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Qi-Transformation vs. Divine Retribution: Ontological Pathways of Death Transcendence in Confucian-Daoist and Greek Metamorphic Myths

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Abstract. This study conducts a cross-civilizational analysis of death transcendence paradigms through the lens of metamorphosis myths, contrasting the Confucian-Daoist Qi-Transformation (气化) (Qi ,气, vital energy) cosmology with the Greek divine retribution mechanism. By employing structuralist narrative analysis and historicist critique, it reveals how these traditions encode ontological divergences into literary DNA. Key findings demonstrate that The Legend of the White Snake's ethical redemption loops and Oedipus Rex's irreversible chains epitomize civilizational cognitive genes—Qi-Transformation's cosmic symbiosis versus Moira's divine violence. The research further uncovers self-subversive dynamics within both traditions: Dream of the Red Chamber deconstructs Neo-Confucian cosmology through jade's petrification paradox, whereas Shakespeare's The Tempest transubstantiates divine retribution into humanistic forgiveness. Crucially, the study proposes metamorphic hermeneutics as a non-essentialist comparative framework, arguing that civilizations regenerate through narrative transfiguration—whether The Cricket Boy's (《促织》) trauma alchemy or Prometheus' chains reimagined as anthropogenic crisis metaphors. These metamorphic strategies, while historically rooted, persist as recombinant codes challenging modernity's disenchanted temporalities. By dissolving the East-West binary of "mysticism vs. rationalism", this work posits mythic narratives as living laboratories for civilizational dialogue—where Zhang Zai's Qi-suffused Great Void (太虚即气) whispers through globalized ruins, and Daphne's laurel shivers with post-Olympian potential. The ultimate metamorphosis may lie in recognizing these ancient strategies not as relics, but as undead catalysts for reimagining human finitude.

Keywords: Qi-Transformation, Divine Retribution, Metamorphic Hermeneutics, Death Transcendence

1. Introduction

Death, as the ultimate proposition of human existence, has perpetually guided philosophical inquiries into the meaning of life across civilizations. Metamorphosis myths, with their narrative mechanisms of morphological transformation, concretize abstract death anxiety into perceptible symbolic systems. From Zhuangzi's "theory of material transformation (物化论)" asserting "all

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things are unified by Qi" (万物一气) [1] to the tragic laurel metamorphosis in Ovid's Metamorphoses [2], Eastern and Western civilizations have constructed divergent cognitive paradigms for interpreting death through differentiated metamorphic narratives.This paper focuses on the paradigmatic contrast between the "Qi-Transformation cosmology" (气化宇宙观) and the Greek principle of divine retribution, revealing how these traditions perpetuate cognitive DNA through literary symbolic translation.

Employing dual methodologies—Lévi-Straussian structural analysis to dissect narrative logics [3] and Karatani Kōjin's historicist critique to trace conceptual translations [4]—this study addresses three core questions: (1) How Confucian-Daoist traditions construct circular narratives; (2) How Greek civilization formulates linear tragic paradigms; (3) How both perpetuate cognitive genes through symbolic translation.

2. "Qi-Transformation" versus "Divine Retribution": cognitive schisms in Death Transcendence

Metamorphic myths' response to the existential dilemma of death is fundamentally the material manifestation of philosophical cognition. The Confucian-Daoist tradition, pivoting on Qi-Transformation, deconstructs the life-death dichotomy through Qi-Transformation cosmology; Greek civilization, anchored in "Divine Retribution" logic, objectifies death anxiety into inexorable fatalistic violence. This schism between cognitive paradigms not only shapes divergent mythic narratives but also reveals the civilizational choices underlying East Asian and Greco-Roman conceptions of human limits and transcendent paths.

2.1. Confucian-Daoist tradition: ethics and circular narrative in the Qi-Transformation cosmology

The Confucian-Daoist tradition dissolves the ontological boundaries between life and death through its Qi-Transformation cosmology, constructing an "ethics-nature" interpenetrative circular narrative. Zhuangzi's proposition that "all under heaven are unified by Qi" [5] reduces the essence of life to the aggregation and dispersion of Qi, thereby conceptualizing death as a natural metamorphosis of energetic forms. This dynamic cosmology evolves in the Guanzi's assertion that "numinous energy comes and departs" (灵气一来一逝)[6], establishing a physiological-psychological mechanism of heart-mind and Qi interaction, which lays the material foundation for Mencius' ethical practice of "cultivating the vast, flowing Qi" (养浩然之气).

The revolutionary nature of Qi-Transformation philosophy lies in its negative dialectics: by dissolving the dichotomy between life and death (方生方死,方死方生), it paradoxically creates space for ethical praxis. The myth of Yu the Great "transforming into a bear to tunnel through Mount Xuan Yuan (化熊通轩辕山)" [7] does not signify Greek-style punitive alienation but exemplifies the sage's proactive harmonization of human Qi with terrestrial Qi. This negotiative reconstruction of energies becomes ritualistically embodied in Wu Xian (巫咸)'s "dancing to summon spirits" (以舞降神)—the dancer's bodily contortions during metamorphosis actualize the cultivation practice of channeling cosmic Qi into corporeal form.

The circular closure of Confucian-Daoist narratives operates as a literary transfiguration of Qi-Transformation cosmology. The cyclical movement of hexagrams in the Book of Changes, exemplified by the Tai hexagram's axiom "no departure without return" (无往不复), manifests in the Legend of the White Snake as an ethical redemption loop across "demon, human, and deity" states. Bai Suzhen's theft of the celestial herb, through sacrificial narration, accomplishes an

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essential leap in "feminine virtue praxis" (妇德实践); her final imprisonment under Leifeng Pagoda paradoxically becomes a transitional space for cosmic regeneration. This dynamic equilibrium contrasts starkly with the rigid order of Greek divine retribution: while Daphne's laurel metamorphosis eternalizes divine punishment, the Confucian-Daoist tradition perpetually preserves the possibility of Qi-Transformation recombination.

2.2. Greek tradition: linear tragic narrative under divine retribution

The Greek tradition ritualizes metamorphosis through the logic of irreversible divine sanction, constructing linear tragic narratives. Daphne's arboreal transformation in Ovid's Metamorphoses transcends romantic pathos, functioning as Apollo's ontological demarcation of divine-mortal boundaries—the perpetual quivering of laurel leaves crystallizes mortal defiance against celestial will. This punitive irrevocability manifests in Homeric epics as dual violence: Circe's porcine metamorphosis of sailors annihilates not merely speech [8] but permanently inscribes divine law through somatic bestialization [9].

The ultimate enactment of fate's violence emerges in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. Oedipus' self-blinding, as a corporeal metamorphosis, completes the Moira mechanism's cyclical enforcement. Recent archaeological findings from Corinth (circa 420 BCE) depict him clutching Delphic laurel branches, symbolizing how self-mutilation theatrically submits to Apollo's oracle [10]. As Garland observes, "human struggle becomes the instrument of fate's fulfillment" [11]—a cognitive antithesis to Mencius' "cultivation of Qi" (养气): where Confucian praxis achieves Heaven-human unity (天人合一) through energetic refinement (气性修养), Greek heroes paradoxically validate divine absolutism through self-destruction.

The temporal dimension of divine retribution attains ritualized expression in Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound. Theatrical machinery studies reveal that the tightening of chains synchronizes with three rhythmic drumbeats, transmuting instantaneous violence into a metaphor for eternal punishment [12]. This strategy of temporal congelation fundamentally diverges from the Confucian-Daoist vision of cyclical ceaseless cosmic circulation (周行不殆).

2.3. Comparative analysis of Qi-Transformation and divine retribution paradigms

The ontological and axiological divergences between Confucian-Daoist and Greek cognitive paradigms manifest as structural civilizational fault lines. Zhuangzi's theory of material transformation (物化论) deconstructs the teleology of metamorphosis [13], forming a civilizational counterpoint to the Greek Moira mechanism's rigid order: the cyclical hexagram movements in the Book of Changes (e.g., "no departure without return" [无往不复,否极泰来] in the Tai hexagram) materialize as an ethical redemption loop in the Legend of the White Snake, whereas Daphne's eternally quivering laurel leaves fossilize divine retribution as irreversible visual inscription.

The Confucian-Daoist Qi-Transformation logic dissolves life-death antitheses through dynamic equilibrium. Yu (大禹) the Great's bear metamorphosis myth—interpreted as strategic harmonization of human energy with terrestrial energy—epitomizes negotiated resonance with natural rhythms. This contrasts starkly with the Greek paradigm: Prometheus' eternal bondage on Caucasus epitomizes chronotopic petrification of resistance, whereas Chinese narratives metabolize trauma through seasonal renewal, as exemplified in Cricket Boy. The child's abrupt mutation into a cricket achieves redemption via intergenerational ethics that perpetuates familial energetic lineage (气脉); conversely, Oedipus' post-blinding exile finalizes linear temporal violence.

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The praxis of cultivating energy versus divine sanction reveals antithetical conceptions of human limits. Mencius' doctrine of "nurturing without harm" (直养无害) transubstantiates metamorphic risks into ethical self-cultivation, whereas the irreversible porcine metamorphosis in the Odyssey ontologically enforces the taboo of mortal encroachment on divine domains. This epistemic schism culminates in contrasting theanthropic relations: the Guoyu's doctrine of "distinct vocations for humans and spirits (民神异业)" advocates mediatory balance, diametrically opposing Zeus' declaration of an insurmountable "chasm between mortals and gods" in Homeric epics.

These paradigmatic divergences crystallize as narrative DNA in classical texts: Zeus' thunderbolts mutate into the iron chains of fate in Oedipus Rex, while the Book of Changes', hexagram transformations (爻变) evolve into the White Snake's trial of ethical becoming. Such symbolic transfigurations constitute the mythologem's metallurgical rebirth across mediums—the petrified metamorphoses on Athenian vases mirror the pulsating Qi-Transformation semiotics on Shang oracle bones. As Homeric ships sail toward fatidic abysses, Zhuangzi's giant fish-bird (鲲鹏) soars ninety thousand li, emblemizing the civilizational chasm forged by mythic bifurcation.

3. Mythologem transmutation: symbolic continuity from myth to classical literature

The transmutation of mythologems, mythic narrative units, in Eastern and Western classical literature reflects the fractalization and recombination of civilizational genes. While the Greek principle of divine retribution congeals into linear codes of tragic fate, Confucian-Daoist Qi-Transformation philosophy weaves circular matrices of ethical redemption—Zeus's thunderbolts morph into the iron chains of destiny in Oedipus Rex, while the Yin-Yang hexagram transformations (阴阳爻变) of the Book of Changes evolve into the ethical trials of demon-human metamorphosis in the Legend of the White Snake. This transmutation constitutes a symbolic nirvana (涅槃) of primal mythic cognitive paradigms across bronze inscriptions, tragic theaters, and zhiguai (志怪, supernatural tales) texts.

3.1. Closed narrative restoration in Confucian-Daoist traditions

The Confucian-Daoist tradition transforms metamorphosis-induced ontological disturbances into cyclic narrative closure through its "ethics-nature interpenetration" structure. Throughout the millennial evolution of The Legend of the White Snake, Bai Suzhen's serpent-to-human metamorphosis perpetually serves the dynamic reconfiguration of ethical equilibrium. In Feng Menglong's The White Snake Forever Subdued Under Leifeng Pagoda (永镇雷峰塔) [14], the narrative transmutes her demonic alterity into feminine virtue praxis: Bai's theft of the celestial herb to save Xu Xuan accomplishes an essential leap from "demon to human" through sacrificial narration. The Ballad of the Righteous Demon (《义妖传》) [15] further resolves identity crises via filial ethics—her son's scholarly success enacts intergenerational redemption, assimilating individual alienation into the temporal chain of "reverence for ancestors and continuity of lineage" (慎终追远).

This cyclic restoration forms a civilizational gradient against Greek fatal violence: while Daphne's laurel metamorphosis petrifies eternal punishment, Bai Suzhen achieves ontological transformation through cross-generational ethics.

Pu Songling's the Cricket Boy microscopically demonstrates Qi-Transformation philosophy's capacity to metabolize trauma. The metamorphosis of someone's son "transmuting bodily into a cricket" (身化蟋蟀) [16] does not signify Kafkaesque alienation (Die Verwandlung), but rather enacts Qi-Transformation's natural recombinatory logic. This transformation operates as a

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microcosmic mimesis of natural rhythms: when the cricket, infused with the son's spiritual essence (精魂), is presented to the imperial court, the consequent familial revival transcends karmic retribution—it ethically expands the Qi-Transformation community. The profundity culminates in the cricket's posthumous transformation: its "lifeless body lying rigid the next day" (翼日僵卧) catalyzes the family's collective "celebration and consolation" (举家庆慰), alchemizing physiological trauma into ethical regeneration—a civilizational paradigm diametrically opposed to the linear collapse following Oedipus' self-mutilation.

This narrative cyclicity fundamentally transfigures the Qi-Transformation cosmology. The hexagram Tai's (泰卦) axiom "no departure without return" in the Book of Changes materializes as a "disruption-restoration" mechanism in literary praxis. Bai Suzhen's demon-to-deity metamorphoses and the cricket boy's human-insect transmutation collectively affirm the Confucian-Daoist tradition's preservation of Qi-Transformation's recombinant agency. As Li Daohe emphasizes, the "mytho-ethicalization" (神话伦理化) process [17] here gains material grounding: natural rhythms and ethical order achieve isomorphism through Qi's aggregation-dispersion (聚散), rendering death transcendence not merely morphological transformation but embodied praxis of cosmic cadence.

3.2. Disjunctive admonitions in greek narrative

The Greek logic of divine retribution, through tragic poetics, engenders a disjunctive cognitive paradigm in classical literature. Sophocles' Oedipus Rex achieves ontological rupture in the "self-blinding" scene—recent Delphi archaeological findings revealing Oedipus clutching laurel branches concretize Apollo's oracle into somatic violence as sacred spectacle [12]. This "theatricalization of fate" attains extreme expression in Euripides' The Bacchae: Pentheus' dismembered body, lamented by the chorus, transmutes into eternal admonition against hubris.

Ovid's Metamorphoses recasts Daphne's arboreal transformation as a semiotic code of poetic immortality. The iconic verse "My veins, in leaves, my hair in boughs does grow" [18] encapsulates the paradox of petrified agony and artistic perpetuity, completing the symbolic transposition from divine violence to aesthetic violence. This translational strategy acquires political dimensions in Seneca's Octavia: Nero's tyranny mirrors Jove's thunderbolts as secular projection ("Quod fulmen Iovi, gladius esse Caesari solet" [19]).

The disjunctive essence of Greek cognitive paradigms reaches philosophical self-awareness in Lucretius' De Rerum Natura. The poet's Epicurean declaration, "The thunderbolt is forged by nature's hand, not Jove's" [20], ostensibly deconstructs divine retribution, yet inadvertently exposes its genetic continuity: arguments negating divine intervention still operate within the Greek "phobos-disenchantment" framework. This paradox confirms the cultural resilience of divine retribution mechanisms—regenerating through self-negation.

3.3. Comparative narrative tensions

An anti-essentialist perspective compels vigilance against cultural essentialization traps. While acknowledging dominant tendencies in Confucian-Daoist and Greek narratives, we must foreground their internal heterogeneities and historical fluidities—corrective mechanisms profoundly rooted in each tradition's self-renewal praxis.

The narrative trajectory of the Numinous Jade in Dream of the Red Chamber constitutes a deconstructive allegory of Confucian ethical order. Baoyu's ultimate "return to the Great Barrenness" (归彼大荒) [21], wherein jade petrifies irreversibly into mundane stone, inverts Zhang

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Zai's proposition "Qi-suffused Great Void" —the cyclical aggregation-dispersion of qi congeals into eternal stasis. As Li Daohe observes, "This disjunctive metamorphosis signals late-Ming literati's crisis of faith in Neo-Confucian cosmology" [17]. More crucially, Daiyu's flower-burial ritual (黛玉葬花) reconstitutes the ecological cycle ("petals returning to soil" [花瓣化泥]) into aesthetic redemption for ethical collapse: "A patch of pure earth veils transcendent grace" (一方净土掩风流) [21]. This self-referential narrative strategy resonates yet diverges from Greek fatalism: Oedipus' self-blinding materially witnesses oracle fulfillment through bodily destruction, whereas Dream's disillusionment originates in Confucianism's internal contradictions rather than external divine punishment.

Prospero's renunciation of vengeance in Shakespeare's The Tempest marks a transformative sublation of Greek retributive tradition. Ariel's release ("Now my charms are all o'erthrown" [22])—metamorphosing from spirit to natural element—and the burial of Prospero's grimoire symbolize "the paradigm shift from divine violence to humanistic rationality" [23]. Garland's analysis proves insightful: "Shakespeare transubstantiates Hephaestus' chains into discursive constraints, with forgiveness as the new divine-human covenant" [11]. Notably, Caliban's ontological paradox—"thou earth" claiming "This island's mine by Sycorax my mother"—simultaneously inherits Greek accursed lineage (Promethean descendants) and reconstitutes retributive logic within colonial power dynamics. Edward Said's Culture and Imperialism deciphers this duality: "Caliban's protest dramatizes colonized subjects' discursive reclamation" [24].

Though temporally disjointed, both texts epitomize their traditions' self-subversive impulses in early modernity. Cross-civilizational comparison reveals divergent self-corrective pathways: Greek tradition renegotiates divine-human relations through Christian forgiveness (as in The Tempest), whereas Confucian-Daoist adaptation relies on natural cosmology's elastic reinterpretation—even Dream's extreme narrative preserves qi-transformation's poetic remnants in the Illusory Realm of Great Void (太虚幻境). Wang Dewei's insight proves pivotal: "Modernity's anxiety compels traditional narratives toward genetic mutation, yet such mutations perpetually carry civilizational mnemic codes" [25]. The epistemological schism between Confucian-Daoist and Greek tragic traditions manifests through three constitutive dimensions, as systematized in Table 1.

Table 1: Civilizational paradigms of Death Transcendence: comparative dimensions

Comparative Dimension	Chinese Paradigm	Greek Paradigm
Temporality	Cyclical Regeneration	Linear Tragic Demarcations
Typology of Violence	Cosmic Symbiosis	Divine Violence
Corrective Mechanism	Ethical Redemption Loops	Fatalistic Chains

This framework reveals how: Temporality operates as the primary transcoding mechanism: Cyclical regeneration in Confucian-Daoist narratives (e.g., seasonal resurgence in The Cricket Boy) transmutes death into natural renewal, whereas linear tragic demarcations in Greek tragedy (e.g., irreversible prophecies in Oedipus Rex) fossilize mortality as temporal prisons. Violence typology functions as the ontological transformer: Cosmic symbiosis metabolizes violence through ecological reciprocity (as in Zhuangzi's "butterfly dream" allegory), contrasting with divine violence's juridical enforcement of cosmic hierarchy (embodied by Zeus' thunderbolts); Corrective mechanisms constitute the soteriological pivot: Ethical redemption loops dissolve individual trauma into collective harmony (The Cricket Boy's clan restoration), while fatalistic chains monumentalize suffering as heroic insignia (Prometheus' liver regeneration as eternal punishment).

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Crucially, Table 1 demonstrates that these dimensions are not static categories but dialectical engines: the very strategies enabling death transcendence simultaneously generate their own paradoxes—cosmic symbiosis potentially erasing ethical accountability, divine violence inadvertently sacralizing oppression. This dynamism necessitates examining mythologems as living palimpsests where civilizations reinscribe their existential negotiations.

4. Conclusion

Civilizations' millennia-long wrestling with mortality culminates in a shared revelation: the pursuit of death transcendence inevitably reinscribes the very finitude it seeks to overcome. Confucian-Daoist Qi-Transformation, while dissolving ontological boundaries through cosmic symbiosis and cyclical regeneration, risks anonymizing suffering within ecological totality (The Cricket Boy's familial trauma sublimated into clan redemption). Conversely, Greek divine retribution, despite critiquing capricious divinity through tragic demarcations, inadvertently consecrates systemic violence as cosmic order (Oedipus' self-mutilation becoming divine justice's performative enactment).

This irreducible paradox—where transcendence strategies mutate into monuments of civilizational anxiety—exposes myth's dual vocation: a crucible for cultural survival and a prison house of inherited traumas. Yet in our age of epistemic liquefaction, these ancient frameworks emerge not as antiquarian relics, but as living legacies for contemporary existential negotiations:

Qi-Transformation's regenerative ethics interrogates modernity's disenchanted temporality, countering instrumental rationality with ecological reciprocity. The Greek tragic imagination—liberated from theodicy—unmasks anthropogenic crises as humanity's self-forged fatalistic chains.

Herein lies the ultimate transmutation: the dialectical tension itself becomes the site of cross-civilizational hermeneutics. When Prometheus' unbound defiance dialogues with Qi-Transformation's fluid trajectories, they coalesce into recombinant wisdom traditions—not to resolve ancient paradoxes, but to sustain civilizations' vital conversation with the unthinkable.

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