



The Merpeople Culture in Ancient China from the Perspective of the Relationship Between Human and Nature

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A Study of 20th Century U.S.-Canada Pacific Fisheries Cooperation in the Perspective of Marine Environmental History(23YJC770002) 海洋环境史视野下20世纪美加太平洋渔业合作研究 (项目批准号: 23YJC770002)

Research purposes

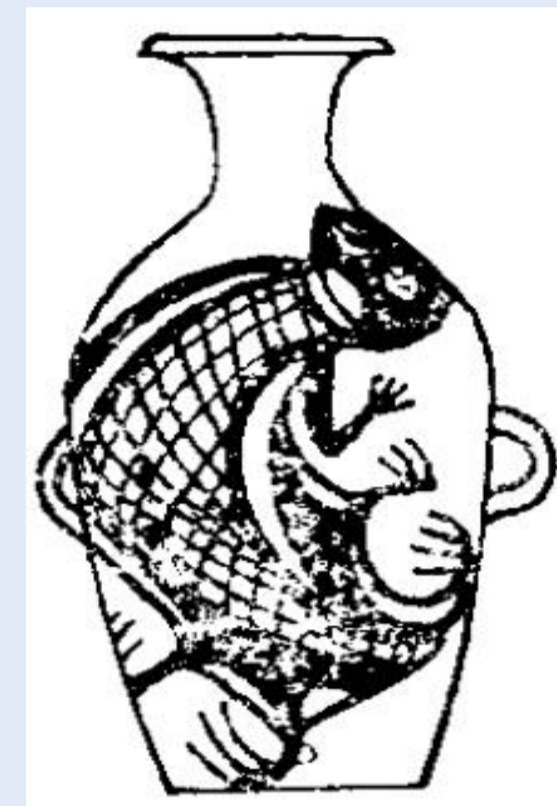
- ✓ To sort out the evolution of merpeople images and relationships between human and merpeople in ancient China.
- ✓ To reveal ancient Chinese deeper understandings of human, nature, more importantly, the relationships between both.

Contents

Pre-Qin: Germination and Prototyping



Neolithic human-face fish pattern pottery basin



Painted pottery bottle with salamander decorations



Lingyu (蛟鱼) in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*

- The earliest depictions of merpeople in China can be traced back to the **human-face fish and salamander decorations on Neolithic coloured pottery**. *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* introduced a plethora of merpeople images with diverse names, forms, and mystical attributes.
- The merpeople culture reflects humanity sincere desires for **resurrection after death**, communication between **heaven and earth**, as well as **physical well-being**.
- The fusion of human and fish elements vividly symbolizes **the deep connection and harmonious coexistence between human and other natural creatures**. Early in civilisation merpeople were attributed with mystical powers, demonstrating **humanity's mysterious worship to nature**.

Wei and Jin: Emergence of a New Genre

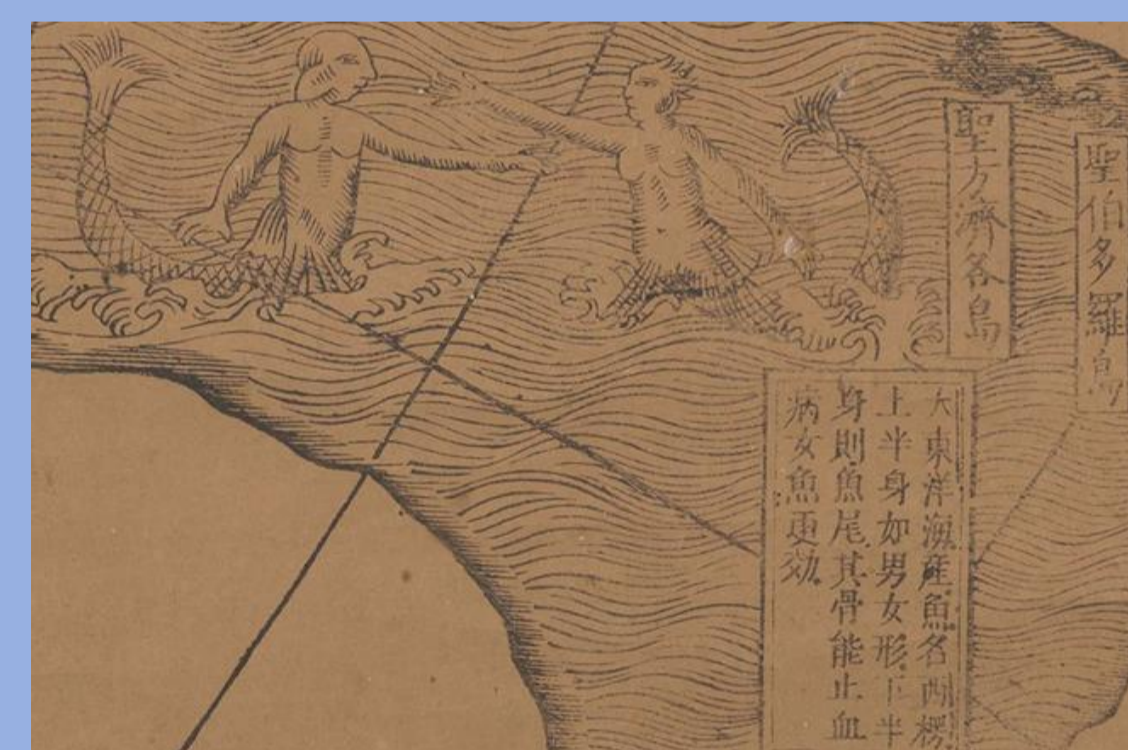
- The *Jiaoren*, originating from the sea depths, integrated into human society. They were adept at weaving and repaid kindness with **tear-turned-pearls**. **A mural painting of a man's head with a fish's body** has been discovered in a tomb.
- The *Jiaoren* had **their affection towards humans and provided wealth through the weaving and weeping into pearls**. The two established **a close secular relationship based on love and wealth**.
- These fantastical notions reflected the collective yearnings of the human spirit during a time of societal decline. It is the embodiment of mankind's sentimental attachment to nature.**



Murals of **human heads with fish bodies** in Dunhuang tomb of Western Jin Dynasty

Ming and Qing: Multi-complex images

- Jiao Ren* (蛟人) resurfaced in the *Weird Novel Xie Duo* (谐谑). Enchanting, calamity-inducing, and ominous **sea maidens** (海女) emerged. The male **monkfish** (和尚鱼) occurred in *Sancai Tuhui*. Western missionaries introduced the European "**Xileng**" fish (西楞鱼). *Haicuotu* featured ugly, sexually indistinguishable *Renyu* (人鱼). The image of merpeople during this period is **more diverse**, encompassing both male and female forms that are **more anthropomorphic in nature**.
- The relationship between humans and merpeople is **complex**. **The sexual relationship between mermaids and humans** is viewed as harmless, yet the presence of **sea maiden** (海女) is often perceived as a potential source of **maritime disasters**.
- Human beings incline to **investigate and comprehend all creatures in the nature**. They have **apprehension towards the prospect of exploring the unknown aspects of the natural world**.



Xileng (西楞) in *Great Universal Geographic Map* by Belgian missionary Ferdinand Verbiest, collected by Toyo Bunko, Japan

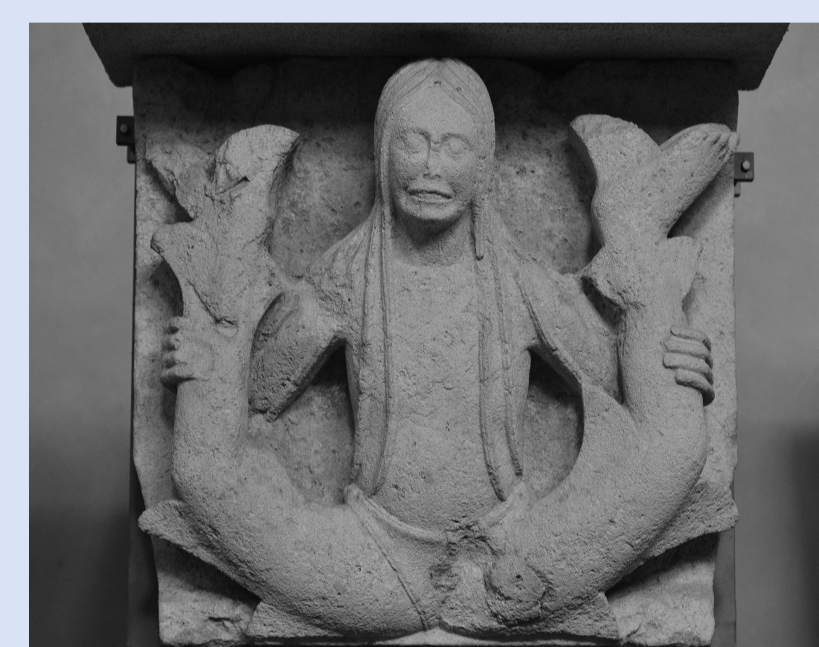


monkfish (和尚鱼) from *Sancai Tuhui*



Renyu (人鱼) from *Sancai Tuhui*

Tang and Song: Important Twist



Twin-tails mermaid, from Museo Dei Duomo Museums in Modena, Italy



Yiyu (仪鱼), unearthed from the tomb of Li Jing, the middle master of the Southern Tang Dynasty in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, China

- The merpeople underwent a transformation into **an alluring female sea mermaid** (海人鱼) that have sex with humans. Tang Dynasty tombs were buried with figurines of **a man-head fish-body merman**, which was believed as symbol of passing Imperial Examination and smooth career in the afterlife.
- Humans project their **own physical and spiritual desires onto merpeople**, thus enabling the two to **achieve an extremely intimate relationship**.
- This intimacy is indicative of **the human subject's mental masturbation and fantasising about the natural object**.

Conclusions

- Merpeople images have increased in variety from **simple to complex**. From the initial superposition of a human head and fish body to the subsequent tendency to assume a human form, the fish characteristics are gradually diminishing. From a gender-neutral representation, the depiction of female mermaids, to male of sea monk and female of sea maidens.
- The relationship between humans and merpeople includes **mutualisation and coexistence, mysterious worship, beneficence, sexual relations, and fear**.
- The relationship between humans and nature is complex and includes **worship, fantasy and fear**. The progression of these relationships is **not necessarily linear; rather, they are intertwined**.

