

# ***Views on Life and Death in Taoism and Ancient Greek Religion: Deities Governing Life and Death in Taoism and Ancient Greek Religion***

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**Abstract:** Life and death are inevitable processes in life, and religions have unfolded rich imaginations and discussions around this topic. Taoism and ancient Greek religion, as religions of the East and West respectively, have formed their own unique views on life and death. This paper, through literature analysis and comparative analysis, studies the views on life and death reflected in the deities that govern life and death in Taoism and ancient Greek religion, compares the similarities and differences in their views on life and death, and explores the reasons behind them. The study finds that Taoism believes that human life originates from the Dao, while ancient Greek religion holds that humans were created by the gods. Taoism seeks immortality and the self-determination of fate, favoring a peaceful and tranquil life, whereas ancient Greek religion emphasizes the glory of the present life and the irresistibility of fate, advocating adventure and ambition. Additionally, in Taoism, there is a belief in an afterlife following death, while ancient Greek religion lacks a clear concept of the afterlife. These aspects show the differences in the views on life and death between the two religions. Despite all these differences, there are some similarities in their respect and appreciation for the value of life and in using the moral judgment of the afterlife to maintain social order.

**Keywords:** Taoism, Ancient Greek Religion, Deities of Life and Death, Views on Life and Death

## **1. Introduction**

Life and death are problems that people must face, and in front of the uncontrollable destiny of life and death, human beings have engaged in endless contemplation and imagination. Religion attributes the destiny of life and death to supernatural forces, and life and death, fate and fortune are all controlled by spirits in charge of life and death. Taoism, as a native Chinese religion, combines myths and legends with official and folk beliefs formed a unique system of deities and immortals in charge of life and death[1]; whereas Ancient Greece, as one of the main sources of Western civilisation, has myths and stories about deities who are in charge of life and death and about mortals who are faced with life and death[2]. Under different cultural backgrounds, the descriptions of the gods of life and death in the two religions show similar and different characteristics. In this paper, we use a literature

review and comparative analysis to explore the deities in charge of life and death in Taoism and Ancient Greek religion, compare the similarities and differences in the concepts of life and death embodied in the deities of life and death in the two religions, and further analyse the reasons for the emergence of the two and the implied cultural differences, so as to provide new perspectives for showing the diversity and universality of the concepts of human beings' lives and deaths under the perspective of the deities of life and death in the religions.

## **2. Deities Governing Life and Death in Taoism and Ancient Greek Religion**

### **2.1. The God of Life and Death in Taoism**

Taoism believes that human life is generated from the nine *ch'i* sent forth by the Three Pristine Ones, the supreme deities. The sun, moon, stars, yin and yang, the five elements, as well as all humans, creatures, and various species, are all created and nourished by these natural energies[3].

After birth, the gods of fate oversee life and death, monitoring good and evil deeds. The Taoist system of fate includes deities such as the Jade Emperor, the Five Dipper, the Three Officials of Heaven, Earth, and Water, and the City Gods. The Five Dipper originate from the worship of stars and have the functions of "East Dipper for calculation, West Dipper for recording names, North Dipper for death, and South Dipper for life"[4]. The Three Officials emerged from the Celestial Master Daoism and later evolved into examiners of good and evil[5]. In the process of integrating Taoist beliefs about fate, a hierarchical structure was formed, with the officials of the deities governing fate examining human actions and reporting to the Three Officials and the Five Dipper, ultimately determining a person's fortune and misfortune.

In the afterlife, Daoism has integrated folk, official, and Buddhist beliefs and formed a netherworld system centered around the King of Fengdu. During the Eastern Han Dynasty, Mount Tai's status was elevated, eventually becoming the Mount Tai's Emperor, who presided over the underworld[6]. Concurrently, Daoism developed the concept of the Northern Capital of Luo Feng serving as a place for punishing souls with severe sins, governed by the Northern Emperor of Fengdu[7]. After Buddhism was introduced, its concept of the "Yama Hell" merged with the beliefs of Mount Tai's ghost management and the Northern Emperor of Fengdu, resulting in a Fengdu Hell concept led by the King of Fengdu and supported by the Ten Kings of Hell[8].

### **2.2. Deities of Life and Death in Ancient Greek Religion**

Regarding the origin of life, the ancient Greeks believed that humans were created by the gods, with two prevailing theories: According to Plato, Prometheus created humans from clay[9]; in Hesiod's account, there were five ages of humans, with the first two ages created by the second-generation god king Uranus, and the last three ages created by Zeus[10].

In ancient Greek mythology, Moira controls the destiny of humans after birth, even determining the fate of the Olympian gods. Moira are three fates who are descendants of the goddess Nyx including Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos. The three of them bestow good and evil upon humans at birth, determining the fate and fortune of both gods and humans[10].

The underworld in Greek mythology is ruled by Hades. After the Titanomachy, Hades became the king of the underworld, co-ruling with his wife Persephone[10]. In the realm of the dead, there are three judges: Rhadamanthys, Aeacus, and Minos, who preside over the souls of the deceased, judge and punish the souls of the dead based on their actions in life[11]. The god Thanatos guides the souls to the underworld, while his brother Hypnos governs sleep and Morpheus governs dreams. The goddess Hecate presides over ghosts, demons, and magic in the underworld[10].

### 3. A Comparison of the Views on Life and Death in Taoism and Ancient Greek Religion

The deities revered by Taoism and Ancient Greek religion that govern life and death reflect two religion's respective views on life and death. While both religions share some similarities in their perspectives on life and death, there are also differences. The comparative analysis can be conducted from four dimensions: the origin of life, the understanding of fate, the attitude towards the present life, and the perception of the afterlife.

#### 3.1. The Origin of Human Life

In Taoist belief, The Three Pristine Ones—Taoism's highest deities—are considered to be formed from the vital energy of the Dao, while humans are the result of the evolution of nine *ch'i* emanating from The Three Pristine Ones. Taoism posits that all beings in the universe originate from the "Dao"[12]. Both humans and deities are believed to be born from it, a product of natural evolution. Consequently, in Taoist views of life and death, deities are not the creators of life; rather, they are part of the natural order and do not play a decisive leading role. In contrast, in Ancient Greek religion, there are two predominant accounts of human origins, both highlighting the gods' creative power. Whether it is Zeus or Prometheus, they are seen as decisive factors in human birth. In the process of divine creation of humans, Ancient Greek religion emphasizes the gods' direct creative role, while Taoism tends towards natural evolution.

#### 3.2. The Arrangement of Human Destiny

Both Taoism and Ancient Greek religion agree that human destiny is prearranged by divine beings. The Taoist classic "The Profound and Mysterious Spiritual Treasure Scripture of the Nine Heavens of the Nature Generating the Creatures" states: "Tai Yi holds the talisman, the Emperor assesses fate, the Recorder keeps the register, and the God of Fate determines the calculation"[3], which means that a person's lifespan and the fortune or misfortune of their destiny are predetermined by the God of Fate at birth. In Greek mythology, the Three Fates each have their roles: Clotho spins the thread of life, determining one's lifespan; Lachesis draws lots with her eyes closed, randomly deciding the fortune or misfortune of one's life; Atropos records the events of one's life and ultimately cuts the thread of life, declaring the end of life[13].

However, Taoism and Ancient Greek religion have differing views on whether fate can be changed. Taoism emphasizes self-determination of fate, believing that one can alter their destiny through religious practice, as stated in the "The Master Who Embraces Simplicity": "My fate is in my hands, not in divinity"[14]. The "Scripture of the Northern Dipper of Mysterious Power Prolonging the Original Life Span" mentions that by worshiping the Big Dipper, one can "enter the golden gate, unite with the divine, transcend the three realms, and never reincarnate"[15]. In contrast, Ancient Greek religion holds a fatalistic view, believing that fate is inevitable. Whether it is the omnipotent deities, great heroes, or ordinary people, they all must submit to the arrangements of fate. Deities cannot change the mortal's end of facing death; even if it is their own husband or wife, they must accept the fact that they grow old. The dawn goddess Eos, Ceres, and Vulcan all wished for their partners to remain young forever, but in the end, they could not fulfill this desire. Their partners would ultimately succumb to the arrangements of fate and face aging and death[16]. In Taoism, praying to deities can help one escape the cycle of reincarnation and achieve immortality; in Greek mythology, the fate determined by the Three Fates is unchangeable, and even the gods cannot escape from it.

### 3.3. Human Life in the Present World

Based on the theory of fate, Taoism and Ancient Greek religion differ in their attitudes towards life in the present world. Taoism leans towards romanticism, emphasizing detachment from worldly affairs and the enjoyment of life in the present. It advocates for health and safety, promoting practices of nourishing life and moderation, as well as a lifestyle of tranquility and freedom. The pursuit of immortality in Taoism aims to extend the happiness of this life and to hope for a healthy and everlasting existence in the afterlife.

In contrast, Ancient Greek religion places greater emphasis on an actively engaged attitude towards life, valuing the creation of glorious achievements in the present world. As exemplified by Achilles, whom Odysseus encounters in the underworld, the Greeks tend to prefer a short but glorious life over a long life of obscurity[17]. They believe that even the life of a poor farmer working on barren land is more valuable than being a hero in the realm of the dead. The Greeks prioritize the glory of the present life, as they believe that although the soul continues to exist in the underworld after death, it can no longer accomplish anything. Therefore, they place the greatest importance on creating a legacy that can be remembered forever.

While there are differences in the views of the present life between the East and West, there is a consensus in the pursuit of health and longevity. Taoist believers pray to the stars of the North Dipper to eliminate disasters and extend life[15], while the ancient Greeks prayed to the god of medicine, Asclepius, for health[18]. Whether in Taoism or Ancient Greek religion, the desire for health and safety is universal.

### 3.4. The World After Death

Both Taoism and Ancient Greek religion involve the judgment of one's actions in life after death. In Taoism, the deceased are judged by the King of Fengdu, who determines their fate in the next life based on their good and evil deeds. As stated in the "Declarations of the Perfected": "On the day of judgment, when sins are examined for good or ill, one must come to this first palace"[19]. The deceased must go to the Palace of Cruel Netherworld, where the Northern King of Fengdu and his officials assess their merits and demerits to decide their destination. In Ancient Greek religion, after crossing the River Styx, the souls are judged by the three judges, Rhadamanthys, Aeacus, and Minos, who determine their fate in the underworld. These belief systems use judgment to reward good deeds and punish evil ones, encouraging people to do good and accumulate virtue.

In the concept of the soul after death, Taoism and Ancient Greek religion differ. Taoism embraces the idea of reincarnation, believing that the soul is immortal and its future life is influenced by the deeds of the past life. As stated in the "Declarations of the Perfected": "Those who are good become immortals, those who fall from immortality become human, those who are evil become ghosts, and those ghosts who are blessed become human again"[19]. Through this cyclical law, reincarnation is achieved, with the Ten Kings of Hell overseeing the process. In contrast, while Ancient Greek religion acknowledges the immortality of the soul, it does not have a clear concept of reincarnation. After death, the soul does not return to the world of the living. Souls are punished in Tartarus according to their sins, and the innocent enjoy peace in Elysium[20]. The souls of heroes are eternally remembered, such as Perseus, who was led to the heavens by Zeus and turned into a constellation, symbolizing glory[21].

## 4. Reasons for the Formation of Life and Death Concepts in the Two Religions

The understanding of deities governing life and death in Taoism and Ancient Greek religion, as well as the formation of their views on life and death, are deeply influenced by their unique geographical

environments, economic contexts, and cultural concepts. These factors intertwine to shape the specific understanding and expression of life and death in the two religions.

#### **4.1. Geographical Environment**

China is a continental country where the Chinese nation relies on agriculture for its livelihood, closely connected to nature. Under this background, the Chinese have developed a concept of harmonious coexistence with nature, pursuing stability and peace. They believe that life originates from nature, and both gods and humans share the vital energy of heaven and earth, being the result of the universe's natural evolution.

In contrast, Ancient Greece was surrounded by the sea on three sides, with numerous islands and a rugged coastline, which facilitated maritime trade and exploration. This geographical feature endowed Greek culture with openness and extroversion. The Greeks emphasized a spirit of exploration and personal adventure, believing that human character and abilities are bestowed by the divine, and directly linked to divinity[22].

#### **4.2. Economic Factors**

The stability and self-sufficiency of ancient Chinese agricultural society shaped Taoism's profound understanding of life cycles and seasonal changes. Observing the cyclical nature of all things, with the coming and going of cold and warmth, the harvest in autumn and the storage in winter, the ancients naturally developed the concept of life reincarnation, which allowed the Buddhist idea of reincarnation to be quickly accepted upon its introduction.

For Ancient Greek, the society relied on commerce and navigation for its prosperity, which propelled the development of mathematics and logical reasoning, fostering a rational spirit. They accepted the arrangement of fate, respected death as the natural end of life, and did not form the concept of reincarnation. However, the Greeks believed that great souls are immortal.

#### **4.3. Cultural Factors**

The eastern part of China is a vast sea, where the sun and moon rise from the East Sea, which remains constant and unchanging. This has led people to believe that the East Sea contains an everlasting elixir of life. In an agricultural country, the cycle of all things is a natural norm, leading to the belief that humans, gods, and all things originate from the "Dao" and can return to their source. This idea has inspired people to believe that they can transcend the limitations of life, return to the original source of the "Dao", achieve immortality, and control their destiny. Influenced by this, Taoism pursues the ideals of controlling fate and achieving immortality.

The ancient Greeks, on the other hand, formed their thoughts and culture through commerce and navigation, which influenced their views on life and death. They believed that nature shaped the gods, and the union of gods created more gods, while humans are limited beings created by the gods. Although gods possess superhuman powers, they must also follow fate, and humans must comply even more. Therefore, the ancient Greeks respected fate and death, preferring to create an eternal history through great achievements rather than pursuing immortality.

Taoism and Ancient Greek religion differ in their understanding of fate and pursuit of life, but both embody the idea of respecting human life and valuing its worth. Both religions regard human life as precious, emphasizing the importance of cherishing life and aspiring to have a joyful and fulfilling life experience.



#### 4.4. Social Factors

In both Taoism and Ancient Greek religion, the concept of moral judgment is incorporated, aimed at maintaining social order and harmony. The afterlife worldview in both religions emphasizes the moral scrutiny of one's actions in life. This reminds believers to exercise self-discipline in their daily lives and encourages them to avoid harming others, so as not to disrupt social harmony and stability. Through this approach, religious doctrines promote the internalization of moral norms, providing spiritual support for social order.

#### 5. Conclusion

This paper compares the deities governing life and death in Taoism and Ancient Greek religion, analyzing the life and death views reflected by these deities and exploring the reasons behind the formation of these views in both religions. Both Taoism and Ancient Greek religion have established complete systems of deities related to life and death. Influenced by natural geography, modes of production, cultural thought, and social factors, Taoism believes humans are from nature and aspires to the self-determination of fate and immortality, while Ancient Greek religion holds the gods create life and pursues glory in the present life and does not anticipate an afterlife. However, both share similarities in respecting and valuing life and maintaining social order. The concepts of life and death deities in Taoism and Ancient Greek religion are a personification and concretization of their understanding of life and death, containing the life and death views of the two religions, providing a new perspective for understanding human views on life and death. Nevertheless, exploring life and death views solely from the perspective of deities' images and functions has certain limitations. To further investigate the life and death views contained in religions, one can continue to delve into religious rituals, scriptures, doctrines, and teachings.

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