

AN ANALYSIS ON CHINESE AND GREEK MYTHOLOGIES ... PROMETHEUS, NÜWA AND GUN

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Chinese and Greek mythologies, as many other mythologies in the world, are mixtures of history, legends, and myths. Although they both have been passed down in oral or written form and have developed over the ages, Greek mythology is much more organized because of *The Theogony* and *The Works and Days* by Hesiod¹, while Chinese mythology is not so systematic and dispersed in a few books², among which *Shan Hai Jing*³, *Shui Jing Zhu*⁴, and *Huai Nan Zi*⁵ are the important ones.⁶ *Hei An Zhuan* is also very important because it is the only collection of legends in epic form but it is not widely known because its value is not recognized until 1980s.⁷ So many Chinese myths exist in different versions, and often conflicting. Take the creation of the first human beings as an example. It is variously ascribed to Tiandi, Nüwa, Pangu, and Yuhuang in different stories. What I am discussing here is based on a common version which is widely spread in North China. So don't be surprised if you come across or have come across a different version. I would compare first Prometheus and Nüwa and then Prometheus and Gun and analyze the culture reflected by their stories.

Prometheus and Nüwa both are the creators of the human beings in their respective mythology. Prometheus was permitted by Zeus, who wants to express gratitude to Prometheus for helping him in the fight with the Titans, to populate the earth with humans and animals, together with his brother Epimetheus. Epimetheus, who wasn't too bright, foolishly gave all the good qualities to animals. Thus we have tigers with strength and speed, dogs with a keen sense of smell, birds with the ability to fly, and fishes that can live underwater... Sadly, with this stupidity, there was nothing much left for man to match for those beasts. After a long consideration, Prometheus determined to create humans in the likeness of gods, using the clay and holy water. He made man stand upright like the gods, to be noble and conscious, and to hold his head high, looking up at the heavens. Athena gave soul and holy breath to the first man.⁸

In a Chinese myth Nüwa⁹ is the sister and wife of Fuxi, who is one of the Three August Ones (San Huang)¹⁰ and has invented many things to help the ancient Chinese people. It is said that there were no men when the sky and the earth were separated. Nüwa felt lonely so she began the creation of animals and humans. On the first day she created chickens. On the second day she created dogs. On the third day she created sheep. On the fourth day she created pigs. On the fifth day she created cows. On the sixth day she created horses. On the seventh day she began creating men from yellow clay, sculpting each one individually in the likeness of herself. She molded figures from the yellow clay and gave them life and the ability to bear children. The clay was not strong enough, so she put ropes into the clay to make the bodies erect. She planned to fill the earth with men and women. She had created hundreds of figures in this way, but she found that the earth was so huge and the work was so taxing that her strength was not equal to it. So instead of handcrafting each figure, she dipped a rope into the mud and then flicked it, so blobs of clay landed everywhere. The mud that dripped from the rope also became men, and each of these blobs became a common person. Those made by molding yellow clay were rich and noble, while those made by lifting the rope were poor and low. Nüwa still laboriously crafted some people out of clay, who became nobles of course.¹¹

In the two myths there are three points in common. The ancient Chinese and Greek people both were thinking about the origin of human beings.¹² Where we are from is a question our ancestors began to think about at the very beginning of our history, which can also be seen in many other mythologies. Living so far away from each other, Chinese and Greek ancient people interestingly believed that human beings came from clay. The second point in common is that the mythologies, including all the gods and goddesses, actually were created by the ancient people, but in the mythologies people were created by a god or goddess. This represents an attempt to render the question comprehensible in human terms and explain the origin of the human beings. The third point is that in both myths human beings were the favorite of the god or goddess who created them together with other animals, from which our ancestors' wishes to be protected by some magical power in the unfriendly surroundings at the beginning of our history are clearly expressed.

There are four points different between the two myths. In the Chinese myth, human beings were said to be created by a goddess. She created men and women at the same time and she was doing this job all by herself. While in the Greek myth, human beings were created by a god, although aided by a goddess, and at that time there were still no mortal women on the earth.¹³ It is a female character in the Chinese myth but in the Greek myth a male character who is worshipped. Nüwa is very highly respected for what she has done for the people and goddesses occupy an important place in pre-Buddhist Chinese mythology. The reason is the female's high social position when the myth came into being. When the Greek myths were produced the male were in power and they were the center of the social life so the male heroes are admired. The notion that the ability to bear children is included in the Chinese myth shows that Chinese people were more realistic and children were important in their lives, which is still the case now. The next difference is that the two myths emphasize different things. In the Chinese creation myth the idea that those made by molding yellow clay were rich and noble while those made by lifting the rope were poor and low shows that ancient Chinese people were trying to offer an explanation to people's different social positions. Because of the relatively late appearance in Chinese literature of myths, there is extensive interaction between Chinese mythology and the belief systems of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Some elements from the teachings and beliefs of these systems became incorporated into Chinese mythology and the ruling class took advantage of the chance to make some adaptation to make their ruling more acceptable.¹⁴ In the Greek creation myth there is no difference between the human beings. It can be inferred that the ancient Greek people emphasize the belief of equality. A third difference is that Prometheus and Nüwa made the creation for different purposes. Prometheus created human beings just because he wanted to do so because he was wiser than the rest and often thought about what would be likely to happen in the future. The idea of the importance of one's own willingness in ancient Greece is expressed. Nüwa molded humans from clay for companionship because she felt lonely. The idea that ancient Chinese people value companionship more is pointed out. The reason is that ancient Chinese people believe that getting together they would feel better and became able to do many more things successfully

and efficiently. A forth difference is that they held different attitudes towards animals. In the Chinese creation myth, there is no conflict between human beings and other animals and the animals mentioned are the early tamed ones which are important in their early agricultural activities. The great importance of agriculture in ancient China can be learned here. But in the Greek creation myth, wild animals in the forest, friendly animals that are closer, birds in the sky and fish in the water all are mentioned and the comparison with them is not favorable for the human beings. This difference shows that different animals are important in the ancient Chinese and Greek people's lives and that ancient Chinese people emphasize the harmony between man and other animals, while ancient Greek people put more importance on the conquest of nature.

Next let's see what are the myths about Prometheus and Gun and what are the similarities and differences between their stories. According to Chinese and Greek mythologies, Prometheus and Gun both have committed theft for the benefits of the human race. Let's continue the story of Prometheus first. Although he stood upright with his face toward the heaven, man had no weapon with which he could defend himself. Prometheus said that man should have Zeus's wonderful flower of fire, so he took a hollow reed, went up to Olympus, stole the red flower of fire, and brought it down to earth in his reed. After this, all the other creatures were afraid of man, for fire had made him stronger than they. Zeus, sitting on his throne, saw with alarm how strong man was becoming. One day he discovered the theft of fire, and knew that Prometheus was the thief. He was greatly displeased with this act.¹⁵ What's more, for the love of his creation, Prometheus told people to leave the best portions of the animals to themselves, rather than sacrifice them to the gods. This behavior made Zeus so angry that he decided to take fire away from man. Of course Prometheus couldn't just sit there seeing people suffering from cold and hunger, so he managed to steal the fire again. In spite of all that Prometheus had done for him, Zeus had our hero arrested. Prometheus was chained onto a huge rock on the highest peak of Mount Caucasus, and each day an enormous eagle, which was sent by Zeus, would arrive and eat at our hero's liver. To make matters worse, the liver grew back overnight and the whole torture was repeated the following day.¹⁶

Gun is one of the chieftains in ancient China. Like most cultures, the Chinese have their flood myths. The Deluge or Great Flood was sent

by Tiandi during the reign of Yao, who is one of the Five Emperors (Wu Di)¹⁷ in ancient Chinese history. Gun is a hero who makes suggestions fearlessly to Yao¹⁸ and has rich experience and excellent talent in controlling the flood. Eventually Gun was elected to solve the big problem and became the single advocate for the human race, which was stranded on mountaintops plagued by wild beasts. Although he is good at controlling the flood, this time it was too much because it was not ordinary flood but flood sent by Tiandi. So Gun pleaded the human case with Tiandi, but he was refused. Finally he decided, Prometheus-like, to do something on his own. Gun told an owl and a tortoise that Tiandi had Xirang, or magic soil, that could be used to stem the flood. They worked together and obtained the magic soil secretly. After managing to steal some of the magical earth substance, Gun dropped it into the waters, where it became land. Although the people were happy, Tiandi was not, and he sent the fire god Zhurong to kill Gun and to retrieve the magic soil. The flood returned, but Gun's body, guarded by his followers, regained life. Tiandi again intervened by having Gun's body cut by a sword. But out of the cut came Gun's son, Yu, more often called Yu the Great by Chinese people to show their respect. With the help of Nüwa, Yu the Great helped dig the canals that controlled the flood and allowed people to grow crops again. Yu the Great became a leader later and was generally regarded as one of the extremely benevolent rulers. Gun himself became a yellow dragon and lived at the bottom of the waters.¹⁹

In the two myths the heroes did not listen to the god of the highest position in their respective system and did what they wanted to do to help the human race. Freedom to do what they want to do is a precious thing and worth being chased. It is no exaggeration to say that freedom is one of the most important things to human beings. The right of freedom can be denied to no one. People value most the freedom to talk and do whatever they like and chase whatever they want, of course within the limitation of laws nowadays. The next thing in common is that it is the heroes who are helping the people, not the gods of the highest position, although they are so powerful, that are highly respected and even worshipped, and that it is the good qualities instead of the power or force that are treasured. The two myths are also similar in another aspect: Prometheus and Gun are punished severely but they are not defeated. Prometheus faced his bitter fate firmly and never lost courage before Zeus. After his son coming out

of his cut Gun himself became a yellow dragon and lived at the bottom of the waters. The spirit of revolt can be obviously seen among the two heroes and actually among the ancient Chinese and Greek people. The male heroes' good qualities are fully displayed to us: their strength, their courage in resisting oppression, their willingness to risk crossing the line into forbidden behavior, and above all for their self-determination and independence.²⁰

At the same time there are also some differences. Prometheus had done the things for the love of his creation, while Gun has done the things just because they could benefit the common people. Different spirits are emphasized here: for Greek people it is the spirit of independence and for Chinese people it is the spirit of sacrificing for others, especially for the group or the nation. Although Prometheus and Gun were punished severely and they were not defeated, Prometheus faced his bitter fate firmly because he knows he will be freed someday, while Gun's son came out of the cut and continued to do what the father did not complete.²¹ We can say Prometheus is brave and firm but he is submissive to a certain fate. From Gun's story these ideas are expressed that Chinese people put emphasis on making every effort to change bad situations, that they are down-to-earth and hard-working, and that they will not give up hope or wait to be rescued by fate because they believe their children will finish what they are doing if they couldn't complete it.

After analyzing the myths about Prometheus, Nüwa and Gun, we can come to the following conclusions:

Mythologies provide a fascinating window into the culture and offer a possible explanation of what really happened. They were embedded in real experience: both growing from it, and helping to shape its perception. The mythical stories have been influenced by and also influenced the character and culture of the people. And the evidence we have here leads us to emphasize how much we have in common.

Although ancient China and Greece were in very different geographical conditions and people there had very different ways of thinking, they had quite a lot in common: our ancestors had considered the same questions and had been faced with similar problems and had expressed similar wishes. These fables embody the way our ancestors understood the world in ancient times. Legends and myths were created by our forebears in order to reflect the

way in which they saw the relationship between man and nature and that between man and man. Themes prevalent in these mythical and fantasy stories are praise of creation, perseverance, self-sacrifice and rebellion against oppression. In ancient times of suffering and poverty our forebears expressed the hope that they could be protected by some supernatural power.

Although there are some or even great differences between different cultures, nobody has the right to say that any one is better or superior. The myths mentioned above display different good qualities in Chinese and Greek mythologies but they are all admired by people all over the world until today. One important thing that people can do today is try to understand and analyze different cultures and absorb what is worthwhile and make full use of it. This is where the values of the cultural heritages lie. At the same time the differences between different cultures make the world more colorful and more interesting. The first Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai had said that the common ground was basic and the differences were minor and that we could seek common ground while reserving differences. His sentence is still suitable now. We can put aside the minor differences and seek the common ground between different cultures so as to get along well with each other and make our globe more beautiful.

NOTES

¹ More widely known are Greek literary sources, especially the two epic poems by Homer, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, focusing on events surrounding the Trojan War. But it was Hesiod who had made Greek mythology well-organized. His works contain accounts of the genesis of the world, the succession of divine rulers, the succession of human ages, the origin of human woes, and the origin of sacrificial practices.

² Recently there appears a novel named *Kun Lun Zhi Ge*, or *Songs of Kunlun*. It is published online from 2008, which is regarded as a valuable effort to construct Chinese mythology in a systematical way.

³ *Shan Hai Jing*, or *Mountain and Sea Scroll*, describes the myths and religion of ancient China in detail. It lists gods and demons for the benefit of travelers and contains a record of the geography, sea and mountain, history, medicine, customs, and ethnicities in ancient times. It has been called an early encyclopedia of China.

⁴ *Shui Jing Zhu*, or *Commentaries on The Water Scroll*, began as commentaries on a briefer work of *The Water Scroll*, but became famous of its

own accord because of its extensive record of geography, history, and associated Chinese legends.

⁵ *Huai Nan Zi* is a book mainly of essays on the philosophical theory systems in the period of the Warring States. It also includes some myths.

⁶ There are also some Chinese imperial historical documents and philosophical canons such as *Shang Shu*, *Shi Ji*, *Li Ji*, *Lü Shi Chun Qiu*, and others which contain some myths. Some myths survive in theatrical or literary formats, as plays or novels. Important mythological fictions which are seen as definitive records of these myths include *Li Sao* by Qu Yuan, *Feng Shen Yan Yi*, or *Anointing of the Gods*, a mythological fiction dealing with the founding of the Zhou Dynasty, and *Xi You Ji*, or *Journey to the West*, by Wu Cheng'en, a fictionalized account of the pilgrimage of Xuanzang to India to obtain Buddhist religious texts, in which the pilgrims encounter ghosts, monsters, and demons as well as the Flaming Mountains.

⁷ *Hei An Zhuan*, or *Epic of the Darkness*, is the only collection of legends in epic form preserved by a community of the Han nationality of China, inhabitants of the Shennongjia mountain area in Hubei, containing accounts from the birth of Pangu till the historical era. It was included in the recommended list of national cultural heritage in 2010.

⁸ <http://www.tingvoa.com/html/20100303/14883.html>

⁹ Nüwa is said to be best known for creating mankind and repairing the sky after Gonggong damaged the pillar supporting the heavens. She is also said to have invented matrimony. These two beings are sometimes worshiped as the ultimate ancestor of all humankind in China. They are often represented as half-snake, half-human creatures.

¹⁰ The Three August Ones and Five Emperors in Chinese mythology are usually called San Huang Wu Di together. They become a part of the Confucian political philosophy of Primitivism and stand for wise and virtuous rulers.

When Qin Shihuang united most of China together in 221 BC, he felt that his achievements had surpassed those of all the rulers who have gone before him. Hence, he combined the ancient titles of San Huang and Wu Di to create a new title, Huangdi, usually translated as Emperor. Qin Shihuang means the first Huangdi of Qin, which is the name of his kingdom, and his son is called Qin Ershi, which means the second Huangdi of Qin. They hope the dynasty will be passed down to their offspring generation after generation. But unfortunately Qin Dynasty only lasted two generations. But the following emperors in the following dynasties are all called Huangdi.

¹¹ <http://www.cultural-china.com/chinaWH/History/en/46H5031H1122.html>

¹² Similarly they are also thinking about the origin of the world and interestingly they share one more point that the whole world comes from chaos.

¹³ Pandora, the first mortal woman in Greek myth, was created by other gods and goddesses together to bring many unfortunate things into the human world as a punishment to Prometheus for his theft of fire.

¹⁴ Ancient Chinese people didn't attach much importance to myths, so a unique characteristic of Chinese culture is the relatively late appearance in Chinese literature of myths. Those that do exist appear well after the foundation of Confucianism, Taoism, and folk religions. Various parts of pre-existing mythology were adapted into these belief systems as they developed. Almost all sorts of feudal ethical principles are encouraged. This is only natural, because literary works inevitably reflect the beliefs of the age in which they are produced.

The ideas of sixth century philosopher Confucius became a profound influence on Chinese culture. Confucius emphasized correct behavior and respect for those senior in age or social rank, and Confucian ideas also included ancestor worship.

¹⁵ <http://www.tingvoa.com/html/20100714/23236.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.nhsyxx.com.cn/teach/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=439>

¹⁷ See [10].

¹⁸ Because of his upright character, Gun could not be cooperated with Yao. For the sake of maintaining great figure of Yao, the later people fabricate many excuses for Gun should not be so great. They libeled Gun and made him become a failure and an incapable person. Gun's libeled figure is a result of the tendency that the following rulers and their protectors create wise monarch.

¹⁹ Dragons are said to be in charge of water in Chinese mythology, unlike the western dragons, which will spurting flames.

²⁰ Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, *The Myths We Live By* (History workshop series), Routledge, 1990, P17

²¹ It is a valued tradition in China for the son to finish the father's uncompleted career and to repay the father's debt.

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