

# The Development of Modern Chinese Mythological Poetry from Western References and Rewriting of Eastern Mythological Elements in Guo Moruo's *The Goddess*

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**Abstract:** Guo Moruo (1892-1978) was a Chinese literary scholar, historian, and social activist. Guo Moruo has been criticized in different ways, but when it comes to literature and poetry, thanks to his study in Japan, his works have been influenced by many Western literary works, and he has written about gods and goddesses in both eastern and western styles, with passionate and romantic phrases; and he has brought these changes back to China, which has brought special nourishment to the pursuit of literary and poetic innovation in the country at that time. Therefore, this paper will analyze Guo Moruo's new collection of poems, *The Goddess*, in terms of the quotation of Western mythological elements and the rewriting of Eastern mythological elements, and use a few Western poems to demonstrate the similarity between the May Fourth New Culture Movement and the development of Western literature and art, and thus to show the development of modern mythological poetry in China.

## 1 Introduction

Guo Moruo (1892-1978) is an indispensable figure in the evolution of modern Chinese poetry. Guo Moruo studied in Japan in 1914 and published his first collection of new Romantic poems, *The Goddess*, in 1921. In the same year, he and Yu Dafu established the left-wing writers' organization, the Creation Society, which led the flag of the May Fourth New Culture Movement, a movement that promoted the vernacular and advocated the study of the West, and shone brightly at that time. As a result, Guo Moruo has been honored as the founder of Chinese free verse, and *The Goddess* is considered one of the founding works of Chinese new poetry. Although the poem has received mixed reviews for its extensive references to Eastern and Western mythological elements, it has actually had a profound impact on the free development of modern Chinese new poetry and the use of myths in the future.

In the study of Guo Moruo's *The Goddess*, the current academic community focuses more on the aesthetic spirit and artistic style of the poem itself. For example, two papers by QIAN Renren analyze the pluralistic and open modern rhythmic form and free and high aesthetic

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style of *The Goddess* from the perspective of the composition of modern Chinese fictional words [1, 2], while WANG Haoyu's *Trial Analysis of Guo Moruo's The Goddess* and GUO Huaizhen's *Discussion of Guo Moruo's The Goddess* point out coincidentally that *The Goddess* possesses the romantic and unrestrained artistic approach and the vivid style of attacking the old [3, 4]. There are also many other points of view, but few of them are new. As for the study of imagery, it mainly focuses on the image of “fire” in the poem, either reflecting the reality of fire and hell, transcending sorrows and thirsting for light [5], or pointing out that the meaning of “fire” is the spark of the collision between Eastern and Western thoughts [6], and inheriting the ancient Chu culture as the prototype [7]; as for the discussion of other elements of imagery, they are often integrated into the analysis of poems, without specialization. As for the combination of Eastern and Western cultures and mythological elements selected in this paper, there are fewer explorations, and the occasional papers are more focused on the Chineseization of Romanticism in poetry and the literary influence of Whitman on Guo Moruo [8, 9], which is a fragmented and unsystematic theme.

Therefore, this paper aims to make a more systematic discussion on the operation of Eastern and Western mythological elements in *The Goddess*. Firstly, it analyzes the references to Greek mythological images in the poem, pointing out that although Guo Moruo has more Western allusions, the meanings of the allusions are relatively shallow, which is a manifestation of the attempts of the literati to feel their way forward in the period of the May Fourth New Culture; secondly, it analyses the rewriting of the Chinese mythical elements in the poem, which is an innovative act of Guo Moruo in integrating the Chinese traditional myths with the Western elements; and then, with the works of famous Western poets such as Rilke, it demonstrates that the rewriting content and intention of *The Goddess* is similar to that of Western literature and art and its development path. Secondly, the rewriting of Chinese mythological elements in the poem analyzes Guo Moruo's innovation of integrating Chinese traditional myths with similar elements from the West, and then the works of famous Western poets such as Rilke are used to prove that the rewriting of myths in *The Goddess* is similar to the Western literature and art and its development, and that all the actions are taken to meet the needs of the reality; finally, the weak issues of literary reform and modern mythological poetry in reality at that time will be developed, so as to show that Guo's *The Goddess* is a response to the urgent demand of learning from the West at that time, as well as an attempt of integrating Chinese modern poetry into Chinese mythology and poetry. This will demonstrate the significance of Guo Moruo's *The Goddess* in responding to the urgent need to learn from the West during the May Fourth New Culture Movement, and the significance of bringing modern Chinese mythological poetry to normative maturity.

## 2 References to Western Mythological Elements

In Guo Moruo's *The Goddess*, many Greek deities appear, and Wen Yiduo once criticized Guo Moruo for “using more Western allusions in *The Goddess* than Chinese ones” [10]. Whether it is the bold imagery of Apollo switching to a motorcycle in the twentieth century in *Sunrise*, or the call for Poseidon to use the waves of the sea to push his boat in *On the Shore*, or the references to Cupid, Poseidon, and Prometheus, it is clear that Guo Moruo has indeed been immersed in Western culture. *Venus* is the only poem directly named after a god (the original poem is named in English), and its content is as follows:

*I compare your mouth of love  
To a glass. The ever-brimming wine  
Always makes me intoxicated.*

*I compare your breast*

*To a pair of graves, in which we both sleep  
And our blood has turned into sweet dew!* [11]

This poem was written by Guo Moruo in 1919, at the beginning of the May Fourth Movement, a revolutionary literary movement in China. The poem is called Venus because it captures the quality of “love” that makes Venus the goddess of love. The poet compares the lover's mouth to a wine glass and the lover's breasts to two tombs, and praises love through such strange associations; this is the meaning that the poet ostensibly intends to convey.

It is interesting to note that in the final stanza of the poem, Guo Moruo mentions the “tomb” twice, the tomb being both the living body of the lover and the place where she will sleep with her partner after death; this stark contrast suggests that the poet believes that love can make the boundaries between life and death disappear, which is similar to some of the sentiments of Western myths, such as Orpheus, who was able to bravely enter the underworld for the sake of his love. However, just as Apollo represented only the sun and Poseidon only the sea in earlier poems, Guo does not change or extend the image of Venus beyond the representation of love, and the meaning of the poem stops there.

Overall, the poems in Guo Moruo's *The Goddess* that contain elements of Western myths are slightly superficial, but there is already the idea and awareness of consciously using elements of Western myths, which expresses the Chinese literati's attempts to learn from the West during the period of the May Fourth Movement, and his writing is childish and clumsy, but his heart is precious.

### 3 Rewriting of Oriental Mythological Elements

Guo Moruo's use of traditional Chinese mythological elements is much more mature. Instead of the stagnation of “imitating the form but lacking the spirit,” Guo rewrites the poems, uniting the elements of Chinese and Western mythologies in an organic way to create new-era imagery that is rich in extensibility.

For example, in *The Regeneration of the Goddess*, although the allusion to “Gong Gong's angry touch on Buzhou Mountain” is taken from traditional Chinese myths, it is emphasized that “*there is a nude female statue at each of the gate and palace of Buzhou Mountain*” [11], which is easily reminiscent of the famous Greek nude gypsum statues, instead of the ancient Chinese people who often regarded nudity as barbaric and ritualistic; not to mention that part of Goethe's *Faust* is quoted directly from the beginning of the text, which adds a more Western mystical flavor to the battle between Gong Gong and Qin. The battle between Gong Gong and Ch'ien adds a touch of Western mysticism to the story.

At the beginning of another work *The Nirvana of the Feng and Huang*, Guo Moruo directly wrote:

*In ancient Arabia, there was a divine bird named “phoenix”. At its five hundred years’ age, it would collect International Journal of Languages, incense woods to burn itself, and to be reborn from the dead ashes that it would be extraordinarily beautiful, and would not die again. This bird is actually the so-called feng-huang in China: the male feng and female huang* [11].

In the above article, Guo Moruo emphasized the resurrection of the Phoenix from the ashes of the Arab culture and associated it with the Chinese Feng Huang in a speculative tone. It is thus clear that Guo Moruo's Phoenix is not entirely an image from traditional Chinese mythology. Although it is written in traditional Chinese texts that the Phoenix is a bird transformed from the five elements of fire [12], the concept of “rebirth” does not exist in the

Chinese image of the Phoenix, and one of the distinctive features of Guo Moruo's Phoenix is "rebirth". In the chapter *The Phoenix Harmonizes* he writes:

*We are reborn  
We are reborn.  
[.....]  
I am you  
You are me.  
Fire is Huang  
Feng is fire.  
Flying and flying high above with grace!  
Hurrah! Hurrah! [11]*

It can be seen that this poem is short and passionate, using vernacular language throughout, with no rhyme scheme or fixed rules; it is very different from the traditional Chinese poems. Not only does it have the sentence form "*We are born*" repeated twice, but it also lays out sentences with the same meaning upside down and upside down; if "*I am you*" and "*You are me*" can form a logical loop, then "*Fire is Huang*" and "*Feng is fire*" in the following text are more like excited murmurs that lack logic, because the Chinese tradition is to mix Feng with the other two. In Chinese tradition, it is customary to treat Feng and Huang as two individuals. Guo Moruo purposely uses this kind of repetition and repetitive chanting to emphasize the rhythmic and metrical beauty of the poem. Although there is no longer any emphasis on the so-called couplets and flat and oblique forms, the repetitive chanting can still remind people of the mysterious and intoxicating feeling of ancient Chinese religious rituals, bringing the whole poem to a climax [13]. The Western "Phoenix" image of rebirth is merged with the traditional Chinese image of Feng Huang, the god of fire; the "Nirvana" in the title is also from Buddhism, which emphasizes its immortality; thus, "Phoenix Nirvana" was first created by Guo Moruo, and became a new concept of fusion of Chinese and foreign cultures that is different from that of traditional Chinese myths, and it is still widely circulated today.

## 4 Arguing for the East with the West

The two examples of rewriting mentioned above are novel, and this kind of rewriting is particularly similar to the poetic performance in the process of Western modernization. For example, take the famous poem *Orpheus Eurydice Hermes* composed by the German poet Rilke in 1907, which re-describes the story of Orpheus who went to the underworld to bring back his beloved Eurydice in Greek mythology, and there are three innovations in the poem:

First and foremost, he adds Hermes as a bystander. The first part of the poem focuses on the setting. The poet does not state that this is the underworld, but repeatedly uses colors and imagery such as black, red, grey, and pallid to suggest it. In this gray environment, the poet presents Orpheus first, but emphasizes several times that there are two people following him all the time; this will undoubtedly arouse the reader's novelty and interest because, in the original myth, the only people who came to the underworld were Orpheus and Eurydice. However, the poet purposely does not say so but writes in parentheses when Orpheus tries to turn back: *wouldn't that look back/mean the disintegration of this whole work/still to be accomplished* [14]. At this point in the game, the original's setting of not being able to go back by the King of the Underworld has been revived, which really whets the appetite.

So, with this sense of mystery and freshness, the poet begins to portray one of the men watching Orpheus. He still does not say who he is, but the labels “*the god of journeys and secret tidings*,” “*the slender wand*,” and “*wings beating in his ankles*” [14], all suggest that this is Hermes. Interestingly, Hermes is also the god of the dead, with the power to communicate between the living and the dead; and Hermes is also the inventor of the Lyra and the user of the serpent-winged scepter, which in some way combines him with the elemental powers of Orpheus and Eurydice. However, at the same time, Hermes leads the reader to look beyond the two to see their outer gestures and inner activities in a new light. The poet's placement of him as a voyeur is therefore carefully considered.

Secondly, the image of Orpheus in the poem is quite different from the usual. As mentioned earlier, the poet places Orpheus first in the scene, but readers seem to have a hard time associating this man with Orpheus. In traditional mythological stories and derivative works, Orpheus is often portrayed as a handsome, calm and courageous man, with a deep sense of love and intoxicated by art; his lute is held in his hand, and his playing can communicate between the living and the dead, and even inspire Hades, the King of the Underworld, to give him the opportunity to bring the dead back to the human world; this ability to transcend life and death is also in line with the gods in our mind. In Rilke's poem, however, Orpheus is a thin man in a cloak, with a gaze “*like a dog*”, a “*mute*”, and “*impatient*” demeanor, and even “*forgot all about the light lyre*” [14]. Such an Orpheus is rare. The separation between life and death has caused him to lose his “communication” with Eurydice, and after realizing this, he loses his strength; he becomes more like an emaciated ordinary man.

Finally, the image of Eurydice is no longer limited to a beautiful, fragile and somewhat unreasonable “vase” waiting to be rescued by Orpheus. Eurydice is the last to appear in the poem, and Rilke first depicts Orpheus's deep love and grief for Eurydice, with a passionate and intense emotion, which is basically in line with the emotion of the original text; however, the Eurydice depicted in the poem immediately afterwards is surprising: it seems that she has lost all the memories and emotions of her life. The poet repeatedly uses the phrase ‘*She was inside herself*’ to represent her state [14], ‘self’ being the key label Rilke gives to his Eurydice, who is not part of the marriage, the divine command, or Orpheus, and who when the god stops her to say that Orpheus has turned back, She simply asks, “*Who?*” [14]. Rilke writes twice about Eurydice, “*footsteps hindered by long graveclothes*” [14], suggesting that this memoryless Eurydice belongs only to the underworld, to the present. Interestingly, Eurydice, who is “dead” in the underworld, is more like a newborn; she is bewildered, “*faltering*”, “*like a young flower at nightfall*” [14]. She has become a “root” with the atmosphere of the underworld, no longer attached to or even aware of Orpheus; no longer in need of love and salvation, but only as herself, the mysterious being “Eurydice” in the underworld.

It can be seen that in Rilke's writing, not only is Hermes added as an observer to the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, adding a new perspective to the work, but also Orpheus, as a god, fails in his rescue mission, and Eurydice's forgetfulness and independence in the underworld indicate that his patriarchal consciousness and gaze have become ineffective. The whole poem highlights the modernist poetry's skepticism and rewriting of tradition, which came out of the rapid development of the Western world at that time, resulting in a spiritual crisis, and the rewriting of myths was indeed a spiritual rebellion against reality; this is also similar to the earlier Western Renaissance period when Shakespeare adapted the Greek myths to create plays to promote humanist ideology.

Although these works have different backgrounds, countries, and other elements, the core of their use of mythological images is similar: they all use ancient images as a conductor, but in reality they are articulating a new voice of reality. The poets' use of a particular element of the myth to evoke a new meaning is rich in enlightenment. Back in China at that time, the

rewriting of poetry was undoubtedly closely related to the demands of the May Fourth New Culture Movement.

## 5 Echoes and Influences of The Goddess

Looking at the previous examples of *The Goddess*, both *The Regeneration of the Goddess* and *The Nirvana of the Feng and Huang*, which use elements of oriental myths, emphasize the theme of “regeneration” from darkness and death; even *Sunrise* and *Venus*, which use elements of western myths in a more superficial way, emphasize the persistent pursuit of sunshine, light and heat, and the praise of free love; coupled with the straightforward and less embellished language expression, free stylistic format, and essential poetic content, they all demonstrate the urgency to get rid of the old feudal society and customs during the May 4th New Culture Movement, and the desire to form a literary form by learning from the West. In addition, the straightforward and unadorned language of the poems, the free form and content of the poems are all indicative of the urgent need to break away from the old feudal society and the desire to reform literature through learning from the West, to inspire the public and ultimately to become a new Chinese society with the spirit of democracy and science. Although the end of this sensational literary movement was not clear, there are still many modernized ideas that have survived to this day, and Guo Moruo and other progressive literati who were determined to open up the literary field are to be credited for this fruitfulness.

On the other hand, modern Chinese mythological poetry started late, and it was not until Liang Qichao used the word “myth” for the first time in 1902 that the concept of “myth” in a systematic sense emerged [15]. In ancient China, there was no lack of mythological works, and it can even be said that there was an abundance of mythological works, but the real Chinese mythology was born in the New Culture Movement, following the example of the West; as to the reason for this, Hu Shi in his *History of Vernacular Literature* once argued that there was no narrative poetry similar to that of the Western *Homeric* poems, which was an important factor for the lack of myths in ancient China [16]. It is true that in ancient China, myths were often regarded as supernatural legends and were not included in official history books, thus resulting in a fragmented and unstandardized situation. During the May Fourth New Culture Movement, Guo Moruo and others intentionally chose and imitated mythological materials from the East and the West, which, in fact, drove the rise of modern Chinese mythological poetry and mythology and the innovative attempts to integrate and unify Eastern and Western myths laid the foundation for the subsequent development of Chinese mythology out of the Western model, and further independence. The early twentieth century Chinese mythological poetry needed the guidance of the West, but also the learning and awakening of self-consciousness.

## 6 Conclusions

Based on the application of Eastern mythological elements in Guo Moruo's *The Goddess*, supplemented by Western contemporaneous poems, this study analyzes how the poems were influenced by the times and fed into the social reality from the aspects of poetic content, usage, and depth of meaning. The study finds that Guo Moruo's *The Goddess* is rich in references to Western mythological elements but relatively shallow in meaning, which not only reflects the urgency of the May Fourth New Culture to learn about the West but also contributes to the development of Chinese new poetry and mythological poetry. In terms of Chinese mythological elements, Guo Moruo innovatively fused similar elements from the East and the West to create brand-new modern imagery; this approach is also very similar to the development paths of the Western Renaissance and the Modern Literary Revolution, both

of which borrowed from the past to express the present and to express the realistic aspirations; in Guo Moruo's case, it was at the beginning of the twentieth century at the time of the May Fourth New Culture Movement, in the context of learning from the West, enlightening the intellect and pursuing a literary revolution. For Guo Moruo, it was in the early twentieth century during the May Fourth New Culture Movement, when he was learning from the West, enlightening the mind and pursuing literary revolution, that he copied the contents and paths of Western literature and pushed the modern mythological poetry of China towards the standardization of the historical needs and presentation of independence and autonomy.

This paper intentionally separates the analysis of Eastern and Western mythological elements and adds them to the analysis of Western poetry; it is hoped that it will be conducive to the presentation of the concepts in the paper in a more hierarchical and systematic way and at the same time provide another analytical perspective on the reasons for the clumsiness of some of the experimental poems of the May Fourth New Culture Movement, and also provide an alternative understanding of the field of modern Chinese mythological poetry different from that of "living under the shadows of the West".

In the process of writing, it is inevitable that there will be slight deviations between the original Chinese version and the English translation, which may lead to the problem that the text and the analyzed content are not integrated closely enough when reading, which is really regrettable; it is hoped that the differences between versions can be included as one of the contents of the study in the future analysis of this kind.

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