The Analysis of the Maritime Cultural Differences between China and Greece from the Images of Merpeople: Take Contrast of *The Classic of Mountains* and *Rivers and Odyssey*

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Abstract: Oceanic literature is a window for human beings to understand their own world through the ocean, reflecting the maritime culture of their society. As a virtual image, the "merpeople" is common in works of the oceanic literature. Although both China and the West have the literary image of human body and fish tail, due to the differences of national culture and geographical factors, the Chinese and Western merpeople have gradually developed into two different independent images. Their personality, appearance and cultural significance are quite distinct. In this research report, I will try to make a comparative analysis of the Di people in *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers* and the sirens in *Odyssey* and explore the maritime cultural differences behind them.

Keywords: Comparative Literature; Oceanic Literature; Literary ImageComparative Literature; Oceanic Literature; Literary Image

1. Introduction

From ancient times to the present, "merpeople" is always an important image in both folklore and literature. Although both China and Europe have the image of the creature with human body and fish tail, due to the differences of national culture and geographical factors, the Chinese and European merpeople gradually developed into distinct images, their personality, image, and the significance of their representatives are quite different.

In this research report, I will choose the images of merpeople in *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers* and *Odyssey* to analyze their differences. And then, according to the different images that I have analyzed, I want to explore the maritime cultural differences between China and Europe.

According to the Marxist literary theory, literature and historiography are always unified. If we want to explore this problem in deeper, we should focus both on the two literature works and the social background at that time.

2. Literature review

2.1 Conceptual framework: Linking maritime culture, oceanic literature and the image of merpeople

2.1.1 Maritime culture

The concept of marine culture is very grand. From nature to humanity, from history to reality, from aesthetics to practicality, marine culture pervades all aspects of life. At present, there seems to be no authoritative definition of maritime culture. This concept was first put forward by German philosopher Hegel in *The Philosophy of History*. He mainly studied the maritime culture of Europe, and mostly confined to the field of trade culture. Although this view has been widely accepted, it is undoubtedly one-sided and biased.

The study of maritime literature developed relatively late in China. Chinese scholar Xu Xiaowang (1999) pointed out that maritime culture refers to all marine activities that human beings can involve. Natural activities are the basis of maritime culture, and spiritual activities are the highest form of maritime culture. This view has laid the tone for the study of maritime culture in Chinese academic circles. Since then, Chinese scholars have divided maritime culture into two parts, one is natural, the other is humanistic.

Professor Zhang Deming (2014) of Zhejiang University has established a system to study the maritime culture. He has divided it into four elements: people, sea, ship and island. These four elements are connected with each other to form a maritime culture system. This has helped me a lot and I decide to use his method to analyze the maritime culture of ancient China and ancient Greece in my later discussion part.

It was not until the 1990s that Chinese academic circles gradually brought "ocean" into their research scope. Many gaps in this area still need to be filled. At present, most of the relevant research about the maritime culture is limited to China itself, lacking of comparative study with other countries, and the connection between various disciplines is too fragmented. Therefore, I hope to be able to conduct more in-depth research in this field. From the perspective of literature, I intend to explore the differences of ancient maritime culture between the two regions by comparing the characters in the two famous literary works.

2.1.2 Oceanic literature

The "Oceanic Literature" refers to the literary works with the sea as the main scene of the story, the sea, sailors, ships and islands as the main elements of the novel. It is subordinate to maritime culture and plays an important role in the history of the literature research.

So far, many scholars have made a comparative analysis of oceanic literature in different regions. Wang Rong (2018), a Chinese scholar, once compared the marine science fiction works of the mainland and Taiwan in order to analyze the differences of marine ecological care between the two sides. Zhang Rong (2018), a professor at Ocean University of China, has made a comparative analysis of the images of the sea in *The Toilers of Sea* and *The Old Man and The Sea*. Similarly, Cao Xiaoan (2013), a Chinese scholar, compared the themes of oceanic literature between Chinese and Western scenic spots from a macro perspective.

The research results of these scholars have given me a lot of inspiration and thinking. They also provide a paradigm for me to analyze literature

2.1.3 The image of merpeople

There are many concepts in literary aesthetics, among which literary image is one of the most important. It has a unique cultural meaning and even a far-reaching significance. However, in the distinctive national culture derived from the different living environment, historical tradition and value orientation, the literary images are often different.

At the beginning of this research program, I find it's difficult to describe this kind of fictional literary image. This literary image is the origin of mermaid in English and " 人鱼 " in Chinese but there are subtle differences between them. In the book *Spirits, Fairies, and Merpeople Native Stories of Other Worlds* (Taylor C J, 2009), I find the appropriate word—the merpeople. It is an important image in both Chinese and European literature. The image in China and in Europe is quite different because of the different culture and social values. There have been some scholars focusing on the study of merpeople and they have studied a lot of literary works. Zhou run (2019), a graduate student from the Communication University of China, has analyzed the changes of Siren images. She has collected a lot of information from the literary books, paintings, and films to analyze the problems clearly. She has also explained the change process of siren's literary image from human head bird body to human body fish tail.

3. Discussion

3.1 The discussion of *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers* and *Odyssey*

Before the discussion of the two different images, we should firstly take these two literature works into consideration.

The Classic of Mountains and Rivers is an important ancient book in Chinese pre Qin Dynasty. Its content is mainly about the geographical knowledge in folklore and it is of great literature and historical value. It can be used as a reference for the study of ancient Chinese history, geography, culture, communication between China and foreign countries, folk customs and myths, etc.

Odyssey is one of the most important epics in ancient Greece. This epic is the foundation work of Western literature. It contains many ancient myths and has a far-reaching influence on the West and even the whole human culture.

However, since this report mainly researches on the maritime culture, we need to analyze whether these two literary works can be classified as typical Oceanic literature. According to the definition proposed by Duan Bo, we can analyze the nature of these two works.

Odyssey is a typical marine literature work. It takes the sea and islands as the main background and takes the sailors' adventure experience on the sea as the main line, showing a magical and magnificent ancient Greek ocean world.

To the contrary, *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers* is not a traditional oceanic literature. From its title, we can see that the background of this book is not entirely focusing on ocean, the mainland also accounts for a large part. Besides, its description for the ocean is not detailed enough. However, it is the first classic work describing the ocean in ancient China, which fully embodies the Chinese social culture at that time and has important research value. Some scholars would like to call this book "the combination of maritime culture and terrestrial culture". (Wei Fu, 1999)

All in all, although there are some differences between these two books, they are generally comparable.

Table 1. The comparability of the two works

		The Classic of Mountains and Rivers	*Odyssey*
Similarity	Background	Slavery society of ancient China	Slavery society of ancient Greece
	Maritime culture	The first classic work describing the ocean in ancient China, the combination of maritime culture and terrestrial culture	A typical example of the oceanic literature
	Theme	Mythology	Mythology
Difference and complementarity	Genre	Prose	Epic
	Image of "merpeople"	Di people	Siren

3.2 The discussion of Di people and the Sirens

According to the system chart of maritime culture mentioned by Professor Zhang Deming (2019), we can analyse the differences of maritime culture through fours perspectives: people, sea, ship and island.

(1) People

Character is one of the key elements in literature. There are descriptions of characters in both works, the Di people and the sirens. They are both typical characters. However, their descriptions of the characters are quite different

In the book *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers*, the author only listed a limited information about the Di people. Most of their stories are quite brief and lack of detailed description and ideological height. They seem strange and mysterious, having little contact with human beings. Therefore, this kind of literary image will give people a sense of distance, which endows them a kind of "divinity".

To the contrary, in *Odyssey*, there is a complete story line with rich plot about the sirens. The author describes this role in detail. Besides, they have many conflicts and interactions with sailors who go to the sea, which makes this character more vivid and endows them a kind of "humanity".

(2) Sea

The sea is frightening, but it is also attractive. In both Chinese and Western languages, sea is the symbol of feminine. She gave birth to both life and maritime culture. Both Di people and sirens live in the ocean, but the characteristic of the ocean is different.

The description of Di people's place of residence in *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers* is vague. It's just a sea area located in the west of the Firm-Tree, which is a completely fictional location. This reflects the ancient Chinese people's imagination for the ocean. At that time, most of Chinese political and economic centres were in inlands. For most Chinese, the ocean is a symbol of barbarian land which is remote and mysterious.

In the *Odyssey*, the sirens live in the Strait of Messina, which can be found on the map even today. The author sets up a real scene for this magical creature, which has narrowed the distance between us and the story. Ancient Greece is located near the Mediterranean Sea, with developed industry and commerce. Therefore, the ancient Greeks needed to go out to sea for fishing, trade and exploration. They were also more familiar with the sea.

(3) Ship

Man conquers the sea through the ship, the intermediary between nature and human. Ship is a unique space. When we are drifting or sailing on the sea, it is a space both fluid and fixed, closed and open, definite and uncertain.

The concept of "ship" is not mentioned in the description of Di people in *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers*. In pre Qin China, the small-scale peasant economy and the terrestrial culture occupied the main position, while the ship-building industry was not prominent.

In *Odyssey*'s description of sirens, the main scene of sailors takes place on the warship. In order to fight against sirens, Odysseus was tied to the mast of the ship. The sailors overcame one danger after another by crossing islands in warships. This also reflects the ancient Greek people's courage and spirit of exploration in the face of the ocean.

(4) Island

The formation and development of maritime culture can not be separated from island. Island is a special cultural geographical space, which connects man with nature, continent and ocean.

In *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers*, the Di people live in the remote fairy island, isolated from the world. In ancient China, the islands were often a place where immortals and rare animals lived, which were endowed with "divinity". This is also caused by the sense of distance between men and the ocean.

In *Odyssey*, the island was a quite common place. The sirens lived on the rocky edge of an island, where flowers bloomed. For thousands of years, sailors had passed the island and been killed by the sirens. This symbolizes the sailors' fear of the danger of the sea, and also reflects their understanding of the sea and the developed maritime culture of ancient Greece.

To sum up, the maritime culture of ancient China and ancient Greece have their own characteristics, but the later is more developed.

4. Conclusion

All in all, there are differences between Di people and the Sirens in various aspects, which are also reflected in the maritime cultural differences between ancient China and ancient Greece. Through the analysis of the image of the two works and the social background of the two places, we can see that maritime culture was more popular in ancient Greece, and agricultural culture was more popular in ancient China.

The ancient cultures of the East and the West have their own characteristics and features. They have an important research value and practical significance. As a carrier, the myth is an important channel to understand their differences and play an important role in cross-cultural communication.

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