

# Comparison of Chinese and Western Civilizations: A Case Study of Mainstream Creation Mythologies

Xinbo Jiao

Foreign Studies College, Hunan Normal University, Changsha, China

---

**Abstract:** Creation myth not only records the birth of all things in the world, but also reflects the understanding of different nationalities on the origin. Due to the differences among nations, the creation myths reflect different national characteristics with universality. This paper makes a comparative study of Greek creation myth, Bible creation myth, Chinese mainstream myth of creation, "Pangu opens heaven" and "Nuwa creates humankind". It is found that the hero worship color dominated by nature worship in Greek mythology and the three classes of "Superman-Nature-Mortal", the nature worship color dominated by hero worship in Bible and the binary opposition between God and man, and the absolute nature worship color in Chinese mainstream mythology. In addition, based on the comparison between Chinese and Western myths, this paper also finds that Western myths embrace duality and systematic feature, while Chinese myths have the characteristics of fragmentation and naturalization.

**Keywords:** Greek Myth, *The Bible*, Chinese Myth, Creation of World.

---

## 1. Introduction

Mythology is the crystallization of early human spiritual civilization, and "creation" is the core issue of mythology [3]. It not only involves the problem of human origins but also, in a "non-real" manner, reconstructs the primitive human way of life and value system, serving as the starting point for studying the lineage of human civilization. Scholars Song Jiao and Li Haifeng believe that the fundamental difference between creation myths and other myths lies in their focus on "exploring origins," which is their essential characteristic. How were all things in the world created? How were humans created? What was the original world like? [5] The answers to these questions are recorded in similar yet different ways in myths of different ethnic groups. In mainstream Western mythology, there are creation stories such as the Greek myth of the gods' creation and the story of Prometheus creating humans, as well as the Hebrew myth in the Bible that records Yahweh as both the creator of the universe and humans. In mainstream Chinese mythology, there are legends of Pangu creating the world and Nuwa creating humans from clay.

Although the records in mainstream creation myths of the origin of the natural world and the birth of human civilization exhibit a certain universality, differences exist among myths of different ethnic groups due to geographical factors and levels of civilization. This paper selects three representative mainstream creation myths that represent current mainstream ideologies for discussion, analyzing and comparing the mythological stories of ancient Greek mythology, the Bible, and Chinese mythology's "Pangu creating the world" and "Nuwa creating humans." Through this comparative analysis, the paper attempts to build a dialog of differences among the three major mainstream myths of the East and West.

## 2. Nature Worship and Hero Worship

In ancient Greek mythology, "In the beginning there was only Chaos" [6], where earth, sea, and air were mixed together in a state of chaos. Subsequently, the gods separated the sky from the earth, and divided the sea from the land, thus creating the oceans, the sky, and the mountains, and bringing life to

the world - vegetation and living beings. Under the rule of the gods, the natural world took shape. The gods created the world according to their will, manifesting nature from the essence of the divine, demonstrating the absolute dominion of the gods over nature. The Titan Prometheus "fashioned a body in the likeness of the ruling god of the universe, mixing together the qualities of good and evil from the souls of animals, and enclosed them within the chest of a clay image" [4]. Thus, humans came into being. In creation myths, the juxtaposition and unity of good and evil characteristics represent distinctive "human nature" attributes within the divine realm. For instance, the inter-Titan and Olympian god wars were filled with power struggles and bloody massacres resembling primitive tribal conflicts. From this perspective, Prometheus' use of "animal souls" embodies a microcosm of divinity. The divinity tends towards "humanization", while humans acquire characteristics and appearances similar to the gods. The boundary between gods and humans becomes blurred, indicating a resemblance between gods and humans. Humans attempt to establish a common origin with gods, emphasizing not only the perceivability of the gods to humans but also the internalized sacredness derived from nature, thus acknowledging the divine's dominance over the natural world. In other words, the "superhuman" rules over nature, while the "ordinary human" is subjected to nature. The superhuman, in essence, is also "human". Therefore, in Greek mythology, the creation and shaping of gods' and humans' shared characteristics and forms encapsulates the ideal of superhuman creation in nature worship, dominated by hero worship.

According to Hebrew mythology in the Bible, the world's origin was similarly in a state of chaos, which God separated into light and darkness on the first day of creation; on the second day, God differentiated the world into land, sky, and water; on the third day, God created land, sea, and vegetation; on the fourth day, God created day and night, and established celestial bodies such as stars, moons, and the sun, and seasons; on the fifth day, God created sea creatures and birds in the sky; and on the sixth day, God created land animals and humans [1]. In the Bible, God created the natural world according to His will. However, unlike in Greek mythology, the God

described in Hebrew mythology is not a "superhuman" similar to humans, but a transcendent being ruling over all things. On the sixth day, God created humans in His likeness; although humans possess the appearance of God, they do not possess His characteristics. The God in Hebrew mythology is a covenant maker, a symbol of goodness. Since the creation of humans, God has continuously exhorted humanity to choose good over evil. Yet, humanity repeatedly demonstrates its propensity for evil. Before the Great Flood, humanity's sins began to escalate, such as Adam and Eve's theft of forbidden fruit, and Cain's murder of Abel out of jealousy. However, in the face of human sin, God consistently chooses to forgive. After Adam and Eve's transgression, God did not issue the ultimate punishment but instead provided humanity with the opportunity for life, although He revoked the power of eternal life. When God released the Great Flood to eradicate human sin, He chose to spare Noah, preserving the seed of goodness among humanity. The stark contrast between human sin and divine forgiveness was evident at that time. Subsequent narratives in the Bible predominantly revolve around the theme of human evil and divine goodness. Thus, in Hebrew mythology, God and humans share the same form but differ in essence. In the Bible, God created the world and humans, intertwining divinity, naturalness, and human form, while asserting absolute dominion over the created world. God represents nature and transcends nature. From the perspective of mythological narrative, humans can only imagine the form of God, and thus humanity is fated to be ruled by nature, showcasing hero worship dominated by nature worship.

In mainstream Chinese mythology, the genesis of the natural world begins with Pangu. According to Xu Zheng's "Chronicles of the Three-Five Historia," it is recorded that "In the beginning, the universe was in chaos like a chicken's egg, and Pangu was born within it. After eighteen thousand years, the heavens and the earth opened up. The clear and light elements rose to form the sky, while the turbid and heavy elements sank to become the earth." Later, Pangu separated the heavens and the earth, where "the sky rose by one zhang, the earth thickened by one zhang, and Pangu grew by one zhang. This continued for eighteen thousand years, with the heavens reaching great heights, the earth reaching great depths, and Pangu growing immensely."

In another work by Xu Zheng titled "Records of the Five Elements' Annual Cycles," there is a more detailed description of the creation following Pangu's separation of heaven and earth. "Initially, Pangu was born, and as he was about to die, his body transformed. His qi became the wind and clouds, his voice became thunder, his left eye became the sun, and his right eye became the moon. His limbs and organs formed the four poles and five sacred mountains, his blood became rivers and lakes, his tendons and veins became geographical features, his muscles became fields and soils, his hair and beard became stars and trees, his teeth and bones turned into gold and stones, his essence and marrow became pearls and jewels, and his sweat became rain showers. The insects on his body, influenced by the wind, transformed into the common people. Unlike Greek and Hebrew mythology, the creation of the natural world in Chinese mythology is achieved through the sacrifice of the divine body by Pangu. Pangu transformed the tangible form of the divine into the intangible essence of nature. Despite creating the world, Pangu is ultimately consumed and transformed by it, reflecting the relative dominion of natural order over gods in Chinese mythology. Furthermore, when analyzing Pangu's

physical features, his facial features, limbs, and bodily fluids resemble those of humans. This aspect differs from the gods in Greek mythology and the Bible, who possess anthropomorphic characteristics.

In Chinese mythology, Pangu separated heaven and earth and created the world, while Nuwa molded humans from clay. According to Ying Shao's "General Meaning of Customs," it is recorded that "In the beginning, when heaven and earth were opened, there were no people. Nuwa kneaded yellow clay to make humans, but the task was too arduous for her, so she pulled out a cord into the mud and lifted it up to create humans." From this, we can discern that gods are not entirely inaccessible; they, like Nuwa, also have limitations akin to humans. This illustrates the characteristic of anthropomorphism in ancient Chinese mythology, where gods resemble humans but are not omnipotent like the "superhuman" gods of ancient Greek mythology. This reflects the absolute worship of nature, where gods and humans alike are subject to the rule of the natural world.

### 3. Division of Creation Labor and Hierarchical Classification

The classification of cosmogonic tasks and the hierarchy of human-divine and human-human order also differ between mainstream mythologies of the East and West.

In ancient Greek mythology, the cosmogonic task was collectively accomplished by the primordial Titans. The first generation of Greek gods manifested the natural world from their own essences. Chaos gave rise to the abyss, birthing Earth, Tartarus, Darkness, Eros, and Night. Gaia, the Earth Mother, within her essence, bore Sky, Ocean, and Mountains, and together with Uranus, the Sky god, created the twelve Titans representing the initial cosmic affairs. The formation of the natural world was thus a collective endeavor of the Greek gods, and people bestowed upon them various titles based on their roles in creation. This indicates a certain division of labor and collective consciousness among the humans living in ancient Greece. In the second generation of Titans, Prometheus created humans. The creator of humanity was distinct from the creators of the cosmos, and the birth of humans temporally diverged from the cosmogony. The birth of nature and the birth of humans were disjointed in Greek mythology, with nature existing absolutely prior to humans. Although the Greek gods have a "superhuman" aspect and wield relative control over the natural world, the birth of nature precedes that of mortals. This hierarchy establishes a sequence of superhuman-nature-mortal dominance in the nature worship dominated by hero worship, wherein absolute humans still control natural phenomena, and relative humans obey the intentions of the absolute and the laws of nature.

In the Bible, however, God is the ultimate and sole creator. The world is not the creation of multiple gods but of one deity. The division of labor and collective consciousness observed in Greek mythology are here unified under the one Holy Spirit. This reflects the contrast between the nomadic culture represented by the Mesopotamian civilizations and the maritime culture of ancient Greece. From the differences in cosmogonic mythology, it appears that Hebrew civilization emphasizes labor and centralized power more. In primitive societies, social division of labor often leads to differentiation in contributions. Centralization of social labor, or the concentration of merit due to labor differentiation, tends to result in the centralization of power. Compared to maritime

civilizations, the Mesopotamian civilizations of the same period were more advanced and earlier entered into centralized authoritarian societies. This may explain why contributions in the Bible are concentrated in the deity. Similar to Greek mythology, the birth of nature precedes that of humans in the Bible. However, the relationship between the two is different from the discontinuity seen in Greek mythology. Firstly, God as the sole creator becomes the absolute link between nature and humanity. God not only created nature but also created humans. This logical continuity emphasizes the naturalness of humans, depicting them as organic elements within the natural system. Furthermore, the chronological order of nature and humanity constitutes their relative relationship in the Bible, where nature precedes human existence. The narrowing of the absolute gap between humans and nature integrates humans into and as part of nature. Thus, the Genesis of the Bible forms a dualistic opposition between God and humans. God governs nature, including humans, and humans must absolutely obey the divine. However, unlike the "superhuman" image of the Greek gods, the God depicted in the Bible is an independent absolute object distinct from humans. The relationship between object and subject is constantly emphasized, thus minimizing the existence of nature between the subject and object. Nature becomes an absolute object and evidence validating the existence of the absolute object.

In Chinese mythology, the creator and the creator of humanity are once again separate entities. Pangu created all things, while Nuwa molded the populace. Unlike Greek mythology where multiple gods created nature, mainstream Chinese mythology is still monotheistic in creation. The legend of Pangu separating heaven and earth has been mentioned above. Similar to God in Genesis, Pangu is the sole and ultimate creator. He shaped the framework of the entire world and the cradle of human birth with his own essence. Although Pangu also possesses the essence of gods birthing nature from their own essence as in Greek mythology, mainstream Chinese mythology differs from the latter. In mainstream Chinese mythology, Pangu's creation involved a "sacrifice of his own essence" to achieve monotheistic creation. This essence sacrifice differs from the transformation of the gods in Greek mythology, which still retained their "human form". Pangu's essence sacrifice is more complete and poignant. It is a transformation of essence, gaining objective consciousness at the cost of losing personal consciousness, rather than a coexistence of two states. In other words, Pangu abandoned his present state to attain eternal life. Additionally, the myth of Pangu's creation of heaven and earth also carries a monotheistic hue as seen in Genesis. However, unlike in Genesis where God is the world's creator, Pangu's descendant, Nuwa, is the creator of humanity. Consequently, mainstream Chinese mythology separates the continuity between world creation and human creation, while still preserving the singularity and ultimacy of the deity during the creation of the natural world. Chinese mythology thus emphasizes the relative relationship between nature and gods through the division of labor in creation, highlighting the dominance and agency between the natural object and the divine subject, achieving a compromise between Greek polytheism and Hebrew monotheism. Regarding the myth of human creation, Chinese mythology introduces a hierarchy among "ordinary people" that is not mentioned in Greek mythology or the Bible. According to the Records of Customs and Meanings by Ying Shao, it is recorded that "It is said that

when heaven and earth were first opened, there were no people. Nuwa kneaded yellow earth to make people, but the task was too great for her to accomplish alone, so she took ropes to shape figures out of mud. Therefore, those of wealth and nobility were formed from yellow earth, while those who were poor and humble were shaped from mud." Mr. Yuan Ke analyzed that this passage only mentions "Nuwa kneading yellow earth to make people," and the subsequent differentiation between those formed from yellow earth and those shaped from mud is actually a social stratification imposed by later ruling classes. However, this stratification still reflects the value orientation of ancient China and is not without historical basis. The transmission of mythology itself is a selection of values, and the analysis of Greek mythology and biblical creation that we are currently undertaking also has ideological roots. Therefore, when faced with the record of Nuwa creating different social classes among people, we also need to analyze it with a historical perspective. From the hierarchy described in Chinese mythology regarding Nuwa's creation of people, Chinese civilization evolved earlier in terms of societal organization and stratification compared to Greek and Mesopotamian civilizations. In the relationship between humans and gods, nature is endowed with absolute dominion, merging with the incarnations of gods and dominating their existence. Humans, in the relationship with gods, occupy a position of relative obedience. Furthermore, distinctions of status among "ordinary people" have emerged.

#### 4. Spiritual Content

In Western mainstream mythology, whether it is Greek mythology or the Bible, both showcase the vast systems of the human world since creation. Just from the creation narrative, Western mythology provides background information and a logical framework for subsequent narratives. In ancient Greek mythology, the lineage of the first generation of creator gods persists alongside the birth and proliferation of humanity. Post-creation, the human heroes born of gods intertwine history with mythology, such as in events like the Trojan War. Thus, a logical system rooted in origin issues is constructed for human society. The Bible, by recounting the lineage of humans Adam and Eve, depicts the survival of successive generations and their covenant with God, transforming mythical narratives into the contemporary history of the Israelites. From the expulsion of humans from Eden in Genesis, the Bible continually narrates around human sin and the goodness of God. Starting with "sin," it emphasizes the religious inevitability of human self-redemption. Unlike Greek mythology, the Bible incessantly emphasizes the "covenant" between humans and God. Under Hebrew mythology, there exists a logic: the forgiveness of Israelites by God, and the development of Israelites to the present, stem from their covenant with God. This makes the Bible, compared to Greek mythology, reflect the absolute dominion of nature over human destiny, bound by the "covenant spirit," permeating with the optimism of the twists and turns of human fate.

Additionally, the dualistic structure of good and evil constructed by Western mythology is also extremely similar in Greek mythology and the Bible. In Greek mythology, the dualism of good and evil exists both in the gods and among mortals. However, concerning creation, the dualism of good and evil is more apparent among the gods. This dualism is an organized and organic duality, where gods possess both good and evil aspects simultaneously. Take Prometheus, for

instance, who brought fire to humanity out of goodwill. However, this act violated Zeus's laws and revealed the inherent evil in humanity. From the perspective of beneficiaries, Prometheus's act was undoubtedly benevolent. But from the viewpoint of the gods, Prometheus's act of bringing fire to humanity was subversive to the established order and incited rebellion. In the Bible, the dualism of good and evil is amplified, becoming the ultimate goodness of God versus the utmost evil of humans. God continuously forgives humanity for their evil deeds, exhorting them to strive towards goodness, yet humans repeatedly commit wrongdoings after each forgiveness. For example, Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden, the Great Flood, Joseph's deceit in claiming God's blessing, and the Israelites' idolatry at Mount Sinai.

Conversely, in mainstream Chinese traditional mythology, it neither possesses the systematic nature of Western mythology nor overly emphasizes the value system of good versus evil dualism. Mr. Yuan Ke pointed out that the documentary materials of Chinese mythology, mainly of the Han ethnic group, exhibit two notable characteristics. One is called "zero," meaning fragmentary pieces: all recorded mythologies are relatively incomplete, consisting mostly of scattered fragments. Another is called "dispersion," meaning scattered or disorderly. According to Mr. Yuan's viewpoint, the reasons for this are firstly due to the complex composition of China's ethnic groups, which entails a rich cultural hue, and secondly, due to China's vast territory, where myths from various cultures blend into mainstream mythology, resulting in its fragmentation. This is why Western mythology, especially Greek mythology, lacks this characteristic of fragmentation. As for the value system of the dualism of good and evil, it is not addressed in the mainstream creation myths of China. For instance, regarding the record of the Great Flood, which is the most universally significant type of mythology in the world's mythologies, both Eastern and Western mainstream mythologies mention it. In Western mythology, the Great Flood is a divine punishment caused by human wickedness. However, in mainstream Chinese mythology, the catastrophic flood is a natural disaster unrelated to sin. Nonetheless, this does not imply that Chinese traditional mythology does not involve the dualism of sin and evil. For example, the battle of Yan Emperor and Huang Emperor against Chi You, the military prowess of Guan Yu, or the calamitous beauty Daji. However, in mainstream Chinese creation mythology, the absolute opposition of ultimate good and evil and the dualistic opposition of good and evil are absent, yielding to the natural logic represented by objectivity.

From ancient Greek mythology to the Bible, and further to

Chinese mythology, there are certain similarities in the records concerning creation and the creation of humanity. This not only reflects the attention different ethnicities pay to fundamental questions but also embodies distinct cultural characteristics. In the beginning of the world, all was chaos, from which later emerged heaven, earth, and all things. Moreover, the accounts of "humans" in these three mythologies all originate at the end of creation and have direct connections with the earth. However, their differences are also apparent.

These three different mythologies demonstrate a transition from relative hero worship to absolute nature worship, which correlates with the geographical transition from maritime civilization (ancient Greece) to nomadic civilization (Hebrew) and agricultural civilization (ancient China). Secondly, regarding the division of labor and hierarchical classifications in creation, ancient Greek mythology emphasizes a three-tier order of superhumans-nature-humans, the Bible emphasizes the dichotomy between humans and gods, while mainstream Chinese mythology, while emphasizing the opposition between nature and humans, also delineates distinctions of status among ordinary people. Finally, from a macro perspective observing the spiritual characteristics embodied in creation myths of the East and West, we find that Western mythology possesses dualistic and systematic traits, while mainstream Chinese mythology exhibits characteristics of fragmentation and naturalization.

## References

- [1] Cogliano, Dan. The King James version of the Holy Bible. [www.davince.com/bible](http://www.davince.com/bible), 2004.
- [2] Li, Jingqi. "Examining Differences in National Character between Chinese and Western Cultures through Flood Mythology." *Tianjin University Journal (Social Sciences Edition)*, vol. 2, 2013, pp. 188-191.
- [3] Luo, Junjun, and Li, Jieqiong. "Characteristics and Evolution of Chinese Creation Mythology." *Journal of Hunan University (Social Sciences Edition)*, vol. 5, 2020, pp. 91-101.
- [4] Schwab, Gustav (Author), Cao, Naiyun (Translator). "Greek Classical Mythology." Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2001.
- [5] Song, Jiao, and Li, Haifeng. "Analysis of Creation Mythologies in Ancient Babylonian and Jewish Cultures." *Religious Studies*, vol. 3, 2018, pp. 238-244.
- [6] Wang, Lei. "Appreciating New Editions of Greek and Roman Mythology." Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2014.
- [7] Yuan, Ke. "An Introduction to Chinese Mythology." Beijing: Houlai Publishing Consultancy Co., Ltd., 2018.