

Ancient Greek and Chinese Water Culture Inspiring Modern Solutions

Good morning, esteemed guests and colleagues and a great thanks to the organizers for the invitation and to all staff for their hospitality.

1. It is an honor to address you today at this distinguished forum in China. Water is the lifeblood of civilization, and as we confront global challenges we can turn to the timeless wisdom of two great water cultures: in ancient Greece and ancient China. Over 2 500 years ago, thinkers and engineers in both civilizations shaped how we understand and manage water. Their insights not only reflect a shared heritage but also inspire innovative solutions that remain relevant for cross-cultural collaboration and technological innovation.

The Roots of Inquiry and Harmony

2. In ancient Greece, Thales of Miletus declared water the fundamental element of life. For the first time in history, he studied a geophysical behavior in scientific terms. This was the “Nile paradox”—why the Nile floods in summer, unlike other Mediterranean rivers. Here in China, scholars like Zou Yan, through the Five Elements theory and *yin-yang*, saw water as part of an interconnected system, essential to balance and renewal. Both cultures placed water at the heart of existence, sparking traditions of inquiry and observation.

Cycles of Nature and Modern Technology

3. By rejecting divine explanations and seeking natural causes, Thales sparked a tradition of inquiry that culminated the final solution of the “Nile paradox” by Aristotle: the Nile’s floods were driven by monsoon rains in Ethiopia. For confirmation of his theory, the first scientific expedition in history was organized. This emphasis on empirical evidence and questioning assumptions can still be inspiring in the modern world. Aristotle also described how water evaporates, condenses, and returns as rain—noting that “the sea will never dry up” because water cycles continuously. He even made experiments, noting that salt water becomes fresh when evaporated. Similarly, China’s Taoist principles and the *I Ching* celebrate water’s cyclical flow, symbolizing harmony with nature.

Resilient Engineering Across Cultures

4. Practical ingenuity also defines both water cultures. In Greece, aqueducts were built in the 6th century BC, some enduring to this day. In China, the Dujiangyan irrigation system, constructed more than 2 000 years ago, remains a marvel of engineering, balancing human needs with the environment. These examples show us how to build resilient infrastructures.

A Philosophical Bridge

5. Finally, both cultures valued clear thinking and harmony. Greek philosophers like Socrates and Aristotle sought precise understanding, much like Confucian ideals emphasize order and mutual respect. This common ground strengthens our ability to collaborate globally, ensuring that efforts to address water problems are holistic and effective.

Looking Forward Together

6. In conclusion, the water cultures of ancient Greece and China teach us to question assumptions, observe nature, build with resilience, and communicate clearly. By embracing these lessons, we can innovate and unite to prevent water disasters, enhance the benefits of water and restore ecosystems. Here in China, with your nation's rich history and technological prowess, you have a unique opportunity to lead.

Thank you.

Demetris Koutsoyiannis
Qufu, China, 2025-07-10