

# *A Comparative Study of Creation Myths from China and Latin America and Their Contemporary Value*

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**Abstract:** Creation myths from China and Latin America reflect the understanding of the origins of the world, humanity, culture, and natural phenomena by the early inhabitants of these regions. To this day, humanity continues to research and explore these profound questions, indicating that the issues raised by these myths still hold value for the human soul. This paper conducts a comparative analysis of the narrative styles and the conceptions of nature, the cosmos, and life as depicted in the creation myths of major civilizations in China and Latin America. Special emphasis is placed on exploring the worship of the sun god in both regions. By examining the commonalities between the two cultures, this study aims to identify their contemporary significance, find the “common language” between Chinese and Latin American cultures, trace cultural roots, and promote cultural exchange and appreciation under the Belt and Road Initiative.

## 1. Definition of Myth

On the definition of myth, Sir Maurice Bowra posited that myths are stories not intended merely for simple entertainment but rather to reduce the confusion experienced by humanity before the advent of science. In ancient times, low productivity levels led to inadequate understanding and recognition of certain natural and social phenomena. Unable to provide scientific explanations, people utilized their imagination to personify and anthropomorphize these phenomena, attributing the forces of nature to the will and power of gods<sup>[1]</sup>. Consequently, they created stories about these gods, which were passed down orally through generations, thus giving rise to myths.

## 2. Significance and Content of Myth Research

Ancient myths can reflect the cosmology, view of nature, and view of life held by ancient people. They are derivatives of ancient human thought and art, forming the origins of human literature. Myths encompass a nation’s philosophy, art, cultural customs, and the entire value system’s origins, profoundly embodying early national culture and continuously evolving to become part of the national identity. They possess rich historical value, providing insights into the trajectories of social development and the economic conditions of their times. Additionally, myths have folkloric and

ideological value. Despite their temporal limitations, myths also hold contemporary significance. From ancient times to the present, people have faced similar issues and challenges, many of which are eternal in nature. Studying myths can help us understand the past, comprehend the present, and bridge the future. Furthermore, it aids in analyzing a nation's psychology, culture, and history.

### 3. Comparison of Narrative Characteristics

In terms of narrative style, the most prominent features of Chinese creation myths are their discontinuity and isolation. This is evident in the chaotic interrelations between deities (mythological figures rarely have blood-related “causal relationships”), the attribution of divine functions and deeds, the abundance and contradictions of variants, and the lack of storytelling elements<sup>[2]</sup>. A typical example of the attribution of divine functions and deeds is the character of Nuwa in Chinese creation myths. Nuwa is the protagonist in both “creating human” and “mending the sky”<sup>[4]</sup>, but in *Huainan Zi*, the accomplishments of Da Yu in “controlling the flood and saving the world” are also attributed to her. In contrast to the chaotic interrelations and lack of storytelling in Chinese creation myths, Latin American creation myths emphasize kinship ties and clear narrative logic, filled with rich imagination and magical elements, making the stories more compelling<sup>[8]</sup>. For instance, in the *Popol Vuh*, animals like ants saving the protagonist, wasps aiding in battle, and hawks delivering messages help connect the story's characters seamlessly. In this book, the creators are not depicted as flawless and omnipotent like the Chinese creators but as beings with imperfections and mistakes. For example, creating human beings was not a one-step process like Nuwa's in Chinese myths but involved stages from mud people to wooden people, a great flood, and finally to maize people, who were wise, understood the cosmos, and were grateful to the gods. The creation was the collaborative result of three “Heart of Sky” deities along with Tepeu and Gucumatz. The narrative is complex, detailed, and rich in storytelling. In both Chinese and Latin American creation myths, the struggle between good and evil is a recurring theme. In Chinese myths, for instance, Yi shooting down “nine suns” and Chiyou inciting rebellion and attempting to usurp the Yellow Emperor's rule illustrate this struggle. Similarly, the *Popol Vuh* narrates the heroic deeds of the twin brothers Hunahpu and Xbalanque, who uphold justice by killing the tyrant Seven Macaw and defeating the evil lords of the underworld<sup>[5]</sup>.

### 4. Comparison of the conceptions of the cosmos, life and nature

#### 4.1 Creation Myths from China

*Sanwu Liji* states: “Heaven and Earth were chaotic like chicken's egg, and Pangu was born within it.” In some related accounts, the primordial universe is seen as a chaos within which a great creator god exists, interpreting “chaos” as clouds, strong winds, and water, and comparing Heaven and Earth to “chicken's egg” (which reflects the “Huntian” theory of the universe, a cosmological concept widely believed in China after the Western Han Dynasty). This also gave birth to the materialistic cosmology in ancient Chinese philosophy, which posits that Qi (vital energy) is the fundamental substance of the universe<sup>[2]</sup>. The early Chinese used the cognitive model of “gauging things by oneself” and “inferring the unknown from the known” to explain the origins of all things, fostering a rich, naive materialism. For instance, after Pangu's death, his body transformed into various elements. His eyes became the sun and moon, his blood became rivers, and his sweat became rain. By drawing analogies between similar things—Pangu's eyes and the sun and moon—they explained the origin of the sun and moon. Additionally, they used the relationship between husband and wife to extrapolate the concepts of Yin and Yang, black and white, and good and evil. The belief that “all things have spirits” was derived from the observation that human have thoughts and emotions, representing an important naturalistic perspective. They also held a view of nature that combined reverence for natural

laws with an aspiration to conquer nature. Their worship of the sun god, moon god, thunder god, and wind god reflected their respect for nature. During Da Yu's efforts to control floods, he adhered to natural laws, promoting cooperation between humans and nature. Conversely, myths like Kuafu chasing the sun and Jingwei filling the sea illustrate the spirit of struggling against nature. Moreover, ancient Chinese creation myths embodied the view that life and death are not absolute endpoints. Death was seen not as the end of life but as the beginning of another form of existence. The physical body may perish, but the soul is immortal and can transform into another form. The myths of Zhuanxu's resurrection after death and Pangu's transformation into all things after his death are good examples of this concept. The stories of Gun giving birth to Yu, the Red Emperor's daughter Yaoji becoming the goddess of Mount Wu, Fengyi transforming into the river god, and various sages being deified after death also illustrate that their lives were elevated and continued in another form (as gods) after their physical demise.

#### 4.2 Creation Myths from Latin America

As for cosmology, one significant difference between Latin American creation myths and those of China is the division of the world into multiple levels, typically including upper, middle, and lower realms. For example, the Aztec cosmological system comprises three layers, the uppermost inhabited by the creator god Ometeotl, the middle by humans, and the lower by the underworld. Similarly, the *Popol Vuh* divides the world into the aboveground, the earth, and the underworld. Additionally, Native Americans believed that the material world and the divine world were interconnected, with no insurmountable gap between dreams and reality<sup>[6]</sup>. The author of *Men of Maize*, Angel Asturias, referred to this way of understanding the world as a "dualistic view". In the *Popol Vuh*, a passage describes this dualistic view, "Thus they found the food that was to enter into the flesh of the newly created man; the blood of man was made of this food. Thanks to the efforts of the ancestors, maize was introduced into the human constitution." This dualistic perspective led to the maize civilization and maize worship in Latin America, as well as "Nahualism"<sup>[6]</sup>, distinguishing Latin American creation myths with a unique magical realism. This view also provided an endless source of inspiration for the magical realism literature of later Latin American authors. Like the ancient Chinese, the ancient Native Americans respected nature while seeking to control and conquer it, adhering to the belief that all things have spirits. They viewed life and death as a cyclical process<sup>[9]</sup>. They particularly worshipped the maize god, believing that maize and human beings were one and the same. Maize benefitted humanity, and thus human beings must treat it with respect. This belief is why in *Men of Maize*, the chief Gaspar Ilom fiercely opposed the Ladino people who wanted to grow maize for commercial purposes, leading to conflict. They viewed this commercialization as selling the flesh of their children and the blood of their family. As the Mayans' primitive religious beliefs evolved into shamanism, they sought to control nature to defeat their enemies. In the *Popol Vuh*, Hun Hunahpu, the maize god, dies and resurrects in the underworld, symbolizing the death and rebirth of all living things.

#### 4.3 Sun God Worship in China and Latin America

Some German scholars have also noted that myths are the products of ancient people's attempts to personify and anthropomorphize natural phenomena they could not explain. This is why many creation myths are associated with light and the sun. Chinese and Latin American creation myths are no exceptions. In ancient Chinese mythology, the sun god is Xihe. Emperor Yao "commanded Xihe to observe the heavens and track the movements of the sun, moon, and stars, to impart the seasons to the people". She gave birth to ten suns that hung on the Fusang tree. During a time of great chaos—when the four poles of the earth collapsed, the nine provinces split apart, and people were in great

distress—Nuwa mended the sky, and Xihe bathed the suns, saving countless lives. In Aztec civilization, after the birth of the creator god Ometeotl’s four sons, they began creating all things in the world. However, their attempts were constantly thwarted by a water monster. They eventually killed the monster and used its body to create the world. The Aztec cosmology includes five sun eras, with two of Ometeotl’s sons, Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl, becoming the sun gods for the first and second eras, respectively. The fourth sun era, known as the “flood era”, was destroyed by a great flood. After the destruction of the first four sun eras, it is said that Ometeotl’s four sons transformed into giant trees to hold up the sky during the flood of the fourth era, thus creating the fifth era. The creation of humans occurred after the establishment of the fifth era. Similarly, in the creation myths of the Inca civilization, the sun plays a crucial role. The Incas believed they were the children of the sun. The creator deity Viracocha created the sun and the moon<sup>[7]</sup>.

Table 1: Basic Information of Major Sun Gods in China and Latin America

	China	Latin America		
		Mayan	Aztec	Inca
<b>Sun God</b>	Xi (Xihe or Fuxi)	Ah Kin and Kinich Ahau	Tonatiuh	Inti
<b>Gender</b>	Xihe is female, while Fuxi is male	Male		
<b>Image</b>	Fuxi is depicted as having a human face with a snake or dragon body, or as a phoenix or dragon	Ah Kin is depicted with square eyes, a straight nose, and T-shaped upper teeth. Kinich Ahau is depicted as an elderly man with a large nose, tongue, and eyes	A warrior wearing a mask, carrying a shield decorated with eagle feathers	A golden statue, a solar disk, or a golden mask

According to the Table 1, the Chinese god of the Sun has Xi and Fu Xi, and the Latin American god of the sun has Ah Kin, Kinich Ahau, Tonatiuh and Inti. We can see that Latin American sun gods are mainly male, while Chinese sun gods are both male and female. The image of the sun god also shows a slight difference: Fuxi, the Chinese sun god, is half human and half animal. In contrast, Latin American sun gods have more human elements.

Based on the main sun gods listed in Table 1, the author compares the sun god worship in China and Latin America. After comparison, the following conclusions can be drawn

The relationship between sun and moon deities in both regions exhibits subtle similarities, showing a kind of “relative” relationship. Firstly, there is a gender-based opposition. In both Chinese and Latin American creation myths, the sun and moon gods are often depicted as a pair, either as spouses or siblings, with one being male and the other female. For instance, Fuxi and Nuwa in Chinese mythology, and Inti and Mama Quilla in Inca mythology, are described as brother-sister or husband-wife pairs. Additionally, this “relative” relationship manifests in other ways. In China, the moon god is considered a derivative of the sun god, giving rise to the dualistic concept of “sun and moon” and “yin and yang<sup>[3]</sup>.” In Aztec mythology, there is a narrative of two gods competing for the position of the sun god, where the victor becomes the sun god, and the loser becomes the moon god, also reflecting a form of opposition.

Both regions have had rituals to honor and worship the sun god, demonstrating reverence and awe, though their descriptions of the sun god differ. In ancient Chinese sun worship ceremonies, singing and dancing were major activities. Similarly, in Aztec rituals, dance and hymns played a significant role. The purpose of these rituals in both regions showed certain similarities, such as seeking the sun god's protection and blessings for agricultural prosperity. However, unlike the Chinese sun god, sun gods in Latin America are often depicted as slightly "cruel". For instance, they might send disasters if dissatisfied and require animal sacrifices, or even human sacrifices.

In both regions, there is a trend of historicalization of the sun god. In China, the Yellow Emperor, who is seen as an anthropomorphized sun god, is regarded as one of the founding ancestral deities of the Huaxia tribes. He evolved into a title for ancient emperors, being both a celestial god and a human sovereign. Similarly, the Inca emperors claimed to be direct descendants of the sun god Inti, with the empire's founder, Manco Cápac, considered Inti's son. This intertwining of mythology and history demonstrates the historicalization of myths.

## 5. Contemporary Value

Exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations are an important driving force for human progress and world peace and development<sup>[10]</sup>. The values and thinking patterns reflected in Chinese and Latin American creation myths permeate various aspects of contemporary life in both regions. Certain similarities in these values provide opportunities for cooperation and exchange, reducing misunderstandings and conflicts. For example, the persistent themes of battling evil, respecting and revering nature, present in both mythologies, facilitate mutual recognition and acceptance. These shared values enable both regions to jointly promote universal human values such as peace, justice, and freedom, and to achieve consensus and collaborate on poverty reduction and green economy development<sup>[10]</sup>. Understanding Latin American culture and values also injects momentum into China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Creation myths have profoundly influenced the lives and artistic cultures of people in both China and Latin America. Notably, contemporary Latin American magical realism has blossomed from the rich soil of ancient Indigenous civilizations. By studying the Latin American "dualistic view", we can better explain and understand the roots of the Latin American "literary boom" and the foundation of Latin American magical realism. This research paves the way for smoother cultural exchanges and mutual learning, enriching the human cultural treasury.

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