

Greek Mythology and its connection to the modern Olympics



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We are in China in 2008 at the Olympic Games in Beijing. Who could imagine that the Old Olympic idea will come to Communist China and will represent the Mythology topics? The greatest event on Earth is played based on the Old Greek Mythology and we are watching it and appreciating it.

The Olympic Games, originally created to honor Zeus, was the most important national festival of the ancient Greeks. However, all competitions involved individual competitors instead of teams. Winning an Olympic contest was regarded more highly than winning a battle and was proof of personal excellence. The winners were presented with garlands, crowned with olive wreaths, and viewed as national heroes.

The original Olympic Games are generally agreed upon to have been first recorded in 776 BC in Olympia Greece, celebrated until AD 393. Scholars diverge as to the exact date, with some citing a date as early as 884 BC and as late as 704BC, but the date of 776 BC is the mostly agreed upon date for the inception of the Olympic Games.

Were the Olympics created to show warrior skills?

There are many myths and theories surrounding the origin of the ancient Olympic Games and why they were created. One popular theory is that Greeks were warriors by trade, and once their domination of land was largely secured, the need for war and battle was no longer necessary. To exercise these physical needs, which no longer had a natural outlet, the ancient Greek city-states started building gymnasiums, stadiums and training centers.

Continuing the tradition of physical excellence

The physical aesthetic of strength and a muscular build continued because this was the physical sign of warriors, and warriors were respected. Since warriors in effect no longer had a job, and their work no longer defined their status, the physical power of a warrior became the new aesthetic – and this was one that could be achieved by almost anyone with enough dedication and effort.

And now, since there were no wars to fight, games were created as a place for men to demonstrate their physical strength, aptitude, and skill. These competitions were open to anyone who could afford the training, and each Greek city-state would elect a representative to send to compete. This was an incredible honor as it gave the chosen participant the opportunity to bring attention to his hometown.

Was Hercules responsible for the Olympics?

The most popular myth as to the origin of the ancient Olympic Games is that Hercules was the creator of the games. He built the first Olympic stadium to honor his father, Zeus, after Hercules completed an assignment of the 12 labors. I bet you never knew that. According to legend, Hercules walked in a straight line for 400 strides and declared this distance a “stadium” or “stage.” This is why the modern stadium is the distance of 400 meters in circumference.

Other myths on how the Games were started

There are several other Greek myths about how the games were started. Another common myth was the story of the hero Pelops, after whom the Peloponnese is named ("the isle of Pelops"). The story of Pelops was displayed prominently on the east pediment sculptures of the Temple of Zeus. Pelops was a prince from Lydia in Asia Minor who sought the hand of Hippodamia, the daughter of King Oinomaos of Pisa. Oinomaos challenged his daughter's suitors to a chariot race under the guarantee that any young man who won the chariot race could have Hippodamia as

a wife. Any young man who lost the race would be beheaded, and the heads would be used as decoration for the palace of Oinomaos. With the help of his charioteer Myrtilos, Pelops devised a plan to beat Oinomaos in the chariot race. Pelops and Myrtilos secretly replaced the bronze linchpins of the King's chariot with linchpins made of wax. When Oinomaos was about to pass Pelops in the chariot race, the wax melted and Oinomaos was thrown to his death. Pelops married Hippodamia and instituted the Olympic Games to celebrate his victory. A different version of the myth refers to the Olympic Games as funeral games in the memory of Oinomaos.

Another myth about the origin of the Olympic Games comes from the Tenth Olympian Ode of the poet Pindar. He tells the story of how Hercules, on his fifth labor, had to clean the stables of King Augeas of Elis. Hercules approached Augeas and promised to clean the stables for the price of one-tenth of the king's cattle. Augeas agreed, and Hercules rerouted the Kladeos and Alpheos rivers to flow through the stables. Augeas did not fulfill his promise, however, and after Hercules had finished his labors he returned to Elis and waged war on Augeas. Hercules sacked the city of Elis and instituted the Olympic Games in honor of his father, Zeus. It is said that Hercules taught men how to wrestle and measured out the length of the footrace.

The mixture of religion and the Olympics

The Olympic Games quickly became a nationally important contest, reaching their height of popularity on the 5th and 6th centuries BC. As is the case with most of Greek life, the Olympics became a fundamentally religious declaration of importance, a way of honoring the gods, as well as the abundance of good life that the Greeks owed to these deities.

The number of games and events grew from just a few to twenty at their height of popularity, and the contests and celebrations were spread over several days. The winners of each event were highly regarded, awarded prizes, and immortalized in poems and statues.

The Olympic Games gradually declined in importance as the Romans gained power in Greece and eventually brought to a halt after the final games in 393 AD. The International Olympic Committee was founded in 1894, and the first modern Olympic Games were revived and held in 1896 in Athens, Greece.

Participation in the Olympic Games is still an incredible honor, bringing recognition to an athlete's home nation, and participation has grown to include almost every country from around the world. The original Olympic Games were held every four years, and that is a tradition that continues through today's modern Olympic Games.

Although records of the Olympics date back to 776 BC when the Olympics were reorganized and the official "First Olympiad" was held, Homer's Iliad suggests that

they existed as early as the 12th century BC. The games were held every four years in honor of Zeus, in accordance with the four year time periods which the Greeks called Olympiads. Emperor Theodosius I of Rome discontinued them in the 4th century AD, and they did not happen again until they were reinstated in Athens in 1896.

Originally, the Olympics was restricted to running, but by the 15th Olympiad, additional sports were added the pentathlon (five different events), boxing, wrestling, chariot racing, as well as a variety of foot races of different lengths, including a long-distance race of about 2.5 miles.

Athletes usually competed naked, proudly displaying their perfect bodies. Women, foreigners, slaves, and dishonored persons were forbidden to compete; women, once they were married, were not even allowed to watch any Olympic events, except for chariot races. However, every four years, women held their own games, called the Heraia after Hera, held at Argos, and beginning as early as the 6th century BC and lasting at least six centuries until Roman rule. This was a running contest in which 16 females participated in three races, divided by age.

How were the Olympics a sacred festival?

Unlike our modern Olympic games, the ancient Greek Olympic Games were religious instead of an experienced festival, celebrating the gods in general and Zeus in particular. The contests themselves alternated with altar rituals and sacrifices, as well as processions and banquets. Individual competitors trained severely not only for personal glory, but also to impress and please a god through demonstrating strength and agility.

Although one legend says that Hercules won a race at Olympia and decreed that races should be instituted every four years, the most common legend suggests that Zeus originated the games after he defeated Cronus in battle. Many events occurred at the Olympic stadium near the temple of Zeus in Olympia southwest of Athens. Inside the temple was the 42 foot high gold and ivory statue of Zeus sculpted by Phidias, considered to be one of seven wonders of the ancient world.

Eventually the games were also held at other sacred spots in the Greek city-states, such as Delphi and Corinth. These games honored the ruling god of the particular area, most notably Apollo and Poseidon in addition to Zeus. Apollo from the start had an indirect role in the festivities, since the winners were always lauded with garlands of laurel, the tree most sacred to Apollo ever since his beloved Daphne was transformed into a laurel tree.

According to a legend, the altar of Zeus stood on a spot struck by a thunderbolt, which had been hurled by the god from his throne high atop Mount Olympus, where the gods assembled. Some coins from Elis had a thunderbolt design on the reverse, in honor of this legend.

Over time, the Games flourished, and Olympia became a central site for the worship of Zeus. Individuals and communities donated buildings, statues, altars and other dedications to the god.

The Sacred Truce

The sacred truce, or ekcheiria, was instituted during the month of the Olympiad. Messengers known as spondorophoroi carried the word of the truce, and announced the date of the games all over the Greek world. The truce called for a cessation of all hostilities for a period of one month (later three months) to allow for the safe travel of athletes to and from Olympia. Armies and armed individuals were banned from entering the sanctuary. In addition, no death penalties could be carried out during the period of the truce.

The Internationalization of the Olympic Games

From the beginning, the games at Olympia served to strengthen the Greek sense of national unity. During the Hellenistic period, Greeks who came to live in foreign surroundings such as Syria, Asia, and Egypt, strove to hold on to their culture. One of the ways they did this was to build athletic facilities and continue their athletic traditions. They organized competitions, and sent competitors from their towns to compete in the Pan-Hellenic games. In the 2nd century A.D., Roman citizenship was extended to everyone within the Roman Empire. After this point there were many competitors from outside of Greece, and the Olympic Games became more internationalized.

When the Greek government reinstated the games in 1896, this international character of the competitions was preserved by Baron de Coubertin. Now, 16 centuries later, the Olympic Games attract competitors from countries all over the world.

The games at Olympia were greatly expanded from a one-day festival of athletics and wrestling to, in 472 BC, five days with many events. The order of the events is not precisely known, but the first day of the festival, like said before, was devoted to sacrifices. On the Middle Day of the festival 100 oxen were sacrificed in honor of a God. Athletes also often prayed.


On the second day, the foot-race, the main event of the games, took place in the stadium, an oblong area enclosed by sloping banks of earth.

At Olympia there were 4 different types of races; The first was stadion, the oldest event of the Games, where runners sprinted for 1 stade, the length of the stadium (192m). The other races were a 2-stade race (384 m.) and a long-distance run which ranged from 7 to 24 stades (1,344 m. to 4,608 m.). The fourth type of race involved runners wearing full armor, which was 2-4 stade race (384 m. to 768 m.), used to build up speed and stamina for military purposes.

On other days, wrestling, boxing, and the pancratium, a combination of the two, were held. In wrestling, the aim was to throw the opponent to the ground three times, on either his hip, back or shoulder.

Boxing became more and more brutal; at first the pugilists wound straps of soft leather over their fingers as a means of deadening the blows, but in later times hard leather, sometimes weighted with metal, was used. In the pancratium, the most rigorous of the sports, the contest continued until one or the other of the participants acknowledged defeat.

Horse-racing, in which each entrant owned his horse, was confined to the wealthy but was nevertheless a popular attraction. The course was 6 laps of the track, with separate races for whereupon the rider would have no stirrups. It was only wealthy people that could pay for such training, equipment, and feed of both the rider and the horses. So whichever horse won it was not the rider who was awarded the Olive wreath but the owner. There were also Chariot races, that consisted of both 2-horse and 4-horse chariot races, with separate races for chariots drawn by foals. There was also a race was between carts drawn by a team of 2 mules, which was 12 laps of the stadium track.

 After the horse-racing came the pentathlon, a series of five events: sprinting, long-jumping, javelin-hurling, discus-throwing, and wrestling.

The ancient Greeks considered the rhythm and precision of an athlete throwing the discus as important as his strength.

The discus was a circle shaped stone, iron, bronze, or lead. There were different sizes according to age groups. The javelin was a long wooden stick shape with spear head, similar height to that of a person. In the middle was a thong for a hurler's fingers to grip and guide to the correct angle it was thrown.

To jump long distances athletes used lead or stone weights to increase the length of the jump. These weights were known as 'halteres' were held in front of the athlete during his ascent, and then swung behind his back and dropped during his descent to help propel him.

Zanes

While these days the Games get bad publicity if an athlete is found to have taken drugs or violated the rules, in the old days Olympia benefited. Statues called "Zanes", based on the ancient Cretan name of Zeus, Zan, were paid for by the fines collected from athletes who had broken the rules. Many of these statues were erected, indicating that times change, but the temptations for athletes do not.

The Sun Shines at the Games

Apollo did more than just shine on the Games; he also competed in a footrace with Hermes. And that wasn't the end of his Olympic trials. The god of war, Ares, was defeated by him in a boxing match.

Poseidon Presiding

While the Olympic Games and Nemean Games both honored Zeus, the Isthmian Games honored Poseidon. In addition to being known as a god of the sea, Poseidon also ruled over earthquakes and horses. For the early Olympic Games, horse races made up a substantial part of the competitions.

Where Did the Priestesses Come From?

For these Olympic Games in Greece, one of the most intriguing images depicts beautiful costumed priestesses kindling the Olympic flame with a giant solar reflector. (Religious authorities have sniffed, "They're not priestesses, they're actresses!" but don't tell that to Zeus, haha).

How did the priestesses become involved when women were originally forbidden to attend the Games? After the original Games ceased to be held, the Pythian priestess at the oracle of Delphi told Iphitos that Greece could be healed of disease and disorder by reinstating the Games. He did so, bringing us the Games in the form that has endured, minus a 1400-year pause when they were halted for being too "pagan", to the present day.

Strangely enough, there are myths for the China Olympics that somehow relate to the other myths:

Fuwa

Like the Five Olympic Rings from which they draw their color and inspiration, Fuwa will serve as the Official Mascots of Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, carrying a message of friendship and peace -- and good wishes from China -- to children all over the world.

Designed to express the playful qualities of five little children who form an intimate circle of friends, Fuwa also embody the natural characteristics of four of China's most popular animals -- the Fish, the Panda, the Tibetan Antelope, the Swallow -- and the Olympic Flame.

Each of Fuwa has a rhyming two-syllable name -- a traditional way of expressing affection for children in China. Beibei is the Fish, Jingjing is the Panda, Huanhuan is the Olympic Flame, Yingying is the Tibetan Antelope and Nini is the Swallow.

When you put their names together -- Bei Jing Huan Ying Ni -- they say "Welcome to Beijing," offering a warm invitation that reflects the mission of Fuwa as young ambassadors for the Olympic Games.

Fuwa also embody both the landscape and the dreams and aspirations of people from every part of the vast country of China. In their origins and their headpieces, you can see the five elements of nature -- the sea, forest, fire, earth and sky -- all stylistically rendered in ways that represent the deep traditional influences of Chinese folk art and ornamentation.

Spreading Traditional Chinese Good Wishes Wherever They Go

In the ancient culture of China, there is a grand tradition of spreading good wishes through signs and symbols. Each of Fuwa symbolizes a different blessing -- and will honor this tradition by carrying their good wishes to the children of the world. Prosperity, happiness, passion, health and good luck will be spread to every continent as Fuwa carry their invitation to Beijing 2008 to every part of the globe.

At the heart of their mission -- and through all of their work -- Fuwa will seek to unite the world in peace and friendship through the Olympic spirit. Dedicated to helping Beijing 2008 spread its theme of One World, One Dream to every continent, Fuwa reflect the deep desire of the Chinese people to reach out to the world in friendship through the Games -- and to invite every man, woman and child to take part in the great celebration of human solidarity that China will host in the light of the flame in 2008.



In China's traditional culture and art, the fish and water designs are symbols of prosperity and harvest. And so Beibei carries the blessing of prosperity. A fish is also a symbol of surplus in Chinese culture, another measure of a good year and a good life.

The ornamental lines of the water-wave designs are taken from well-known Chinese paintings of the past. Among Fuwa, Beibei is known to be gentle and pure. Strong in water sports, she reflects the blue Olympic ring.



Jingjing makes children smile -- and that's why he brings the blessing of happiness wherever he goes. You can see his joy in the charming naivety of his dancing pose and the lovely wave of his black and white fur. As a national treasure and a protected species, pandas are adored by people everywhere. The lotus designs in Jingjing's headdress, which are inspired by the porcelain paintings of the Song Dynasty (A.D.960-1234), symbolize the lush forest and the harmonious relationship between man and nature. Jingjing was chosen to represent our desire to protect nature's gifts -- and to preserve the beauty of nature for all generations. Jingjing is charmingly naïve and optimistic. He is an athlete noted for strength who represents the black Olympic ring.



In the intimate circle of Fuwa, Huanhuan is the big brother. He is a child of fire, symbolizing the Olympic Flame and the passion of sport -- and passion is the blessing he bestows. Huanhuan stands in the center of Fuwa as the core embodiment of the Olympic spirit. And while he inspires all with the passion to run faster, jump higher and be stronger, he is also open and inviting. Wherever the light of Huanhuan shines, the inviting warmth of Beijing 2008 -- and the wishful blessings of the Chinese people -- can be felt. The fiery designs of his head ornament are drawn from the famed Dunhuang murals -- with just a touch of China's traditional lucky designs. Huanhuan is outgoing and enthusiastic. He excels at all the ball games and represents the red Olympic ring.



Like all antelopes, Yingying is fast and agile and can swiftly cover great stretches of land as he races across the earth. A symbol of the vastness of China's landscape, the antelope carries the blessing of health, the strength of body that comes from harmony with nature. Yingying's flying pose captures the essence of a species unique to the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, one of the first animals put under protection in China. The selection of the Tibetan Antelope reflects Beijing's commitment to a Green Olympics. His head ornament incorporates several decorative styles from the Qinghai-Tibet and Sinkiang cultures and the ethnic design traditions of Western China. Strong in track and field events, Yingying is a quick-witted and agile boy who represents the yellow Olympic ring.



Every spring and summer, the children of Beijing have flown beautiful kites on the currents of wind that blow through the capital. Among the kite designs, the golden-winged swallow is traditionally one of the most popular. Nini's figure is drawn from this grand tradition of flying designs. Her golden wings symbolize the infinite sky and spread good-luck as a blessing wherever she flies. Swallow is also pronounced "yan" in Chinese, and Yanjing is what Beijing was called as an ancient capital city. Among Fuwa, Nini is as innocent and joyful as a swallow. She is strong in gymnastics and represents the green Olympic ring.

Chang'e Flew to the Moon

This is a well-known myth of ancient China. It was said that in emperor Yao's reign, the God of Heaven could not control his ten sun sons who slipped out to play, drying all the crops and trees and burning the land. People could not live at all. Emperor Yao appealed loudly to the god of heaven, describing the overwhelming disaster the ten suns had brought to his people. The god of heaven then sent Hou yi, an archer

god, to settle the problem. Hou yi, with his wife Chang'e, descended from the Heaven. He shot down nine of the ten suns and left one. The climate then became mild, plants began to grow, and people were able to live a good life again. The god of heaven at first just wanted Hou yi to give his sons a start, never expecting him to kill nine of them. Bearing a grudge, the god of heaven reduced Hou yi and Chang'e to common people, never to return to heaven. Feeling wronged, Chang'e was at odds with her husband every day. Hou yi, unable to bear this had to go to Mt. Kunlun to ask the west mother goddess for the elixir of life. The west mother goddess told him: "if two people eat it together, they will neither get old nor die. If one person eats it all, he will ascend to heaven and become an immortal." Hou yi brought the elixir home and told all he had heard to Chang'e. one day when Hou yi was absent, Chang'e secretly ate all the elixir herself. At once she felt her body become as light as a swallow, flying towards the moon. Later, Chang'e was confined in the palace of the moon, living a lonely life.

Liu Xiang

Just recently something happened. Liu Xiang, one of China's idols, a 110 meter hurdler, entered the track to cheers from flag-waving fans around 11:45 am. He took off his jacket and walked to his lane. It was the last of the heats of the first round of the 110m hurdles. Liu walked with a slight limp but stretched out his right leg, slipped into position and ran-yet in pain-when there was a false start.

He then stood up and walked away in silence. The reason was that an injury—in the Achilles tendon! I just heard about it, and it reminded me of the story of Achilles and the arrow. I'm so glad that yet another thing in the Olympics connected with Mythology.

But very sadly, all the people in China were very disappointed. The shock was all round. Disbelief, choked voices and damp eyes were the order of the moment. People who had gathered to watch the first appearance of their sports icon were numb for words.

I thought Greek mythology was a pretty interesting subject to study and I can't wait until we start studying the Odyssey. I learned so much this summer. I've been listening to college courses, going to museums, and, of course, went to the Olympics. Here I come Pre AP!

