

Sisyphus and Wu Gang—Probing into Humanity and Divinity in Ancient Greece and China’s Legends

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Abstract. This article starts with "Sisyphus" and "Wu Gang" in Greek Roman mythology and Chinese mythology, and analyzes the humanistic deity in the two traditional cultures. Firstly, a brief introduction and comparison were made between the two legends, showcasing the different characteristics of humanistic divinity. Among them, Greek mythology emphasizes the value of human beings, while Chinese divinity emphasizes the harmonious coexistence and moral nature of human beings and nature. People's attention and belief in the two gods also reflect two different value orientations. Finally, this paper makes a cross-cultural analysis of the humanistic deities of the two traditional cultures, points out the different value orientations of collectivism in Chinese traditional culture and Humanism in Greek and Roman culture, and emphasizes the importance and value of both in world culture. This article is an in-depth analysis of the differences between Western and Eastern culture, which will help deepen the cultural differences and value orientations of the two traditional cultures.

Keywords: Legend, Mythology, The relationship between humans and gods, The Image of God, Ancient Chinese Divinity, Greek gods, Hidden Order.

1. Brief introduction of punishment mythology

1.1. Legends and culture

“The primitive myth explains the world or nature, not in its concrete words of telling, but in its hidden mythological meaning” (Wu, 2001, p.235). Legends were extracted from the collective memories of a nation’s distant past, reflecting the mind of forefathers of a nation. They were then passed on through generations, accumulated as the fundamental elements of national spirit and influencing the development of its culture.

As “the reflection of a nation’s collective subconscious”(Floyd) and “specific cultural symbols or codes of thought” of primitive people (Deng, 1992, p.135), mythology is an ideal subject for the study of a nation’s cultural traditions and characteristics. Basing on this premise, this report discusses the different value orientations and cultural clues between ancient China and Greece with the comparison of two typical legends.

1.2. Myths of a place of punishment

According to L.Spence (1921), legends could be divided into 21 categories, among which “Myths of a place of punishment” is an important one. The myth of punishment is composed as a way of self-regulation, a way for primitive people to incorporate their inner judgments and opinions about morality into their own created divine stories, then disseminated them as warnings to admonish and discourage humans from committing morally corrupted behaviors. Such legends prevailed in both ancient Chinese and Greek societies. In this report, the author will focus on two typical examples of the myths of punishment in these cultures, which both demonstrate eternal torment that divinity forced on humanity.

1.3. The comparison between the two stories

Despite the many versions of interpretation and only very limited written records, the legend of Wu Gang does come to a common end. Whatever kind of sin Wu Gang had committed, he had

violated the rules set by the divinity and received the punishment he deserved, which indicated that one must unconditionally conform to the established system and respect the power of authority. He did not intentionally take arms against the divinity, or rather, he had no way to rebel at all.

In Sisyphus's case, however, he violated the established rules by rebelling against the Gods himself. Though all the same receiving eternal punishment, he had used his courage and wisdom to fight for his benefits and joy, regardless of the mighty power of divinity. In other words, his conflict with Gods was direct, and his conformity was a result after all his attempts failed.

The major conflicting factors of the two stories could probably be attributed to the different conceptions about divinity and the different relationships between humans and Gods.

2. Cross-Cultural analysis of Greek and Chinese Gods

2.1. Different images of Gods

2.1.1. The omnipresent divinity in ancient China

The concept of a supreme being in ancient China could be traced back to *Shanhaijing*, in which the term "Tian" appeared to represent the accumulation of natural phenomenon, or a place far above the sky (Chao, 2016, p.23). Due to respect for power, the mighty tribal leaders may also be deemed as the representation of divine power. With the development of civilization, the concept of "Tian" was furthered to embody the connotation of sacred divinity and "the order of Tian" was derived. "Tian" was said to be able to control all natural movements, all social events and even the change of dynasties. In Xia dynasty, the system consisting of various ghosts and Gods was greatly venerated by people, and they would practice ceremonial rituals to ask for "Tian"'s instructions on addressing important affairs. The belief of divine beings was so prevailing that even Emperor Zhouwu Wang waged war on corrupted Shang dynasty with the banner of "Tian". In Zhou dynasty the ceremonial system of venerating Gods was strengthened, a complicated set of relevant social etiquette was invented and the emperors were officially acknowledged as the receivers of divine power

Since the dissolution of Zhou dynasty, with the rise of people-oriented school of thoughts, the divine power was gradually relegated to be the subordinate of people's wills. In the age of a hundred schools of thoughts, the concept was furthered developed and "Tian" was concealed behind ruling of the society as the abstract rules' representation, rather than forceful executors.

Hence, in the age of the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period, ancient China had already established a highly sophisticated and practical system of humanity and divinity. Divinity, known as "Tian", was the concentrated form of the general principles governing the nature as well as human society, especially pivoting on people's common interest. As personifications of ultimate truth in the world, the Gods were considered to be free of personalities or emotions. They distinguished themselves from human beings in that they were always right and was the culmination of virtues, naturally enjoying a higher status than ordinary individuals. In fact, according to the descriptions given by Confucius and Zhuangzi, one need to rid himself of any subjective mind and even feelings to approach total spiritual transparency, complete justice and the prestige of omnipresence. In other words, the gap between humanity and divinity could only be breached if humans actively sync themselves with the rhythm of the world and become a part of it.

The most typical case demonstrating this concept is the story of Gun and Yu. Though Gun was considered to be the Prometheus of the east, he was very self-important to make mistakes in his project and acted on his own without the consent of the God, hence receiving the punishment for disturbing the great harmony of universe. His son, Yu, on the other hand, made substantial contribution to the people while acting on the law of universe and divinity, hence was qualified to be a ruler and thus the representation of deities in the profane world.

2.1.2. The humane figures of Greek Gods

Though sharing many common features, the Greek Gods were addressed more humane characters compared with the Chinese conception of divinity. The Gods in Greek thoughts also derived from the

fear for ghosts and powerful supernatural beings, and the first generations of Greek Gods were manifestations of natural beings and phenomenon. Nevertheless, as Xu Baogeng had remarked, “among the gods of Olympias centered around Zeus, most of the men were greedy and lustful, while the women were jealous of the same sex and pursued vanity” (1990), Gods were given humane characters (especially flawed personalities) and even possessed endless desires that could hardly be satisfied. Gods were also said to be in possession of physical features of men, as can be observed on the statues in ancient Greece.

In the view of some researchers, Gods in ancient Greece were bordering on human beings with superpower and omnipresent control of the world. They distinguished themselves from human beings in their immortality, wisdom and strength but not their virtues. Like oriental Gods, they also governed natural phenomenon and change of human societies, but with their own will rather than objective laws.

Consequently, the boundaries between humans and Gods are determined more by the origin and “genes” of divinity. While some of Zeus’ bastards with mortals assumed positions in his court, ordinary human beings could never reach divinity in any aspect.

2.2. Different relationships between humanity and divinity

2.2.1. The tacit order of Chinese divinity

As had been illustrated, in the age of the Spring and Autumn period and the following Warring States period, people’s wills were highly stressed and even divinity was thought to be serving the people. As Tso Chuan had recorded, “people are the lords of Gods, and thus holy kings appease his people first before dedicating to honoring Gods”, only by enforcing benevolent policies which benefit the people can emperors receive the bless from the Gods. Hence, In the pre-Qin legends the influence of divinity on people is always indirect and benevolent. Gods did not directly engage in profane affairs other than solving critical problems for the people in silence.

It can be summarized that in ancient China, the obedience to the Gods is tacit. On one hand, the objection to divinity symbolize violation of principles, which necessarily relates to personal failure or the fall of political powers and vice versa. On the other hand, since the need of humanity is generally in accordance with the purpose of divinity, individuals need only labor in the order “created” by deity to receive benefits from Gods, and no rebellious behaviors are necessary.

The construction of a system governed by divinity is thus a tool to accomplish the harmonious co-existence of deities, rulers and the people, a certain form of supernatural authority created to maintain the stability within the order and promote morality. Should any punishment be enforced by the Gods, it is usually associated with the personal violation of virtues, ethics or the authority itself.

In conclusion, Wu Gang’s punishment was a gesture of reprimanding those violating harmony between humanity and divine order, an essential for enforcing moral education and cleansing misconducts from the heavenly world. His silent obedience demonstrated that once offending the tacit order of Chinese deities, individuals are in no position to rebel, as he makes himself an enemy of even the air he breathes.

2.2.2. The conflict between humans and Gods in Ancient Greece

The relationship between Greek Gods and ordinary human beings, however, is much more complicated. Initially, unlike the people-oriented deities in ancient China, people had only a minor share of their attention and consideration in ancient Greek’s religion. Additionally, humans succumb to the rule of Gods not because of their virtues but their might. There are many passages in both Iliad and Odyssey, where “god” is mentioned as the dispenser of good and bad fortune, happiness and suffering in general. They may take against mortals for trivial reasons or pour benevolent wishes on them out of personal Favor. For instance, Odyssey was met with numerous obstacles in his journey home after he offended Poseidon, and afterwards was lured by Calypso and even offered the chance of immortality.

As the inequality between humans and Gods are based on power imbalance, plus the fact that Gods may intentionally seek pleasure in mortals' world, the interaction between humanity and divinity is more frequent in ancient Greece. Gods may directly engage in humans' affairs as they like (e.g. the Trojan war), and men may be invited to the Gods' court or exploited to fulfill certain tasks when Gods' powers are out of reach. The relationship between the two worlds are actually dependent on their benefits and interests, as had been reflected in Sisyphus' case (his trade with Alpheus), which may also be indications that humans and Gods have accomplished certain form of conditioned quality.

Moreover, humans are actually allowed to rebel against the established order as they are not morally inferior to Gods (except for the fact that they never win), which explains Sisyphus' combat against Hades and almost the whole court of Gods. In fact, human's gestures against the overwhelming might of Gods may actually be associated the Greek advocacy of humanism, the praise for individual's strength, bravery and intelligence. The conflict between humans and Gods, besides its attaching importance to venerating Gods, may also convey the message that "humans are the measure of everything", even in front of Gods. As a matter of fact, humans could even reach the position virtually equivalent to Gods as "heroism transforms humans into virtual gods by conferring on them divine qualities"(Segal, 2013, p. 45), among these qualities are "physical attributes" as strength and size as well as intangible ones an intelligence and integrity.

It's safe to assume that the creation of Gods mirroring the potential of human beings may just be the step towards a society stressing merely men's values. In *Odyssey*, statements about men's power had already been presented, even denying the might of Gods. When Zeus declares in the council of gods that man is himself responsible for his doings-thinking mainly about the negative side-Odysseus comes up to this principle in a positive way, getting his way through divinely set challenges and constructing the order of humans rather than Gods. Other statements in the epic went as far as to claim that "Men themselves, not the gods, are responsible for their sufferings beyond their destined share"(Kullmann, 1985, p.5) and that Gods are just guardians of justice who warned them of their malicious deeds. With the proceeding of history, the tendency of boosting men's worth and undermining Gods were manifested in all areas of Greek life, especially in philosophical arena. In the parallel time with China's age of multiple kingdoms, Plato denounced the immortality of Gods and the traditional view of men's value, and Aristotle claimed that Gods were even not as important as philosopher Epicurus. They constructed the theoretical framework of "the study of men", depriving Gods of their omnipresence.

In general, as Swiss scholar Ann Bonner had pointed out, the starting point and object of the whole Greek civilization was man, the relationship between Gods and men in ancient Greece actually reflected its early humanism orientation, which was vividly demonstrated in the myth of Sisyphus.

3. Conclusion: the different value orientation

3.1. Collectivism reflected in ancient Chinese divinity

The myths of China's distant past to a certain extent reflects the inherent collectivism in Chinese culture. As a civilization thriving on agriculture (especially, small-scale peasant economy), Chinese culture stresses settlement and stable environment for production. Since the foundation of Xia dynasty, a centralized government and a political system aiming for grand unification of the nation was gradually formed and developed, leading to the Chinese values of honoring authorities and emphasizing harmony. Hence, the system of divinity, originating from primitive belief to become representation of abstract governing principles, also served to maintain the reign of central government and regulate behaviors of the people, fulfilling China's national aspiration of a harmonious society. In the long history of China, the power of deities and emperors were progressively integrated, both to enforce and monitor dictatorship, and philosophical schools supplementing such trans-dimensional unity, like Zhu Xi's school of principle, came into being. The legend of Wu Gang, along with many other myths in ancient China, provided a glimpse of such cultural value through the tacit punishment of deities.

3.2. Humanism reflected in ancient Greek divinity

Through the myths of ancient Greece, humanism was a distinctive and vibrant feature. With relatively smaller and more fragmented areas of plains, the ancient Greece lived more on trades than agriculture. With the thriving sea trades, the exploring spirits and strengths of Greek people were cultivated and recognized, determining its main value orientation. Moreover, as Greek citizens united in the form of city-states with small populations and practiced political system of democracy, they had more opportunities to engage in social affairs, give speeches and debate, which strengthened their awareness of the powers within themselves. In the meanwhile, since no centralized government was formed, the concept of Gods came into existence to influence major decisions in politics, to educate citizens and unite the loosely restrained Greek nations. With weak sense of authority and rather turbulent social circumstances (constant wars between city states), the Greek people projected their own personalities on deities and created fascinating stories about them. Consequently, Gods were always mirroring their own power, no matter in conflict or cooperation with human beings. The character Sisyphus was exactly the reflection of such views, as he represented humans' eternal pursuit for personal well-being and their mighty intelligence, even when confronted with the insurmountable power of Gods and fate. He was even elevated to the height of existentialism by philosopher Albert Camus, reflecting common challenge for the whole human race in the absurd reality.

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