



Philosophical Interpretation of the Historical and Cultural Connotation of Chinese and Greek Individualistic Heroism: *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Greek Mythology*

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Abstract

This paper compares and analyzes the similarities and differences of the historical and cultural connotation of Chinese and Greek “individualistic heroism”, and then interprets the causes of the differences from the angle of philosophy, taking different heroic images for examples such as the historical image, the literary image and the folk image of the individualistic heroes in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Greek Mythology*.

Key words: *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*; *Greek Mythology*; Individualistic heroism; Similarities and differences of the historical and cultural connotation

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INTRODUCTION

According to different spiritual characters of heroes, the heroic spirit can be divided into “individualistic heroism” and “national heroism”. Different from the national heroism that serves for the country and nation, the individualistic heroism means the spirit of being in pursuit of self-interests, such as power, money, honor or beauty at the expense of the collective interests or others’ lives as well as the humans’ happiness.

The culture of the three kingdoms inherited Chinese nation’s spirit of struggle and dedication, and depicted

the heroic characters and stories that later became the research objects of litterateurs and historians. With respect to the study of the culture of the three kingdoms, the most noted works are *Records of the Three Kingdoms* written by Chen Shou, a historian of the Western Jin Dynasty, and another version written by Peisong Zhi, a historian of the Southern Song Dynasty, as well as the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* written by Luo Guanzhong, the great litterateur of the turning of Yuan and Ming dynasty. All the three great works became the prototype of later books, literature, television and drama. Up to now, most of the studies on the culture of the Three Kingdoms aim at an era interpretation, an analysis of characters of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and applied researches in the fields of politics, military, economy and culture etc.. Greek mythology is the origin of European civilization, and also one of the most important components of the ancient Greek religion. In ancient Greek, the study of mythology focused on the origin, definition and nature of the mythology. After 18 century, relevant studies on mythology adopted some ideas coming from religion, ethnology and folk science, concerning the nation’s experience and psychology of the myth’ inheritance. In 20 Century, the study on mythology absorbed the research findings of anthropology, psychology and structuralism and more deeply stepped into the fields of modern people’s soul and the narrative structure. Its research mostly centered on theme, politics, religion and literary works. With regard to the field of research on cultural comparison, the “heroism” has not been talked about as the topic.

This paper at first compares and analyzes the similarities and differences of the historical and cultural connotation of Chinese and Greek “individualistic heroism”, taking the heroic images in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Greek Mythology* as examples, and then digs out the causes of the differences from the angles of philosophy, politics, religion, ethics and values.

1. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONNOTATION OF THE IMAGES OF INDIVIDUALISTIC HEROISM

The heroic images may fall into three types: one is the historian-entitled historical images which reflect the true nature of heroes, such as the heroes recorded in Records of the Three Kingdoms; the second one is the literary images portrayed by literature and artists, who remold the hero prototype into a new one in literary and artistic works; the third one is the folk images, living in civilians' hearts. The first type of heroic images represents heroes' real personality, while the other two are the creative works in the process of its heritage and innovation (Lei, 2014). There were many heroes both in the culture of the *Three Kingdoms* and *Greek Mythology*, some of them are selected as the representatives who have been classified into different types on the basis of their spiritual characters and behaviors as follows:

Table 1
Classification of Individualistic Heroes

Classification of individualistic heroes	Heroes of the <i>Three Kingdoms</i>	Heroic gods of <i>Greek Mythology</i>
To lust for power	Cao Cao	Zeus
To lust for material	Lü Bu	Poseidon, Hades
To lust for beauty	Cao Cao, Ma Su	Aphrodite, Ares

Of so many heroes of the *Three Kingdoms*, Ma Su, a general in Shu country, was the typical image of the individualistic hero. He was self-willed and foolhardy, often made a decision in accordance with his own will be regardless of the interests of the overall situation. Cao Cao, an outstanding statesman, militarist and litterateur in the Eastern Han Dynasty, was named as an "arch-careerist both in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and folk legend, due to his crafty and uninhibited behavior. Of the individualistic heroes in *Greek Mythology*, Zeus, the king of the gods, infought with his wife, Hera, for the utmost power; Poseidon, the king of the sea, resorted to arms with other gods for the city's jurisdiction and ownership; Hades, the king of the underworld, abducted Persephone to the lower world as his wife; Aphrodite (the goddess of love) and Ares (the god of war) were amorous and dissolute.

1.1 Lusting for Power

In the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Cao Cao was molded into the literary image as a traitor attributed to his strong desire to the power and rule, which was also reflected in his motto like "I would rather betray others, but not be betrayed", so that he was not respected and admired by the folks. As a story said, Cao Cao once escaped from the city in order to avoid Dong Zhu's persecution, on the way, he passed by his old friend Lü

Boshe's family, but his old friend was not in, which caused Cao's doubt that Lü was intended to murder him, whereupon Cao killed Lü's family. But when he figured out that Lü was innocent, he regretted but wept "I would rather betray others, but not be betrayed". This story thoroughly exposes Cao's ruthless and tyrannical, but which has been overstated and rewritten as "I would rather betray people all over the world, but not be betrayed by anyone else", which lead to Cao Cao's folk image as a traitor.

In *Greek Mythology*, Zeus (the king of the gods) and his wife Hera possessed the utmost power. Zeus, the king of the gods and the ruler of the twelve Olympians, didn't allow anyone's opposition. If anyone betrayed him or did not listen to him, he would punish them by his invented invulnerable weapon lightning. It was Zeus's arbitrary, cruel, romantic dissolute and affairs with many goddess irritated his wife Hera, who filled with anger and hatred and was against him in secret as occasion served, even though she was weaker and under his authority, finally she failed. Nevertheless, as Homer wrote, Zeus had the equal power with Hera, and often followed Hera's advice. If Zeus hid from her to discuss affairs with other gods, she would severely condemn him, thus her love for quarrel, envy, and being stubborn often scared Zeus to tremble. In Homer's Epic, Zeus' being as the embodiment of the power of nature, to some extent, had been weakened or erased, but he more often represented politics and national spirits, appeared as the king, the founder or defenders of divine laws, customs, or religious organizations.

1.2 Lusting for Material

As Chen shou commented in his Records of *The Three Kingdoms*, Lü Bu was one of the feudal princes at the end of Han Dynasty, he successively followed Ding Yuan, Dong Zhuo but eventually killed them. After established his independent power, he fought against Cao Cao, and sometimes regarded Liu Bei and Yuan Shu as enemies and sometimes friends, but finally was defeated. Even though being more brave and fierce, he lacked stratagem and was capricious and mercenary. In the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*, Lü Bu is the unique and superior military officer. Once a time, he defeated the alliance of Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei three generals in Hu Nao Guan and fought against six generals of Cao's army alone, which contributed to his recognized image of the superior general. Thanks to the literary and folk artistic reproduction, Lü Bu's image of being venality has been neglected, but his image of the unparalleled valiant general of the three kingdoms lives in folks' minds.

In *Greek Mythology*, Poseidon, a brother of Zeus, was the great Olympian god of the sea. Being second to Zeus, he was combative by nature and extremely greedy to struggle with other gods for administration and ownership of the city. He once sent a sea-monster to punish the Trojans for refusing to pay him for building their walls

and also contested with Athena for the rule of Athens. Hades, another brother of Zeus, was the King of the Underworld, the god of death and the dead. He presided over the funeral rites and defended the right of the dead to due burial and also in charge of the hidden wealth of the earth. He was greedy, cruel, jealous and seldom leaved away from the underworld, and also unwilling to send back the soul from the Midgard and even tricked Persephone to the underworld as his wife. However, in folk literary anthem, Hades was the defender and well-wisher to fairly judge the soul of the underworld. In folk society, Hades gets widespread worship throughout Greece and Italy, even in some parts of the world where temples have been built.

1.3 Lusting for Beauty

In the history, Cao Cao successively had fourteen wives and lusted for beauty. As written in Records of the Three Kingdoms Biography of Guan Yu, as soon as being besieged by Cao Cao and Liu Bei, Lü Bu sent Qin Yilu out to ask for rescue, hence, Guan Yu came to Cao and said that Lv's envoy had been sent out, if they won the war, he would marry Qin's wife. Cao agreed but after they broke through the city, he changed his mind and rejected Guan's request regardless of Guan's repeated demands for doubt that Qi's wife was a great beauty. When the doubt had been confirmed, he took her as his own wife, which upset Guan. Cao's amorousness can also be verified in his own swear recorded in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, "I desire to wipe out the world and become the emperor, to have the great beauties, Jiangdong two Joe in old age to Tongquetai. If that may translate into reality, I would die without regret." Thus Cao's historical and literary individualistic heroic image of lusting for passion and beauty has been revealed vividly on the paper.

It was Ma Su, the general of Shu country, who was fond of the limelight, craved for greatness and success, and considered himself always right regardless of collective interests. It was in the war on Jieting Mountain on the way of the northern expedition to Cao Wei that he disobeyed Zhuge's command to arrange the army near the mountain and by the river, decided by himself to deploy the army on Jieting Mountain in spite of Wang Ping's repeated opposition, which eventually lead to Shu Army's utter defeat by Cao army where Zhang He detected Ma Su and then cut off the source of water and the route for providing foodstuff to besiege Ma on the mountain and then set a fire. It was Ma Su's extremely individualistic heroism resulted in Shu Army's thorough defeat in the northern expedition.

In *Greek Mythology*, many gods headed by Zeus were unable to stand the lure of the seven emotions and six sensory pleasures, such as Poseidon (the King of the Sea), Aphrodite (the goddess of love), Ares (the god of war) etc.. They were dissolute and not subject to any ethics

and morality. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, beauty, and procreation, was a born beauty and the embodiment of beauty, desire and love. She had a magic belt which could make anyone fascinated and fall in love with her at once. Both her adulterous affair with the god Ares, and her love for Adonis (a handsome youth) and Ankhises (a shepherd-prince) sufficiently revealed her dissolute and amorous. Especially in the war of the golden apples that stirred up by Eris (the Goddess of discord), Aphrodite induced the Trojan prince Paris to rob and marry Spartan King's wife, Helen, in order to get the honor of "the most beautiful goddess", which triggered a decade year's Trojan war. It can be seen that lusting for vanity and beauty may indeed bring about unexpected disaster. However, Aphrodite's disloyal to love together with her other disorderly behaviors had not been criticized and condemned in Homer's Epic, which on the contrary inspired the creative wisdom of the ancient artists who took her story as the primitive material for writing.

From above analysis of the individualistic heroic images in two different cultures, it can be found out that both common similarities and differences are involved in the culture of the *Three Kingdoms* and *Greek Mythology*.

The similarities lie in that the individualistic heroism in two cultures is characterized by the heroes with possessive desire of power, money, beauty and honor. They would get what they want by hook or by crook and even at the expense of others' and collective interests. Furthermore, the philosophic values of the two kinds of cultures were nearly born in the same historical period.

At the same time, the differences consist in the selfish individualistic heroism of the two cultures. First, they are different in respect of the gender structure: heroine image was missing in the culture of the *Three Kingdoms*, but in *Greek Mythology*, the goddesses of heroes had equal opportunities to pursue their own desires. Second, the differences of the historical and literary images of individualistic heroes consist in the aspect of their content: In the culture of the *Three Kingdoms*, the literary images of individualistic heroes were able to distinguish the good from the bad, whose moral shortcomings were often amplified such as Cao Cao, the great statesman, strategist and literature, whose moral defects such as being treacherous, cunning to friends had been amplified and criticized as being disloyal without benevolence. In literary works about *Greek Mythology*, some shortcomings and moral defects of the individualistic heroes had usually been ignored, tolerated, eliminated and even beautified such as Zeus, Hades, Aphrodite and Ares ect., whose selfish and disorderly behaviors had not been criticized in Homer's Epic. Third, Folks' attitude towards the individualistic heroes is different: In the culture of the *Three Kingdoms*, the selfish individualistic heroism would not accept folks' respect and admiration but on the

contrary would be severely criticized and condemned; nevertheless, in Greece, no matter how defective the gods of heroes were, they would still be sacrificed and worshiped by people. Fourth, the two kinds of cultures produced the different spirits of philosophy: Chinese culture was based on the spirit of ethics and morality, which lead to the creative images of the perfect "saints"; but in Greece, people were not subject to ethics and morality in religion and morality activities, which were guided by the spirit of myth values that is free from ethics and morality.

2. CAUSES OF THE DIFFERENCES IN HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONNOTATION OF THE "INDIVIDUALISTIC HEROISM"

2.1 Differences in Terms of Philosophy

At first, it is the different philosophic concepts in which the two different cultures grow up that produce the two different kinds of "individualistic heroism".

In China, the culture of the *Three Kingdoms* had been deeply influenced by the Confucian philosophy on the basis of ethics and morality. Confucianism occupied an important position in Chinese culture and history. It viewed "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, faith" as its spiritual connotation, and was also the most influential philosophic school which had become the mainstream consciousness in ancient China. Confucian concept was not only an ideological tool, but also the main boy of China's feudal culture, of which the feudal system of the Confucian female subordination lead to a lack of heroines in the period of the *Three Kingdoms*. Meanwhile, Confucian "benevolence, loyalty and braveness" had become the standard of heroes' conducts, which hence molded the heroic images of the *Three Kingdoms* into the perfect "saints". Those who ignored or betrayed the standard would be criticized by the folks.

In Greece, It was the myth values by which people were free from ethics and morality that guided people's religious and moral activities. The ancient Greek natural philosophy had a great impact on the produce of the images of heroic gods. It was Plato's soul theory and political theory together with Aristotle's metaphysics theory that explained and supported the creation of the mythological heroes and the inheritance of the heroic spirit (Lei, 2014). Different from Confucian perfect images of "saints", it was Plato's view, in Utopia, that regarded moderation as the virtue of the producer class, the braveness as the virtue of the warrior class, the wisdom as the virtue of the ruler class, which supported and explained the singleness in personality of the heroic gods, and also revealed the prevail of the individualistic heroism: every heroic god had bad deeds as human (to

deceive, to have vanity, to lust for beauty, to be envy, to revenge, to struggle) with strong personality to behave at his own will and passion (Zhao, 2012). It was the individualistic philosophy that shaped the heroic gods who were disloyal and immoral in their marriage and love.

2.2 Differences in Terms of Ethics and Values

Secondly, due to the two kinds of quite different philosophic foundation where the two cultures rooted, they are different in aspects of ethics and values.

Heroes of the *Three Kingdoms* attached most importance to collective and national interests. It was not regarded as a real hero but strictly criticized who seek for his own will at the expense of the collective and national interests. In the period of the *Three Kingdoms*, people were subject to the polygamous feudal marriage system which both men and women would comply with.

Greek Mythology was of the gods who were the embodiment of the gods and humans. Heroic gods payed more attention to their personal desires and would hardly sacrifice their own interests to ensure others' and collective interests. They advocated "equality, freedom and individualism" and tended to be free from any ethic or moral restriction in marriage. Both the gods and goddesses equally enjoyed the freedom of being free from any ethic or moral restriction with the personality of being aggressive, warlike, immodest and intolerant.

2.3 Differences in Terms of National Belief

Moreover, "Belief means loyalty, dependence and obedience" (Shen, 2004). It is also one of the most important reasons to cause the difference that two cultures gave birth to different beliefs.

Buddhism and Taoism spread widely in the period of the *Three Kingdoms*. It was Buddhist thoughts of being merciful and charitable, Taoist beliefs of being subject to morality, being of filial piety and loyalty, etc. as well as Confucian thoughts of righteousness that jointly directed and restrained people's behaviors. It was no other than people's worship of the spirit of Buddhism, Taoism doctrine and Confucianism that gave birth to a party of perfect heroic images who took "Zhuge Liang, Guan Yu" as their models and another party of individualistic heroes represented by Cao Cao in literature and folk society.

Greek religious belief of polytheism was an important spiritual support in ancient Greece. It was the significant sacrifice ceremony that united Greek families, clans, tribes and city-states together and had them identified and had the sense of belonging to the community. People's worship of the twelve preeminent gods, led by Zeus and their sacrifice for them was conducted in different area at different time according to their different importance and status in folks' mind. As a result, the belief of polytheistic worship contributed to the presence of so many individualistic gods of heroes in *Greek Mythology*.

2.4 Differences in Terms of Politics

Finally, thanks to the significant differences in terms of philosophy, ethics and values, and religious beliefs, the two cultures reflect their different political views.

In the period of the three Kingdoms, it was the feudal monarchy autocracy that advocated “policy of benevolence”, “rule of the king” and “ritual” and dreamed of “the great unity” and “grand unification”, which greatly influenced by Confucian political thoughts that represented by Confucius “the monarch should appoint and treat his ministers with courtesy, in return, the ministers should serve their thrones with loyalty”, Mencius “put people first, country second and the monarch last” and Xunzi’s ideas

If the monarch did something against the convention, the minister should adhere to the truth and expostulate with him even at the risks of being punished to death; and in the same situation that is also fit for the son and his father. That is the principle of conducting oneself. (*Confucian Encyclopedia*, 2013)

It was due to above Confucian political ideas that supported the feudal rulers to praise and advocate people to follow Guan Yu’s model image of “being benevolent, brave; being loyal to the throne and country” but the individualistic heroic images of being disloyal to others would be strictly condemned and criticized in the folk.

In ancient Greece, It was composed of many city-states where different city-state had its own political policies, for example, Sparta carried out the monarchy; Athens implemented the democratic political system which had a profound influence on later generations; some other city-states put the noble parliamentary system into effect. It was due to the different city-state where people had different political opinions that caused the city-state sacrifice of heroes. Therefore, the gods of heroes put their personal and city-state’s interests at first, which contributed to the majority of the individualistic heroic images in *Greek Mythology*.

CONCLUSION

The individualistic heroism both in the culture of the *Three Kingdoms* and *Greek Mythology* means the spirit of the pursuit of self-interests regardless of the collective and national interests. However, due to the differences in aspects of philosophy, ethics and values, religious beliefs and political opinions, the individualistic heroism in two cultures has their different historical and cultural connotation: In the culture of the Three Kingdoms, the image of heroine was missing; the literary image of the individualistic heroes could distinguish the good from the bad and its moral weakness was often exaggerated and severely condemned and criticized in the folk. But in *Greek Mythology*, both the gods and goddesses had the equal opportunity to seek for their own self-interests; the personal weaknesses and moral defects of the individualistic gods of heroes were usually ignored, tolerated and even beautified; the individualistic gods of heroes, whether they are perfect or faultless in personality or morality, would accept the folks’ sacrifice and worship.

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