

Original Paper

Comparison of Cultural Value Orientations in Images of Nyuwa and Athena

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Abstract

Born in the fertile imagination of primitive people, mythologies are the epitome of different cultures and societies, implying value orientations and national spirit of each nation. Even after thousands of years, these old stories still have a profound influence on later generations. Therefore, this article selects Nyuwa and Athena, two of the most classic female characters in myth, to discover cultural value orientations in Chinese and Greek mythologies. Through this study, value orientations differences between East and West are embodied in human nature, relationship to natural world, and social relations.

Keywords

Nyuwa, Athena, Chinese and Greek myth, Cultural value orientations

1. Introduction

As the spiritual creation of primitive people, images in mythology represent civilizations of different nations, reflect their unique cultural patterns, and witness social development on every piece of land. Though people who worship those traditional gods are not common nowadays, it is also necessary to study their images in mythology and values behind them because they can help us build up national identity and save our roots. Tychkin (2015) regarded myth as an anthropological phenomenon in cognitive process because it could broaden people's imagination and strengthen their confidence as a subject. Meanwhile, studying mythological images comparatively is of great importance in cultural transmission and communication. In 2011, He stated that differences in Chinese and Greek gods character shaping showed diverse cultural spirit and value orientation, leading to various development directions of Chinese and western cultural systems.

Nyuwa and Athena are the archetypal characters in Chinese and Greek myth respectively, both of them play an important role and have a profound influence on their own society and civilization. As a goddess of order in ancient Chinese mythology, Nyuwa has a human head and a serpent body. She is best known

for creating mankind and repairing the hole in heaven. For this reason, she is called “Mother of all human beings” and worshiped in many places in China. At the same time, there is also another famous goddess of equal importance as Nyuwa in Greek mythology. Athena is believed to have been born from the head of her father Zeus. She usually shows up in art wearing a helmet and holding a spear. Her image is often associated with wisdom, handicraft, and warfare. Previous studies about these two influential goddesses is numerous. The character shaping of Nyuwa demonstrated the need for human reproduction of ancient Chinese people and the reproduction worship has been implied by Wang (2016). Deacy suggested that Athena originated from the goddess worship tradition of early Mediterranean civilization, and influenced by the civilization of Athens city-state and patriarchy in 2007. However, there is limited research that focuses on one-to-one comparative study in the images of Nyuwa and Athena. And in the international academic circle, because of the translation issue, people seldom compare Chinese myth with Greek myth. Therefore, based on Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s value orientation theory, this article conducts a detailed comparison between the images of Nyuwa and Athena from three aspects.

2. Cultural Value Orientations in Images of Nyuwa and Athena

In 1961, two American anthropologists, Florence Kluckhohn and Fred Strodtbeck, proposed cultural value orientation theory in their book *Variations in Value Orientations*. According to this structure, there are five dimensions that reflect basic cultural characteristics of different cultural groups, including time, humanity, relationship to natural environment, activity, and social relation. This theory later became an influential method to illustrate cultural differences.

2.1 Different Orientations on Human Nature

Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck hold that people with different culture backgrounds may have different orientations on human nature. There are three kinds of tendency: good, evil, and mixed.

2.1.1 Good Human Nature in Chinese Mythology

It is evident that Chinese mythology believes in the goodness of human nature. Taking a global view of female deities in those stories, people can find that many of them are described as perfect model with high morality. On the one hand, noble virtues of goddesses are recorded and praised. One of the most well-known moral models is Nyuwa. There was a fight between two of the more powerful gods—Gong Gong and Zhu Rong. When Gong Gong found that he was going to lose, he smashed his head against the Mount Buzhou, leading to the falling of half the sky. The universe was almost falling apart, and floods sprout from beneath the earth and fierce animals leapt out at the people. Seeing her kids undergo such miserable sufferings, Nyuwa finally mended the sky and ended this catastrophe.

On the other hand, Chinese mythology also depicts some negative lessons to guide people. For instance, Chang’e, a woman with excellent looks, was forced to abandon her husband because she accidentally ate the elixir. Her desolate and lonely life in the Moon Palace is a negative example of female unkindness. This tendency towards human nature was strengthened by the ethics of feudal society in later generations,

which made the myth in the process of development further weaken the dark side of human nature, and highlight the virtuous character of women.

2.1.2 Mixed Human Nature in in Greek Mythology

To stress the complicity of human nature, gods were created in the image of human beings, and the gods had the characteristics of humanization in Greek mythology. In 2001, Gimbutas and Compleu pointed out that the starting point and object of Greek mythology were human beings, emphasizing human nature and taking human nature and desire as beauty. Lives of those goddesses are not so different from those of human beings, they have no need to worry about the world, and they do not have to teach human beings, and they seem to spend most of their time just having fun.

To put it another way, nature of goddesses in Greek mythology is more realistic, paying more attention to the personalities and true feelings. It is hard to distinguish between good and evil, only few of whom have a perfect moral character. Athena, on the one hand, was the goddess of wisdom. She was a warrior and taught people all kinds of crafts and arts. But on the other hand, she was competitive, narrow and selfish. Infuriated by the skill of a normal woman naming Arachne, she felt her divine dignity as being challenged and turned her into a spider. Unsatisfied with the result of the golden apple of discord, she accelerated the outbreaking of the Trojan War. Compared with the selfless and kind-hearted goddesses in Chinese mythology, the female images in Greek mythology are closer to the essence of human nature, stressing the beauty and reality of human nature. In the ancient Greek aesthetic ideal of Genesis mythology, gods are not more moral than human beings, but more powerful and beautiful than human beings (Nicole, 1992). They are more like human beings than gods.

2.2 *Different Orientations on Relationship to Natural World*

Myth reflects the primitive comprehension of the origin of the universe, natural phenomena. It is the product of personification of the natural world by means of imagination and fantasy. So discrepancy in relationships between human and nature can be found from the images in Chinese and Greek mythologies. Kluckhohn and Strodbeck describes three potential relationships between man and nature, including nature over humans, humans over nature and harmony with nature.

2.2.1 Harmony between Man and Nature in Chinese Mythology

During the figuring of characters in Chinese ancient mythology, the Chinese people adhere to the belief of the unity of nature and man all the time, whose basic meaning is to follow the natural law and to promote the harmonious development of nature and man. They do not regard the natural world as independent of man, but as a combination of man's survival and development, and make efforts to advocate the unity of nature and man (Xiang, 2010). The creation myth of Nyuwa exposes this concept fully. There were no people after the creation of the universe. For this reason, Nyuwa began to create animals and people out of loneliness. Having created animals for six Days, she shaped the first group of human beings one by one out of yellow clay on the seventh day.

As soon as she finished this work, the land was full of life. Born in the soil, Nyuwa used the yellow clay as the material to recreate people. This behavior makes people, nature and the creation God share the

same body. There is a high degree of harmony between people, between people and nature. At the same time, the Chinese gods pay more attention to the harmony, unity of opposites and dynamic balance of the relationship between heaven and man, or the relationship between things and me (Wang, 2016). While Nyuwa is the creator of human beings, she is not the operator of the world. She even stands up to human beings when they are in trouble. In Chinese mythology, there are many goddesses like Nyuwa. Under those circumstances, the discourse of Chinese mythology reconfirms the universal connection between man and nature.

2.2.2 Humans over Nature in Greek Mythology

Different from the Chinese traditional nature value, in Greek mythology, man and god are opposite, and heaven and man are divided. The traditional western view of nature holds that man is superior to nature and should conquer nature. On the one hand, the controlling of everything in the worlds by Greek gods manifests the Greeks' strong desire to conquer nature. On the other hand, as the representatives of natural forces, the contradiction between man and God discloses the opposition and constant struggle between man and nature. Accordingly, the principal contradiction between god and man persisted. Many stories in Homer illustrate the separation of man and nature. One of the most classical cases about Athena is the story of Arachne. Arachne was a mortal craftswoman who boasted that she was even more skillful than Athena, the goddess of handicraft. Athena offered her a chance to resent, but Arachne refused to apologize. She decided to challenge Athena with a weaving duel. The goddess worked out a beautiful tapestry which illustrated the gruesome fate of the mortals who have had challenged the gods. Arachne, on the other hand, chose for a subject of the stories telling the mortals unjustly victimized by the gods. However, she did not even have a chance to finish it. Being enraged and offended, Athena tore Arachne's fabric into pieces and turned her into a spider. As such, Arachne was doomed to weave ever since.

Obviously, from this story, gods and man form a simple binary opposition, which also exhibits the discrepancy between heaven and man. Gods are not only the masters of the world and nature, but also the masters and manipulators of the world and human destiny, they can even punish people out of personal feelings and desires (David, 1969).

2.3 Different Orientations on Social Relations

As for how to deal with the relationship among people, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's theory contains three orientations: hierarchical, collateral, and individual. People in some societies, like Chinese, think it most natural that a society be organized hierarchically. And in traditional Greek society that place great value on individualism, people are likely to believe that each person should have control over his/her own destiny.

2.3.1 Collectivism in Chinese Mythology

For a long time, Chinese society has been regarded as an example of collectivism culture, in which personal stake can be sacrificed for the development and profits of the group. This orientation is reflected in shaping female images of Chinese mythology, especially when they are pursuing love. To begin with, the basis and maintenance of love between men and women is often the beautiful personal integrity of

women. Equally, love attaches more importance to spiritual resonance, so the basis of love is often the inner and spiritual beauty of the other party (Zhou & Li, 2018). Beyond that, women rarely have the freedom to choose their marriage partners freely and are still bound by the idea of arranging a match on the orders of their parents. The establishment of Nyuwa's identity as a goddess of marriage is closely related to this idea. According to legend, for the reproduction and development of future generations, Nyuwa prayed to the god in the ancestral temple, hoping that she could be a matchmaker and set up a system of marriage and wedding. After obtaining the consent of the god, she teaches people how to reproduce by themselves. Another story talks about the marriage of Nyuwa. In the beginning of the world, there were no other humans except Nyuwa and her brother Fuxi. At the foot of the Kunlun Mountains, under the guidance of the clouds, they got married, becoming the ancestors of the Chinese nation. Even a great goddess like Nyuwa cannot freely fall in love, let alone with other mythological women.

2.3.2 Individualism in Greek Mythology

Influenced by individualism orientation, the pursuit of free love is a very important concept of Greek women, for people are willing to sacrifice everything for love. Unlike Chinese mythology, the generation of love cannot be separated from the drive of lust in ancient Greek mythology. This kind of love comes from human instinct and is often directly linked to the appearance of beauty. Both gods and people are more likely to be moved by things that look beautiful, which is also clearly expressed in Greek mythology. For example, in the case of the "golden apple" in the Greek epic, Prince Paris finally awarded the apple to Aphrodite, because she promised him to get the love of the most beautiful woman in the world. From this story we can see that the beauty of a member of the opposite sex is even more attractive than the supreme power, outstanding wisdom and strength, so it is easier to produce the so-called love. The Greeks are more receptive than the Chinese, who are fiercely opposed to the idea of divine love, and are free to choose whom they fell in love with. Faced with love, many females are undoubtedly crazy and willing to sacrifice themselves. As can be seen, in the esteem of the ancient Greeks, love arose out of the instinctive desire of man. These Greek love stories unveil the natural demands and the quest for self-worth of the western people in early life. Driven by this kind of desire, women make all kinds of efforts to fight for their freedom in mythology. Instead of resigned to their fate, they choose to rise up to gain their own happiness.

3. Conclusion

Being a special cultural legacy, myth can reflect people's values in a certain period and region. It is widely acknowledged that myth is a significant basis for people to study the value and spirit of the past. Ancient China and ancient Greece, as the origin of Chinese and western human civilization respectively, are rich in mythological and historical materials. Therefore, the study of various goddess images in their myths has been regarded as an important basis for people to explore the historical development trend and characteristics of females' values in the two countries. The differences between Chinese and Greek

national mythological images of women reveal early human thinking, influencing the value orientation towards females in later generations.

In this context, this paper centers around two females, Nyuwa and Athena, then compares their different values behind their images from three perspectives. First of all, Chinese and Greek mythologies show different attitudes to nature. Females in Chinese mythology stress the harmony between man and nature while Greek goddesses hold the belief that man and nature are separated. Secondly, orientation towards human nature in mythologies varies from culture to culture. Last but not least, Chinese myth shows a collectivist tendency whereas Greek myth is individualistic.

Additionally, there exists some limitations in this text. Though developing three aspects of value differences, it does not go into detail because of space issues. Cross-cultural communication is a complex subject requiring unique perspectives. The author hopes to contribute to the cross-cultural study of East and West, as well as the outreach of Chinese culture.

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