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A Comparative Analysis of Tragic Prototypes in Chinese and Western Disaster Myths: Taking Gun's Efforts in Flood Control and Prometheus' Act of Stealing Fire as Examples

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Abstract:

In ancient times, prior to the establishment of written records, early civilizations often relied on oral narratives to cope with frequent yet inexplicable natural disasters. The resulting disaster myths underwent continuous evolution yet eventually crystallized through intergenerational transmission and evolved into a distinct form of collective identity endowed with unique ethnic traits. This paper focuses on the types of natural disasters in mythological narratives, selecting two classic mythological tragedies—Gun's attempt to tame the floods and Prometheus' theft of fire—with the aim of comparing the differences between Chinese and Western myths through dimensions such as mythological settings, central figures, and underlying logic, and thereby exploring how national myths articulate distinctive cultural features. By comparing the typical cases of disaster deepening tragedies in China and the West, it can not only help us gain insight into the profound differences between different cultures, but also provide a feasible approach for modern people to solve the problem of disaster response, and even play an important role in the process of continuing the collective memory and cultural genes of the nation.

Keywords: mythology, disaster myth; national culture

1. Introduction

Disaster myths constitute some of the earliest testaments to humanity's initial recognition of calamities and its endeavors to inquire into and interpret them. As a narrative form predating written records, these myths served as a medium through which ancient people expressed their understanding of human propagation, the human-nature relationship, and concep-

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tions of time and space. On this level, even amid a state of primordial chaos, humans had already reached the limits of their cognitive capacity while simultaneously demonstrating infinite potential for development. In modern society, where natural disasters remain frequent, comparing Chinese and Western disaster myths not only enhances our understanding of the core national cultures shaped by distinct living environments but also helps contemporary individuals confront disasters more directly and actively seek solutions.

As Karen Armstrong aptly observes, when humans began creating myths, they placed themselves within a broader context, uncovering an inherent pattern that clarifies—amid profound despair and chaos—that life embodies meaning and value [1]. In this sense, adopting a broader comparative perspective to analyze the narrative approaches to disasters in Chinese and Western mythology is not only a return to the intrinsic value of myth itself but also embodies a proactive rather than passive attitude toward existence.The following text will provide an overview and comparison of the basic characteristic differences between Chinese and Western disaster myths, and conduct a detailed analysis of two typical tragic cases, and conclude by summarizing the similarities and differences between the two in terms of character images and narrative structures.

2. Disaster Myths in China and the West: Different Characteristics in Cultural Contexts

2.1 Chinese disaster myths and their basic characteristics

Chinese mythology is distinctly characterized by its extensive corpus and evolutionary complexity The content addressed in this paper pertains to ancient Chinese mythology, a phase predating the emergence of self-conscious literary creation. Nevertheless, texts including *Shanhai Jing, Biography of King Mu, Book of Songs, Chuci*; and even *Shangshu* and *Records of the Grand Historian* contain, to varying degrees, accounts of traditional mythological narratives

As an agrarian civilization, ancient China's productive forces exerted a profound influence on shaping its people's values, which were in turn projected onto its mythological traditions. In Chinese disaster myths, natural catastrophes are often intertwined with moral disorder, social turmoil, and cultural decline. Rather than emphasizing divine retribution or fatalistic convictions, Chinese disaster myths lay greater emphasis on humanity's capacity for active intervention and regulation in accordance with natural laws, ultimately aiming to restore the ideal state of "harmony between heaven and humanity". Moreover, these myths often carry a strong theme of familial continuity. As recorded in and *Shanhai Jing*, Gun fails to control the flood and is executed, but his son Yu continues his mission and succeeds. This reflects a narrative pattern rooted in familial responsibility and legacy—whether framed as "the son pays the father's debt" or "the son inherits the father's mission."

2.2 Western disaster myths and their basic characteristics

In contrast, Western disaster mythology—exemplified by ancient Greek traditions—exhibits distinct features. In terms of structural coherence, Western myths are more systematically organized compared to their Chinese counterparts. Furthermore, a prominent theme in Western disaster myths revolves around the conflict between individuals and inexorable fate or the will of omnipotent deities. The tragedy in these myths is highly explicit: the failure and destruction of heroes are inevitable when confronted with overwhelming forces of destiny. Yet, it is precisely through such struggles that individual heroism is vividly manifested, rendering their resistance both poignant and commendable.

In comparison to Chinese disaster myths, ancient Greek disaster myths are replete with narrative plots centered on human repentance. Moreover, most of the plots indicate that human atonement and repentance to the gods are the only way to eliminate disasters. This reflective disaster narrative makes ancient Greek mythology a philosophy of disaster and also a narrative tool for treating disasters, which to a certain extent can reduce the occurrence of disasters. After all, how to prevent disasters from happening again is a question that humanity needs to constantly think about. In this regard, ancient Greek disaster myths offer a path for reflection.

3. Gun: A celestial deity who fell after the failure of flood control

Gun is depicted as the first figure in Chinese disaster mythology to undertake flood control efforts. Although traditionally regarded as a failed flood controller and even a guilty thief for stealing the Xirang, a comprehensive analysis of pre-Qin records pertaining to the myth of Gun may allow us to reconstruct a more complete image of this mythological figure and clarify certain specific details and ambiguities within his story.

The question of whether Gun qualifies as a deity can be investigated by examining related accounts and establishing connections among classical texts such as *Shanhai Jing, Chu Ci, Discourses of the States*, and *Lu Spring and Autumn*. It becomes evident that the image of Gun underwent an evolutionary trajectory: from deity, to demigod, to human

Within the Shanhai Jing, descriptions of Gun are not entirely consistent. In the *"Classic of Regions Within the Seas: XVIII,"* it is recorded: "黃帝生駱明，駱明生白馬，白馬是為鯀。"[2] Meanwhile, the *"Classic of the Central Mountains: V"* notes that south of Mount Qingyao lies Shandan Marsh—the site where Gun transformed into a yellow bear [2]. These passages reveal a clear clan lineage linking Gun to the Yellow Emperor.

According to the mythological accounts in Qu Yuan's works within the *Chu Ci*, Gun is explicitly designated as a deity. He was punished by the Supreme Deity for unrecorded reasons at the very moment his flood control efforts were approaching success. Yu was born from Gun's abdomen; after Gun's death, he transformed into a yellow bear and traveled westward in pursuit of immortality. Furthermore, in the pre-Qin text *Discourses of the States*, one passage even lists Gun among the ancestral deities worshipped by the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, grouping him together with deities such as Zhu Rong and the phoenix as an auspicious sign of a dynasty's prosperity.

When synthesizing accounts from these classical texts, it becomes clear that Gun's image underwent a complex evolution. Across transmitted mythological narratives, he underwent a fall from divine status, and his moral characterization remains highly contested. Nevertheless, his tragic end at Mount Yu constitutes a consistent element across nearly all relevant mythological accounts.

4. Prometheus: The god of prophets who stole fire

The Greek name Prometheus (Προμηθεύς) originally denotes "forethought" or "foresight," a meaning that reflects his capacity to foresee the future. He was the son of Iapetus and Themis and ranked among the most intelligent of the Titans. The literary image of Prometheus first emerges in the works of the ancient Greek poet Hesiod, particularly in the Theogony—a term signifying "the birth of the gods" in Greek. As the only extant complete genealogical poem of the gods, it systematically records the lineage of Greek deities and stands as the earliest written account of the Prometheus myth.

Similar to the Chinese figure Gun, evaluations of Prometheus in surviving texts differ considerably across various authors. Hesiod's Theogony and Works and Days both narrate the conflict between Prometheus and Zeus, and only by connecting these two accounts can one grasp Hesiod's complete image of Prometheus. Overall, in these earliest narratives, Prometheus is not a fully heroic figure but rather a cunning and deceitful character who sought to deceive Zeus (Works and Days, 43–44); he is ultimately "subdued, bound in heavy chains, his cleverness of no avail"(*Theogony*, 613–616)[3].

Aeschylus' tragedy Prometheus Bound presents a different narrative: that of a compassionate, rebellious, and genuinely prophetic god [4]. The play opens with Prometheus being punished by Zeus for stealing fire. Hephaestus, accompanied by the personifications of Violence and Force, chains him to a cliff in the Caucasus Mountains. Fully aware of his suffering and the lack of pity he receives, Prometheus nevertheless declares that he "willingly sinned" and shows no regret for aiding humanity, thus embodying the resolve and fortitude of a sufferer, prophet, and sage.

In 19th-century Western Romantic literature, Prometheus was reimagined as a revolutionary martyr. In his lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound*, Percy Bysshe Shelley depicts him as a defender of human rights and a revolutionary figure. Following Zeus' overthrow, Prometheus is freed from his chains by Heracles and ultimately achieves liberation. Moreover, Karl Marx's revolutionary theories are closely associated with this image of Prometheus as "the noblest saint and martyr in the calendar of philoso-

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phy." [5]In theoretical works such as *his Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy*, Marx repeatedly invokes refers to the Promethean spirit of revolution.

From his initial role as the fire-stealer to his subsequent portrayals as a rebel, revolutionary, and martyr across literary works, the image of Prometheus has undergone continuous evolution, expanding its spiritual connotations. What remains unchanged, however, is his wisdom as a prophetic god, his spirit of resistance, and his capacity for self-sacrifice.

5. A comparison of the two characters

The images of Gun and Prometheus share numerous similarities, yet the processes of their image evolution differ substantially—additionally,they simultaneously reflect the disparities in social concepts and cultural traditions between China and the West.

From the perspective of the figures themselves, both of these mythological characters are pioneers who stepped forward amid major disasters within their respective mythological systems. No matter what the outcome is, the courage to sacrifice oneself and challenge authority for the survival of the nation is consistantly admirable and moving. In this process, the greatest challenge confronting both was not the absence of means to save their communities, but rather the necessity of choosing between absolute submission and challenging the authority of higher deities, as well as between personal honor and collective interests. But the ultimate outcome proved that authority still remained unchallengeable. Although they still helped humanity survive in the end, they were all punished, which reflects the tragic nature of the characters' fates.

From the perspective of image evolution, Gun—who initially appeared as a deity that rebelled against imperial orders—evolved into a commoner minister accused of fomenting chaos, eventually became one of the "Four Evils". This transformation was from a positive mythological image to a negative historical one. As Mr. Yuan Ke put it, "Under the special circumstances of the historicization of mythology in China, Gun defamed and defiled the feudal rulers beyond recognition, and suffered a bad reputation for thousands of years." It was not until after the May Fourth Movement that myth studies emerged and gradually restored Gun to his original image.

Ulike Gun, Prometheus' image gradually became more positive, especially his character of brave resistance. In Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Work and Days*, the image of Prometheus was condemned by the poet. In Aeschylus' tragedy *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus and Zeus; In the works of Goethe and Byron, Prometheus evolved from a god of suffering into a rebel striving for liberation. In Shelley's poetic drama Prometheus Liberated, Prometheus finally defeated Zeus and achieved victory. By this stage, Prometheus had been further abstracted from a mere mythological figure into a spiritual symbol and even a cultural symbol.

6. Conclusion

Disasters and suffering constitute the primordial memories of nations, and disaster myths function as faithful records of the various catastrophes humanity endured in prehistoric times. Despite the vast differences in ethnic cultures and geographical contexts between China and the West, their distinct mythological narratives have each contributed to the construction of collective cultural memory, thereby emerging as invaluable spiritual heritage. Throughout this process, the protagonists within these narrative traditions exhibit similar moral virtues: the initiative to seek survival possibilities amid extreme adversity, the commitment to maximizing the resilience of life, and the courage to step forward and sacrifice themselves when large-scale collective disasters occur. It is precisely due to such heroes that a glimmer of hope becomes attainable. These myths not only profoundly reflect the worldview and values of ancient peoples, revealing distinctive national cultural traits, but also provide modern society with an inexhaustible source of spiritual strength and the courage to confront suffering.

There remain areas for improvement in this article. The discussion of the two mythological stories only starts from the main characters, and fails to clarify the relationships between the main characters and other figures, and mainly discusses from a literary perspective. Incorporating sociological, historical, and anthropological interpretations would render it more comprehensive.

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