



Exploring the Similarities and Differences in Chinese and Western Ethical Values Through Ancient Mythology

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Abstract

Ethical values are the moral principles that guide individual and societal behavior, deeply rooted in cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and historical experiences. These values shape how communities perceive virtues such as justice, courage, and responsibility. Mythology has served as a profound cultural mirror, reflecting the ethical ideals and philosophical foundations of different civilizations. Myths are not merely ancient stories but encapsulate the collective ethos of a culture, transmitting core values across generations. Chinese and Greco-Roman mythology, while both emphasizing virtuous conduct, reveal striking contrasts in their ethical priorities. Chinese myths often highlight the importance of collective harmony, self-sacrifice, and alignment with cosmic order, influencing Confucian and Taoist philosophies that prioritize societal balance. In contrast, Greco-Roman myths celebrate individual heroism, personal glory, and moral autonomy, also influencing the idea of humanism and individualism in Western thought. This paper argues that while both Chinese and Western mythologies promote ethical behavior, their narratives diverge in fundamental ways: Chinese myths underscore collective welfare and harmony, whereas Western myths focus on individual agency and heroic achievement. These differences are deeply rooted in different mythologies. Chinese mythology influences Confucian thought like collectivism, while Western mythology influences the humanistic spirit that followed. By examining key mythological narratives, this paper will demonstrate how these distinct ethical frameworks manifest themselves and why they remain culturally significant today.

Keywords

Chinese mythology; Greco-Roman mythology; Ethical values

1. Conceptual Framework

In China's philosophical tradition, the "Five Relationships" form the bedrock of social ethics, emphasizing duty, hierarchy, and mutual obligation as pathways to collective stability. This Confucian framework—ruler-subject, parent-child, husband-wife, elder-younger, and friend-friend—prioritizes role-based morality over individual autonomy. As China Daily has noted in cultural commentaries, this system historically reinforced societal cohesion during periods of transformation, from imperial dynasties to modern governance (Confucius, 1997). In contrast, ancient Greece's Cardinal Virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, courage) focused on personal cultivation as the foundation of civic life. Where Chinese thought asks, "How do I fulfill my position?" Greek philosophy inquires, "How do I perfect myself?" This distinction remains relevant today: China's social policies often emphasize collective

responsibility (e.g., family-based eldercare), while Western systems lean toward individual rights-based approaches.

The Taoist principle of *WuWei*, often translated as “non-action,” advocates for minimal interference in natural and social systems—a concept that resonates in China’s adaptive governance model. As observed in China’s economic reforms, strategic restraint in certain sectors allows organic growth (e.g., rural entrepreneurship), mirroring *wuwei*’s emphasis on indirect facilitation. Meanwhile, the Hellenic ideal of *aretē*—the competitive pursuit of excellence—manifested in Athenian democracy’s agonistic debates and Olympic contests. Yet both traditions share an undercurrent: Taoist *wuwei* requires deep attunement to context (like a skilled gardener), while Greek *aretē* demands discipline to transcend limits. As global challenges mount, this comparative lens offers insights—China’s long-term ecological civilization goals reflect *wuwei*’s patience, whereas Western tech innovation races echo *aretē*’s striving spirit.

These philosophical roots inform contemporary governance. China’s poverty alleviation campaigns, which emphasize systemic support over individual bootstrap narratives, reflect Confucian relational ethics. Meanwhile, Western leadership training often focuses on personal agency. Understanding these differences is crucial for cross-cultural dialogue, particularly in global institutions where both paradigms interact.

2. Chinese Ethical Values in Mythology

China’s ancient mythology is more than just folklore—it’s a moral compass that has guided Chinese thought for millennia. Stories like “Nüwa Mends the Sky”, “Yu the Great Tames the Floods”, and “The Foolish Old Man Moves the Mountains” aren’t just tales of heroism; they embody the ethical principles that later became central to Confucianism and Taoism. These legends highlight virtues such as self-sacrifice, self-discipline, and perseverance, which continue to influence Chinese culture today.

The Confucian concept of innate human goodness finds early mythological precedents in Chinese narratives that emphasize inherent virtue and moral potential (Lu & Zhang, 2025). For instance, “Yu the Great Tames the Floods” portrays him not as a divinely appointed savior but as a leader whose tireless labor and self-sacrifice (“passing his home thrice without entering”) reveal an innate sense of responsibility as well as self-discipline (Chao & Xu, 2015; Yang, 1994).

2.1 The Pillars of Chinese Ethical Tradition

Three main pillars are listed below, which respectively emphasize self-discipline, self-sacrifice as well and persistence. These three ideologies in myths vividly constitute the frame of the Chinese ethical tradition. “Nüwa Mends the Sky”, “Yu the Great Tames the Floods”, and “The Foolish Old Man Moves the Mountains” support each other, forming a unique Chinese moral system that still guides the way of thinking and behavioral norms of the Chinese people today.

The mythohistorical narrative of “Yu the Great Tames the Floods” (Da Yu zhishui) symbolizes China’s prioritization of collective welfare over individualism. Unlike other civilizations where the transition from primitive to class society entrenched private interests, China’s early state formation under Yu reinforced communal responsibility (Chao & Xu, 2015; Yang, 1994). His labor-intensive flood management—diverting rivers rather than damming them—required mass coordination, cementing collectivism as a cultural ideal. This ethos persisted in later societies, shaping Confucian emphasis on social harmony.

The legend of “Yu the Great Tames the Floods” is also one of China’s most famous tales of leadership. For over a decade, Yu traveled across the land, dredging rivers and redirecting floodwaters to protect the people. His commitment was so absolute that he passed by his own home three times without stopping—a powerful symbol of prioritizing public service over personal comfort. Yu’s story became a model for later Chinese rulers and scholars. It is embodied in Confucian governance, state-building principles. His self-discipline and self-sacrifice shaped Confucian thoughts. Ancient Chinese dynasties used Yu’s methods as a blueprint for water management and centralized governance. Even today, Yu is celebrated as a symbol of resilience and effective leadership, with his story taught in schools as a lesson in perseverance.

2.1.1 “Nüwa Mends the Sky”: The Ultimate Sacrifice for Harmony

The myth of “Nüwa Mends the Sky” tells of a catastrophic disaster—the collapse of the sky, leading to fires, floods, and chaos. To save humanity, the goddess Nüwa worked tirelessly, melting five-colored stones to patch the sky and using the legs of a giant turtle to stabilize the four pillars of the earth. Her selfless act restored balance between heaven and earth, symbolizing the Chinese ideal that individuals must sometimes sacrifice themselves for the greater good.

This story embodies two key philosophies. The first is self-sacrifice, where moral duty comes before personal gain. The second philosophy is harmony: her act of repairing nature aligns with the belief in living in balance with the universe (harmony between humans and nature). Nüwa's legacy endures in modern China, where collective responsibility remains a core societal value.

It is believed that in a subsequent work *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the character of Jia Baoyu was created based on "Nüwa Mends the Sky". It becomes the soul of Jia Baoyu's life. Jia Baoyu's birth with jade is a symbol of the archetype of the mythological spirit of his origin Nüwa Mending the Sky (Pu & Yang, 2025).

2.1.2 "The Foolish Old Man Moves the Mountains": Persistence Moves Mountains

The fable of "The Foolish Old Man Moves the Mountains" is a classic lesson in determination (Du, 2019). When an old man's path was blocked by two massive mountains, he decided to move the mountains away with his family. Despite ridicule from neighbors, he insisted that future generations would continue the work until the mountains were removed. His unwavering spirit moved the gods, who finally moved away the mountains for him. The old man's stubbornness reflects the Chinese spirit "perseverance"—success comes to those who never give up. "The Foolish Old Man Moves the Mountains" remains a cultural touchstone in China and is often cited to encourage persistence in the face of difficulties and challenges.

2.2 Philosophical Underpinnings

The Chinese mythologies "Nüwa Mends the Sky", "Yu the Great Tames the Floods", and "The Foolish Old Man Moves the Mountains" collectively embody the philosophical foundations that shaped China's ethical tradition. These narratives demonstrate how mythological archetypes evolved into systematic philosophies, particularly influencing Confucianism and Taoism through their emphasis on moral perfection, social responsibility, and cosmic harmony.

At the core of these stories lies the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation. Yu the Great's thrice-passing his home without entering exemplifies the Confucian virtue of self-discipline. His actions established a paradigm for public service that would later be codified in Confucian texts as the "junzi" ideal, where personal desires are subordinated to societal welfare. Similarly, the Foolish Old Man's determination and persistence can later be seen in the Confucian principle of unyielding perseverance that transforms moral intention into action. These narratives collectively formed an ethical framework where individual behavior was measured against its contribution to society.

The Taoist philosophical tradition draws equally profound lessons from these myths. Nüwa's cosmic repair work embodies the Taoist concept of "wuwei"—not as passivity, but as harmonious intervention that restores natural balance. Her sacrifice illustrates the Taoist ideal of aligning human action with cosmic patterns, a principle later articulated in the *Daodejing's* teaching of harmony between heaven and humanity. The Foolish Old Man's story similarly contains Taoist wisdom, showing how persistent human effort can evoke nature's cooperation when aligned with its rhythms.

These mythological foundations reveal a unique synthesis in Chinese thought. Where Confucianism developed the social and political applications of these virtues, Taoism expanded their cosmic dimensions. Together, they established an ethical system where: self-sacrifice maintains cosmic and social order (Nüwa), self-discipline enables effective governance (Yu), and persistent virtue can transform reality. This philosophical legacy continues to inform Chinese values today, demonstrating how ancient narratives crystallized into enduring ethical principles that balance human agency with natural harmony.

3. Western Ethical Values in Mythology

The Western concept of inherent human imperfection ("original sin") finds deep roots not only in Biblical tradition but also in Greco-Roman myths that depict flawed human nature and moral frailty. Greek mythology abounds with tales of hubris and its inevitable punishment—Icarus ignoring warnings to fly too close to the sun, or King Midas' golden touch destroying what he loves—illustrating humanity's tendency toward destructive excess. The story of Pandora's box, where curiosity unleashes eternal suffering upon the world, frames human weakness as an inescapable condition. Roman myths reinforce this, such as Romulus' foundational fratricide, suggesting violence is embedded in civilization itself. Even heroic figures like Achilles embody fatal flaws (his rage in the *Iliad*), while Prometheus' theft of fire—though benefiting humanity—is punished eternally, reflecting the ambiguous moral status of human ambition. These narratives collectively portray humans as fundamentally prone to error, requiring external discipline (divine punishment, laws) to curb their instincts—a worldview later systematized in Augustine's doctrine of original sin and Hobbes' "nasty, brutish" state of nature (Xu, 2024). Here are some mythological stories to illustrate this.

3.1 Zeus: The Paradox of Power and Infidelity

As the supreme ruler of Mount Olympus, Zeus wielded unparalleled authority over gods and mortals alike. However, his reign was marred by serial infidelities that reveal fundamental contradictions in Greek conceptions of divinity. Ancient sources document over one hundred romantic liaisons, ranging from goddesses like Leto and Demeter to mortal women including Europa and Leda. These affairs frequently involved deception, with Zeus assuming animal forms—a bull for Europa, a swan for Leda—highlighting the predatory nature of his desires. Modern scholarship interprets this behavior as reflecting the complex Greek understanding of divine power. Unlike perfect Chinese deities, Zeus embodies the Greek view that supreme power inevitably corrupts, and that even the gods are subject to human frailties.

3.2 Athena: Wisdom Tainted by Wrath

Born fully grown from Zeus's head, Athena was the goddess of wisdom, strategy, and warfare. While renowned for her sound judgment and protection of heroes like Odysseus, she could be fiercely vindictive when crossed. When the skilled weaver Arachne dared to challenge her, Athena not only defeated her in a weaving contest but also cruelly transformed the boastful mortal into the first spider. When Teiresias accidentally saw her bathing, she laid her hands over his eyes and blinded him, but gave him inward sight by way of compensation. She is also recorded to have shown petulant jealousy on more than a single occasion. These stories reveal that even the goddess of wisdom could be blinded by pride and anger.

3.3 Diana (Artemis): The Untouchable Huntress

The twin sister of Apollo, Diana was the virgin goddess of the hunt, wilderness, and childbirth. She fiercely protected her independence and punished any threats to her purity. When the hunter Actaeon accidentally saw her naked while bathing, she transformed him into a stag and set his own hunting dogs upon him without mercy. She also sent the monstrous Calydonian Boar to ravage the countryside when King Oeneus forgot to make proper sacrifices to her. While she protected young women and assisted in childbirth, her wrath was terrible when her boundaries were violated. These stories show her cruelty and mercilessness.

3.4 Achilles: The Greatest Yet Most Tragic Warrior

The central hero of the Trojan War, Achilles, was nearly invincible in battle but fatally flawed in character. His rage when Agamemnon took his war prize, Briseis, caused him to withdraw from fighting, nearly costing the Greeks the war. Later, his grief over Patroclus's death drove him to mercilessly slaughter Trojans and desecrate Hector's body. Even his legendary invulnerability (except for his heel) couldn't protect him from his own pride and anger. Achilles embodies the Greek ideal of the tragic hero - supremely gifted but ultimately doomed by his human weaknesses (Homer, 2017). In addition, his grief over Patroclus' death and subsequent rage against Hector reveal his extreme emotions and pride. Achilles' vengeful desecration of Hector's body highlights his hubris and inability to control his wrath, traits that align with his mortal imperfections despite his near-invincibility. Yet, his eventual mercy toward Priam (sparked by thoughts of his own father) shows a capacity for empathy. His death, caused by the vulnerable heel, symbolizes the inescapability of fate—even for the greatest warrior.

4. Comparative Analysis

The profound differences between Chinese and Western ethical values are vividly illustrated through their mythological traditions, which serve as cultural mirrors reflecting distinct worldviews and societal priorities. At the core of Greek mythology lies a humanistic approach that embraces imperfection and individualism. Greek gods and heroes, such as Zeus, Athena, and Achilles, are portrayed with strikingly human flaws—prone to jealousy, impulsiveness, and hubris. Their stories celebrate personal glory and autonomy while acknowledging moral ambiguity, as seen in tales like Pandora's Box. This tradition influences the ideas of humanism that formed later, which questions absolute ideals and emphasizes human agency. The Greek acceptance of conflict and competition, exemplified by the Trojan War narrative, continues to resonate in modern Western societies that value debate and personal freedom.

In stark contrast, Chinese mythology presents deities and heroes as paragons of virtue and moral perfection. Figures like Yu the Great, Nüwa, and the Foolish Old Man embody selflessness, perseverance, and self-discipline. Yu's

tireless flood control efforts, where he passed his home three times without entering, epitomize the ideal of prioritizing collective welfare over personal needs and perseverance. Nüwa's sacrifice to mend the sky reflects principles of maintaining natural balance, while the Foolish Old Man's determination to move mountains demonstrates the cultural valorization of persistent collective effort. These stories reinforce a worldview that assumes innate human virtue cultivable through proper education and social harmony. The Chinese mythological tradition deeply intertwines with Confucian and Taoist philosophies and also influences the formation of Confucian and Taoist thoughts, continuing to influence modern values of filial piety, ecological balance, and societal cohesion, as seen in contemporary concepts like China's "ecological civilization."

The enduring legacy of these mythological traditions still manifests itself in contemporary cultural differences. Western societies, influenced by Greco-Roman mythologies, tend to emphasize individual rights, accept human imperfection, and tolerate conflicts. Even their idols usually embody imperfect and secularized images. Chinese culture, rooted in its mythological heritage, prioritizes social harmony, collective responsibility, and the cultivation of moral exemplars. Thus, the idols often present perfect, kind, and idealized images. Yet both traditions grapple with universal questions about virtue, governance, and human nature, demonstrating how ancient narratives continue to shape ethical frameworks across civilizations. Understanding these differences through mythological lenses provides valuable insights for cross-cultural dialogue in an increasingly interconnected world, where both individualistic and collectivist perspectives must collaborate to address global challenges.

5. Conclusion

This comparative analysis of Chinese and Western ethical values through ancient mythology reveals profound cultural divergences rooted in their respective philosophical traditions, while also highlighting shared human concerns about morality and societal order. Chinese mythology, as exemplified by narratives such as "Nüwa Mends the Sky", "Yu the Great Tames the Floods", and "The Foolish Old Man Moves the Mountains", emphasizes collective harmony, self-sacrifice, and alignment with cosmic and social order. These stories influence the thoughts of Confucianism and Taoism, which prioritize duty, the harmony between humans and nature, and the cultivation of innate virtue. The idealized portrayal of deities and heroes in Chinese myths serves as a moral compass, reinforcing values like perseverance, benevolence, self-discipline, self-sacrifice, and harmony between humanity and nature. In contrast, Western mythology, particularly Greco-Roman traditions, portrays gods and heroes as flawed beings whose struggles mirror human imperfections. Figures like Zeus, Athena, and Achilles embody individualism, moral ambiguity, and the tension between ambition and hubris. These narratives underscore themes of personal agency, the pursuit of excellence, and the consequences of unchecked pride, reflecting a worldview that acknowledges human frailty and the need for external discipline. Unlike Chinese myths, which often depict virtue as innate and aligned with cosmic order, Western myths suggest that morality must be actively imposed against humanity's darker impulses.

The comparison further illuminates how these mythological foundations shape contemporary cultural and ethical frameworks. Chinese values, rooted in collectivism and harmony, continue to influence modern governance, social policies, and environmental initiatives (e.g., ecological civilization). Western traditions, with their emphasis on individual rights and competitive achievement, persist in meritocratic systems and leadership paradigms. Yet, both traditions share an underlying goal: the pursuit of a just and stable society, albeit through divergent paths. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that mythology is not merely a relic of the past but a living cultural force that perpetuates ethical ideals across generations. By understanding these differences, we gain deeper insights into cross-cultural dialogue and cooperation in an increasingly interconnected world. The enduring relevance of these mythological narratives lies in their ability to articulate core values that continue to guide human behavior, whether through the collective ethos of Chinese tradition or the individualistic spirit of the West.

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