

The Universality of the Similarities and Differences between Malay and Chinese Mythologies

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Abstract

In the literary context, folk literature is also referred to as oral literature. As one of the oldest known sources of literature, mythology falls into this genre. This research aims to identify the universality of the similarities and differences between Malay and Chinese mythologies. This study was based on a qualitative approach involving a library method and a descriptive analysis based on Plummer's (1997) Literary Sociology Theory, which were used to analyze the primary data of the study. In addition, several books and journal articles were selected to be used as the secondary of the study. Specifically, this study employed literary-based research by using storybooks of Malay and Chinese mythologies, namely *Cerita Rakyat Malaysia* (2008) and *Mitos China Purbakala Jilid 1 dan Jilid 2* (2009). The analysis revealed that irrespective of their cultural origins, Malay and Chinese mythologies shared some similarities in terms of their plots, themes, characteristics, social values. The analysis also revealed that their main differences stemmed from the religious perspective. Revealingly, the analysis showed that the importance placed on such oral literature was not only for entertainment purposes but also for educational purposes as well. Overall, these findings reinforce the universality of Malay and Chinese mythologies as a literary genre that defines their unique cultural identity that is heavily influenced by mysticism. Given such interesting findings, it becomes imperative for practitioners to promote stories of mythologies as an important cultural heritage to the young generation.

Keywords: *Chinese Mythology, Cultural Identity, Malay Mythology, Mysticism, Oral Literature*

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1. Introduction

The origin of the word *myth* is derived from the Greek word *mythos*, which means *tale* or *speech*. Invariably, most myths are not set forth in an unorganized,

randomized manner, but instead are based on the belief patterns that are already in existence, and this reflects the connection between the society's thinking and elements of animism that serve as the background of their lives

before the arrival of other beliefs (Zakaria, Mohamad Hanapi, Harun, & Mohd, 2019). In general, people tend to associate mythologies with mysticism and old traditions that are passed from generation to generation (Fahmi, Gunardi, & Mahzuni, 2017). In the Malay context, the word myth carries several definitions. For example, according to *Kamus Dewan* (1997), a myth is defined as “ancient, tales of old which is deemed truthful and believable, such as stories of origins, the rise of a race, events of nature or tales of personal legends.” Hashim Awang (1986) argues that mythology is a type of folklore about humans or creatures and extraordinary tales beyond human logic. Furthermore, he categorized mythologies into two types, namely the mythology of foundations and origins and the mythology of personal legends. An example of the former is the foundation of Malacca and the latter can be exemplified by the story of *Raja Iskandar Zulkarnain* (Alexander the Great). Depending on the nature of the story, the identity of the creators of myths remains unknown. In general, the primary aim of is to develop and nurture strong cultural values, and knowledge to help stimulate the development of creative thinking (Iswidayati, 2007). Mythology also provides some social functions for society (Manuaba, Satya Dewi, & Kinasih, 2012). In general, A review of the literature would reveal that mythologies are generally ancient oral literature, originally attached to religious beliefs. Since the advent of Islam, mythologies are no longer associated with the religion but relegated to records of origins and the lore of nature, humans, animals, the universe, and other matters related to life, which later known as fairy tales or old wives’ tales to some people.

In exploring the mythologies of oral literature, a myth is usually conveyed orally, created and developed from middle-class society to enable them to be known as one. Furthermore, an oral myth usually maintains the features of an original culture shared by the community, which have similar characteristics. As oral literature, mythologies can be used not only for entertainment but also for teaching and learning. In the old days, mythologies were primarily used to explain the origins of living things or a chain of events, but now they can serve as an educational tool and a medium of communication, in addition to relating imagination with reality. In the old Chinese and Malay cultures, mythologies were instrumental in helping the ancient peoples to relate with the universe and nature by creating mystical stories of human origin and other natural events.

The mystical elements of mythical stories help explain the relationship of such literary work with the thinking and world views of ancient societies. To these people, mythologies were regarded as something sacred which were deeply rooted in their minds (Zakaria et al., 2019). Existing records of mythologies available serve as a testimony of human ingenuity, perseverance, and close relations between humans and the nature of ancient people. Now, with the use of information and

communication technology running, the way in which mythologies are transmitted and the role they play has drastically changed for the better. In today’s realm, Malay and Chinese mythologies are available in printed form and digital form, which can be used not only for entertainment but also for educational purposes. More importantly, the oral transmission of mythologies by past generations has been replaced by digital transmission enhanced with graphics, interactive media, and animations, which collectively help improve their utility as an educational tool. Equally important, in modern living, myths are no longer seen as sacred, liturgical text or narratives of the elite as they have become mainstream, allowing easy access to people of various backgrounds.

Against such a backdrop, the researchers embarked on this study with the main objective of identifying the universality of mythologies of different cultures in terms of their similarities and differences by focusing on the social and cultural aspects, including their beliefs in mystical deities, which have evolved ever since.

2. Methodology

This study was based on a qualitative approach involving a library method and a descriptive analysis based on Plummer’s (1997) Literary Sociology Theory, which were used to analyze the primary data of the study. In addition, several books and journal articles were selected to be used as the secondary of the study. Specifically, this study employed literary-based research by using storybooks of Malay and Chinese mythologies, namely *Cerita Rakyat Malaysia* (2008) and *Mitos China Purbakala Jilid 1 dan Jilid 2* (2009), as well as other literary materials.

3. Analysis and Discussion

The Origin of Mythology and the Comparison of Malay and Chinese Mythologies

Myths can be observed and studied from the sociological point of view, which will highlight that, in the bygone era, arts were “a reflection of a community” and “a view of thought and co-owned collectively”. Such a view underscores the strict adherence of traditional communities to a value system regarding mythology regardless of their backgrounds, which had been widely accepted by the whole community as a literary convention. According to *Glosari Istilah Kesusasteraan* (1988), a literary convention is a manner, style or root cause of expressing literature, or a technique well-received by many due to widespread belief and usage. In traditional literature, such a convention constitutes fantasy-like stories, such as tales of deities by storytellers. For example, kingdoms were built by those worthy of rule from the land of gods endowed mystical power. Traditional literature delves into the relationships of thoughts and worldviews of a community, as exemplified in old Malay literature that would portray the feudalistic mindset of Malays of past generations (Ali Ahmad,

1994). However, there are legitimate questions that need to be answered as cautioned by Plummer (1997) in his article titled “*An invitation to the sociology of stories*”, in which he sees traditional literature is more than just “a reflection of the community.” Premised in this context, this study aims to explore and discuss possible answers to

questions relating to “the nature of stories,” the audience of “the social processes of producing and consuming mythologies”, and “the social role of mystical stories” by comparing both Malay and Chinese mythologies, which are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of Malay and Chinese mythologies

Malay mythology	Chinese mythology	Comparison
1) <i>Batu Penyu</i> 2) <i>Perang Kayangan</i> 3) <i>Mengapa Pungguk Rindukan Bulan</i>	1) <i>Jing Wei Penambak Laut</i> 2) <i>Paman Guruh dan Bibi Kilat</i> 3) <i>Chang E Terbang ke Bulan</i>	Tales of the transformation of humans into animals or other beings.
1) <i>Tuk Naga</i> 2) <i>Puteri Naga Menjadi Pulau</i>	1) <i>Perang Besar Maharaja Huang Di dan Chi You</i> 2) <i>Da Shun Bersawah</i> 3) <i>Nu Wa Pencipta Manusia dan Penyelamat Bumi</i>	Tales of dragons.
1) <i>Puteri Tiga Beradik</i>	1) <i>Cetera Pengembala Niu Lang dan Penenun Zhi Nu</i>	Tales of a princess from the heavens.
1) <i>Puteri Sanggul</i>	Nil	Tales of Chinese kings and Malay folklore.
1) <i>Kisah Dua Matahari</i>	1) <i>Hou Yi Memanah Matahari</i>	Tales of the sun.

To understand and elaborate on this genre, the researchers scrutinized the similarities and differences in the plots, themes, and characteristics that exist in the structural aspects of myths of both cultures. Interestingly, such examination revealed that Malay and Chinese mythologies shared similar structural aspects, suggesting the universality of such a genre that transcends Malay and Chinese cultures. As revealed, both Malay and Chinese mythologies share a similar structure in that a plot would start at the beginning of a story and, later, develop further in the middle of such a story. Finally, the plot culminates in a climax (with a happy ending) or an anti-climax (with a sad ending) at the end of the story. For such a plot, there are several examples available in Malay and Chinese mythologies. For instance, a popular plot would always involve the “rags-to-riches” storyline in which a prince or princess who rises from poverty and oppression to wealth and liberation, respectively. For example, a Chinese myth titled *Da Shun Bersawah* (Volume 2) tells a story of an ancient Chinese emperor named Shun who lives in agony under threats by his stepmother and stepbrother, named Xiang. As a kind-hearted prince, he cares deeply for animals which later helps save his life. In this story, the plot introduces Shun as a kind character and, finally, the plot thickens with a climax that sees him saved by a sparrow and a pangolin from the evil scheme of the antagonists to kill him. The story ends with him forgiving his stepmother and stepbrother (who repented their evil intentions) and becoming a just, kind emperor who reigns over his throne with prosperity and justice. The same plot can be traced in Malay mythology, particularly in the story of *Puteri Sanggul* (2008, P.62). In the Malay

version, the story recounts the tale of Puteri Gunung Balai and Puteri Sanggul Berjurai who suffer after the death of their parents whose wealth was forcibly taken away by their family members. The suffering of Puteri Sanggul Berjurai becomes more intense after the marriage of Puteri Gunung Balai, with the former being tormented by an evil man. Endowed with intelligence, she pulled a trick to escape from her tormentor by sailing over the sea on a small boat. After weathering so many obstacles, she married a Chinese prince and lived a happy life. Such a plot underscores the universality of storytelling elements that are prevalent in Malay and Chinese mythologies, as highlighted in the following excerpt: “*Perahu kedua-dua puteri itu terus ditolak angin hingga sampai di kuala negeri China. Raja China diberitahu akan perahu kecil itu.*”

In the above excerpt, the character of Puteri Sanggul Berjurai marries a Chinese king and becomes his queen, signifying and emphasizing Chinese royalty as a symbol of sovereignty in that era. Such an emphasis is evident in many traditional literary narratives, including *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals). Likewise, Malay and Chinese mythologies also have several similar themes. As a source of entertainment, narrators would delve into themes of love, passion, and sacrifice, aspects that were deeply cherished by past societies, which were dominated by peasants. They tended to be inquisitive and hungered for some form of escapism, thus entailing the narrators to creatively tell myths that could tinge the former’s curiosity to know their origins. Invariably, the narration of mythologies mostly depicts stories of origins and deities, typically embellished with elements of love to

make readers feel with awe and admiration for beings from an imaginary realm. Such mythologies could mystify listeners with creatively narrated stories, such as the love between the two realms or between an ordinary and a heavenly princess, and stories about kindness and sacrifice. For example, in *Jing Wei Penambak Laut*, the story tells the origin of events leading to the death of Emperor Yan's (God of the Sun) princess who later transforms into a bird, which is known as Jing Wei. For causing her death, she harbors a deep hatred for the sea and vows to revenge her premature demise by making the sea a wasteland, which is clearly depicted in the following excerpt:

Sesudah kematian si anak gadis kecil, kepiluan dan dendam semangatnya menjelma menjadi seekor burung bernama Jing Wei. Kepala Jing Wei mempunyai jaluran warna yang cantik. Paruhnya putih dan kakinya merah. Jing Wei bersarang di Gunung Fa Jiu di sebelah barat. Jing Wei amat mendendami samudera luas yang meragut nyawa mudanya. Dia bersumpah akan membalas dendam dan mahu menambak laut sehingga penuh dan rata.

(*Jing Wei Penambak Laut*, Volume 1)

The story *Puteri Tiga Beradik* (2008, p.20) portrays a mythical story of love and fairyland in the astral realm. Similar stories can also be found in *Cetera Pengembala Niu Lang dan Penenun Zhi Nu* (Volume 1). The following are excerpts from such mystical stories.

Kononnya, ada tiga orang puteri raja yang cantik-cantik belaka. Mereka tinggal di kayangan. Puteri Sulung bernama Puteri Suria Pagi. Yang tengah bernama Puteri Purnama Sari. Yang bongsu bernama Puteri Cahaya Bintang. Ayahanda mereka, Sultan Malim di Awan memerintah di kayangan. Permaisurinya bernama Puteri Mega Bestari.

(*Puteri Tiga Beradik*, 2008. P.20)

Kononnya Maharaja Kayangan mempunyai tujuh orang puteri. Kesemuanya cerdik dan lincah gerak gerinya. Di antara ketujuh-tujuh orang puteri itu, puteri bongsulah yang paling cantik, baik hati dan rajin. Malah beliau pandai menenun kain, justeru beliau diberikan gelaran Zhi Nu (Gadis Penenun).

(*Cetera Pengembala Niu Lang dan Penenun Zhi Nu*, Volume 1)

Despite having different endings, both stories share some similarities in their storylines. The former, which has a happy ending, tells a story of a heavenly princess who descends to the world to cleanse her body and later discovers that her dress was stolen by a young man, with whom she eventually marries. In the latter, the story revolves around a heavenly character called Princess Zhi Nu, seen by the Chinese as a weaving goddess, who has broken the law of fairyland by coming down to earth. As punishment, she and her husband, Niu Lang, were forcibly separated and can only meet once a year – an ending that is full of sadness and sorrow. It is from this mystical story that the present Chinese will celebrate the meeting on Qixi Day by going out in the open space to look on the sky on the seventh day of the seventh month of the Chinese calendar. On that day, they will bring flowers and fruits to pay tribute to Zhi Nu, who they believe was kind enough to bestow womenfolk with weaving skills.

In Malay and Chinese mythologies, human and animal characters are usually of astral origin. For the latter, the universality of characters is quite self-evident as both types of mythologies usually similar animal characters, such as dragons, birds, and snakes, among others. It is important to note that animals have a profound presence and influence in many cultures. For example, in the Chinese community, monkeys, horses, dragons, and rats are some of the animals that carry specific cultural meanings in their society. For the Indian community, elephants, cows, and snake have some religious significance. For the Malays, fish, snakes, large eagles, and crocodiles are mentioned in their text to depict various connotations.

The presence of dragons in Malay mythology can be found in the story of *Tuk Naga* (2008, p.14). In this story, the wife of Tuk Lokman gives birth to a twin, one with a human body and the other with a snake-like body. They both decide to release the latter to the sea, who later evolves into a dragon, to whom they give the name of Tuk Naga. The character of dragons also appears in *Perang Besar Maharaja Huang Di dan Chi You* (Volume 2) as an astral carrier of a Chinese Emperor to travel to the land of deities, as illustrated in the following excerpt.

Masa untuk gembira lazimnya pendek. Tibalah masanya Maharaja Huang Di berangkat pulang ke Indera Kayangan. Pada hari keberangkatan, seekor naga emas muncul dari celah-celah awan lalu merendahkan kepalanya. Maharaja Huang Di pun memimpin isterinya, pegawai kanan dan segala dewa naik ke atas tubuh naga.

The character of dragons in the above excerpts of mystical stories symbolizes goodness, power, and prosperity. Referring to the story of *Tuk Naga*, the dragon son of Tuk Lokman is depicted as a symbol of heroism as he saves his twin brother and father from drowning at sea, while in its Chinese counterpart, the dragon is seen to

always be of assistance to those who are good and treat them with kindness.

The second research question focuses on the background of the readers of both Malay and Chinese mythologies. In the old days, most of the myths were transmitted orally as a majority of people were illiterate, as only the aristocrats and members of royal families could write and read. In the oral tradition, myths were transmitted through memorization, the impact of which heavily relied on the narrative skills of the narrator. According to Muhammad Haji Salleh (2000, P.106), oral tradition starts with a description or a simple narration using layman's terms about phenomena, people, and events.

The third research question concerns the use of mythologies as a tool that is used not only to entertain but also to educate societies. Most mythologies are used to entertain the common people with stories of fantasy. However, some mythologies are also used to convey social messages that emphasize love, kindness, tolerance, and benevolence, among others. For example, the story of *Batu Penyu* highlights such an emphasis as follows:

Setelah minum, mata penyu jantan mula berpinar. Akhirnya semua anggotanya tidak dapat bergerak lagi. Rupanya penyu itu terminum air dari kolam larangan dan tersumpah menjadi batu.

(*Batu Penyu*. 2008:14)

A similar premise is also used in Chinese mythology, best exemplified in the story of *Jade Rabbit and Wu Gang*. The story sets about the lives of Jade Rabbit and Wu Gang. The former has been punished for consuming forbidden grass while the latter for breaking the rules while in the apprenticeship of learning magical power. As part of expiation and purification, both have to live in confinement in a palace throughout their entire lives, which is highlighted in the following excerpt.

Teman Chang E ialah seekor arnab jed. Sepanjang tahun arnab itu kelihatan menumbuk ubat di istana purnama. Arnab jed itu ditempatkan di situ kerana melanggar peraturan termakan rumput keramat larangan. Justeru diusir oleh Maharaja Kayangan ke istana Guang Han. Ada seorang lelaki bernama Wu Gang diusir ke situ kerana tidak mematuhi peraturan ketika menuntut ilmu sakti.

(*Chang E Terbang Ke Bulan*. Volume 1)

As discussed earlier, dragons have profound a presence in Malay and Chinese mythologies, especially the latter, underlining the belief that such mythical animals have extraordinary power among the people of past societies. For instance, Chinese golden dragons are depicted as a royal carrier to take an emperor to a battle

on Earth and, after defeating the earthly mortals, bring him back safely to a fairyland. Such a depiction is well illustrated in *Cerita Perang Besar Maharaja Huang Di dan Chi You*, a story involving such an animal character. In the Chinese cultural belief, dragons are said to be the carrier of prosperity and good luck. Thus, it is hardly surprising to see dragons being prominently portrayed in many Chinese myths and tales and celebrated in festivals. The symbolism of dragons as a royal carrier of a mighty, powerful emperor is made evident by the symbol of dragons on his royal dresses. In particular, the intricate design of dragons on royal robes and dresses signifies the Chinese reverence for such a mythical beast, an example of which can be found in Qing Dynasty's imperial dresses.

In Chinese culture, a dragon named *Liong* is a popular mystical animal that signifies a specific, complex symbolism of goodness and prosperity. Dragons are also depicted to symbolize virility and fertility in such a culture. In the Western world, however, the depiction of such an animal carries negative connotations, such as bad and evil. In the modern, contemporary world, dragons are viewed as an identity of the Chinese culture that carries "social-cultural memories" (Kustedja, Sudikno, & Salura, 2013). According to Neumann (1975), the depiction of dragons (or earth monsters) symbolizes not only power but also other aspects of the universe, such as its origin, the creation of human beings, and the beginning of the cosmos.

It is worth to note that the narration of Malay and Chinese mythologies highlight not only their societal functions but also the creative minds of the creators or narrators. Creativity in penning and telling stories of mythologies can be seen as a benchmark of popularity and credibility of a story. Depending on their skills and techniques, rivalry among narrators might exist. Naturally, they would employ various methods to convey the stories by adding elements of drama or excitement or by reducing redundant, irrelevant details out of a story. With such creativity, the role played by mystical stories would transcend its fundamental functions to entertain based on oral tradition such that the mythologies told in such stories could also teach the society of good values that they could emulate.

4. Conclusion

Myths were, and still are, relevant to many societies throughout the world, especially in Eastern cultures, such as Malay and Chinese cultures. As revealed in this study, irrespective of their cultural origins, Malay and Chinese mythologies share some similarities in terms of their plots, themes, characteristics, and social values. However, there are some slight differences that stem from the religious perspective. The utility of such oral-literary art is perceived quite differently between modern and past societies. In the old days, myths were mainly transmitted orally to awe the common people with mystical animal

and human characters that possessed mystical power or strengths. In short, people of past generations saw mythologies purely from the entertainment perspective. Now, endowed with greater intelligence, people interpret such stories from several standpoints, such as ethical and moral standpoints, depending on the background of listeners, to discern the nuances of such stories. Moreover, the advent of information and communication technology, notably multimedia technology and web technology, has enabled the transmission of mythologies in many forms, formats, and elements. For example, mythologies can appear in printed form, such as books and magazines, or in digital form, such as pdf files and web contents. Hence, the practitioners of this literary art can capitalize on such diverse transmission modes to help promote mythologies an important cultural heritage to the young generation.

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