

# Spiritual Metaphor and Pursuit in Chinese and Western Giant Myths: A Comparative Analysis of Kuafu and Prometheus

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**Abstract:** Both Chinese and Western myths often serve as expansions of historical reality and as dramatized portrayals of historical figures, enriching modern people's memories and associations with ancient ancestors. From one perspective, myths reflect the broader historical context of their time; reality, in turn, forms the foundation of myths. The author starts with two mythological figures, Kuafu and Prometheus, and through the comparison and discussion of the positive and negative influences of Kuafu and Prometheus, respectively, analyzes the metaphors of the principles in the Chinese and Western giant myths from the aspects of the environment of different myths and the atmosphere of the characters.

**Keywords:** Chinese and Western giant myths; Kuafu; Prometheus

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## 1. The giant identity of Kuafu and Prometheus

According to the “Classic of Mountains and Seas · Great Wilderness North Classic”:

“Kuafu chased the sun, entering its path. Thirsty, he sought water and drank from the Yellow River and Wei River. When these failed, he drank from a vast marsh to the north. Before reaching his destination, he died of thirst. He discarded his staff and transformed into a forest<sup>[1]</sup>.”

Kuafu's extraordinary drinking capacity is evident in his legendary tales: ‘He drank from the Yellow River and Wei River; when these failed, he drank from the Great Marsh to the north. ‘His staff could transform into a towering forest, as shown in the phrase ‘He discarded his staff and became a forest.’ These accounts confirm that Kuafu was indeed a giant.

Greek mythology contains the following account of Prometheus: According to ancient legends, there was a great deity named Zhou Peter (Jupiter), also known as Zhou Shi (Zeus). He ruled the heavens and earth, wielding supreme authority<sup>[2]</sup>. He was positioned above the dense peaks of the mountain range<sup>[2]</sup>.

“Exquisite in its thunderous arch, it sets forests ablaze and rocks ablaze, with a force that shatters mountains and shatters rocks. A single strike sends earth quaking, mountains trembling, and smoke billowing. The heavens darken, and the sun veils its face<sup>[2]</sup>.”

In the primordial age, there were two brothers who were neither human nor the evil deities dwelling among the peaks.

Who were they? They were the sons of Sotan, the Emperor of Taiden, and Peter Zhou, who were imprisoned in hell. The elder was named Prometheus<sup>[2]</sup>.

Clearly, Zeus, the supreme god, is depicted with a single point on his head, causing mountains to tremble and smoke to rise. The sky darkens as the sun obscures his face, indicating his colossal stature. His son Prometheus, being a giant, further reinforces this image of a towering figure.

## 2. The positive influence of mythological characters

### 2.1. The positive influence of Kuafu

The earliest recorded accounts of the Kuafu myth can be found in the “Classic of Mountains and Seas” and “Liezi: Tangwen.” A strikingly similar<sup>[2]</sup> passage in both texts reads: “He discarded his staff and transformed into a forest of trees”<sup>[3]</sup>. Through poetic interpretation, the author elevated these words, enriching the mythological essence of Kuafu while reinforcing his heroic image. As Chinese mythologists consistently observe: “Kuafu’s sacrifice to the sun and his staff’s transformation into<sup>[3]</sup> a forest symbolize his relentless struggle against scorching heat and drought,” “He chased the sun to conquer the elements,” and “He pursued the sun to eradicate drought”<sup>[4]</sup>. Kuafu, driven by humanity’s need for light, sought to pluck the sun and place it in the hearts of weary souls. Defying nature’s will, he fought tirelessly for illumination, even sacrificing his life from exhaustion and thirst. More profoundly, after his death, his staff became a peach grove, perpetuating his indomitable spirit. The story employs mythological techniques to powerfully expand humanity’s courageous pursuit of light. It embodies the spirit of perseverance, self-sacrifice, exploration, and altruism, ultimately elevating the narrative into a tale of triumph over nature. This transformation imbues the myth with a romantic allure, making it both profound and inspiring. This shows that the myth of this allusion has also exerted a great positive influence on later generations.

### 2.2. The positive effects of Prometheus

The creation of mythology can be viewed as ancient people’s understanding of their world, a spiritual pursuit of the unknown through their imagination. It also represents their romanticized conjectures, revealing the subconscious desires of early humans hidden beneath mythological narratives. Analyzing myths clearly demonstrates humanity’s ideological evolution—from reverence for deities to seeking equality with them, and ultimately transcending divine authority. To truly understand mythology, we must examine what lies behind its surface. With this perspective, the significance of “The Fire Thief” becomes immediately apparent.

Prometheus was a unique giant. Throughout Greek mythology, even Athena—the most frequently portrayed as a benevolent figure—remained aloof, bestowing or punishing humans solely based on her whims. As Luo Xiaoying observed:

In mythology, whether it’s the twelve Olympian gods reigning supreme or the numerous Titans cast into the depths of hell, they all symbolize the uncontrollable and irresistible natural<sup>[2]</sup> disasters and phenomena that humanity could not resist at the time. By comparison, humans are utterly insignificant<sup>[5]</sup>.

They are gods endowed with their own divinity, yet this very divinity is a cruel force. To the gods, humans are insignificant, but Prometheus stands apart. This prophetic Titan possesses a unique humanity that defines him as a god. Analyzing Prometheus reveals that he is the deity who created humanity. He once deceived Zeus for mankind, stole the fire from heaven, and willingly accepted punishment for humanity. It can be said that throughout Greek mythology, only Prometheus is not aloof. His decision to aid humanity was not driven by sympathy or pity for this fragile race, but rather by the inherent humanity within humans that drew this great creator to them.

The emergence of Prometheus embodies humanity’s awakening. Among the gods representing forces of nature that humans cannot resist, there exists a deity who, like humans, possesses human-like actions and forever stands with humanity. This god stole the fire from heaven, which symbolizes the hope of life. Fire enabled humans to distinguish

themselves from beasts, to defend against their fangs and sharp teeth, to stay warm, and to rest and recover. Prometheus represents humanity's first awakening—showing how, refusing to be at the mercy of nature, humans began to tentatively control it. Fire became the symbol of humanity's journey toward conquering nature. Thus, Prometheus, who stole the key, naturally acquired a profound new meaning.

From the perspective of mythological figures with positive influences, studying myths from different regions and ethnic groups offers valuable insights into the cultural and historical development of these societies, as well as the evolution of human thought. The essence of these myths lies in their portrayal of human virtues such as fearless dedication, resilience in adversity, and willingness to make sacrifices—qualities that continue to inspire future generations.

### **3. The negative impacts of mythological characters**

#### **3.1. The negative influence of Kuafu**

The fable "Kuafu Chasing the Sun" literally centers on "chasing the sun," yet ironically, the core lies in Kuafu's thirst from chasing the sun and his desperate need to drink<sup>[6]</sup>. Modern records show the water levels of the Yellow River and Wei River have steadily declined, as described in the passage "Drinking from the Yellow and Wei Rivers; when these failed, they drank from the Great Marsh"<sup>[7]</sup>. This myth essentially conveys ancient people's interpretation of natural phenomena. From the perspective of humanity's material development, the fable explores the reasons behind the drastic reduction in water flow of the Yellow River and its tributary Wei River. Kuafu, driven by his inner desires, acted against nature's course, only to be met with a harsh reality: humans are fundamentally human. Compared to nature, they are as insignificant as ants. Modern society clearly demonstrates that natural disasters are beyond human control.

While exploiting Earth's resources for personal gain may yield temporary benefits, the ultimate consequences outweigh the advantages. As Wang Xiaolian noted in "China's Mythological World".

To challenge nature with the spirit of Kua Fu is to overestimate one's capabilities, ultimately becoming a test subject of defiance against nature<sup>[8]</sup>.

#### **3.2. The negative effects of Prometheus**

To discuss the negative impacts of Prometheus, it is essential to analyze the geographical environment of Greece and the developmental history of its ethnic groups. The exotic and unconventional cultures, along with the unique geographical conditions, have given rise to distinct mythological systems that often carry certain ethnic characteristics inherent to the local populations.

Greece was a city-state system with small states and<sup>[5]</sup> sparse populations, resulting in low per capita productivity levels<sup>[9]</sup>. The frequent wars between city-states, absence of unified religious and political systems, and relatively primitive human nature led to frequent rebellious acts and acts of vengeance for survival. This cultural context is reflected in Greek mythology, where stories of gods killing their fathers to marry their mothers, or deceiving beautiful women through robbery or trickery to become wives, are common. The myths are predominantly filled with themes of war and plunder. While these narratives highlight the nation's ferocity and survival instincts, they also reveal inherent barbarism. Take Prometheus as an example: his three attempts to save humanity involved deception, theft, or robbery. In the first instance, when humans offered sacrifices<sup>[6]</sup> to the gods, Prometheus deliberately deceived them by dividing the meat into two piles—stashing the better parts under the skin while hiding bones and internal organs beneath the fat, reserving the finest offerings for humans. In the second instance, he stole the fire from heaven without warning<sup>[10]</sup>. As Chen Zhongmei noted, myths remain myths: "Though the East and West may evolve with the times, this barbarism inherently carries a degree of negative significance for future myth readers, demanding our attention and rational analysis<sup>[11]</sup>."

We must approach the significance of myths rationally. The myths of any civilization inevitably carry negative connotations shaped by their geographical, environmental, and historical contexts. This is an inevitable process as humanity evolves from primitive to civilized states. In the pre-literate era, myths often served as vehicles for cultural

transmission. We should critically evaluate these myths, distinguishing their harmful elements while preserving the valuable, inspirational aspects. By understanding our ancestors' struggles to harness nature and their yearning for survival, we can integrate their wisdom with modern realities—absorbing the essence while discarding the dross. This balanced approach allows myths to positively influence contemporary society through rational interpretation.

## 4. Conclusion

Theoretically, the comparative study of Eastern and Western cultures clearly demonstrates the significant theoretical reference value of mythology in folk knowledge research. By analyzing representative Eastern myths alongside their contemporaneous Western Greek myths, we observe that mythology inherently reflects the historical and cultural characteristics of its originating ethnic groups. This distinctive local and ethnic identity carries substantial theoretical significance for related historical studies.

A comparative study of Kuafu from Chinese mythology and Prometheus from Western Greek mythology reveals that these two mythological figures share certain overlapping characteristics. Both represent the ancient people's abstract and romantic understanding of the universe, shaped by historical and geographical constraints during their respective eras. However, their distinct national identities, environmental contexts, and historical developments have imbued them with unique cultural hues. This comparative analysis holds significant theoretical and historical research value.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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