



# Western Culture

A Discussion of Its Evolution,  
Noteworthy Personalities, and Prominent Ideas

## 西方文化论

■ 邹 颀 著



浙江工商大学出版社  
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邹 颀 著



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## PREFACE

This book is intended for students of English at college level in China, aiming to help them to explore the key ideas, values, and ideals upon which Western institutions have been built and by means of which Western people guide their lives. The format is chronological. The historical development of Western Culture—from ancient Greece to contemporary Europe and America—is set forth in twelve topics: ancient Greece, ancient Rome, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Reformation, Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, Romanticism, Socialism, Psychoanalysis, and Contemporary Western World. Although the book's general arrangement is historical, moving closer to the present day as it proceeds, the main chapters are fairly self-contained, and can be read selectively or out of the present order.

This is not a definitive work on Western Culture, but a kind of map by which interested readers can find their way along some of the main roads of Western Culture. I hope it is clear and concise enough for this purpose. At the same time, I have tried to give enough information and interpretation to serve as a point of departure for further reading and research.

I hope the book will be useful for those interested in Western Culture, but I feel it necessary to add a word of caution. The reader should always keep in mind that this is an overview, a broad discussion. Any generalizations drawn from the material contained in these pages will be just that—generalizations.

I am grateful to College of Foreign Languages of Zhejiang Gongshang University for funding the publication of the book. My gratitude goes to Prof. Zhang Xin from School of Marxism Studies of Zhejiang Gongshang University

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Zou Jie

Zhejiang Gongshang University

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## **Chapter 1    Ancient Greece: Fountainhead of Western Culture**

The civilization of the Greeks goes back to about 6500 BC, when nomad farmers crossed into the European continent from the fertile river valleys of Mesopotamia in the Middle East. By 3000 BC these settlers had fortified cities on the European mainland and on the nearby islands in the Mediterranean that would become the isles of Greece. About 1900 BC an Indo-European people called the Achaeans migrated to the area, founded their own towns, and brought with them a language that became Greek.

### **1.1    Homer's Epics**

To understand the Greek experience, it is helpful to start with Homer, the poet whose epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* preserve for us a brilliant and well-rounded picture of the time. An epic is not “true” in the sense that it accurately portrays a specific time and place or a particular series of events. It is, rather, a narrative woven out of the collective memory of a people. The particular circumstances in which the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed are not known, but it is likely that the *Iliad* appeared somewhere on the coast of Asia Minor in the eighth century BC, and the *Odyssey*, at least two generations later.

Both epics describe events that took place in Mycenaean Greece from the fifteenth to eleventh century BC, but some scholars believe the society described in the poems existed later, probably during the tenth and ninth century BC. The epics tell us a great deal about the economic and social life of the agrarian society in which they were produced—its warrior cult, its religious beliefs, its customs, its standards of behavior—and they illuminate the thought world of a primitive civilization.

The *Iliad*, a story about warriors, is set in the tenth year of the Trojan War. Paris, the son of King Priam of Troy, had seduced Helen, the wife of King Menelaus of Pylos, and abducted her to Troy. Such an insult had to be avenged, and the Greeks—called Achaeans by Homer—had held Troy under siege for nine years, unable to storm into the city for a total victory. The central figure of the poem is Achilles, the son of Peleus, king of the Myrmidons in Thessaly, and the sea nymph Thetis, who rendered him invulnerable, except for the heel by which she held him, by dipping him in the river Styx. Wise, courageous, and handsome, Achilles is the prototype of the Homeric hero.

As the epic begins, a plague was ravaging the Greek camp. Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek expedition against Troy, had angered the god Apollo by insulting one of Apollo's priests. Apollo had awarded Agamemnon by giving him the priest's daughter. When the priest tried to bargain for her return, Agamemnon sent him away, and the plague began. The gods agreed to end the devastation only if Agamemnon returns the prize. He obeyed, but demanded in her place Achilles' war prize, a girl called Briesis, and Achilles was outraged.

While the gods watched and took sides, Achilles withdrew his powerful troops, the Myrmidons, and was in a sulk in his camp. Without Achilles' support, the Greeks were sufficiently weakened to allow the Trojans, led by Hector, the eldest son of King Priam of Troy, to venture from the safety of their city and very nearly destroy the Greek fleet. Although Achilles couldn't be persuaded to help, Patroclus, his best friend and companion since childhood, donned Achilles' armor intending to frighten the Trojans, only to be killed in combat by Hector. It is only the death of his friend, a death he watched from the sidelines, that finally moved Achilles to action. He made peace with Agamemnon and then, in armor forged by the gods, entered the combat, although he knew he would meet his death. Accepting his fate, he slaughtered countless Trojans and drove the rest back within the walls of Troy. But he was not satisfied until he had killed Hector and dragged his body three times around the walls of Troy.

The *Iliad* ends when Achilles, at the order of Zeus, accepted a ransom for the body of Hector so that the Trojans could bury him with honor. He was left to await the fate he knew he couldn't escape: He would die in battle. He was killed by Paris, who shot a poisoned arrow into his heel. Achilles died young,

but his glory goes on forever.

As the sequel to the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* was composed later and is concerned with the homecoming of the Achaeans after their victory in the Trojan War. Its hero is the warrior Odysseus, known for his prowess and cleverness. It is his fate to endure ten years' delay in his homecoming—to be shipwrecked, lost, held captive, and subjected to various trials. Finally, twenty years after his departure from home, the goddess Athena helped him to return to the island of Ithaca.

The *Odyssey*, like the *Iliad*, starts *in medias res* and describes the voyage home of Odysseus after the fall of Troy, and the vengeance he took with his son Telemakos on the suitors of his wife Penelope on his return. Believing Odysseus to be dead, a large band of noblemen from Ithaca and other kingdoms were asking for his wife's hand, but the faithful Penelope, who still mourned for Odysseus, steadfastly refused to wed any of the suitors. Meanwhile, the gods had decided to restore Odysseus to his kingdom, and he was released by the demigoddess Kalypso, who had held him captive as her lover for seven years. After a dangerous voyage and a shipwreck, he was washed up on the shore of Phaiakia. Appearing as a beggar, he revealed himself to his young son Telemakos, and they planned to avenge themselves on the suitors. Coming to his own home at last, Odysseus and his son slaughtered the suitors. Telemakos proved himself a man in aiding his father, Odysseus regained his kingdom, and order was restored to Ithaca.

Violence and honor are the dominant themes in the two great epics. Together, the epics depict a tribal society that revolved around the family. Kinship counted for almost everything. The most important dividing line in social, economic, and military relationships—the line between the aristocracy and the common people—was set according to the kinship group a man was born into. Not only was a man's status dictated by his lineage, but his very nature—even his personal standards of behavior—were determined and ruled by it.

The gods were ever present in Homer's world. Every meaningful action had to be preceded by a libation or sacrifice in honor of the appropriate god. Wine was poured on the ground, or a sheep, goat, or cow was slaughtered and its thigh bone wrapped in fat and burned on the fire. Feasting followed and the god was pleased. Failure to sacrifice to the gods met swift and sure retribution.

But one could not be absolutely sure of a favorable outcome even after proper ceremonies. It was easy to give offense to the gods unawares, and aside from this, there was sometimes the intervention of fate, from which there was no escape and no appeal.

Homer's gods differed in one important respect from the gods of most primitive peoples. For Homer, the forces of nature were not in themselves divinities. He seldom saw gods in rocks or trees or animals. The gods, rather, were anthropomorphic, that is, they were supermen. A god might control the sea or some other natural force, but except for his immortality and the fact that he lived high on Mount Olympus, he was similar in behavior and appearance to man. The gods were subject to human passions and they actively participated in human affairs. Humans could be descendents of gods, could look like gods, and could act like gods, but were removed from the gods, like Achilles, only because of their mortality. Homer's idea of the gods was revolutionary, because he envisaged the gods so much like man and made man nearly divine. The idea that man is "like a god" stands very near the heart of the Greek humanism of the fifth century BC Athens.

From the archaic period of Homer to classical Greece, these three centuries saw profound changes in the social and political forms of society, but Homer's picture of the gods remained the accepted standard. The Greeks never ceased to emulate the Homeric ideal of honorable human behavior. The aristocratic ideal of Homer's time, the conviction that man must seek honor through excellence, was adapted to local social and political forms to provide a standard for Greek ethical behavior that prevailed for centuries.

## 1.2 The Polis

By the time Homer's epics were written down in the eighth century BC, great changes were taking place in Greece, out of which emerged a world far different from the world described by Homer. Not long after Homer's time, Ionia, an area not far away from the site of the city of Troy, developed into an urbanized and prosperous cultural and commercial center. It led the Greek world into contacts with the Near East and other forms of civilization that heralded the emergence of Greek society from the Dark Ages. Ionian culture contributed not only to the works of Homer but also to the revival and

refinement of writing and the development of early science, philosophy, and lyric poetry.

As communication between various areas in Greece became more frequent, the Aegean Sea became the center rather than the boundary of the Greek world. The Mediterranean, with the revival of trade, became once more the highway of the Greeks. Eastern techniques and motifs in pottery and art again exerted a wide influence on Greek forms. At this time, the Phoenician alphabet was imported by the Greeks and adapted to the Greek language, making written literature possible. The Greek world was settled down to a more ordered, more civilized existence.

With its dramatic increase in population, Greece called for a higher level of agricultural production. But the land of Greece could not support a large population. Therefore, the Greek world underwent a period of rapid expansion through colonization. The colonists took with them a constitution and the gods and customs of the home community, but the new settlement was essentially independent. In a movement of expansion that lasted for more than a century, the Greeks dotted the eastern Mediterranean with colonies, from Sicily and the French coast in the west to the Black Sea in the east.

Such profound changes in the conditions of life were sure to have a major impact on the old tribal society. The end of eighth and beginning of the seventh century BC saw the transformation of the old community based on the family and tribe into the polis, the so-called "city-state". Although there were many similarities between the two, the bases of the polis implied an important departure from the old tribal relations. The polis was like a tribe in that its citizens were usually born into it and in that it dominated all aspects of life. It differed from the tribe in that it came to control a specific territory and in that its social and economic bases had little to do with the old kinship relationships.

The center of the polis in the earliest days was not even a town, let alone what we would call a city. It was merely a settlement of houses of the farmers who worked the land in the surrounding area. It was originally organized on the basis of tribal relationships, but later it became more a territorial division as the polis took on the characteristics of a town. Public buildings, temples, and meeting places appeared. As the economy grew more complex, the polis became a marketing center for the exchange of goods as well as a home and a meeting place. Gradually people came to be conscious of the polis as an entity

independent of family relationships. Religious cults associated with particular polis grew up, and a feeling similar to patriotism developed.

The new form taken by the polis led, among other things, to the disappearance of kingship, for kingship did not fit the new society. The king had no effective means to tax the community at large, and his financial position therefore was very weak. In addition, more settled conditions and the development of the hoplite formation made the old warrior kings obsolete, and their place was taken largely by groups of aristocrats. Often the executive function of government was divided among a priest, a military leader, and a judicial officer; sometimes a council of aristocrats ruled. On the whole, the new political arrangements did not keep pace with the development of society. In the seventh and sixth centuries BC, much of Greek history revolved around the attempts of the polis to find forms of government that would satisfy, first, the need for justice and impartial public authority and, second, the desire for a public authority responsive to new social and economic groups.

### 1.3 Religion

The Athenian polis was not only a community involving the political, social, and economic lives of its citizens, but also the center of their cultural life, which was intimately connected with religion. The process of religious development by which the religion of the tribe or family was transformed into the religion of the polis was shaped by two fundamental trends. The major trend was toward the gradual absorption by the state of the religious beliefs and practices of the family and locality. Second, the polis tended to adopt the more rational and aristocratic versions of the gods as they were presented by Homer in his epics and by Hesiod in his systematic account of the gods' origins.

Greek religion never incorporated a code of behavior or a coherent body of theological beliefs. It was, rather, a medley of myths, of stories that accounted for particular phenomena. For example, the explanation for the changing of the seasons was given in the story of Kore, who was abducted by Hades to the underworld. Kore's mother, Demeter, goddess of crops, was overcome by sadness and wandered the barren earth until Zeus pacified her by arranging that her daughter would spend only part of the year with Hades and

part with her. Thus, the earth was barren for part of the year, but when Kore returned to her mother every spring, life returned to the earth.

Another type of religious cult operated primarily outside the state. These cults were characterized by wild, ecstatic behavior on the part of participants, behavior that might include hallucinations, orgies, and the sacrifice of animals and even sometimes of human beings. The typical cult of this sort was the worship of Dionysus, god of wine and fertility. Its participants were from all levels of society, even including slaves, and the ritual, carried out at night, apparently consisted mainly of wild orgiastic dancing to music. Dancers wound their ways across the mountainsides in a frenzy, the object of which apparently was to lose oneself, to escape from reality. The cult of Dionysus was eventually taken over by the polis of Athens and transformed into a solemn religious festival that featured the recitation of choral odes. In time, these odes developed into full-scale plays; the festivals thus gave birth to the classical Greek tragedy.

One of the most important aspects of polis religion was the worship of heroes. The idea of hero-veneration grew naturally out of the Greek view that a man's immortality consisted mainly in how he was remembered by other men. Thus, it was an important duty of the polis to honor its heroes. The spirit of the hero, as of all ancestors, resided in his tomb, which thus had to be properly revered. In return, the hero, through his spirit, could help protect the polis. The dead Athenian hero Theseus, for instance, was said to have been seen fighting in the Athenian ranks against the Persians at the battle of Marathon. Neglect of a hero, however, could bring disaster to a polis.

Although most religious observances took place within the polis, there were Panhellenic religious institutions in which all Greek participated. The most important of these was the Delphic oracle, located at Delphi in central Greece. The Greeks believed that northerners had brought Apollo to Delphi, where he established his oracle and then shared it with Dionysus, who took possession during the three winter months when Apollo was absent. The god spoke through a priestess, who, in a trance, answered questions asked by official emissaries from the Greek cities. The oracle was also visited by common people with personal problems and by foreign emissaries from Asia. Apollo was the god of justice, and the oracle gave advice that ranged from instructing poleis when and where they should found colonies to telling

murderers whether and how they could purify themselves. Lycurgus was thought to have received his Spartan constitution from the oracle, and many cities took care to gain the advice of the oracle whenever new laws were issued. In addition, in each polis emissaries from the oracle acted as overseers of all religious observances in their polis. They saw that rituals were duly followed and that crimes were punished in the correct manner, and they gave advice when the proper course of action for the polis was in doubt. When the matter was especially serious, the emissaries were sent to the oracle for advice directly from Apollo himself.

All these facets of Greek religion were parts of a messy body of myths, cults, rituals, and beliefs, which grew up side by side in various localities in a haphazard fashion. Such a religious climate could find room—along with its huge number of gods and goddesses—for a mixture of ideas about supernatural phenomena. Conceptions of the afterlife and the underworld, for instance, varied widely, and there were vastly divergent notions about such fundamental beliefs as the nature of the spirits of the dead and the location of the underworld itself. Nothing was excluded simply because it was incompatible with any existing deity or tale. Greek religion could and did absorb anything that interested and attracted the Greeks.

It is only within this framework that we can comprehend the achievement of Homer and Hesiod. Working in the midst of this complex and often contradictory body of myth, the two poets attempted to formulate and describe an ordered conception of the gods and their relationship to man. Homer gave the gods a dwelling place (Olympus), a father (Zeus), and assigned them places in the hierarchy of beings in the universe. Gods were like man, except that they were physically flawless, immortal, and able to foresee human events; in short, they were man perfected. Because of their superior nature, they exercised power over human events in much the same way that the nobles of the Dark Ages possessed authority over the commoners, who were inferior to them. The gods' anger could breed affliction for man, while their blessing promised success. In Homer, the gods were ever present in human affairs, especially at moments of human decision. They might speak aloud to a man, avert a spear to save his life, or put in a personal appearance at any time and in almost any guise. Above all, the gods were to be seen at work in actions that surpassed the normal behavior of man. Transcendent wrath were hints that the



gods had intervened. In addition, the gods had control over natural forces and could bring them to bear either for or against a man. Sailors, for instance, had to be careful to retain the good will of Poseidon, god of the sea. It was Poseidon who, when offended by Odysseus, delayed his passage home. Zeus not only exercised his persuasive thunderbolt at certain decisive moments but also gave out good or evil fortune variously to each man at birth.

In Homer, there is never any question as to whether one should believe in the gods; nor will obedience to the divine ever be questioned. The will of the gods is inescapable, and therefore they simply cannot be ignored. If punishment is not visited upon a man who insults the gods, it will surely strike his children or children's children. But when a man unknowingly commits an offence against a divinity, it is possible, by observing the proper rituals and by behaving properly, to remain on good terms with the gods. To behave correctly is to act in accord with one's nature. Just as a commoner could be humiliated for speaking out of turn in the assembly, so the suitors in the *Odyssey* could be punished for behavior inappropriate to their position.

The ideal man never forgets his humanity and his mortality, but at the same time he has to emulate the gods. The gods were supposedly deserving of this emulation by reason of their perfection, although the myths are full of instances where the gods tell a lie, cheat, commit adultery, and generally act in less than a god-like fashion. A hero is a man who possessed godlike qualities, and he is given immortality in the only way that is meaningful or appealing to the Greeks. To live forever in the memory of one's polis is the incentive to proper human action. The gods look with favor upon lofty human behavior. For example, Heracles was a man the gods found so worthy that they accepted him as a god. Heracles represented the closest thing the Greeks ever had to a universal symbol of a hero, and he belonged to all the Greeks.

Homer created the Greek image of the gods and gave them personality and function. It remained for Hesiod in his *Theogony* to attempt to systematize the family of deities and depict the genealogy of the gods and their roles. His system was Greek, of course, but it shows some Near Eastern influences. Hesiod's major contribution was to explain the conception that the gods were a moral force. He achieved this by making them champions of justice.

The Greek polis adopted Homer's and Hesiod's conceptions of gods, and despite the variety of local practices, a distinctive Greek religion was