

## Modern Mythological Poetics in China and Lu Xun's Mythological Writing of Modern Style Poems

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**Keywords:** mythological poetics; modern Chinese poetics; Lu Xun; modern style poems; mythological writing; symbol.

**Abstract:** Mythological poetics is a dimension of cultural poetic analysis. This paper discusses the general situations of mythological poetics and modern mythological poetics in China, as well as the mythological features and symbols in Lu Xun's modern style poems from the perspective of mythological poetics.

### 1. Introduction

The influence of mythological thinking on literature has a long history. In the ancient times, when our primitive ancestors explored the mysterious world and all things in it, the emotional experience and symbolic metaphors of mythological thinking were injected into the blood of literature. Chinese literature of later generations was deeply nourished by ancient myths included in *The Book of Mountains and Seas*, as well as the songs of Chu like *Nine Odes* and *A Request to God*. These myths create a world with rich and magnificent images. Ancient Greek myths and Hebrew myths also bred many creative ideas and fantasies in western literary epics and even modern novels, and led to the academic study of mythological archetypes and mythological thinking patterns carried out by scholars such as Northrop Frye, Jung Carl Gustav, Claude Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes. The influence of Chinese myths on literature also lasts for a long time. With the continuous development of Mythology in China since modern times, Lu Xun, Xie-gang Gu, Mao Dun, Yi-duo Wen, Jing-wen Zhong and other literary researchers have carried out multi-angle analysis and interpretation with a broad vision. In the course of studying ancient classics, Lu Xun rediscovered the original vitality of Chinese civilization contained in ancient Chinese myths, and then devoted himself to establishing a connection between the new voice of modern literary thought with prototypes and the cultural context of ancient myths through the creation of mythological poems, so as to better face the challenges of the development of Chinese literature.

### 2. The Study of Mythological Poetics in Modern China

The word "myth" originated from "mythos" in Greek, which contains stories and fables of gods. Later, it gradually evolved into "myth" in the modern sense. The study of myths has gradually developed into a special subject called mythology. The discussion of mythological thinking and mythological prototypes in academic circles has gradually brought mythological poetics into the view of researchers. French scholar Foucault believes in *The Order of Things* that the "sympathetic thinking" in mythology, which "plays a role in the depth of the universe" and can "traverse the broadest space"<sup>[1]</sup> in a moment, still plays a role in human culture, and that the mythical epics did not disappear, but continue to exist in literary works such as *Don Quixote*, in which writers re-create epic poems through shaping the character of hero. "Adventures" of heroes realize the "identification of the world"<sup>[2]</sup> and thus continuously depict the image of "man"<sup>[3]</sup> in cultural history. Heidegger identified Hoelderlin as a poet connected with God, believing that he used the words "in sacred chaos"<sup>[4]</sup> to enlighten the poet. When Hans Georg Gadamer interpreted Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegy*, he believed that poetry showed "mythological poetics of the mind".<sup>[5]</sup> Jacobson explained Pushkin's mythological poetry in his study of mythological poetry, while Meletinsky made a theoretical study of "mythological poetry".<sup>[6]</sup> Besides ancient Greek and Roman

mythological poems, the themes of “statues” in Pushkin’s poems and the theme of mythological poetics in Aleksandr Blok’s *The Twelve* are also frequently discussed by literary researchers.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the ideas and methods of myth research gradually influenced the perspective of many Chinese scholars and writers on traditional literature. The study on the relationship between myths and literature has attracted more and more attention in the academic circle of China. A large number of texts of myths and legends are recorded in ancient books, such as *The Book of Mountains and Seas*, *The Songs of Chu*, *The Commentary of Zuo*, *The Historical Records*, *Chuang Tzu*, *Huai-nan Zi* and *Liezi*. They have become materials for scholars and writers to explore the cultural prototypes and the spirit of Chinese myths. After scholars such as Guan-yun Jiang and Zeng-you Xia introduced mythological methods to the study of Chinese myths, mythological study in modern and contemporary China began to focus on observing mythological materials from historical and theoretical perspectives, and combining the mythological study with literary studies. Scholars and writers explore the cultural contexts and evolution rules of Chinese myths from the perspective of mythology, and link ancient Chinese myths with myths and legends around the world. Guo-wei Wang explored the mythological materials in *Chuang Tzu* when he studied the literary spirit of Yuan Qu.<sup>[7]</sup> He praised myths in *Chuang Tzu* with “great and rich” imagination. Examples include the trees lived for tens of thousands of years; the kingdoms built in the tentacle of a snail; the giant fish lived in Beiming. He regarded them as the “early” cultural products of the “developed national culture” in ancient China, and compared them with the “magnificent myths” of “ancient India and Greece”,<sup>[8]</sup> which shows the vision of modern mythology research. Qi-chao Liang studies the origin of Chinese flood myths based on literary texts in *The Book of Mountains and Seas* and *The Songs of Chu*. In the article *Mythology and Poetry*, Yi-duo Wen introduced the perspective of cultural anthropology to link the subject of mythology with poetry research, and devotes himself to “studying the origin and evolution of Chinese ancient myths”<sup>[9]</sup>. He explored the images of Fu Hsi, Nuwa as well as the changes of flood myths, and compared them with myths of other countries. Mao Dun’s mythology study focuses on using anthropological research methods for reference. In the *Preliminary Study of Chinese Mythology*, the “evolution and interpretation”<sup>[10]</sup> of Chinese myths since *The Book of Mountains and Seas* is discussed.

In his *Structural Mythology*<sup>[11]</sup>, Shu-xian Ye attempts to explore the method of interpreting thinking modes in literary works with mythological themes from the academic and mythological perspectives. Yan-liang Zhou discussed the research category of ancient “mythological poetics”<sup>[12]</sup> with *The Book of Songs* as the main body in the article, *The Origin and Development of Mythological Poetics Concepts in Jing-zi Wu’s The Study of the Book of Poetry: Focusing on the Theory of “Hanshen God”*<sup>[12]</sup>. He also discussed the academic proposition of “the theoretical construction of Chinese mythological poetics”<sup>[13]</sup>. In his book *From Aesthetic Poetry to Cultural Poetics*, Qing-bing Tong explores the significance and scope of cultural poetry as external study, and holds that the studies of ancient Chinese prose, history and philosophy are inseparable. Therefore, in the vast literary territory, it is possible to take the “cultural poetry” as a comprehensive perspective of literary research. The ancient Chinese theory of “emotion expression, observation, communication and criticism” is cultural poetry; Bakhtin’s theory of “Carnivalization” is cultural poetry; Jung’s prototype theory is the “cross-study of literature and myths and legends”<sup>[14]</sup>. It is a new dimension of cultural poetry : “mythological poetry”.

In the course of Chinese poetry writing since the 20th century, Mo-ruo Guo wrote mythological poems such as *Silent Night and Goddess*; Yi-duo Wen created poems contain mythological and legendary images such as *The Chant of Sun*, *Pray* and *The God of Love*; some poems written by Chang-yao and Hai-zi are originated from mythological archetypes of Chinese culture (such as Hai-zi’s *Seven Books of the Sun*). Chinese poets of different times have advanced the new development of Chinese mythological poetry. Lu Xun’s modern-style poems and mythological poems, together with works created by above-mentioned poets, have made great contribution to the development of Chinese mythological poetry.

### 3. A Poetical Study of Lu Xun's Mythological Modern Style Poems

Lu Xun is a poet with strong creativity and vivid imagination. The ideological implication in his poems can be interpreted as philosophical thinking. His poems, novels, prose and translated works form a dialogic relationship. Analyzing Lu Xun's mythological writing as a whole can enrich our understanding on his ideological space and artistic pursuit. Jia-jian Zheng, a scholar of Lu Xun's studies, believes that "poetics" will become a "new hot spot" in Lu Xun study.<sup>[15]</sup> Studying Lu Xun's poems from the perspective of mythological poetics is a unique field in the poetic study of Lu Xun.

Lu Xun's mythological perspectives can be reflected in his early writings such as *On the Poetic Power of Maras*, *Refuting Malevolent Voices* and *Cultural Bias*. These macroscopic and holistic research perspectives and cultural poetics ideas are also shown in his later academic works and poetry chapters, in which ancient Chinese myths in *The Book of Mountains and Seas*, Greek myths, Hebrew myths as well as Indian myths are all included in the scope of discussion. Lu Xun's mythological research thought is fully elucidated in his research papers such as *Refuting Malevolent Voices* and *A Brief History of Chinese Novels*. By pursuing the mythological thinking of our ancestors, Lu Xun expressed their emotional experiences and ideas under the influence of mythological thinking in his works such as *New Stories*, which also influenced his poetry writing. In the creation of modern style poems, various mythological images were used to express feelings; these mythological archetypes were endowed with individualized poetry implications. In order to interpret Lu Xun's mythological poetics as a whole, we can take his mythological literary thought reflected in poems, fictions, essays, research works and other texts as a reference frame, so as to analyze the mythological prototypes in his modern style poems, and then analyze the dialogue between poetics and mythology in his works.

Modern style poetry, also known as metrical poetry, including poems of eight and four lines. It was originated in the Northern and Southern Dynasties. In the Tang Dynasty, the pattern was basically established. While paying attention to the rhyme and number of words, these poems also integrate rhythm with rhetoric, and combine poetry spirit with artistic inspiration. Guang-qian Zhu's *On Poetry* discussed the evolution of poems with eight lines; these poems are regarded as the symbol of the transformation of Chinese poetry from "natural art" to "artificial art".<sup>[16]</sup> Since modern times, vernacular new literature has risen, and modern style poems, as a traditional Chinese style of poetry, still maintain a lasting influence in the history of new literature. In modern times, it has become an artistic form of expressing feelings and a kind of gift giving to relatives and friends of literati. The modern style poems created by Guo-wei Wang, Lu Xun, Yi-duo Wen, Lao She, Zhe-cun Shi and other writers can be used to study these writers' artistic styles and spiritual worlds. Lu Xun's modern style poems are unique in the integration of new ideas and the artistic pursuit of old poetry styles. By writing these poems, Lu Xun used the form of classical poetry and historical allusions to express his thoughts of modernity, as well as the enthusiasm of reviving poetic elements in Chinese mythology.

Lu Xun's modern poems on the subject of ancient mythology is an innovative creation based on ancient materials of Chinese culture, thus injecting modern "brand-new ideas"<sup>[17]</sup> and life-based value into Chinese poetry, and giving modern significance to modern style poetry. Such an attempt is similar to the efforts of seeking lost poetry and power in mythology in the history of world literature. The efforts include the singing of ancient Greek and Roman mythology in Renaissance European literature, the romantic literature created by Schlegel brothers in Germany of the 19th century<sup>[18]</sup>, Novalis' poetry as well as the pursuit and reconstruction of the artistic beauty of mythology by Jena school centered on the *Athenäum* magazine<sup>[19]</sup>, as well as the rewriting of Greek mythological allusions in Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *Waste Land* in the 20th century. The analysis of Lu Xun's mythological thinking and mythological prototype symbols in his modern style poems can enrich our understanding on Lu Xun's works and thoughts, thus expanding the research horizon.

The language of myth and the language of poetry are interlinked in the way of imagination and thinking. In his book *New Science*, Italian thinker Vico believes that the endowment of ancient

theological poets is a kind of “poetic wisdom”<sup>[20]</sup>. Lu Xun, as a poet, embodies his ability to use the language and wisdom of mythological poetry in the process of his modern poetry creation. In Lu Xun’s modern style poems, the thinking of reality and life is integrated into lyric poems, showing the ideological connotation of Chinese mythological imagery. The mythological prototype of the songs of Chu represented by the goddess of Xiangshui River is artistically represented in Lu Xun’s modern style poems such as Song of Goddess of Xiangshui, Mourning Ding Jun and No Title (Pick a beautiful and elegant flower to comfort the Goddess of Xiangshui). The writing of the prototype of Xuanyuan Yellow Emperor can be found in Self-titled Portrait. Mythological prototypes like the bird of Jingwei fills up the sea in the Book of Mountains and Seas can be found in the Preface and Postscript on Sanyi Pagoda Poems Collection. The legend of Emperor Wang who became a crying cuckoo after death can be found in Thoughts in an Autumn Night. The mythological prototype of Yu the Great can be found in No Title (There are a lot of air forces in the city of Yu). The images of Book God and Money God in folk legends can be seen in Oration to the Book God; the kitchen god can be found in Sacrifice to the Kitchen God in the Year of Gengzi. Cupid in Greek and Roman myths became the artistic image of expressing feelings in Self-titled Portrait, which put the symbolic meaning of the prototype of Xuanyuan Yellow Emperor in a broader perspective of cultural poetics.

Mythology and poetry are integrated by the connection of thought and art. Lu Xun’s singing of mythological imagery presents factors with characteristics of so-called “intellectuality and emotion complex”<sup>[21]</sup>, thus creating a mythological imagery space with rich artistic expression, cohesive “subjective spirit”<sup>[22]</sup>, emotional experiences and conceptual sustenance in the form poetry construction through the transmission of the meaning of images.

#### 4. Conclusion

As Wellek argued in Literary Theory, the terms of myth, image, metaphor and symbolization all belong to the same category.<sup>[23]</sup> From the 17th century to the 18th century, when the Enlightenment discourse came into being, Nietzsche, Vico as well as other thinkers and philosophers discovered the commonality between myths and poems: both of them create images and symbols. From the perspective of mythological poetics, Lu Xun, by re-writing mythological archetypes in The Book of Mountains and Seas and The Songs of Chu, symbolized the mythology materials of ancient China again and created metaphors as well as symbols. Through creating mythological images, Lu Xun intuitively expressed the real world in his poems. The cultural connotation hidden in mythological prototypes came back to poems; the modern poetic spirit of culture revival and “cultivating person” was also attached to the connotation.

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