

# Is the Divine Model of Literary Creation Obsolete? Ironies, Paradoxes, and Insights

**Gu Mingdong**

**Abstract:** Across cultures, the divine has often been used as the ultimate yardstick for measuring the achievement of an artist and hence become the aesthetic ideal in artistic creation. The relationship between the divine and the artist, however, is a controversial topic. While some scholars consider the divine model of creation still has some value for aesthetic studies, some others dismiss it as meaningless to creation in our time. To better understand the complexity of the controversy, this paper conducts an inquiry into some cross-cultural ideas of the divine in aesthetic thought and attempts to reveal the similarities and differences as well as the subtleties, ironies, and paradoxes that often escape the attention of scholars and theorists in the realm of literature and art.

**Keywords:** divinity; artist as god; creative model; aesthetic ideal; human creativity

**Author:** **Gu Mingdong** is Distinguished Visiting Professor in the School of International Studies at Yangzhou University (Yangzhou 225000, China) and Katherine R. Cecil Professor in the School of Arts, Humanities, Technology at University of Texas at Dallas (Dallas 75080, USA). His research interests include comparative literature, poetics, critical theory, comparative thought, and cultural studies (Email: mdgu@utdallas.edu).

**标题:** 神性文学创作模式过时了吗? 相关争论的反讽、悖论与洞见

**内容摘要:** “神”这一概念在不同文化中一直被用来作为衡量一位艺术家成就的最高标准,因而成为艺术创作中的审美理想。但是,神性与艺术家的关系却是一个颇有争议的话题。一些学者认为神性文学创作模式对审美研究仍然具有一定的价值,而另一些学者则认为其对当代的创作毫无意义而不屑一顾。为了更好地理解这一争议,本文对跨文化美学思想中的相关观念进行研究,试图揭示此争议中常为文艺领域的学者和理论家所忽视的异同、微妙之处、反讽及悖论。

**关键词:** 神性; 如神的作者; 创作模式; 审美理想; 人的创造力

**作者简介:** 顾明栋,扬州大学外国语学院特聘客座教授、美国达拉斯德州大学人文艺术学院凯萨琳·西塞尔讲席教授,主要研究领域包括西方文论、英美文学和中外文学文化关系等。

Artistic creativity is a human endeavor, but in major literary traditions, creativity is believed to relate to the divine. In Greek mythology, creativity is attributed to the Muses, daughters of the supreme god Zeus.<sup>1</sup> In early Greek thought, Plato considered literary creativity as a kind of divine madness that possesses the poet.<sup>2</sup> In classical times, Julius Caesar Scaliger, influenced by Plato's idea of divine inspirations, proclaims: "while they [other arts] [...] represent things just as they are, in some sense like a speaking picture, the poet depicts quite another sort of nature, and a variety of fortunes; in fact, by so doing, he transforms himself almost into a second deity" (139). This line of thought continued into the Age of Enlightenment. In his magna opus, *New Science*, a treatise supposed to probe into history, language, poetry, and human sciences in rationalist terms, Vico suggests that poetic "wisdom began with the Muse, whom Homer in a golden passage of the *Odyssey*, defines as the knowledge of good and evil or what was later called divination [...] This popular wisdom contemplated God in the attributes of His providence, so that from divinari, to divine, his essence was called divinity" (325).

Up to our own time, people across cultures are fond of using god or gods as the ultimate yardstick for measuring the artistic achievement of an artist. A most common practice is to view the relationship between the artist and his creation in terms of an analogy that treats the latter as a god. As a result, the divine continues to be the aesthetic ideal in artistic representation. It is therefore reasonable to believe that the concept of art as being related to the divine is not obsolete, at least in popular parlance. As I will show shortly, in the domains of literary and art criticism, the idea of the artist as a god has given rise to a divine model of artistic creation, endorsed by some prominent creative artists and thinkers. The relationship between the divine and artistic creation, however, is a topic that has aroused controversies in our time. While some scholars consider the divine model of creation still has some value for literary studies, some theorists like Roland Barthes and Jonathan Culler have expressed views which practically dismisses the divine model as meaningless to creation.<sup>3</sup> To better understand the complexity of this controversial topic, I will conduct an inquiry into some cross-cultural ideas of the divine in aesthetic thought

1 See Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, New York: Mentor Book, 1969, 37.

2 See Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961, 220.

3 For example, while Roland Barthes argues against the text as an entity "releasing a single 'theological' meaning the 'message' of the Author God," Jonathan Culler simply dismisses the divine conception of literary creation as "useless." See Bathes, "The Death of the Author," *Image Music Text*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, 146; Culler, "Omniscience," *Narrative* 12 (2004): 23.

and attempt to reveal the similarities and differences as well as the subtleties, ironies, and paradoxes that often escape the attention of scholars and theorists in the realm of literature and art.

### I. The Nature of the Divine Model in Conceptual Terms

Generally speaking, the divine is conceived in two major modes, one theological and the other intellectual. The theological approach conceives the divine as a creator of the world or primal mover of nature. The intellectual approach conceives the divine as the first principle in nature perceived by the human intellect. This article will examine both conceptions. Interestingly, the divine in the second conception is also called “One” or *pneuma* in both Chinese and Western traditions, which covers a gamut of ideas related to intellect and reason. For meaningful comparison, I will select conceptions by Plotinus from the West and Liu Xie from China, as both thinkers synthesized ideas of the divine prior to them and served as a connection with later thinkers. In Plotinus’ conception, the One manifests itself in a triad: the Good, the Intellect and its knowledge, and the intellectual principle. As a result, in his discourse, the discussion of gods is largely conducted in a symbolic manner. In Liu Xie’s conception, the One is called *shenli* (divine principle), equivalent to the Dao, and manifests itself through virtue, sages, and human spirituality. Although both talked about the divine, their conceptions of gods have little implication of a personal creation god in the Christian sense. In Plotinus’s discourse, he did talk about gods as prior models for artistic imitation, but these gods are simply perfect forms like Plato’s Idea or Aristotle’s artistic ideals, objects for the highest order of imitation. In many ways, Plotinus’s conception of gods represents a metaphysical notion that comprises both the Platonic Idea and Aristotle’s empirical Ideal. In his analysis of Greek art, images of Helen, Aphrodite, and other gods are universally acknowledged images of beauty. Where does their beauty come from? Plotinus answered this question with a series of rhetorical questions meant as answers: “Is not this beauty everywhere form, which comes from the maker upon that which he has brought into being, as in the arts it was said to come from the arts upon their works? Well, then, are the things made and the forming principle in matter beautiful, but the forming principle, which is not in matter but in the maker, the first immaterial one, is that not beauty?” (243) The forming principle is rooted in intellect and is both transcendental and immanent, subjective and objective: “There is therefore in nature a rational forming principle which is the archetype of the beauty in body, and the rational principle in soul is more beautiful than that in nature, and is also the source of that in nature” (245).

The subjective and objective duality also underlies the Chinese conception of the divine in art. In traditional China, popular belief holds that everything in the universe is endowed with *shen* (the divine or essence). Mountains, rivers, forests, and land, each has a god (or spirit) who is often personified. Philosophers hold a similar view albeit in impersonal and non-theological terms. Guanzi (d. 645 B.C.), for example, said: “The essence of myriad objects can transform to give life. On earth, it generates five grains. In heaven it gave rise to various stars. When it floats between heaven and earth, it is called ghosts and the divine. Hidden in a person’s heart, it turns him into a sage” (*Guanzi* 154). In this passage, *shen* or the divine obviously refers to the essence of myriad things in the universe, as well as to the intellect and its knowledge in the mind. This Chinese conception comes even closer to Abrams’s view of Platonism in the Renaissance, which connects the Idea in the individual mind with the universal Idea in nature.

Here, we need to pay a special attention to the choice of words in the Chinese phrasing. The divine essence is like a floating energy, which flows to and resides in myriad things in the universe. This energy is also called *qi* (literally “air,” metaphysically pneuma) in Chinese philosophical thinking, and *wenqi* (literary pneuma) [a compound word which combines *wen* and *qi*] in aesthetic thought. What is the relationship between *shen* (the divine) and *qi* (pneuma)? Liu Dakui (1698-1779 AD), a Qing dynasty poet-scholar, described their relationship thus: “The divine is the master of pneuma. The pneuma is the function of the divine. The divine is the essence of pneuma” (“Lunwen ouji” 137). He meant that the divine controls literary creativity and literary works represent the outward manifestation of the divine. The ultimate source of creativity is the divine. Here again, we see the duality of transcendence and immanence in the divine. Renaissance Platonism also viewed the divine Idea as something that flows in the universe. Only, while the Chinese use the analogy of air, their Renaissance equivalents employ an optical analogy, “according to which rays of archetypal beauty, streaming from the countenance of God, are reflected in three mirrors, one in the angels, a second in the souls of men, a third in the material world” (Abrams 44).

Plotinus’s view of the artist/nature relationship and Liu Xie’s view of the same relationship are mutually illuminating. From one direction, Plotinus’s view provides an insight into the Chinese conception of the relationship between the Dao and literature, first posited by Liu Xie and continuously expounded by later theorists like Ye Xie. Plotinus thought that there are two kinds of wisdom involved in artistic imitation: the wisdom of nature and the wisdom of the artist. The wisdom of nature, which presides at artistic making, is everywhere: “Some wisdom makes

all the things which have come into being, whether they are products of art or nature, and everywhere it is a wisdom which is in charge of their making” (Plotinus 253). Plotinus viewed it as coming from the ultimately unknowable One. In this sense, the first kind of wisdom resembles and illuminates Liu Xie’s *shenli* (divine principle) which is responsible for “all creations in the universe” (Liu Xie 18). Plotinus recognized the wisdom of the artist as a separate category, but he also viewed it as inseparably bound to the wisdom of nature: “But the craftsman goes back again to the wisdom of nature, according to which he has come into existence, a wisdom which is no longer composed of theorems, but is one thing as a whole, not the wisdom made into one out of many components, but rather resolved into multiplicity from one” (253-255). Plotinus called it “primal wisdom” or “intellectual principle.” It is in nature, yet nature itself is its source. He went to some lengths to explore how nature came to possess it, whether nature derived it from some other source, whether it is self-generative, and drew the conclusion that “The true wisdom [...] is substance, and the true substance is wisdom; and the worth of substance comes from wisdom, and it is because it comes from wisdom that it is true substance” (255).

## II. The Controversy over the Divine Model

Since art is mainly a representation of the observed universe or an expression of inner experiences resulting from observing the universe, conceptions of artistic creation is invariably related to conceptions of the humankind’s relation to the universe or Nature. Each cultural tradition’s approach to the universe is predicated on certain conceptual models. As one scholar points out, “all the definitions of nature and of the human are given in terms of models, models filled by divine, evolutionary, or merely human will” (Owen 83). The creationist model, which conceives of God as the primal maker of the world is one of them. It has exerted a profound impact upon conceptions of art as well as upon the relationship between nature and humanity in Western culture. In literary creation, the creationist model gave rise to a model of literary creativity based on the author-as-god analogy. In 1886, Mark Twain compared his literary creation to that of God: “When the Lord finished the world, he pronounced it good. That is what I said about my first work, too. But Time, I tell you, Time takes the confidence out of these incautious opinions. It is more than likely that He thinks about the world, now, pretty much as I think about the *Innocents Abroad*. The fact is, there is a trifle too much water in both” (DeVoto 764). According to recent studies, this conception is still very much alive. Susan Lanser, for example, notes: “It is not accidental that we use the term author

to refer to God or that the root of the word ‘authority’ links it to the notion of the creator or promoter” (84). In a more systematic study, Barbara K. Olson, taking the author/God analogy seriously, has demonstrated through well-documented research the reasons why the analogy continues to have significance for conceptualizations of authorial creation in narration. In her article on “Omniscience” in narration, Jonathan Culler, despite his criticism of Olson’s study as an “extreme instance” of taking the author-God analogy seriously and his intention to put the analogy behind us, admits to the power of the analogy and acknowledges that it may help us “to imagine the possibility of a creator, a god, a sentient being, as undetectable to us as the novelist would be to the characters who exist in the universe of the text this god created” (23).

Nevertheless, Culler considers the analogy useless to literary study because “The fundamental point is that since we do not know whether there is a God and what she might know, divine omniscience is not a model that helps us think about authors or about literary narration” (*ibid.*). In a rejoinder, Olson disagrees with Culler’s dismissal of the author-God analogy and cites more evidence to argue that authors from Henry Fielding to Virginia Woolf have long been enamored by the analogy and reflected on literary creation in theological terms. Even authors who consider the belief in the existence of God “obscene” have no qualms in employing the author-as-god model for theorization. Olsen analyzes the case of Woolf, a self-professed atheist, and compares her literary universe to a “narrational cosmology” by quoting from the latter’s own words: “And yet we who have named other presences equally impalpable—and called them God for instance or again The Holy Ghost—have no name but novelist or poet, or sculptor or musician, for this greatest of all preservers and creators” (Woolf 61-62).

Aware of the power of the author-as-God model, some comparative scholars claim that the formation of aesthetic systems is heavily dependent upon metaphysical conceptions of the universe, especially models of cosmogony. Stephen Owen, a scholar of Chinese and comparative literature suggests that the fundamental difference between Chinese aesthetic system and its Western counterpart is largely determined by the historical fact that each tradition followed a different model of cosmogony in high antiquity. In the West, the model of cosmogony is a creationist one based on the Christian conception that God created all living creatures in the world including humans: “Humankind was humankind not in its differentiation from the beasts, but had its identity from a divine model, which it replicated prolifically” (Owen 82). He argues that even after Darwin’s theory of evolution forced many people to abandon the divine model of cosmogony, the creationist model has

had considerable impact upon human conception of teleology and entelechy in metaphysical thinking.

By contrast, the Chinese followed a different model of cosmogony, in which the world was conceived to begin differently than that in the creationist model. In Stephen Owen's apt summary, the world in ancient Chinese conception "simply happened, uncreated either by transcendent plan or empirical necessity" (83). Owen's view is solidly grounded in Chinese thought, especially in the writings of Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Huainanzi. Laozi's *Daode jing* (The Way and Its Power) states: "The Way begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets the myriad creature. The myriad creatures carry on their backs the yin and embraces in their arms the yang and are the blending of the generative forces of the two" (Lao Tzu 103). Clearly, the cosmogony conceived by Laozi is different from the creationist model of cosmogony in the Judaic-Christian tradition.

The difference in creative models gave rise to some further differences in poetic creations in the Chinese and Western traditions. In the created world of the West, Owen observes, "The model of a transcendent and hidden Plan, which may end the world as it was begun, authorizes the little 'makers' to fabricate their fictions and metaphors, and the secret meanings of these lesser creations belong to the 'maker' alone: theirs is the power to begin, direct, and end their stories, and their little creatures run through strictly guided paces under the guise of free will" (ibid.). By contrast, in the Chinese tradition, "In the uncreated world such willful fabrication is perverse, a mere deception: the poet is concerned with the authentic presentation of 'what is,' either interior experience or exterior percept. The *shih* poet's function is to see the order in the world, the pattern behind its infinite division; like Confucius, he 'transmits but does not create'" (ibid. 84). In other words, the poet in the Chinese conception is only a transmitter, not a maker in the Greek conception, still less a creator, a minor deity.<sup>1</sup>

### III. Subtle Ironies and Paradoxes of the Divine Model

Owen's conceptualization has made an important connection between Chinese and Western literary traditions. I agree that models of cosmogony may have their impact upon conceptions of artistic creation and aesthetics, but I venture to question the claim that the presence or absence of a divine model of cosmogony in a tradition determines the conception of the artist as a creator or transmitter. I argue that though the dominant model of cosmogony in the Chinese tradition is a self-generative one

1 This view for a time gained a wide currency but was later criticized by a number of scholars. See Yong Ren, "Cosmogony, Fictionality, Poetic Creativity: Western and Traditional Chinese Cultural Perspectives," *Comparative Literature* 2 (1998): 98-119.

and that the primal creator of the universe is generally speaking not a personal God, but there are alternative models of cosmogony and alternative views on the creator of the universe. In high antiquity of the Chinese tradition, the supreme divine being responsible for creating the world is called *Shangdi* or God on High. Later on it was interchangeably used with and gradually replaced by *Tian* (literally, Heaven). In traditional Chinese thought, *Tian* (Heaven) is conceived both as a self-generative force and as a personal God. *Shangshu* (The Book of Documents), one of the oldest Chinese historical documents, states: “Heaven protects human beings below. He designated a king and a teacher for them” (180). This idea is also found in major Chinese schools of thought. In both Confucianism and Mohism, *Tian* is viewed as a personal God (Shangdi or God on High) who has all the characteristic traits of humans. He has his will, personality, and emotions, and can confer legitimacy to rule through the Mandate of Heaven. Emperors of different dynasties are but his sons who are successively given the Mandate to rule. As a result of various models of cosmogony and cosmology, subtle ironies and paradoxes appear in the Chinese conceptualizations of the divine and art in relation to the Western counterpart.

The first paradox is that although in the West, God is believed to be the primal Maker who created human beings in His image, the irony is just the opposite. David Hume may be the earliest thinker to challenge the accepted view on God. He suggested that “the idea of God, as meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being, arises from reflection on the operations of our own mind, and augmenting, without limit, those qualities of goodness and wisdom” (97). Later on, Karl Marx (and Feuerbach) astutely pointed out that it is not God who created humankind in His image but humankind who created God in their image. In his critique of Hegel’s dialectic, Marx views the creation of God or the absolute spirit as “an abstraction, and alienation of human life,” which is the very reason for regarding it as a “divine process of mankind,” a “process which man’s abstract, pure, absolute being, as distinguished from himself, traverses” (190). In an ironic way, Marx’s critique contains a vision of human creativity that comes wryly close to the Chinese vision. In the Chinese conception of the divine as personalities, although Chinese thinkers did not explicitly claim that human beings created gods in their images, they made implicit conceptions in this vein. In Chinese thought, while the primal mover in philosophical Daoism is the impersonal Tao, in religious Daoism, the Dao [Tao] has been anthropomorphized as a personal God of creation. The Xiang Er’s Commentary on Laozi’s *Daode jing* (Way and Its Power) is a foundational text of religious Daoism. In it, the Dao [Tao], the impersonal first principle of Chinese metaphysics, is transformed into a personal God of creation. Laozi’s Chapter 4 states: “Do you

not yet know whose child I am? My image preceded the Thearchs.” The Xiang Er’s Commentary explains: “‘I’ refers to the Dao, as does the phrase ‘preceded the Thearchs’” (Bokenkamp 81). Laozi’s Chapter 37 reads: “Since the Dao never acts falsely, nothing is left undone.” The Xiang Er’s Commentary explains: “The nature of the Dao is such that it does not perform evil deeds. Thus it is spiritual and is creative of all things” (ibid. 140). In *Laozi bianhua jing* (the Classic of How Laozi Transforms), another Daoist text, Laozi, the reputed author of the *Daode jing* (the Way and Its Power), becomes a personal God: “He exists at the origin of the Great Beginning, he walks about in the beginning of the Great Simplicity [...] Alone, without companion, he wonders in the times of yore, before there were Heaven and Earth. He comes out of his hidden state and returns there to dwell. Having vanished, he is the Primordial; being manifest, he becomes human. Elusive! Through the transformation of Heaven and Earth and of his spirit, he is made flesh in the bosom of Mother Li” (Schipper 114). Moreover, his cosmic body becomes the model and sources of the whole universe: “Lao Tzu [Laozi] transformed his body. His left eye became the sun; his right eye, the moon; his head became Mount K’un-lun; his beard, the planets and constellations; his bones, dragons; his flesh, four-footed creatures; his intestines, snakes his stomach, the sea; his fingers, the Five peaks; his hair, trees and grasses; his heart, the Flowery Dais; as to his two kidneys, they were united and became one, the Real and True Father and Mother” (ibid. 114).

The transformation of the Dao from a cosmic principle into a personal God and of Laozi into a personal deity who gives rise to the entire universe testifies to the correctness of Marx’s conception of God as a human creation, but at the same time, it complicates the conceptions of cosmogony, cosmology, and the primal creator. It in turn gives rise to alternative models and alternative views with regard to divine and artistic creation. Chinese tradition is deeply rooted in shamanism, which exerted a profound impact upon Daoism as well as artistic creation. The shamanistic beliefs serve as the theoretical and theological foundation for people to believe that a human being can become a god who creates his world, or an immortal who transcends the limitations of this world, or a semi-god, who creates, orders, organizes his own universe. As one scholar of Daoism aptly puts it, “In this dynamic world, which he himself has built, the Taoist sits at the center, as a kind of demiurge, a creating spirit: by locating connecting, identifying, and naming, he gives meaning to the cosmos” (Robinet 16).

In shamanism and religious Daoism, myriad things in the universe can receive the quintessential pneuma floating in the universe and become a god with personalities. In the popular mind, the sky, the earth, mountains, rivers, forests,

valleys, even the kitchen and toilet at home may have a god. Human beings can become gods as well. Yuhuang Dadi (the Great Jade Emperor), the Supreme God in Chinese mythology who is the leader of all gods in heaven, was a legendary prince before he attained divinity through arduous cultivations (*Zhongguo wenhua cidian* 1068-1069). Even real historical persons may become gods and receive sacrifice and worshipping. Guan Yu, a historical person of the Eastern Han, became the Chinese god of war and fortune. Qing Qiong and Yuchi Gong, two generals of the Tang Dynasty became the guardian gods of the house. Zhong Kui, a warrior who committed suicide after he failed a martial examination, became another guardian god who specialized in catching ghosts (*ibid.* 1089). Most significantly, almost all the gods in the Daoist pantheon in the Chinese tradition were ordinary human beings before they were believed to become gods through cultivation.<sup>1</sup> Even the Daoist priests who play the role of media between the human and divine worlds tend to view themselves as a semi-god (medium) who can command various gods in the universe to perform at their rituals and religious services.

The second paradox is to be found in the realm of art. In the West, it is believed that God imparts a kind of divine madness to the artist who involuntarily creates his art work which exerts effects on the audience. In Plato's "Ion," Socrates employs the analogy of how a magnetic stone attracts iron rings to explain the rationale of poetic inspiration and how it works: the god first imparts poetic inspiration to the poet and then gives the rhapsode his skill; the rhapsode transmits the poet's original inspiration from the muse to the audience.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the poet is only one of the links in the chain that connects gods to the audience. In this conception, the artist is by no means a god, but an intermediary possessed by divine madness. At most, he or she can only be viewed as a minor deity or a second god. By contrast, the Chinese penchant for creating gods in human image has complicated the relationship between poets and gods in literature, and further problematized the source of literary creativity. Although the Chinese tradition seldom attributes literary creativity to a goddess as the Greek tradition does, there is no lack of instances in which literary writings are viewed as the results inspired by a goddess.

In the Warring State period, Song Yu (c. 290 BC – c. 223 BC), a famous court

---

1 The Daoist Pantheon consists of hundreds of gods, goddesses, immortals, masters of inner alchemy, and personified natural forces. Its most well-known figures include its founder Laozi, the supreme ruler in heaven the Jade Emperor, the Eight Immortals, and the Three Purities. Most of them are historical personages in the Chinese tradition. In other words, they were "real people" before they were deified in history.

2 See Plato, "Ion," *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, New York: Norton, 2001, 41.

poet wrote a lyric exposition titled “Shennü fu” (rhyme-prose on the goddess). Over history, scholars have paid much attention to its lavish use of ornate language in the description of the goddess, but few have paid much attention to its significance for the study of creative inspiration. The writing is accompanied by a preface, which gives a detailed account of how the writing came to be written. According to the preface, King Xiang of Chu and Song Yu had a visit to the Yunmeng (Clouds and Dream) Lake. The king ordered Song Yu to write a rhyme prose on the legendary goddess of Gao Tang. That evening, the king dreamt of an encounter with the goddess. The next day, the king told Song Yu of his unusual dream. Song Yu inquired about the details of the dream, but the king said that as he was in a dazed state of mind, inflicted by both joy and a sense of loss, he could only faintly remember seeing an extraordinary lady in his dream. After he awoke from his sleep, he could not remember her appearance and therefore felt very unhappy. Hearing this account, Song Yu put his imagination to work and was able to re-present what the king had dreamt. He gave the king a brief description of the goddess and the king asked him to write down the account in detail. Hence the birth of a brilliant rhyme-prose on the goddess, a lyric writing that has had a lasting impact on the imagination of Chinese writers in history.

This legend offers us an insight into the relationship between the divine and literary creation in the Chinese tradition. As a rule, Chinese creative writers do not view god or goddess as the maker of a literary writing, but they accept them as a source of creative inspiration. In their mind, humans are responsible for the rise of literature and art although they do not deny the inspirational role played by the divine in literary creation. Thus, in the final analysis, the ultimate maker of literature and art is still human, not divine. And the world of the divine created with this conception fully reflects the predominance of rational spirit promoted by Confucianism and historical empiricism. Self-consciously or otherwise, the divine world in Chinese literature and art is an objectification of the human spirit. Li Zehou, the well-known Chinese aesthetician, makes an apt observation on the relationship between the human world and the divine counterpart:

The world of men and that of gods have maintained a direct and complex relationship, not in reality but in imagination; not in conceptual thinking but in artistic fantasy. The inseparable unity of men and gods in dream fantasies of primitive art and reality became a unity of senses and desires in the world of imagination. It is no longer a world of primitive art in which gods were invited to coerce and control the human world, but a world in which human beings

attempted to ascend to heaven to participate in and share the joy of gods. (*Mei de licheng* 90-91)

The objectification of the human spirit in the Chinese tradition gave rise to a literary phenomenon rarely found in the literature and art of the West: it is not gods who created the humans but the humans who created gods. Here, I will only cite a legendary account. In Chinese literary history, Cao Zhi (192-232), the literary genius of the Wei Dynasty, wrote a poetic piece, “Rhyming Prose on the Goddess of River Luo” (Xiao Tong 254-256). The preface to the poetic composition narrates a real account of unfulfilled love, and the poetic composition presents an intriguing case in which a poet turns a fellow human being into a goddess. According to the preface, towards the end of the Eastern Han, Cao Zhi fell in love with Zhen Fu, a daughter of a noble man Zhen Yi, and wanted to marry her. But his wish was not fulfilled, for his father married Zhen Fu to Cao Zhi’s brother, Cao Pi who became the Emperor of the Wei Dynasty. Cao Zhi was so lovesick that he often forgot food and sleep. After many years, Cao Zhi went to the capital to see his brother. The latter showed him a jade pillow inlaid with gold filets, which belonged to Zhen Fu. At the sight of the pillow, Cao Zhi could not help shedding tears. The woman was already dead due to an imperial concubine’s persecution. The emperor bestowed the pillow to Cao Zhi, who traveled back to his home. On his way, he stopped at the River Luo at night. Thinking of the departed beauty, Cao Zhi could not fall asleep. Just as he was about to doze off, the beauty appeared and told him that she was in deep love with him and wanted to be his wife, but fate separated them. While expressing her undying love for Cao Zhi, she gave the latter the pillow, which was part of her dowry. They slept together on the pillow and shared each other’s tender affections. They wanted to live together forever, but the divide between humans and spirits separated them. Overcome by the joy of meeting and the sorrow of separation, Cao Zhi composed a poetic prose. In the prose, Cao Zhi merged Zhen Fu with an existing goddess of the river, Fu Fei.

According to Chinese legends, Fu Fei was a daughter of Fu Xi, the legendary ancestor of the Chinese nation in high antiquity. She was drowned in River Luo and became the river goddess after her death. In Chinese literary history, she seems to be a source of poetic inspiration, if not a Chinese Muse.<sup>1</sup> She first appears in Qu Yuan’s (c. 340 – c. 278 BC) long poem, *Lisao* (Encountering Sorrow) (Qu Yuan 51-62). In that poem, the poet takes an imaginative journey on which he attempts to court the

---

1 I believe that if one wishes to find a goddess of poetry in the Chinese tradition comparable to the Muse in the Western tradition, she may be the most qualified legendary figure.

goddess: “And so I made Feng Lung ride off on a cloud/ To seek out the dwelling-place of the lady Fu-fei. I took off my belt as a pledge of my suit to her,/ And ordered Chien Hsiu to be the go-between” (Qu Yuan 57). Then she figures in Sima Xiaoru’s (179-117 BC) “Shanglin fu” (Rhyme Prose on the Shanglin Park) (Birch 142-153), and finally in Cao Zhi’s “Rhyme Prose on the Goddess of River Luo). What is original and fascinating in Cao Zhi’s lyric composition is that he replaced a legendary goddess with a real person in history. Thereafter, Zhen Fu became the Goddess of River Luo in Chinese mythology. The prose presents a vivid account of the interaction between the human and the divine. Through artistic imagination, Cao Zhi created a river goddess out of a real person. This poetic composition is a typical example, which reveals an irony in Chinese tradition: the artist may not be a god himself, but he is capable of creating a god. Thus, although the Chinese tradition does not have a strong belief in gods as the primal maker of arts, it believes in the human creation of gods both in life and art.

By contrast, although the conception of gods as the ultimate maker of arts is embedded in the Western tradition, it is not a guarantee for the rise of the conception of the artist as a creation god. In fact, it may be an impediment if it is taken too literally. By simple logic, the Greco-Roman conception of the Muses as goddess for arts makes it difficult to attribute the sources of artistic creativity to humans. The Judaic-Christian theology of monotheism made it even more difficult for ancient Western thinkers to conceive of the artist as a god who is the ultimate creator of his art. In the opening of this essay, I have mentioned Scaliger’s well-known idea that by depicting another sort of nature, the poet “transforms himself almost into a second deity” (Scaliger 139). While he heartily agreed with the Greeks in defining the poet as the maker and a creative maker at that, Scaliger took a step backward, admitting that “its common title was furnished it, not by the agreement of men, but by the provident wisdom of nature” (140). He eventually reverted to the Platonic idea of divine inspiration and regarded artists as servants to gods: “Plato first, and then Aristotle, said that there are diversities of inspiration, for some men are born inspired, while others, born ignorant and rude, and even averse to the art, are seized on by the divine madness, and wrested from their lowliness. It is the work of the gods, who, though divine, use even these as their servants. Thus Plato himself, in the *Ion*, calls such men the interpreters and expounders of the gods” (ibid.). In the final analysis, the poet is able to create because he is driven by the gods: “The poets invoke the Muses, that the divine madness may imbue them to do their work” (ibid.). Thus, the ultimate makers are still gods who created all forms of art. By contrast, in Chinese literary thought, literary thinkers conceive of poetry as emanating from the

work of genius and even admit its relation to the creative work by gods or nature, but they firmly believe in its human origin.

#### IV. The Artist as a Pseudo-Deity in Creation

My little comparison suggests an intriguing irony in the Chinese and Western tradition on the matter of divine in art. Because of the creation God, the Western tradition could not go all the way to view the artist as the ultimate creator. At most, it will only accept the conception of the artist as a minor deity, second to the primal God, who can only serve to show the almighty power of the primal Maker. By contrast, though the Chinese tradition does have ideas of creation gods, yet, precisely because it does not set great store by a creation god, it was able to conceive of the artist as a deity, a creative maker. In philosophical as well as creative discourses of the Chinese tradition, there are numerous statements that suggest that it is not nature that drives the artist into creation but the artist who, like a god, drives nature to work for him. There are numerous instances in Chinese metaphysics and aesthetic thought in which the artist is viewed both implicitly and explicitly as a creative god.

In the remaining pages, I will provide some illustrations to argue against the view that because the Chinese tradition lacks a creation god, there is no creative model to conceive the poet as a creative maker. In Chinese history, there are many stories of how a superb artist observes different specimens of bird, fish, or flower for years and is finally able to represent the birdiness, fishiness, and essence of a particular flower. When an art object acquires that essence, it is said to have transmitted the divine spirit (*chuanshen*) or entered the divine (*rushen*). In the philosophical writings of Zhuangzi, there is a parable of the master carpenter. By closely analyzing it, we may see the similarity and difference in the Chinese and Western conception of the divine. In the parable, the Marquis of Lu contracted Carpenter Qing to make an ornate music stand with carved birds and animals. When the stand was finished, people saw the life-likeness of the carved birds and animals and suspected that he must have been a god. The Marquis inquired how he acquired his divine skills. The carpenter gave a detailed account of his material, mental, spiritual, and technical preparations and said: "If I did not do these preparations, I would not have started the job. I was using nature to meet nature. Isn't this the reason the stand makes people suspect that I was a god?" (Zhuangzi 210-211) This parable suggests that contrary to Plato's claim that the idea of an object can only be created by God, Chinese mimetic theory believes that so long as an artist absorbs himself in his creative act and leaves no stones unturned in his observation of objects, cultivation of his creative imagination, and perfection of his skills, he will be able to rival the

Creator and represent his subject as though he was aided by the divine. Clearly, the Chinese belief locates the divine not in heaven but on earth.

This belief in locating the divine in art is not alien to the Western theories of representation. It finds a similar expression in Joshua Reynolds's Platonism, an empiricist revision of Plato's original Idea or Form. Reynolds examined the Platonic belief that all the arts receive their perfection from an ideal beauty, superior to what is found in individual objects in nature and the artist is supposed to ascend heaven and to furnish his mind with the perfect idea of beauty. Like Carpenter Qing in Zhuangzi's parable, Reynolds believed that the divine ideal in art should be sought in the artist. He did not completely reject the Platonic idea of divine inspiration, "The artist is supposed to have ascended the celestial regions, to furnish his mind with this perfect idea of beauty." But he declared: "This great ideal of perfection and beauty are not to be sought in heaven, but upon the earth. They are about us, and upon every side of us" (354-355). And the way of finding the divine is also similar to that in the Chinese parable. It is the cultivation of the eye, which, through "a long habit of observing what any set of objects of the same kind have in common, has acquired the power of discerning what each wants in particular," and enabled the artist to form "an abstract idea of their forms more perfect than any one original" (55). As a summary, Reynolds stated: "Thus it is from a reiterated experience, and a close comparison of the objects in nature, that an artist becomes possessed of the idea of that central form," which is "the abstract of the various individual forms belonging to the class" (*Discourse on Art* 356). Reynolds considered an artist who has achieved the "idea of the perfect state of nature" as having "a right to the epithet of divine," because "it may be said to preside, like a supreme judge, over all the production of nature; appearing to be possessed of the will and intention of the Creator" (355-356).

In Chinese literary thought, there are many famous sayings and poetic lines, which suggest that even though the artist is not a god, he could, through a combination of innate talent and post-natal practice, emulate gods and accomplish their supreme creations (*qiao duo tian gong*). In his comment on some superb poetic lines, Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) said: "The ingenuity of poetry is like the delicate touches of a painter. From this, one knows that writing can compete with the creator in skills" ("Wen Tingyun Yan Wei shi", vol 2, 6). Some poets expressed similar ideas in their poetic lines. Du Fu (712-770), China's sage poet, expressed an idea of the divine in quite a number of his poems. Here are some of the poetic lines containing this idea:

1. After reading books over ten thousand volumes,

- I feel as though aided by the divine in my composition.
2. Intoxicated by wine I was a passive guest.  
Poems completed, I felt the presence of God.
  3. Welding a pen, gorgeous brocade flies in the wind.  
Your writings appear to possess the divine.
  4. Composing poems among the guests, / And wielding his brush to shake eight bounds; / Known as a master-hand of the time, / He is ever more divine in power with old age.<sup>1</sup>

In a comment on the first couplet in the above poetic lines by Du Fu, Wu Dashou, a literary critic of the Qing Dynasty, remarked:

Writings of poetry and prose will not go far without divine power. The divine is the living pneuma in my body. Du Fu said, “Having read books over ten thousand volumes, / I feel as though aided by the divine in my composition.” When the divine in my body connects with poetry, my god has arrived and I feel as though I were assisted by a supreme being. Why should we consider being inspired by the zither playing of the goddess of River Xiang as the only form of divine assistance? (*Shihua* 371)

This statement affirms that a superb writer is a creative being endowed with inner divine power, which does not necessarily come from without. In other poetic lines by Du Fu, we may find the divine in the subject as well as in the object. When a poet feels aided by the divine, he may be said to be in a subjective state described by Plato as possessed by God. When a poetic composition is said to be endowed with the divine, it is believed to have captured the divine in the objective world. Whether it is a subjective state of the mind or an objective state of an object, the divine in Chinese aesthetic theory has a transcendental nature, which coincides with Plato’s Idea of an object. Nevertheless, it is also immanent in the represented object. Sikong Tu (837-908) in his *Twenty Four Forms of Poetry* characterized it as something that objectively transcends outward appearance and subjectively exists in the artist’s mind: “It rises beyond the image, / And yet is obtainable within a poet’s contemplation” (38).<sup>2</sup>

1 All the poetic lines are quoted from *Qian zhu Dushi* (Du Fu’s Poetry Annotated by Qian Qianyi) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958), 1, 321.

2 Previous scholarship has annotated “huanzhong” as referring to Zhuangzi’s metaphorical state of emptiness and transcendence. I have adopted its literal meaning, “dunei” (in one’s contemplation).

By now, the fundamental difference between ancient Western and Chinese thinkers on the divine in art is clear. Western thinkers believed that human beings are not divine and therefore cannot emulate gods; hence the divine can only serve as the ultimate aesthetic ideal beyond the reach of human artists who can only approximate it. By contrast, Chinese thinkers believed that the divine is not alien to humans. A first-rate artist is a creative deity whose creation is capable of capturing the spiritual essence of representation and rival nature. This conception of the artist started with metaphysical inquiries into the relationship between Man and the universe, was transposed into inquiries into literature and art, and continued to be upheld by thinkers and artists throughout the dynastic history of China. Here, I will cite another ancient Chinese thinker's view as an illustration. Ye Xie (1627-1703), a scholar-poet of the Qing Dynasty, further enriched the line of thought pioneered by his predecessors in metaphysical and aesthetic inquiries. Like his predecessors, he continued to think of the relationship between nature and art in terms of the divine: "Wind, clouds, rain, and thunder constitute the great pattern/literature (*wen*) of heaven and earth. They change and transform in such an unpredictable manner that no one can envisage their bounds. They are therefore the ultimate gods of heaven and earth and also the ultimate pattern/literature" (72). He viewed the universe as an entity with divine luminosity and art as a creation resulting from the joint work of nature and man. He rejected a popular view of literature as a result of following certain mechanical rules but located the law of literary creation in divine luminosity: "I say that poetic composition requires another method, which lies in the divine luminosity, but beyond skilled competence. It is the so-called method in which changes and transformations give birth to a creative mind" (21).

In conceptualizing the relationship between the world and the artist, Ye Xie posited two series of terms to discuss the subjective and objective conditions of literary creativity, which correspond respectively with the subjective and objective divine advanced by his predecessors. Furthermore, he explored how the integration of the two turns the writer into a godlike creator. He first discussed the objective divine in the universe: "The three terms, *li* (principle), *shi* (event), and *qing* (condition), can exhaustively encompass the transformations of myriad things in the world. No shapes, colors, sounds, or appearances can exist independent of them. When we talk about their presence in things, there is nothing that can escape from them" (*Yuanshi* 23). Evidently, these three terms cover the internal operations of the universe. Then he discussed the subjective divine: "The four other terms, *cai* (talent), *dan* (courage), *shi* (learning), and *li* (energy), can exhaustively encompass the divine luminosity in the mind. All shapes and colors, sounds and appearances,

depend on these four qualities to rise and propagate, and to become known and manifest” (ibid.). These four terms concern the creative consciousness of a writer’s mind in the creation of a literary work. When the subjective divine meets the objective divine, the writer becomes a god-like person who creates a world that rivals the natural world.<sup>1</sup> Ye Xie’s conception explores how the subjective and objective divine relate to each other in the triple relationship of the artist, art, and the world. It exemplifies an aesthetic condition called *shensi* (literally, “divine thinking”; figuratively, “imaginative thinking” or “daemonic thinking” in Goethe’s conception of poetic creation). Liu Xie, who wrote the first comprehensive poetics in the Chinese tradition, views “divine thinking” (359) as a creative process through which the subjective divine in the artist grasps the objective divine in the universe and brings about a fusion of the two. Through “divine thinking,” an artist enters the realm of the divine, an imaginative space constructed on the subjective perception of the objective essence in an object and creates a representational totality that encompasses the subjective divine in the artist and the objective divine in the world. By penetrating the secret of the divine order, the artist may be considered to have achieved the highest order of artistic creation in the Chinese tradition and attained the stature of a creative god.

### **Conclusion: Divine Conception as Infinite Potential of Human Creation**

On the nature of the divine and the relationship between the human world and the divine world, the Chinese conception shares both similarities to and differences from its Western counterpart. While both traditions view the divine as a supernatural power beyond human ken, they differ as to how the divine is related to human beings. Whereas in the West, the divine is always humanized as a personal god responsible for the creation of the world, the Chinese divine is not always a personal god who creates everything in Nature, but often an invisible, all-present, and ineffable force that makes things be themselves. In analytic terms, the Chinese divine comes close to the Platonic Idea or Form and converges with the neo-Platonic conception of the divine as the spiritual essence of an entity, human or natural. When the Chinese divine is humanized, it is not monotheistic but polytheistic or pantheistic. Anything and everything may be endowed with the quintessential *pneuma* between heaven and earth and become a god with supernatural powers. This way of thinking makes it easier for the Chinese to attribute divine powers to humans and to conceive of the artist as a minor deity who creates an art work that rivals Nature. But ultimately, the Chinese and Western traditions share one

---

1 See Ye Xie, *Yuanshi (Origins of Poetry)*, Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1979, 24.

common conception of the divine, aptly described by Northrop Frye as an unlimited projection of the human potential. The artist as god is thus a creator of an aesthetic universe centering on “a universal man” who is also “a divine being conceived in anthropomorphic terms” (Frye 120). In the final analysis, the divine model of art is essentially a humanistic approach to the creation and conception of art. As such, it will continue to be relevant to our life and study of art.

### Works Cited

- Abrams, M. H. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and The Critical Tradition*. New York: Norton, 1953.
- Bathes, Roland. “The Death of the Author.” *Image Music Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
- Bokenkamp, Stephen. *Early Daoist Scriptures*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997.
- Cao Zhi. “Luoshen Fu (‘Rhyming Prose on the Goddess of River Luo’).” *Wenxuan (Selections of Refined Writings)*, compiled by Xiao Tong. Taipei: Qiming Shuju, 1960. 254-256.
- Culler, Jonathan. “Omniscience.” *Narrative* 12 (2004): 22-35.
- DeVoto, Bernard, ed. *The Portable Mark Twain*. New York: Viking, 1946.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957.
- Guan Zi. *Guanzi (Writings of Master Guan)*. *Ershi'er Zi (Writings of Twenty-Two Masters)*. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1986.
- Hamilton, Edith. *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*. New York: Mentor Book, 1969.
- Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.
- Lanser, Susan. *The Narrative Act*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981.
- Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching*, translated by D.C. Lau. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963.
- Li Zehou. *Mei De Licheng (A Journey of Beauty)*. Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 1984.
- Liu Dakui. “Lunwen Ouji (‘A Random Note on Literary Discussions’).” *Zhongguo Liedai Wenlun Xuan (Selections of Chinese Literary Theories through the Dynasties)*. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1963.
- Liu Xie. *Wenxin Diaolong (Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons)*. Jinan: Qilu Shushe, 1995.
- Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, translated by T. B. Bottomore. *Marx’s Concept of Man*, Erich Fromm. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1966.
- Olson, Barbara. *Authorial Divinity in the Twentieth Century: Omniscient Narration in Woolf, Hemingway, and Others*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated UP, 1997.
- Ouyang Xiu. “Wen Tingyun Yan Wei Shi (Poems by Wen Tingyun and Yan Wei).” *Zhongguo Meixheshi Ziliaoxuan*. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985. 3-10.
- Owen, Stephen. *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985.
- Plato. “Ion.” *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001.

- Plato. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961.
- Plotinus. "On the Intellectual Beauty." *Plotinus* Vol. 5, translated by A. H. Armstrong. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984.
- Qian Qianyi. *Qian Zhu Dushi (Du Fu's Poetry Annotated by Qian Qianyi)*. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1958.
- Qu Yuan. "Lisao Encountering Sorrow." *Anthology of Chinese Literature: From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century*, edited by Cyril Birch. New York: Grove Press, 1965. 51-62.
- Ren Yong. "Cosmogony, Fictionality, Poetic Creativity: Western and Traditional Chinese Cultural Perspectives." *Comparative Literature* 2 (1998): 98-119.
- Reynolds, Joshua. "Discourse on Art." *Critical Theory since Plato*, edited by Hazard Adams. San Diego and New York: HBJ Publishers, 1971. 354-358.
- Robinet, Isabelle. *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997.
- Scaliger, J. C. *Poetics. Critical Theory since Plato*, edited by Hazard Adams. San Diego and New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971.
- Schipper, Kristofer. *The Taoist Body*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993.
- Shisanjing Zhushu (Thirteen Chinese Classics Annotated)*. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1979.
- Sikong Tu. *Twenty Four Forms of Poetry. Lidai Shihua (Poetic Talks from Various Dynasties)*, edited by Wenhuan. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1981.
- Sima Xiaoru. "Shanglin Fu (Rhyme Prose on the Shanglin Park)." *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, edited by Cyril Birch. New York: Grove Press, 1994. 142-153.
- Song Yu. "Shennü Fu ('Rhyme-prose on the Goddess')." *Wenxuan (Selections of Refined Writings)*, compiled by Xiao Tong. Taipei: Qiming Shuju, 1960.
- Vico, Giambattista. *New Science. Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Pointz Hall: The Earlier and Later Typescripts of Between the Acts*, edited by Mitchell A. Leaska. New York: University Publications, 1983.
- Wu Dashou. *Shihua (Poetic Remarks)*, requoted in Chen Liangyun. *Zhongguo Shixue Tixi Lun (Chinese System of Poetics)*. Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 1992. 371.
- Zhongguo Wenhua Cidian (A Dictionary of Chinese Culture)*. Shanghai: Shanghai Shehui Kexueyuan Chubanshe, 1987.
- Zhuangzi. *The Zhuangzi (Writings of Zhuangzi)*, annotated by Guo Xiang. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1995.