

The Origin and Evolution of Ancient Myths in China and Greece: From a Perspective of Marxist

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Abstract: This study explores the origins and evolution of ancient myths in China and ancient Greece, adopting a Marxist perspective, as well as their relationship with modes of production. The findings indicate that ancient myths were deeply influenced by geographical environments, social structures, and material production methods, exhibiting diverse forms and cultural connotations. Chinese myths evolved from totem worship to the myth of the emperors, and eventually to social ethics, reflecting the stability of agricultural civilization and the transformation of myths into tools of governance. In contrast, ancient Greek myths embody the adventurous spirit of maritime civilizations and the historical shifts in religious beliefs. Through a comparative analysis of myths, this study reveals how myths, as tools of ideology, were produced, transmitted, and transformed across different social formations.

Keywords: Myth, Ancient Myths, Marxism, Modes of Production, Myth Comparison.

1. Introduction

Since ancient times, myths have played an important role in various nations and societies by conveying values and regulating behavior. In ancient times, myths often took the form of stories about deities, heroes, the origins of the universe, and natural phenomena. Examples include Pangu creating the world and Nüwa creating humans in ancient Chinese mythology, the tales of Zeus and the gods of Mount Olympus in Greek mythology, and the legends of Odin and Thor in Norse mythology. In modern contexts, myths are increasingly seen as ideological constructs embedded in popular culture. French theorist Roland Barthes, in *Mythologies* [1], analyzed everyday symbols and uncovered the ideological narratives behind them, particularly those shaped by the bourgeoisie. He argued that myths serve to naturalize and legitimize social norms and power structures, often transforming class-based practices into universal values that obscure their origins in material conditions. For example, he examined how seemingly personal rituals, such as grand bourgeois weddings, reflect and reinforce class ideologies by embedding them into collective societal imagination.

Building upon Marx's tradition of ideological critique, Barthes viewed myth as a subtle tool for maintaining the dominant ideology. Marx himself, in his critique of ideology, emphasized how the ruling class not only controls material production but also dominates the production of ideas, culture, and ideology [2]. According to Marx, this dominance enables the ruling class to reinforce its power and naturalize existing social relations through various forms of mental production, such as religion, literature, art, and myths.

Furthermore, Marx explored the dynamic relationship between myth and human productivity, noting that myths arise from humanity's attempt to understand and master natural and social forces. As societies develop and gain actual control over these forces through advancements in material production, the role of myths evolves or diminishes. For instance, different historical stages with their distinct material production methods and social structures gave rise to corresponding myths.

Although Marx highlighted the close relationship between

myths and the material conditions of specific historical contexts, there is still limited research on how myths change as production relations evolve over time. This study aims to address this gap by employing a Marxist perspective to examine the connection between myths and material production at different historical stages. It also investigates the pathways and driving forces behind the transformation of myths in relation to shifting production relations. Ultimately, this research seeks to uncover the essence of myths as ideological tools and to deepen our understanding of how myths interact with specific modes of production, thereby contributing to the further development of Marxist views on mythology.

2. The Impact of Geographic Environment on Modes of Production

In *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel identified three key geographic foundations for historical development: highlands, river plains, and coastal regions [3]. He argued that river plains were particularly conducive to the development of civilization, often serving as its cradle. He further emphasized that the vastness of the sea not only inspires humans to think beyond their limitations but also fosters courage and ambition. By navigating the sea, people break free from the constraints of the land and pursue opportunities for exploration, conquest, and trade. In his view, the sea represents openness and infinite potential, while plains confine people to the soil, fostering dependency and limiting their ability to transcend their environment. Hegel also observed that coastal regions encourage human interaction and exchange, facilitating the leap from national history to global history. In contrast, he believed that societies located in river plains, such as ancient China, lacked an active relationship with the sea and thus remained more rooted in stability and tradition. According to his analysis, China's political and social development was shaped by its interaction with the land rather than the sea, which limited its potential for maritime exploration and external engagement.

In essence, geographic environments not only shape modes

of living and production but also influence the cultural characteristics of a society. For Hegel, the sea provided people with opportunities to challenge their boundaries and engage with the world, enabling a transition from regional to global interactions. In contrast, the dependency on land in plains-based societies created a focus on stability and internal cohesion. This geographic diversity deeply influenced modes of production, which in turn shaped the core of mythological narratives. For example, the maritime civilization of ancient Greece and the agrarian civilization of China's Central Plains each developed distinct mythological systems. Greek mythology, rooted in maritime adventures and trade, embodies the openness and diversity of a seafaring society. Conversely, myths from the Central Plains reflect the values of agricultural production and land worship, emphasizing societal stability and order.

Greek mythology, in particular, was closely tied to the productive forces and production relations of its time, which were shaped by its unique geographic environment [4]. The rugged terrain, abundance of islands, and rich marine resources of the Aegean Sea fostered a reliance on fishing and maritime trade. Fishing provided not only food but also cultivated a spirit of adventure and resilience, essential for navigating the unpredictable sea. Maritime trade transformed Greece into a cultural and commercial hub, contributing to the development of ideas such as democracy, equality, and fairness. Mythological figures like Poseidon, the god of the sea, symbolized both the power and unpredictability of the maritime environment. Stories like Odysseus' seafaring adventures in *The Odyssey* illustrate the Greeks' dependence on and reverence for the sea.

In contrast, China's Central Plains, characterized by flat terrain and fertile soil, supported the development of an agrarian civilization. Agriculture became the economic foundation of the region, with farming practices relying heavily on the land and seasonal cycles. This dependence on agriculture fostered a focus on familial and collective cooperation, which was vital for maintaining productivity and social stability. Myths from this region, such as those of Da Yu controlling the floods, Hou Yi shooting the suns, and Shennong tasting herbs, reflect agricultural themes and a deep reverence for land, seasons, and natural resources. The geographic environment also facilitated centralized governance and the formation of unified political structures, which further influenced the transmission and systematization of myths in Chinese culture.

Following Hegel's ideas, Marx also recognized myths as expressions of societal consciousness in specific historical contexts. However, Marx critiqued Hegel's idealism, arguing that myths should be understood within the material and social conditions of their time. Marx emphasized that myths initially arose as imaginative responses to natural forces but later incorporated social attributes as society evolved [5]. These mythical figures came to represent historical forces, reflecting the dynamics of material production and social relationships. Building on this perspective, the next section will explore how myths, at different historical stages, became tools for the ruling class to produce and maintain ideological control, as well as how they served the material needs of their respective societies.

3. The Evolution of Ancient Chinese Myths

Ancient Chinese myths are often closely tied to social organization and social ethics. In different societal contexts, myths exhibited varying forms and content, reflecting the social structure and power relations of their time. Totem worship and heroic myths were typically associated with tribal forms of organization. Myths about democratic emperors were directly connected to the centralized organization of unified states, emphasizing that the essence of centralized governance was to address the survival needs of the people. Myths about divine birth, on the other hand, reflected hereditary systems and the bloodline inheritance of rulers, highlighting the connection between kings and deities to maintain the legitimacy of feudal rule. Folk myths often conveyed ethical constraints and expectations imposed by the ruling class on the people, including values such as filial piety, justice, and courage.

In primitive tribal societies, where productivity was extremely low, people had to rely on cooperation and collective labor to meet basic survival needs. In such contexts, religion and myths served as essential tools for maintaining social production relations and stability. They explained natural phenomena, guided behavioral norms, and strengthened tribal cohesion. Myths related to totem worship were deeply tied to the clan-based organization of tribal societies and often expressed reverence for ancestors and nature. These clan beliefs not only provided a sense of identity but also enhanced group cohesion during military endeavors, thereby improving the survival prospects of clans or tribes. For instance, Marx noted that clans could serve as military units, as demonstrated in Homer's *Iliad*, where Nestor advised Agamemnon to organize the army based on tribes and clans, so they could support one another. According to Chinese scholar Wen Yiduo [6], the Chinese dragon—an important cultural symbol—originated as a totem, existing only in the mythical and symbolic realm rather than in the biological world. He argued that the dragon was a composite of various totems, created as tribes with different totemic symbols merged. For example, the totem of a snake might have initially been a standalone figure. As a snake-worshipping tribe absorbed other tribes, the snake figure acquired additional features, such as the legs of a beast, the head of a horse, the tail of a fish, the horns of a deer, the claws of a dog, and scales. Over time, this composite creature became the dragon. In short, as the ancient Huaxia clans continuously defeated other tribes, the totems of these defeated tribes gradually merged with the snake totem of the dominant Huaxia tribe, eventually forming the dragon totem. Chinese mythology fused reverence for nature with ancestral worship through totems. Similarly, the snake totem of the Ba people is the origin of the shared Chinese dragon totem.

Regarding the emergence of the state, Marx suggested that the state arises as a product of a specific stage of social development. It reflects the acknowledgment of irreconcilable contradictions and opposing interests within society. To prevent these conflicts from destroying society entirely, a force emerges that appears to stand above society, mediating and maintaining order. This force is the state. After the establishment of states, myths related to emperors were often historicized [7]. Figures such as the Yellow Emperor, Yao, Shun, and Yu the Great were not only celebrated in mythology but also incorporated into historical records as

actual historical figures. The stories and deeds of these mythical emperors were portrayed as the accomplishments of founding rulers, emphasizing their governance, moral excellence, and contributions to the state. Early myths of emperors, such as those about Yu the Great controlling floods and Hou Yi shooting down suns, can be seen as democratic emperor myths because they focus on addressing the survival needs of the people. These stories reflect ancient Chinese concerns about natural disasters and survival issues. The establishment of early centralized regimes was often driven by the need to resolve such survival challenges, linking these myths to the emergence of centralized governance. Some of these myths, like the story of Yu the Great, also involve themes of political succession and have been referred to as abdication myths. However, scholars have noted that these abdication myths, such as those found in the Bamboo Annals, often reflect Confucian ideals rather than historical reality. While these myths may not represent actual historical events, they contributed to the formation and development of a shared national identity among the Chinese people.

As society evolved and political systems transitioned from abdication to hereditary rule, myths about democratic emperors gradually disappeared, while myths about divine birth became more prevalent. Divine birth myths often describe supernatural events at a ruler's birth or the mystical experiences of their mothers during pregnancy. These myths emphasize the divine mandate of rulers, linking their legitimacy to heavenly will. By doing so, such myths suggested a special relationship between rulers and the divine, reinforcing their authority and legitimacy [8]. These narratives also provided a sacred basis for the hierarchical order and hereditary succession system in feudal society. For example, Yu (2019), in her research on divine birth myths in Records of the Grand Historian, observed that early divine birth myths, such as those of Shang and Zhou dynastic founders, retained traces of totemic beliefs [8]. However, later myths, such as those surrounding Emperor Gaozu of Han, emphasized their political utility, reinforcing the absolute authority of feudal rulers [9]. By portraying themselves as chosen by heaven, rulers used these myths to legitimize their rule. The transition from democratic emperor myths to divine birth myths in official histories reflects the changes in political power and social structures throughout Chinese history.

In addition to official myths about emperors, Chinese mythology also includes a significant body of folk myths. These folk myths often carried ethical and moral guidelines, serving to regulate behavior and promote harmonious social relationships. For instance, the myth of the Cowherd and Weaver Girl evolved and was reinterpreted over time to align with changing social values and ethics. In the pre-Qin period, this myth did not explicitly convey themes of agricultural faith or filial piety. Instead, it was primarily seen as a story about love and the separation between mortals and celestial beings. However, as society developed, particularly during the Han dynasty, the myth was imbued with greater social and moral significance. It came to symbolize the ideal relationship between heaven and humanity and emphasized the importance of filial piety. This transformation linked ancient myths to the social production relationships, modes of production, and moral values of their time. Emperor Wu of Han played an important role in this process by promoting filial piety as a central value of Han society. His emphasis on filial piety reinforced its expression in myths like that of the

Cowherd and Weaver Girl, further embedding these values into the collective consciousness of Chinese culture.

4. The Evolution of Ancient Greek Myths

Ancient Greek mythology originated as the spiritual product of Greece's primitive clan society and is considered the earliest form of European literature. Emerging around the 8th century BCE, it was shaped by the oral traditions of ancient Greek inhabitants and by influences from myths transmitted to Greece from other cultures. Over time, these myths were consolidated and recorded in works such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Hesiod's *Theogony*, as well as in Greek poetry, drama, history, and philosophy. These foundational texts not only preserved the rich mythological traditions of the Greeks but also provided a framework for understanding their worldview. Central to Greek mythology was the belief in a world that began in chaos, from which emerged Gaia (Mother Earth), Tartarus (the Underworld), and Eros (Love). Myths such as the Titanomachy—where Zeus and the Olympian gods defeated the Titans to establish their supremacy—reflected both the struggle for order and the projection of human-like traits onto divine figures. Similarly, myths like Prometheus creating humans and defying Zeus by stealing fire symbolized humanity's aspirations and the consequences of challenging divine authority.

The polytheistic nature of Greek mythology mirrored the decentralized political structure of ancient Greece, which was composed of numerous independent city-states [10]. Each city-state had its own guardian deity and mythological traditions, linking mythology closely to local identity and governance. For example, Athena, the patron goddess of Athens, symbolized wisdom and warfare, reflecting the city-state's political and military culture. This close association between mythology and city-states created an imagined community, strengthening unity within the city-state and across the broader Greek world. Greek mythology thus not only provided religious foundations but also reinforced a sense of shared cultural identity and cohesion among its people.

The societal structure of ancient Greece, built on slavery, further shaped its mythology. Myths often depicted themes of war and conquest, reflecting the prevalence of conflict in Greek society and the role of territorial expansion in sustaining the economy [11]. These conflicts were a significant source of slaves, who became integral to the productive forces of Greek society. Myths like Prometheus stealing fire for humanity can also be interpreted as symbolic reflections of societal hierarchies, with gods representing ruling elites and humans symbolizing subjugated classes. Such narratives reinforced existing power structures, portraying the domination of the ruling class as natural and legitimate, much as the societal hierarchy placed slaves at the bottom, subservient to free citizens.

The influence of Greek mythology extended far beyond its borders, particularly through its interactions with ancient Rome. A long history of cultural exchange and trade in the Mediterranean region facilitated mutual influence between Greek and Roman civilizations. Greek scholars, philosophers, and artists were often invited to Rome, enriching Roman intellectual and cultural life. While Rome's military campaigns led to the conquest of Greece, the Romans did not eradicate Greek culture. Instead, they absorbed and adapted it,

incorporating Greek art, literature, philosophy, and religious traditions into their own. This cultural fusion significantly shaped Roman civilization, with Greek deities reinterpreted and integrated into Roman mythology. For instance, Zeus became Jupiter, Hera became Juno, and other gods underwent similar transformations to align with Roman values and identity.

As Greek and Roman mythology served the narratives of rulers and conquests, the rise of Christianity marked a dramatic shift toward a mythology centered on the suffering and redemption of the oppressed. In Christian tradition, stories such as the Israelites' liberation from slavery in Egypt and their wandering in the wilderness highlighted themes of salvation, resilience, and faith. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, central to Christian belief, symbolized hope and redemption in the face of adversity. Christianity initially emerged on the margins of Roman society, with early Christians often facing persecution. However, internal conflicts within the Roman Empire created opportunities for Christianity to expand. By the time of Emperor Constantine, Christianity had gained significant traction, providing spiritual solace to those struggling with war, instability, and poverty. Christianity's eventual establishment as the state religion of the Roman Empire marked a profound transformation in the cultural and ideological landscape. By 392 CE, Christianity had become the Empire's official religion, displacing the polytheistic traditions of Greece and Rome [12]. As Marx observed, religion reflects the external forces dominating human life, evolving alongside societal changes. In its early stages, religion personified natural forces as deities, but over time, these forces were consolidated into a single omnipotent deity, representing humanity in abstract form. Christianity's rise, characterized by the shift from polytheism to monotheism, reflected this evolution, offering an ideological response to the social and economic alienation of the time. However, by 395 CE, the Roman Empire's internal conflicts and external invasions led to its division into the Western Roman Empire and the Eastern Roman Empire, further splintering Christianity into Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy.

The cultural and intellectual revival of the Renaissance, spanning the 14th to 16th centuries, marked yet another pivotal moment in the evolution of European thought. Originating in Italy and spreading across Europe, the Renaissance rediscovered and revived the classical art, literature, and philosophy of ancient Greece and Rome. During the so-called "Dark Ages" of the medieval period, much of this classical heritage had been forgotten in Europe, though it was preserved and advanced in the Arab world during the Abbasid Caliphate. Arab scholars, through the "Translation Movement," preserved and translated classical Greek texts, reintroducing them to Europe via Spain and Sicily. This transmission of knowledge played a crucial role in sparking the Renaissance.

The Renaissance celebrated human potential and championed individualism, secularism, and reason. It emphasized earthly life and scientific inquiry, breaking away from the constraints of medieval scholasticism. As classical culture was revitalized, myths from ancient Greece and Rome gained new relevance, influencing art, literature, and philosophy. At the same time, the Renaissance sowed the seeds for modernity by challenging traditional power structures, including the dominance of the Church.

From a Marxist perspective, the evolution of myths reflects

the dynamic interplay between material production and ideology. Historical materialism posits that changes in productive forces drive societal transformations. In each historical period, the ruling class not only controls material production but also dominates ideological production, using myths, religion, and art to legitimize its power. However, as productive forces develop, contradictions emerge between outdated production relations and societal needs, leading to social revolutions. New myths and ideologies arise to reinforce the newly established order, illustrating the co-evolution of mythology and material conditions.

5. Discussion

Examining the evolution of Chinese and Greek myths reveals distinct trajectories that reflect the profound influence of geographic environments on the two civilizations. The Central Plains civilization of China, heavily dependent on agriculture, emphasized stability in its culture. Consequently, the evolution of Chinese myths consistently served to uphold the interests of rulers. In contrast, the maritime civilization of Greece valued adventure, militarism, and profit, characteristics that infused its myths with themes of conflict and confrontation. This cultural ethos often plunged Greek civilization into conflicts between states and nations, even leading to shifts in belief systems.

Early Chinese myths originated from tribal totem worship, which reflected a reverence for natural phenomena and animals. For instance, the dragon and phoenix were products of early totemic worship. With the formation of states, myths gradually became tools for legitimizing the rule of the governing class. Dynasties such as the Xia, Shang, and Zhou used myths to emphasize the divine nature and legitimacy of their rulers. The Zhou Dynasty's "Mandate of Heaven" theory, for example, asserted that the emperor was chosen by heaven, endowing him with sacred authority. As society progressed, particularly with the rise of Confucianism, myths began to incorporate and transmit social ethics and moral values. Many myths were used to teach virtues such as filial piety, benevolence, and loyalty. It is evident that Chinese myths evolved from tribal totem worship to state-centered myths, such as democratic emperor myths and divine birth myths, and eventually to folk myths promoting social ethics. These myths consistently functioned as tools for maintaining the legitimacy of the ruling class and reinforcing social order.

In contrast, the evolution of Greek myths was marked by conflicts between states and nations. For example, the myth of the Trojan War is not merely a heroic tale but also reflects the conflicts and alliances among Greek city-states. Greek and Roman myths later came into conflict with Christianity, representing a struggle between the beliefs of the ruling class and those of the oppressed. The replacement of polytheism with monotheism in Greek-Roman civilization exemplifies this clash of faiths. Early Christians in the Roman Empire often faced persecution, but as Christianity became the state religion, the traditional mythological system was gradually replaced by Christian theology.

Thus, ancient myths were shaped by geographic environments, social structures, and modes of production, resulting in diverse forms and expressions. Chinese myths evolved from tribal totem worship to state-centered emperor myths, reflecting changes in the organization of Chinese society. Greek myths, on the other hand, evolved through the cultural exchanges and conflicts of the Mediterranean region, moving from the polytheistic traditions of Greece and Rome

to the establishment of Christian monotheism.

6. Conclusion

Through the lens of Marxist historical materialism, this study reveals that the formation and evolution of ancient myths in China and Greece were deeply influenced by geographic environments, modes of production, and social organization. Chinese myths evolved alongside the development of productive forces, transitioning from tribal totem worship to state-centered emperor myths and finally to folk myths reflecting social ethics. This trajectory highlights the role of myths in reinforcing social order and legitimizing the rule of the governing class.

Greek myths, by contrast, evolved amid the cultural exchanges and conflicts of the Mediterranean region. From a rich polytheistic tradition to the rise of Christianity and the establishment of monotheism, the trajectory of Greek myths reflects the struggles between social classes and civilizations.

As ideological tools, myths interact with material production and production relations, illustrating the co-evolution of myths and socio-economic structures. This study's dynamic analysis of myths not only deepens the understanding of Marxist perspectives on mythology but also offers new insights into the cultural and ideological functions of ancient societies.

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