

From the Capitoline She-Wolf to the She-Wolf of the Wusun: Differences in Narrative Structures of the "Wolf Raising Human Infants" Legend between China and the West from the Perspective of Mutual Learning among Civilizations

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Abstract. The stories of wolves raising babies in ancient Rome and the Wusun Kingdom have the same theme, but they show big differences in story structure and cultural role. The Roman story is a clear origin story. It has developed step by step over many years. It first came from local old religious beliefs, then mixed with Latin culture, and finally became a sign of the emperor's rule. The Wusun story is about rebuilding their own country. In this story, the mother wolf is just a witness of the god's will, and her role is to help rebuild the country's power. The written form of this story was also rewritten by people in the Han Dynasty, and it carries strong Confucian ideas about the god's will for rulers. These two stories show that when different cultures communicate with each other, the story structure of the same myth theme will be changed by the history and cultural needs of different civilizations. This creates origin stories with very different roles, and shows the different ways each culture builds its own identity.

Keywords: wolf raising human infants, legendary motif, narrative structure, reception history

1. Introduction

The story of a mother wolf feeding human babies is a famous old myth from ancient Rome. Its main characters are Romulus and Remus. The Roman people believe they are the people who built Rome. We can find records of a similar wolf-feeding-babies story from the Wusun people. These records are in *Records of the Grand Historian · Biographies of the Dayuan* and *The History of the Han Dynasty · Accounts of the Western Regions*. Its main person is Kunmo. He was the king of the Wusun when Zhang Qian went to the Western Regions.

Because of limited old materials and research areas, most past studies only looked at one of the two stories. They almost never studied both together. The few studies that compare the two stories mostly use archaeology or cultural study ways to find their similarities. But they do not pay attention to their differences. In fact, the two stories have many differences besides their same theme. So there

is still much to study about these two regions' myths. Both myths are built around the same theme of wolves feeding human babies.

So this paper uses the method of comparative study of ancient writings. It carefully studies the main differences between the Roman and Wusun stories in story structure and other small themes. It also tries to find out where they may come from culturally. It further studies how the "wolf feeding human babies" myth theme first appeared and spread. It does this by looking at how people accepted it over time. This study not only wants to give new proof for the cross-cultural spread of this theme. It also wants to show how different civilizations change one common theme into country-building stories. These stories help make their own ethnic groups have a clear and unique identity.

2. Literature review

In researches on the mythic motif of the wolf raising infants of ancient Rome, Western scholars mostly adopt philological and archaeological research methods, while Chinese scholars tend to sort out and interpret historical documents from the perspectives of mythology and cultural anthropology. In terms of research timeframes, Chinese scholars prefer to trace the origin of the motif, whereas Western scholars focus more on the spread and transformation of the motif after its formation.

In *On the Formation and Evolution of the Founding Legend of Rome*, Hu Yujuan studies the wolf-nursing-infant motif within the framework of Rome's founding legends. She argues that the image of the she-wolf is closely linked to the wolf totem worship on the Palatine Hill from the 13th to the 12th century BCE. This image evolved into the legend of beasts nurturing infants prevalent in Etruria in the 5th century BCE, and was eventually combined with the twin-born motif originating from Lavinium, both integrated into the founding myth of Rome. This indicates that research on the wolf-nursing-infant motif cannot be separated from Rome's founding myth, and it is necessary to attach importance to legends of city-states in Latium and elements of Greek epics contained in the motif [1]. Following a similar research perspective, Cai Lijuan's *Historical Writings on the Founding of Rome and the Construction of Roman Identity* analyzes the wolf-nursing-infant motif from the dimension of identity formation. The author holds that Rome's founding legend falls into the same category as birth myths of monarchs such as Cyrus and Sargon, all reflecting the custom of young Indo-European males leaving their original groups to build new settlements. Such young men were referred to as "wolves", and the she-wolf legend may represent recognition of Rome's similar founding process. Meanwhile, the author notes that Rome expanded the scope of people deemed descendants of the wolf in its narratives to include all Latins, so as to pursue ethnic identity on a broader scale. This reveals that exploration of this motif needs to trace back to shared customs of the entire Indo-European language family, and also offers a potential route for the motif's dissemination across the Eurasian continent [2].

Compared with the above works, Yin Guoming's *Wolves and the Origins of Western Civilization* covers a wider scope and features more prominent interdisciplinary attributes. Drawing on cultural anthropology and psychological theories proposed by Freud, Jung and other scholars, the work starts with the Roman wolf-nursing-infant motif, incorporates the Trojan legends in the *Homeric Epics*, and further extends its analysis to shape-shifting myths of humans turning into animals in Mesopotamia, jackal myths of ancient Egypt and wolf totem worship among Native Americans. The scholar contends that wolf worship in ancient human cultures was closely associated with humanity's transition from primitive society to civilized society, fundamentally embodying the savage forces of warfare, procreation and other factors that laid the foundation of civilized societies.

This conclusion carries great significance for exploring the early origins of the wolf-nursing-infant motif [3].

Western scholars have studied the "wolf raising human babies" story theme a lot. Bebina Milovanovic and Nemanja Mdric used an archaeology way in their book *She-Wolf Motif with Romulus and Remus on the Tombstone of an Augustan Priest from Viminacium*. They think the wolf pattern on the tombstone shows the owner's two identities. He was a Roman citizen and an imperial government official. Besides, they found Celtic elements in the knotted bands on female figures of the tombstone carvings. So the tombstone also shows how Roman culture spread to Lower Pannonia. It also shows how Celtic people there became Roman. This study shows the "wolf raising human babies" theme spread as Roman identity grew [4]. Also, Cristina Mazzoni wrote a book called *The She-Wolf: A History of a Roman Statue*. She checked when Rome's bronze wolf statue was built and what materials were used. She also summed up past studies on the wolf theme from art history. And she studied and talked about what the wolf image meant in different times. She listed how people accepted this theme from the Middle Ages to today [5].

Francesco Mongelli wrote an article called *The Origins of Rome — From Cassius Dio to the Suda: Romulus and the She-Wolf*. He studied old writings and sorted out all different versions of the wolf legend. His study focused on how this theme spread and was accepted. It shows historians changed this Roman founding story from the Roman Empire to the Byzantine Era. Early people thought the wolf stood for a prostitute who raised Romulus. Or they saw the wolf as a sign of imperial power. Later people slowly cared less about the wolf legend. Some even left it out completely. They paid more attention to Romulus' foster parents and old Roman festivals. This study shows Roman people did not always value the "wolf raising human babies" theme the same way. People's understanding of this myth changed many times over history [6].

Scholars from China and other countries have studied the Wusun version of this theme. They noticed it may have a link with the same Roman theme. They tried to find out how this link came to be. Besides, most scholars found Turkic origin stories are similar to Wusun and Rome's founding stories. They think the Wusun wolf legend is an early cultural part of Turkic origin myths.

Shang Yongqi wrote a book called *A Study on the Wolf-head Banner and Wolf-descendant Legends of Ancient Steppe Ethnic Groups*. He used an archaeology research way. His study mainly looked at Turkic peoples. He studied wolf totem worship of many steppe groups, including Wusun, Xiongnu and Mongols. He thinks Turkic people's use of wolf-head banners came from Scythians and Sarmatians. About how the "wolf raising human babies" theme spread, he used Denis Sinor's ideas. He said this theme's spread is linked to Indo-European languages. It is also linked to Sogdians who lived among Turkic groups. Also, he sorted out wolf totem worship of steppe peoples. He proved Xiongnu and Mongols did not have clear wolf totem worship. But Wusun and Turkic peoples did. This finding lets us know more clearly how far east this theme spread. It further proves this theme is strongly linked to Indo-European language families [7].

Chen Hao wrote an article called *An Analysis of Turkic Origin Narratives from a Global Historical Perspective*. He studied old texts and analyzed the "wolf raising human babies" theme. He thinks it is one of the most important Turkic origin stories. He also agrees with Denis Sinor's theory. He confirmed this theme is linked to Indo-European groups who lived among Turkic peoples [8]. He studied this theme together with other Turkic origin stories. He pointed out Frankish records said Rome and Turkic peoples both came from Troy. This shows they share the same Indo-European roots. It also shows the practical diplomatic needs of that time. Though this article does not directly study the Wusun founding story, it supports the idea that this theme came from Indo-European peoples. Also, its research way is very useful for other studies. This way studies legend origins by

looking at their political and economic background. It also looks at why people created these legends [9].

All in all, past studies have talked about how this theme appears in different ways in Eastern and Western civilizations. They also studied the links between these different versions. But each study is limited by the scholar's field and research method. They only look at one small part of how this theme developed and spread. When comparing the two stories, most studies only focus on their similarities. They do not pay attention to their differences. They also do not study the story structures of the legends deeply. Also, limited by their research views, most scholars cannot study the Wusun wolf legend on its own. They only see it as an early part of similar Turkic legends. They care little about how the Wusun founding story was created and why. Based on past studies, this paper analyzes the story structures and different small themes of the two legends. It also studies the key differences in how Eastern and Western "wolf raising human babies" themes were formed.

3. On the narrative structure of the legends

3.1. Narrative structure of the Roman she-wolf legend

Multiple versions of the Roman she-wolf legend exist, with discrepancies in plots and story components across different editions. Moreover, numerous early Roman myths concerning the origin and foundation of the city do not incorporate the motif of the she-wolf nursing infants at all. Nevertheless, shared core elements can be generalized as follows: the maternal grandfather of the protagonist (twins in some versions, a single child in others) was the former ruler, who was usurped and exiled by his own brother. The protagonist's mother was forced to serve as a priestess bound to perpetual chastity, yet she conceived the protagonist after a union with the god of war. The infant protagonist was abandoned owing to their dishonorable birth, survived after being suckled by a she-wolf, and was subsequently raised by shepherds. Upon reaching adulthood, the protagonist gathered a group of followers, chanced upon their grandfather and learned of their birth origins, helped the grandfather overthrow the usurper, departed from their homeland state, and founded a new regime.

Preceding this legend is generally the tale of fugitives fleeing Troy who established Alba Longa, the homeland of the protagonists. Following it are accounts of site selection for the founding of Rome and the fatal quarrel between the twin brothers. Combined together, these narratives form the complete myth of Rome's origin.

The suckling by the she-wolf stands as a profoundly sacred segment within the Roman wolf-nursing-infant legend. In the Roman pantheon, the wolf itself serves as the symbol of Mars, god of war. Beyond the she-wolf alone, other sacred creatures or symbols linked to Mars, such as the fig tree and the woodpecker, regularly appear alongside the wolf in the scene of the beast nursing the infants [10]. This episode confirms the twin brothers as descendants of the war god and further attests to their extraordinary nature and unique status. For this reason, the she-wolf nursing infants evolved into the most iconic episode of Rome's founding myth, carrying symbolic meaning for the entirety of Roman rule. The wolf became an emblem of the Roman state and its rulers. With Roman expansion, the wolf symbol and the notion of descendants of the wolf spread across Latium, reaching Celtic settlements and even Central Asia in the imperial era, where imagery of the she-wolf and infants was also placed on display.

Frequently, the she-wolf carries greater significance than the twin founders themselves. Archaeological findings prove the ancient bronze statue of the she-wolf with infants in Rome originally depicted only the she-wolf; the figures of the twins were added during the Renaissance [5]. In many cases, the solitary image of the she-wolf alone sufficed to symbolize Rome, without the

full scene of the wolf nursing the children. This simplification may also stem from the condensation and abstract refinement of the original motif in artistic creation.

Shepherds also constitute a pivotal part of the legend. Romulus and Remus are raised by shepherds in nearly every version of the tale, and numerous variants omitting the episode of suckling by the she-wolf still lay emphasis on the foster parents' occupation as shepherds, which fully demonstrates their significance. In these storylines, the shepherd's wife usually plays a more prominent role than her husband, and she is named Acca Larentia in many accounts. From the Regal Period through the Republican Period and into the Byzantine Era, Rome maintained a festival falling around December 23 closely associated with Acca Larentia. Though the title of the festival altered over time, its customs of hosting feasts and exchanging gifts remained largely unchanged [11]. It is evident that the foster mother of Romulus and Remus held an exalted standing in Roman tradition. Many scholars of the Roman era argued that the term *Lupa*, the Latin word for she-wolf, might serve as a nickname or epithet for Acca Larentia. The she-wolf and Acca Larentia were thus two sides of a single entity in a certain sense. Most Roman scholars of the Imperial Age, including Livy, supposed that Acca Larentia earned the title of "she-wolf" possibly because she worked as a prostitute, with *Lupa* acting as a euphemism for sex workers [12]. Plutarch, on the other hand, proposed that the term *Lupa* might link to the worship of Fauna, a mountain goddess vested with powers over fertility and nurturing [10]. It can be seen that despite being two sides of one figure, the she-wolf bore stronger connections to the cult of the war god and national identity, while Acca Larentia frequently appeared in attempts to rationalize the legend as factual history, and was deeply tied to Roman festival customs inherited from an earlier era untouched by Greek cultural influence. Another notable element of the legend is the abandonment of the twin boys. Many versions recount that the two infants were placed in a basket and set adrift on the Tiber River, and some narratives attribute their survival to the intervention of the river god of the Tiber [13].

Hence, every stage of the twins' experience is permeated with miracles and divine mystery: their ambiguous parentage, their survival against all odds, their nursing by the she-wolf, the subsequent founding of the city, and the eventual deification of Romulus. It must also be noted that the deities featured in the legend, such as Vesta the household goddess, Fauna the fertility goddess, and Quirinus, the divine form Romulus ascended to become, all originated from Roman or adjacent regional beliefs prior to Greek cultural penetration. Even Mars, the Roman war god generally equated with the Greek Ares and named as the twins' father, was originally an agricultural deity in early Roman mythology; he gradually acquired the attributes of a war god only alongside Roman expansion and the introduction of Greek culture. This proves that Rome's founding legend was inextricably bound to its primitive worship of native gods.

The process through which the twins came of age and resolved to take revenge also merits attention. In the Roman she-wolf legend, their vengeance was directed at specific individuals rather than the entire city-state. They acted as liberators of their original homeland rather than destroyers. Having gained prestige and power, the two brothers encountered multiple conflicts and misunderstandings before coincidentally meeting their living maternal grandfather, the former ruler, learning of their lineage and identifying their target of revenge [10]. After succeeding in their retaliation, they chose to leave their old homeland once more to establish a new city: Rome. In truth, founding a new settlement was their core objective from the very beginning, and revenge amounted merely to a side plot and interlude along their journey.

3.2. Narrative structure of the Wusun she-wolf legend

Two main versions of the founding legend bearing the motif of the she-wolf nursing infants exist for the Wusun people. The first is recorded in *Records of the Grand Historian · Biographies of the Dayuan*, and the second appears in *The History of the Han Dynasty · Biography of Zhang Qian*. The two accounts are largely similar in content, with the primary distinction lying in the invader that destroyed the original Wusun tribe: the *Records of the Grand Historian* attributes the destruction to the Xiongnu, while *The History of the Han Dynasty* names the Greater Yuezhi as the aggressor. Judging comprehensively from geographical locations and information sources, the record in *The History of the Han Dynasty* is likely closer to historical facts.

Generalizing the shared plotlines of the two versions, the narrative structure of the Wusun founding legend can be summarized as follows: First, the regime to which the protagonist belongs is conquered, leaving the protagonist as one of the very few survivors or even the sole survivor of the nation. The protagonist is then stranded in the wilderness and suckled by a she-wolf. Leaders of another or hostile regime witness this miraculous experience of the protagonist being nursed by the wolf, regard it as a divine omen, and therefore take the protagonist in for upbringing until adulthood. Having grown up, the protagonist breaks away from the adoptive state, carries out acts of vengeance, gathers a group of clansmen, establishes a new regime, or in other words accomplishes national restoration, and ascends to the position of ruler.

Compared with the traditional Roman she-wolf legend, the wolf plays a far less prominent role in the Wusun founding legend, described merely in brief phrases such as "the wolf went to suckle him or people saw the wolf nursing him." As Denis Sinor put it, the she-wolf acts more as a savior of the ancestor rather than a direct ancestral figure in the Wusun legend [8]. Due to the scarcity of written records on Wusun customs and relevant archaeological relics, it cannot be confirmed whether the Wusun practiced wolf worship or revered the wolf as a national symbol like the Romans. Nevertheless, according to the accounts in *Records of the Grand Historian* and *The History of the Han Dynasty*, the image of the she-wolf appears nowhere outside this single legend. Accordingly, the she-wolf itself may not hold great significance in this tale; what matters is the abnormal act of the wolf nursing a human infant. This deed attests to the protagonist's status as a ruler ordained by heaven, rationalizes the subsequent development of the story, and explains the protagonist's success in revenge, restoring the nation and claiming kingship.

In contrast to the Roman legend, the Wusun tale also carries far weaker mystical overtones. Only the scene of the wolf nursing the infant is deemed extraordinary and divine. No explanation whatsoever is provided for the origin of the protagonist's exceptional qualities, whose distinction derives solely from his deeds and experiences, with no clear link to his bloodline.

A more substantial divergence lies in the identity of the protagonist's foster parent. In the Wusun legend, shortly after surviving thanks to the wolf's nourishment, the protagonist is adopted by the leader of a sovereign state. Details of his upbringing are omitted entirely, and the narrative centers on the conferral of power, as written: "When he came of age, the ruler put him in command of troops, and he won numerous battles. The chanyu then granted him the clansmen of his father and ordered him to guard the Western Regions long-term." Moreover, the sovereign adopts the protagonist out of practical motives, solely because the boy has displayed a divine miracle [14].

The entire legend thus forms a self-fulfilling prophecy. The protagonist is believed to possess extraordinary power by the state leader for having been nursed by a she-wolf; in turn, the protagonist is able to demonstrate his prowess and achieve revenge precisely because the ruler raised him and vested him with authority. This differs from the classical self-fulfilling prophecy pattern in

Greek and Roman myths, in which those aware of a prophecy act to prevent its unfavorable fulfillment, only to bring the prophecy to pass with their own efforts. Though Kunmo eventually maintained neutrality and refused to attend the Xiongnu assemblies, inflicting certain losses on his foster ruler, the foster leader subjectively intended for the prophecy to come true, and only failed to obtain the desired final outcome.

Another noteworthy difference concerns the reason for the protagonist's abandonment. Nearly all legends featuring the wolf-nursing-infant motif incorporate the exposed-child motif, which some scholars classify as a variant of the abandoned child archetype. Yet the causes for the abandonment of the protagonist vary across legends from different regions and cultural backgrounds. In the wolf-nursing-infant legends of the Eastern peoples including the Wusun and Turkic groups, the child is left adrift or isolated chiefly because the entire regime of his people has been annihilated, as recorded in original texts such as "the Xiongnu attacked and killed his father" or "the Greater Yuezhi attacked and killed Nandoumi, seized his land, and his people fled to the Xiongnu" [14, 15]. The protagonists of these tales are better defined as survivors or remnants of a fallen nation rather than abandoned infants.

Distinct origins determine their different paths of vengeance. Kunmo, the protagonist of the Wusun legend, has a clear target for revenge: the regime responsible for the fall of his homeland, either the Xiongnu or the Greater Yuezhi. The legend offers no detailed account of how the orphaned protagonist learned about the past, his own lineage or his vengeful goal, treating this awareness as a natural progression. All of Kunmo's efforts to seize power and rally his former clansmen serve this single purpose. Following the battles recorded as "the Xiongnu dispatched elite troops to attack him but met defeat; they deemed him divine and kept their distance, only holding nominal suzerainty over him without launching major assaults" or "he petitioned the chanyu to avenge his father, then marched westward and defeated the Greater Yuezhi, who fled further west to occupy the land of Daxia", Kunmo strove for the partial revival of his old state, and the core of his new regime consisted of former clansmen, survivors and ancestral territories [14, 15].

In summary, compared with the Roman legend of the she-wolf nursing infants, the wolf assumes a diminished role in the Wusun tale, and the embodiment of heavenly will or fate is rendered more ambiguous. The protagonist's foster parent holds a far higher social rank, yet no prominent mythological elements are involved. The protagonist's target of revenge covers a broader scope, and his aspiration for national restoration is far more intense. Above all, the protagonist is best characterized as a survivor of ruin rather than an abandoned infant.

4. The spread and evolution prior to the compilation of written legends

4.1. Dissemination and evolution of the Roman she-wolf legend

All surviving written records of the two legends accessible to modern scholars are not their primitive original forms upon creation, but products undergoing multiple rounds of dissemination and adaptation. Therefore, the two legends reflect not merely the cultural features of the two ethnic groups at a specific historical moment, but the ideological and cultural shifts of diverse communities within a region over a considerably long period.

Long before the Roman she-wolf nursing infants legend was documented in writing, decorative motifs depicting wild beasts suckling human infants had already prevailed in Etruria. The twin identity of Romulus and Remus was not an indigenous Roman creation either, and might derive from the worship of twin deities in Lavinium [1]. It can be stated that the majority of components in this most renowned and classic founding myth of Rome were not originated by the Romans

themselves. Only the worship of the wolf was native to Rome, traceable earliest to the *Lupercalia* rituals held by Romans on the Palatine Hill from the 13th to 12th centuries BCE, the sacrificial ceremonies honoring the mountain goddess Fauna mentioned above [10].

Between the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, exchanges and conflicts between Rome and other city-states of the Latin League grew increasingly frequent. To split the Latin League, Rome frequently forged friendly ties with one or two of its member polities [16]. To win over or assimilate these city-states, Rome deliberately absorbed their cultural elements. Eventually, as these polities were fully incorporated into Roman territory, their cultural elements were categorized as part of "Roman tradition" and blended with Rome's native wolf worship. This fusion culminated in the standardized she-wolf nursing infants legend recorded by Livy, Plutarch, Dionysius of Halicarnassus and other ancient authors.

While assimilating cultural traditions of other city-states, Rome also incorporated these polities into the community of "wolf descendants". Livy depicted all Latin peoples as descendants of the wolf, particularly in his accounts of their joint battles alongside Romans against the Gauls [17]. As Rome transitioned from a republic to an empire, the symbolic connotation of the wolf transformed as well: it stood first for the sovereign power of the Roman state, and later evolved into an emblem of royal and imperial authority. Meanwhile, with Roman expansion, imagery of the she-wolf and infants became a symbol of Roman citizenship and imperial rule across numerous overseas provinces.

In general, the she-wolf nursing infants legend took shape as Rome integrated mythic tales from other Latin city-states. Furthermore, through this legend and other founding myths, Rome reconstructed the origin narratives of fellow Latin polities, framing them as kindred peoples sharing the same ancestral roots and cultural symbols with Rome without distinction. This construction served to legitimize Rome's own founding of the city and its annexation and assimilation of other states across Latium.

4.2. Dissemination and evolution of the Wusun she-wolf legend

The Roman wolf legend was formed little by little over a long time. It slowly took in myths from nearby areas. But the written version of the Wusun wolf legend was a fast jump across different places and cultures. All existing written records of the Wusun wolf legend come from Han Dynasty history books. The Wusun people themselves left no written or physical things about this legend.

According to *Records of the Grand Historian* and *The History of the Han Dynasty*, Zhang Qian learned this legend on his first trip to the Western Regions. Later he lost his noble title because he lost a battle [14]. He wanted to make up for his mistake. So he told this legend to Emperor Wu of Han. He also gave his plan to work with Wusun to stop the Xiongnu. Because of this, Emperor Wu sent Zhang Qian to the Western Regions a second time [14].

When Sima Qian wrote *Records of the Grand Historian*, he did not put this story in the part where Zhang Qian told Emperor Wu about Western Regions states after his first trip. Instead, he had Zhang Qian tell the legend before the second trip. Ban Gu wrote a special chapter about the Western Regions in *The History of the Han Dynasty*. But he still put this legend in the part about Zhang Qian's life. These choices show that for the historians, this legend was more than just an interesting story from a foreign place. It was the reason for Zhang Qian's second diplomatic trip. In other words, Sima Qian wrote down this legend only because it had a big influence on Zhang Qian's life. For Sima Qian, what the legend said was not the most important thing. What really mattered was the plan Zhang Qian gave after telling the story. The legend was just supporting evidence.

Sima Qian probably did not want to or could not check if the legend was true. So he used Zhang Qian's story completely. By Ban Gu's time, Han Dynasty and Western Regions had much more contact. Historians knew more about the history of Western states. At this time, some things in Zhang Qian's Wusun legend did not make sense. Ban Gu kept Sima Qian's original story about Zhang Qian's experiences. But he changed some wrong historical details and added a more complete version of the Wusun legend. This is why there is a difference between the two books. In *Records of the Grand Historian*, the Xiongnu destroyed the original Wusun tribe. But in *The History of the Han Dynasty*, the Greater Yuezhi did it instead.

Also, the Wusun king did not care about Zhang Qian's plan. He refused to help Han fight the Xiongnu [14]. This shows the legend Zhang Qian told may be very different from real history. This difference may come from the special folk story he heard. Or it is just as possible that to make Emperor Wu believe him, Zhang Qian carefully chose the most exciting version of the Wusun founding story. This version showed that Wusun and Xiongnu hated each other. He may even have changed the story to fit his own needs.

This also explains why a founding story from a Western state that had little contact with Han had such clear themes of the god's will and revenge. A Han envoy changed this legend to make his plan seem possible to the emperor. He had to tell it in a way that Han people could understand and accept in their own cultural background.

5. Conclusion

This paper wants to answer a key question. Why do the two stories look similar but have big differences? By studying the story structures of Rome and Wusun's wolf-feeding-babies legends, this study clearly shows two very different cultural logics. They lie under the same basic theme that looks the same on the surface. But they have the same basic story part: a mother wolf feeds abandoned babies. However, the two stories serve very different historical story purposes. They follow different story rules. And finally, they stand for two different ways of telling where a civilization came from.

The Roman wolf-feeding-babies legend is basically a basic story about where they came from. It builds a long god-given family line. This line connects the founding of Rome to older myth times. In this story system, the wolf has many layers of meaning. As the symbol of Mars, the god of war, it proves the twin brothers have a god-given family line. Together with other sacred symbols like fig trees and woodpeckers, it makes a magical birth scene. More importantly, it has a connected relationship with Acca Larentia, the human foster mother. This quietly puts old goddess worship and birth rituals into Roman founding mythology. So the wolf's feeding action means much more than a miracle survival. It stands for the passing of sacredness. Through the important act of breastfeeding, the wild and pre-civilized power of the wolf goes into the ancestors of Roman civilization. This forms the myth origin of Romans' continuous outward spread. This spread is driven by war and birth desires [3]. The Roman legend developed through long-term cultural accumulation. It inherited old Indo-European traditions of young men leaving their tribes. It took in native Roman goddess worship. It mixed twin-origin and beast-feeding myths from Latin city-states. And finally, it added Hellenistic and imperial symbolic meanings of the war god. Each layer of cultural addition shows the social and historical changes of Roman society. The story of the wolf feeding babies is itself a short account of early Roman history.

But the Wusun wolf-feeding-babies legend works as a story about rebuilding their country. It gives a reason for Wusun to break away from Xiongnu rule. In this version, the wolf's role is greatly reduced. It is only described by three simple Chinese words meaning "the wolf came to suckle him".

The scene has no other sacred symbols or links to specific gods. Instead of giving the main character a god-given family line, the wolf only acts as a witness of the god's will for rulers. The extraordinary feeding act proves the main character has a special status chosen by god. This gives supernatural legitimacy for his later independence from Xiongnu rule, revenge, and national rebuilding. Unlike the Roman legend where divine and human foster figures exist together, the wolf and human caregiver in the Wusun story are completely separate. The foster ruler plays a purely practical role. He adopts the child because he is amazed by the god's miracle. And he gives military power and authority based on the main character's repeated military successes [14]. This difference shows the two stories have different core goals. Rome's legend answers why the city was built in its territory. So it emphasizes motherly reproduction, nurturing, and cultural inheritance. The Wusun legend explains how the nation got back its territory and became independent. It focuses instead on sovereign authorization, military merit accumulation, and vengeful redemption [9].

The differences between the two legends come from the unique historical and cultural backgrounds. These backgrounds shaped how each civilization used this ancient shared theme. Rome's story development happened during steady urban growth. It shows the continuous rewriting and enrichment of its origin story throughout different historical stages of a single civilization. But the Wusun story rewriting happened during big changes in political situations. As a small regime surviving among major powers, the Wusun origin legend had to meet practical political needs. It needed heavenly authorization to justify breaking away from the Xiongnu. And it needed a vengeful story to gather scattered survivors and get back ancestral lands. Also, the existing version of the Wusun legend has gone through second filtering and rewriting through cross-cultural communication. Recorded and passed on by Han envoys like Zhang Qian, the legend carries Han diplomats' subjective views. These views are about the relations between Western Regions states and the Xiongnu. They also include their strategic expectations that Wusun would rebuild its homeland and limit Xiongnu influence in Central Asia. In the process of writing down the story, ancient historians inevitably interpreted and restructured oral folklore. They based this on traditional Chinese concepts of retributive justice and the god's will for rulers. This gave the legend distinct Eastern cultural characteristics. The version available to modern scholars is a text revised through many steps [18]. It reflects both the Wusun's own historical memory and the Han Dynasty's external interpretation of Western Regions folklore.

The two wolf-feeding-babies legends vividly show that myth themes work like cultural genes. When they spread across time and cultures, their story structures are reshaped by the historical backgrounds and cultural needs of different civilizations. This creates legends with completely different forms and social functions. The value of exploring these differences lies not only in tracing routes of cultural transmission. Even though an Indo-European origin serves as a common cultural foundation, specific spread paths may never be fully proved. It also lies in showing how diverse civilizations creatively build unique self-identity stories through shared ancient cultural symbols [2]. Rome used the theme to shape an eternal foundational moment of civilization. It turned primitive wild power into the driving force of urban civilization. The Wusun and later steppe peoples like the Turkic tribes used the theme to make a declaration of survival in turbulent history. They interpreted the survival of vulnerable ethnic groups as heavenly grace. And they legitimized their political independence. Together, the two legends show the diverse evolutionary possibilities of the ancient wolf-feeding-babies theme across civilizational boundaries.

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