power, and can participate in the affairs on the earth. More importantly, human and god can fall in love with each other, and gods need human support even when they are in charge of the destiny of human beings. The Greek gods live in a world that resembles human society and have more communication with humans. Mortals could be invited to gods' banquets, gods could also be guests in mortal homes. When the gods argued about something, they would also turn to the wise men of the earth to decide who was right and who was wrong. Whereas gods in Chinese myths are perfect and superior. Love between gods and humans is strictly forbidden. The place where the gods dwell, according to Chinese mythology, is a pure land where they do not have human desires nor need human help, and there is no problem that gods cannot solve. The Chinese gods are not only the embodiment of supreme power, but also of virtue and omniscience, so they must never be allowed to fall in love with humans, or they will be punished by the heaven.

#### *C. Characteristics of Chinese and Greek gods*

Most of the gods in ancient Greek mythology were brave and wise and had super divine power. Zeus, for instance, mastered thunder and lightning with incomparable power; Poseidon, the god of the sea, could summon wind and rain. The super power of these gods embodied the determination and courage of human beings to challenge and conquer nature at that time, and was the driving force of the ancient Greeks in their pursuit of freedom and liberation of personality. Meanwhile, gods in ancient Greek mythology also possessed human characters, which embodied both the goodness and evil of human nature. As a matter of fact, quite a lot goddesses in Greek mythology were jealous, be it Hera, the queen of heaven, Athena, the goddess of wisdom, or Venus, the goddess of love and beauty. In general, gods in Greek mythology are super human in action and human in emotion. They had both the beauty and ugliness of humanity in their characters. Bravery, the pursuit of freedom and the emancipation of individuality are fully reflected in the gods of Greek mythology, and this desire for the release of humanity reflects the relentless efforts of the ancient Greeks to realize humanistic values and the values of Western culture which attaches importance to individual pursuit and personal interests.

In comparison, many gods in Chinese mythology are both historical figures in legends and those in mythology, so gods and humans are usually intertwined. What these gods show to the world is their perfect personality, and it is difficult to find shortcomings of human nature in them. If Prometheus is a rare near-perfect god in Greek mythology, there are many such gods in Chinese mythology. Chinese gods seldom express personal emotional needs, instead, they

have a great spirit of struggle and sacrifice, and their personal emotional pursuits are often ignored. This is also a reflection of the Chinese culture's emphasis on the collective morality.

### **III. SOCIAL REASONS FOR THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE AND GREEK MYTHOLOGY**

Firstly, since Chinese mythology was created much earlier than Greek mythology, it was more influenced by totem worship and the worship of female in matriarchal clans. Beasts were revered as sacred pets by the Chinese at that time, and the worship of gods and beasts was unified, resulting in the mythical image of the unity of man and beast. Chinese mythology is a product of the matriarchal era of clan society and is heavily influenced by female worship. Due to the continuity of the national history, this influence has remained unbroken, but was suppressed by the later patriarchal social consciousness, and only lie dormant in the Chinese consciousness in a subliminal form. Greek mythology came into being later, and it was a product of the patriarchal system of primitive society, so the males in Greek mythology are the center. Greek mythology was produced in the heroic age, which was far away from the age of totem worship. As a result, most of the gods in Greek mythology are still in the form of humans. And Greek mythology is characterized by the homogeneity of gods and men as well as male worship.

Secondly, since the early Chinese people formed a relatively closed, stable and mono-cultural tradition in the Yellow River valley, they formed the earliest agricultural civilization and developed the idea of valuing practicality over mysticism. In their battle against the nature, the Chinese hoped to have a kind of super power to help them conquer natural disasters, so the Chinese gods are all capable of helping them to fulfill their wishes. Chinese mythology began with rational and moral components, and underwent a religious reformation during the Yin and Zhou dynasties, when the original concept of lineage succession gave way to the concept of moral succession. After the formation of centralized authoritarianism, Chinese mythology was gradually transformed to meet the needs of political and moral education, and was also branded as ethical, didactic and social. On the other hand, Greek culture is characterized by openness and pluralism as the civilization of the sea. The essential features of the Greek city-state system were "sovereignty rests with the people" and "ruling in turn", which were based on the principle of equality of citizens. In the process of democratization, citizens' assemblies and powers were strengthened, and the idea of freedom was gradually formed. This is why it has been said that the Greek city-states laid the foundation for the free consciousness, thoughts and reality of the

West. The economy in ancient Greece was highly developed, providing ancient Greeks with an abundance of resources and a rich spiritual life. The city-state never developed a unified religious ideology that could clamp people's freedom of thoughts, which was a beneficial condition for Greece in world history. Therefore, Greek mythology has maintained its individuality, integrity and clarity.

### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Mythology is an idealized expression of environment and state of existence when the productivity and cognition of human are not yet mature. Different social backgrounds, development and geographical environments have created the differences between Chinese and Greek mythology, which also enrich the world culture and promote cultural diversity. Chinese and Greek mythology have many similarities because they both originated from people's imagination and creativity during the struggle with nature. However, there are also many differences between the two countries due to dissimilar geographical regions, natural conditions, and historical development process. Chinese culture is single, stable, local and clan-oriented, while ancient Greek culture yearned for freedom and individuality with reason and morality not accounting for much of the national spirit. Therefore, Chinese mythology is magnificent, reflecting Chinese people's perseverance and strong sense of responsibility. And Greek mythology is natural and artistic, reflecting the optimistic character of Westerners who advocate freedom. Nevertheless, these two different forms of mythology have had a profound influence on the development of their respective civilizations. A comparison of the two cultures, including myths and legends, is conducive to better mutual understanding and proximity.

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