Research article

Sign Decoding and Gender Politics of Goddess Mythology in *The Davinci Code*

Wu Juan[1]

(School of Foreign Language, Beijing Institute of Technology, Beijing 100081, China)
E-mail: janewu@pku.edu.cn

Abstract

This paper decodes the underlying goddess mythology in *The Davinci Code* to illustrate the cultural value of ancient mythical archetypes in the postmodern sign economy and reveal the sign economy transfers the much-beaten yet still-vigorous mythical resources into huge profitable capital. These mythical modes of thought within the sign economyfights against the self-conceit modern materialism and overweening rationalism, challenges the long-standing European-oriented value and rigid social Darwinism, heals the crisis of western civilization by means of search for the ideal life which was more fit for the human nature. **Copyright © AJSSAL, all rights reserved.**

Key words: Sign Decoding, Cultural Reconstruction, Goddess Mythology, *The Davinci Code*

Mythology, as a long-standing cultural phenomena and crucial cultural heritage, along with its various archetypal derivation, play a vital part in helping the human civilization to live through numerous military conflicts and political transitions and still enjoy a lasting cultural vitality until the postmodern era. Mythological archetypes not only function as the spiritual bonding in the formation of human civilization but also provide

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[1]**Brief biography**: Dr. Juan Wu mainly engages in the study of English Literature and Literary Theory, Cultural Studies, Comparative Mythology, is a lecturer at School of Foreign Language, Beijing Institute of Technology. She has authored Vladimir Nabokov: "A Rigid Moralist" and numerous articles on academic journals. Recently she focuses on the Retelling of Myth in the Postmodern Sign Economy and Archetypal Criticism of Chinese Jade Mythology.

cultural resources and creative inspiration for the post-modern sign economy. This paper, taking *The Davinci Code*, a typical example of postmodern sign-economy, as a case in point to exam how the postmodern sign economy transfer the much-beaten yet still-vigorous cultural resources into huge profitable capital by exploring the roots of culture in a splendid, marvelous manner. Besides, this paper traces postmodern cultural products back to the great tradition of ancient mythological resources, and tries to find out the underlying archetypal stereotype behind these sign economy and explain how they function as the cultural bonding and commercial opportunity in the era of postmodern sign economy.

I.Mythology and Cultural Identity

Human civilization is the surviving one that has a continual cultural vitality that lasts for several thousand years. Mythical Archetypal plays a vita part and a long-established cultural centripetal force in maintain the continuation of civilization. Regarding myths, scholars from different fields have different views even on a working definition, with of with more than fifty individualized definitions. Sarah Allan defines myths more narrowly as "stories of the supernatural" (impossible in natural, not cultural reality). (Allan, 1981: ix). Dundes distinguishes "sacred" from "secular and fictional associates myth with all forms of religion" and defines a myth as "a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form," (Dundes, 1984: 1) Birrell opts for William Doty's eclectic synthesization (Doty, 2000: 28-34) and insists on viewing myth as "a human experience that must be understood on its own terms and in its own right with its own autonomy."(Birrell, 1993: 4-5) Mark Lewis holds that because there exist no grounds for seeing myths as an autonomous realm，while myths should rather be historicized "within its own culture," where its "place(s) and meaning(s)" (Lewis, 2009:553) may vary over time in accordance with its interest and utility for communities which keeps telling them in one way or another. Lewis defines myth then as any traditional tale with secondary，partial reference to something of collective importance，where "traditional" means that it has no identifiable author but appears in several sources and further develops over time. These stories dramatically express the ideology under which a society lives, reflect on the elements and tensions that form a society and justify the rules and traditional practices without which everything in a society would disintegrate. Myths thus belong to and serve to define particular groups. As the groups change across time，the form of the myths and their uses will likewise change，or the danger exists that those stories will simply be forgotten. (Lewis, 2009: 549)

Cultural identity fundamentally refers to ethnicity. This characterizes a group whose members claim a common history or origin and a specific cultural heritage, no matter that the history or origin is often mythicized or that the cultural legacy is never totally homogeneous. The essential thing is that these common elements are lived by the concerned group as distinctive characteristics and perceived as such by others. (Abou, 2008: 11).Though neglecting many facets, such as the linguistic, economic, religious, or conventional ones, contained in cultural identity and simply equalizing cultural identity to ethnicity, this interpretation by Selim Abou has grasped the core element of identity, that is certain mythicized history or shared cultural heritage. When the mythicized cultural heritage is shared by a larger group that has many ethnics, cultural identity should be interpreted on a higher level, from ethnicity to nationality. Max Weber is one of the founders of modern sociology who inherited Dilthey's "moral science" and Rickert's "cultural science". He believed that social science research can develop a "cultural science" which, unlike the natural science that explores the universal rules of things, explores the values of specific culture and the cultural phenomena or the "meaning" of social reality dominated by these values. In 1904, Weber pointed in his thesis that: "All knowledge of cultural reality,

as may be seen, is always knowledge from particular points of view. When we require from the historian and social research worker as an elementary presumption that they distinguish the important from the trivial and that he should have the necessary 'point of view' for this distinction, we mean that they must understand how to relate the events of the real world consciously or unconsciously to universal cultural values and to select out those relationships which are significant for us." (Weber, 1949: 81)

From this, we could see that the critical link between mythology and cultural identity lies in the special cultural factors that mold the ideology. The western scholars who studied the origin of literature once focused on the ancient Greek literature, later formed the school of Myth and Ritual in the 20th century, which holds that Greek drama originated from religious rites, and the underlying driving force behind performances is god worshiping and religious belief, not aesthetic or entertainment (Harrison, 1987: 67-80).Oians holds that philosophies and sciences originated from the religious beliefs at the outset of civilizations, "those are the basic beliefs about life, thought and fate, which determine man's discourse and actions, which are not exclusive to the Greek. In some sense, what we are digging is none other but the root or origins of civilizations in Europe and other places." (Oians, 1954: 1) This also explain why the definition of cultural anthropology turns from the "the science of man" in the early 19th century to "The Interpretation of Cultures" (Geertz, 1973). What it explores changes from the deduction of general pattern of all human cultures' evolution is to the interpretation of special characteristics and unique features of each culture. The concept of man becomes relatively more concrete instead of being highly abstract. (Ye Shuxian, 2003: 19-39) From it, we could see it is possible to explore the formation of cultural identity through a critical cultural heritage---mythology and to explain the centripetal force that promoters the prehistoric multi-cultures to the integrated civilization, and to eventually interpret the structure between the multi-cultures and the integral one. In the following, the variety of codes in the *The Da Vinci Code* will be analyzed to explain why these codes have been attractive to public and how they embody the underlying goddess mythology.

II.Textual Interpretation and Sign Decoding of Goddess Mythology

The novel *The Da Vinci Code* is a successful cultural product in the era of sign economy and its sales are comparable to that of the *Harry Potter* series. The novel starts with the appalling murder of the Louvre Museum's curator, Jacques Sauniere, who leaves clues to decipher his mysterious death and is filled with a variety of signs, codes, mysterious numbers, puzzles, Tarot Cards, goddess, magic, astrology, pilgrimage, secret rituals and other mysterious matters. Dan Brown boldly combined religion with pagan ideas, codes and queried the authenticity of Christian history, which gave rise to much controversy. The religious groups claimed that the book opposed and offended the traditional religious belief. Archbishop of Genoa Tarcisio Cardinal Bertone castigated the book and those who sold it on grounds of anti-Catholic bias, calling it "a throwback to the old anti-clerical pamphlets of the 1800s, a gross and absurd distortion of the history, full of cheap lies**"** (Kellmeyer, 2004:276). Numerous works had been publishedto explain why any claim to accuracy is difficult to substantiate, among them there were, *Secrets of the Codes* (Burstein, 2006) *The Real History Behind The Da VinciCode*(Bock, 2005) and so on so forth. Whether being approved or criticized, Dan Brown fully shows his in-depth knowledge for the western classic culture and his hyper awareness of secular society. In this part aims to study how Dan Brown uses signs of words and painting to transform the goddess mythology to a great commercial and cultural success.

Max Müller proposes that, "if we want to understand, more than just know, the ancient style of uncivilized peoples, we must try very hard to distinguish. Sometimes, a log or a stone is worshiped, because it belonged to an obsolete altar, or a trial place in the ancient; sometimes it represented a spot where a great battle or murder happened; sometimes it belonged to certain king's tomb; sometimes it guarded the holy border of a race or clan". (Müller, 1989:69) One of the keys to the goddess mythology is the cryptex found by Langdon and Sophie. This code can be divided into three layers, and each layer contains a riddle to be decoded. The first riddle is "An ancient word of wisdom frees this scroll. / Helps us keep her scatter's family whole./ A headstone praised by Templar's is the key./ At bash will reveal the truth to thee. (Brown, 2003: 223)The poem includes four key words as a chain, and the answer is a word with five letters related to wisdom. The "headstone" in the poem is Baphomet which is spelt in Hebrew to decode the riddle. After employing Atbash Cipher system to decode it, Langdon finds the first password is a Latin word and "Sofia" which refers to a goddess. Goddess Sophia enjoys great popularity in the Eastern Orthodoxy world. Being the symbol of wit, Sophia's birth is described in Bible: "I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water" (The Holy Bible: 1650). The religious scholar and poet Powell defines Sophia as an eternal goddess with remarkable wit and being highly worshipped. And the pervasive Saint Sophia Church could prove her popularity.

After Langdon deciphers the first riddle, the second riddle is found within the first one: "In London lies a knight a Pope interred./ His labor's fruit a Holy wrath incurred./You seek the orb that ought be on his tomb./It speaks of Rosy flesh and seeded womb. (Brown, 2003: 248)In the poem, "a pope" does not mean the Bishop of Rome or the leader of the worldwide Catholic Church, but the English poet, Alexander Pope. So the actual meaning of this sentence is "in London lies an Alexander Pope interred". And Langdon reasons that it is the scientist Newton who was buried by Pope, so the next clue is hidden in Newton's tomb. When he comes there, he realizes that fruit, orb and womb are all associated with the word "APPLE", because apple which dropped from the sky brought Newton the inspiration to his career, therefore it is considered to be the "fruit" of his hard work. Furthermore, apple is also an "orb" covered by "rosy flesh" and it leads Eva get pregnant with human beings, thus, it also represents the "womb" of Eva. Being the mother of mankind, Eva should be worshipped and deserve a high status. However, according to the Bible tempered by Rome emperor Constantine, in the chapter of Genesis，the man, Adam, is the creator, and the female, Eve, is made of Adam's ribs, in other words, female is the derivative of male. Moreover, because Eve tastes the forbidden fruit-apple, all the humans should be punished, changing the great life-creator into a sinner.

The third layer is revealed afterwards and the words are as follows: "The Holy Grail 'neath ancient Roslin waits./The blade and chalice guarding o'er her gates./Adorned in masters' loving art, she lies./She rests at last beneath the starry skies.(Brown, 2003: 248) This cryptex code contains a clue that Roslin is the ancient transliteration of Rose Line, so the address of the Holy Grail is on Rose Line．Also, the two pyramids in the Louvre include the triangle and inverse triangle indicate the signs of blade and chalice．Besides, the inverse pyramid is a great view under the starry sky in the night, so the location of Holy Grail is deciphered in the Louvre Museum．The three codes in the form of exquisite poem enable readers to enjoy the beauty of language while search for the rich connotations they contain. Some words in these poems signify womb, Holy Grail, etc., which reveal more clues for readers to the ultimate truth of Holy Grail. At the same time, through decoding these codes, readers are informed by relevant thoughts and history of goddess mythology.

III.Archeological Verification and Cultural Intertextuality of Goddess Mythology

Besides textual connotation, Dan Brown makes use of the famous painting from Virgin of the Rocks and The Last Supper, to subvert the traditional Christianity and leads the reader to the rediscovery of goddess mythology. In the Virgin of the Rocks, a painting the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception entrusts Da Vinci to portray for the centerpiece of an altar triptych in their church of San Francesco in Milan. The painting depicts the scene when Jesus' family is fleeing to Egypt. After knowing that "the King of the Jews" is born in Bethlehem, King Herod orders to kill all infants in that region. To avoid being killed, Mary, Joseph and their children leave home and hide in the desert. However, the scene in the Virgin of the Rocks has never been mentioned in the Biblical Gospel, but appears in the Apocrypha: Mary with baby Jesus meets Uriel and baby John the Baptist. Da Vinci painted the four characters: Virgin Mary, baby John the Baptist, Uriel, and baby Jesus sheltered in a cave on the nuns' request, but he added some details that have triggered controversy and panic.

The painting portrays a blue-robed Virgin Mary sitting with her arm around an infant child—baby Jesus. On the opposite side, sits Uriel with the other infant—baby John the Baptist. Oddly, "rather than the usual Jesus-blessing-John scenario, it was baby John who was blessing Jesus... and Jesus was submitting to his authority" (Brown, 2003:99). Dan Brown gives a reasonable explanation: Da Vinci considers John the Baptist to be more important than Jesus. More weirdly, Mary is holding one hand high above the head of infant John and making a decidedly threatening gesture— "her fingers looking like eagle's talons, gripping an invisible head" (Brown, 2003:99). And the most obvious and frightening image is that "just below Mary's curled fingers, Uriel was making a cutting gesture with his hand— as if slicing the neck of the invisible head gripped by Mary's claw—like hand" (Brown, 2003:99). Because of this horrific gesture, Da Vinci was asked for a second painting in which Jesus has a halo around his head and all the improper poses have been altered.

Dan Brown uses controversial details in the first version of the painting to indicate his rebellious spirit towards conventional Christian value. And the painting also serves as an important clue for Langdon and Sophie's journey towards Holy Grail.Virgin Mary is the mother of Jesus. She gets pregnant with the help of God while still keeps her virginity. When Jesus is tortured on the cross, she shares his suffer. She is not only being a great woman for giving birth to and raising Jesus, she herself is a philanthropist who cares about every person and often protect them, even sacrifice herself for them. Although in the real society, the system of male authority oppresses the belief in goddess, there are still many literature works and works of art about Virgin Mary. The Madonna in the forms of painting, carvings sculpture, etc. all represent people's worship for her and her supreme status in the whole world.

The next work of art is The Last Supper which cost great Da Vinci three years to accomplish. In *The Da Vinci Code*, Robert Langdon and historian Sir Leigh Teabing decode the painting's greatest secret—Jesus's marriage in detail. Firstly, the person sitting on the right side of Jesus cannot be a man— John the Apostle, but a woman—Mary Magdalene. Brown describes the person with vivid language, "the individual had flowing red hair, delicate folded hands, and the hint of a bosom. It was, without a doubt... female" (Brown, 2003:177). Being Jesus's wife, Mary Magdalene is defamed as a prostitute, because as Dan Brown explains, Roman Curia had to sanctify Jesus and conceal everything about his mortal life, including his marriage. Secondly, the color of their clothes is inverse: "Jesus wore a red robe and blue cloak; Mary Magdalene wore a blue robe and red cloak" (Brown, 2003:178), signifying the harmony of yin and yang.The third clue lies in the space between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Jesus and his wife appear to be joined at the hip and are leaning away from one another,

forming a "V"—the sign of female's womb. Finally, if viewing Jesus and Magdalene as compositional elements rather than as people, an obvious shape of "M" will turn up, and "M" could be decoded as marriage or Mary Magdalene. All the evidence reveals the fact that Jesus is married with Magdalene.Teabing also uses the Gospel of Philip in the Bible to illustrate Jesus' relationship with Magdalene, "and the companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth" (*The Holy Bible*, 2006: 560). The word "companion", in those days, as Teabing says, "literally meant spouse" (Brown, 2003:180). If Jesus was not married, according to Jews' tradition, he would be condemned, and his Jewish father was obliged to find a wife for him. But in the Bible, there is no gospel accounts for his single status.

The two paintings mentioned above are described not only about the painting itself but also about the hidden religious belief. When people think they are familiar with these paintings, Dan Brown opens a brand-new outlook for them and convinces them with evidence. In this way, readers begin to doubt about their inherent ideas. Just as the words of Sir Leigh Teabing: everyone misses it," Teabing says, "our preconceived notions of this scene are so powerful that our mind blocks out the incongruity and overrides our eyes" (Brown, 2003: 178). These blind spots are used to tell us that the Holy Grail stands for the bloodline of Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

IV.Creative Reconstruction and Gender Politics of Goddess Mythology

The curator, Sauniere, postures himself as Vitruvian Man and uses his own blood to draw a five-pointed star on his belly. These two signs deliver Sauniere's religious belief—goddess worship. The circle outside the man is always interpreted as a female sign, meaning protecting the man. Therefore, the painting conveys Da Vinci's idea of harmony between men and women. The five-pointed star on Sauniere's stomach is also called "pentacle", which symbolizes female religion and as professor Langdon says, appears before the foundation of Christian. In ancient Egypt, pentacle is the sign of underworld's womb, while in Greek mythology, pentacle signifies earth goddess Kore. The ancients believe the world is composed of female and male, and the pentacle on Sauniere's stomach represents the feminine side.

Just as Professor Yu put forward: "human beings have paid a heavy price in the process of passing from barbarism to civilization, and the greatest price is women's dignity and freedom"(Yu Longyu, 2001: 345). In the primitive ages, human lived in a matriarchal society. Because women gained more resources from planting activities than man's hunting activities, therefore, women obtained the dominant position. In addition, people only knew who his mother was while father always remained unknown because of the promiscuity at that time. Gradually, this kind of single blood relationship laid a firm foundation of matriarchy.

However, men gradually acquired the power by their physical strengths and abilities as well as the awareness that they have equal importance of creating life (Su, 2004). Then, they started to belittle the role of women, asserting women as accessories for men and were subordinated to men. In Bible, because Eve's fault, God stipulates that women should be obedient to men; Lot refuses to give his guest to the perverted mob, offering his two "virgin daughters" instead. All these stories show that during that time, female's status was hardly weakened while man began to predominate in society, and meanwhile the patriarchal society came in to being.

However, with the development of modernity, machine production has eliminated the gap between genders' physical abilities and enriched human's material basis. Under this circumstance, women began to require more power. Furthermore, in the mid-nineteenth century, western countries initiated large-scale feminist movement which then spread all over the world. After two profound feminist movements, the role of female has changed

drastically. Firstly , women has acquired political recognition, which means that they have equal power as men; secondly, female are gaining more and more resources of various kinds, especially economic resources; thirdly, being accessed to education, women are exerting more influence on arts and culture. And the improving status of women would help to bring the renaissance of goddess worship and restoration of gender balance.

The worship for goddess has been existed since a long time ago. However, with the development of society, men's inborn advantages in strength and vitality helped them gain more resources and power. As a result of it, they gradually became the dominant side in the society. Among then, the Rome emperor Constantine saw the potential threat of goddess worship and the benefit of sanctifying Jesus. In order to consolidate his power, he decided to temper the original Christian doctrine. Not only he "transfigured Jesus from a mortal to an immortal, deleted the documentary of the marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene", but also "tried to distort the myth of Adam and Eve to end Goddess worship" (Brown, 2003: 185). The Roman Curia at that time oppressed women, expelled and forbid goddess worship religions and burned witches as well as people who didn't believe in Christ. *The Witches' Hammer* issued by Roman Catholic in 1486 is the bloodiest publication. It indoctrinated the world to the dangers of free-thinking women and instructed the clergy how to locate, torture, and destroy them, "during three hundred years of witch hunts, the Church burned at the stake an astounding five million women" (Brown, 2003:92).Thus it can be seen that "history is always written by the winners" and as "Napoleon once said: 'What is history, but a fable agreed upon?'"(Brown, 2003: 96)

Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* is a real hot best seller, creating astronomical sales figures．The novel influences so many readers who might not usually pick up fiction, owing to the intriguing nature of its multilayered plot：the idea that Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene were married and had a child；deciphering the signs found in many famous works of art，including Leonardo Da Vinci's paintings that indicate the secret history of Jesus' relationship with Mary Magdalene; the resulting power struggle between the Catholic Church and the secret society — Priory of Sion over what to do with this explosive information. Most importantly, the protagonist Professor Langdon is designed as a professor of symbol in Harvard, placing the readers in a world full of cultural codes, pushing readers to decode cultures through decoding the signs. In a word, through the form of detective novel, the author adopts the method of decoding signs, citing from the classics or ancient works to crack the codes and challenge the orthodox belief in Christianity. He even expressed his religion view through the Professor Langdon that in the past, every religion worshipped both god and goddess, but today, the mainline factions in Christianity only praise god. "As every Mars should have his Venus, we should have both god and goddess in our life." (Publishers Weekly, 2007)

V.Conclusion

In *The Davinci Code*, Brown turnd from the literary study of the mythology to the genetic or archaeological study on its mythological concepts, which is similar to the archaeology of knowledge proposed by Michel Foucault. In this way, the scope and subject of mythology extends from ancient mythological narratives in written form to the pre-writing prehistoric. As the joint point of literature and sign economy, mythology is attached great importance by both sides. The literature major usually focuses on the literary property of mythology and excel in analyzing the elements of characters, themes, motifs, linguistic rhetoric and style in mythological narrations; while, the postmodern sign economy focuses on the multimedia reproduction of mythology and rites and its function in specific cultural society. For them, literary narration is the external expressions of mythology, and what determines is the hidden values, driving forces and operating mechanism. It

is like a puppet show, what acts and performs on the stage are the puppets, however, what dominates these puppets are the invisible dominator. It is mythological belief and archetypes dominating the mythological imagination and narration in the postmodern sign economy.

Max Weber holds that, "The supreme gold of social sciences is not to pursue the construction of new ideas or new concepts, but to make efforts in understanding the cultural meaning of concrete historical links." (Weber, 1999: 60) By implementing knowledge archeological, Dan Brown not only gained great economical success, but also subverts the commonly held perception by providing convincing evidence and reliable sources. Dan Brown expresses his appeal of breaking women's spiritual shackles through decoding these signs. In addition, he exposes the fact that men had adopted harsh tactics to depreciate even defame goddess. Therefore, he expects to bring back goddess worship and rebuild a harmonious society where men and women could enjoy the peaceful coexistence. Furthermore, the great popularity of the novel helps to spread the idea of new age movement, accelerating and deepening the renaissance of goddess worship. People should bypass boundary of traditional thoughts, like the top university's professor Langdon, and pay close attention to undercurrent of life, because "myth is neither a liar's lie, nor pointless fantasy product, which the human mind as it is simple and spontaneous forms. Only when we guessed the sense of these myths for the primitive people which were lost in many centuries, we can understand the human childhood" (Lowie, 1929:215).

The revival of mythical mind and the exploration of poetical wisdom not only provide not only the movie media, but also the brand builder, advertisement design and product sales media with an innovative mode of thought and a new framework of marketing psychology. For example, the apple company enjoy a worldwide popularity and tremendous commercial success not only because of its excellent quality and innovative creation, but also of its archetype image---a bitten apple, which is easily associated with the forbidden tree in the Eden garden and is heavily tainted with the bolding innovation and unyielding courage. Another example is 2012 Olympic medal which is surrounded by Chinese jade, because Chinese believe that, with the aid of divine jade, he acquires the ability to cultivate himself to be a genuine virtuous man and he could attain the mythological ideal of unity of man and god, thus jade has become a holy component of Chinese rites-and-music culture. In china, Jade Mythology not only plays a vital part for the formation of Chinese identity but also promote the profound jade-worship and accompanying bumper jade-business. From these, we can see that the postmodern sign-economy not only promotes us to reflect profoundly on the significance of mythical mind and poetical wisdom, reconsider the amazing commercial potential underlying the mythical archetype, but also help us to fight against the self-conceit modern materialism and overweening rationalism, search for the alternative ideal life which is more fit for the human nature.

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