Tragic Heroes:

A Comparison between “the Defeated Heroes” in *the Iliad* and *Shan Hai Jing*

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Every civilization has its own myth. Whether it is Western civilization or Eastern civilization, there is a series of myths, such as Greek mythology and Kunlun mythology. In most people's minds, myths are simply treated as stories passed down from generation to generation. However, myths are far more than that. What is more, myths can be related to today's social values, which has its roots in ancient times.

Myth is often considered the outcome of the “primitive” mind (Lossky, 1926, p. 145) in the form of “object + event” (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 25-26). As both the object and event are based on life experience and imagination (Tylor, 1871, p. 247-248), the myth serves as a “mirror” of distant history, and its dual function has been discovered: on the one hand, the mirror reflects the “personification” towards inexplicable natural phenomena in ancient times (Bulfinch, 2006, p. 195; Frankfort, 2013, p. 4). On the other hand, it is a mirror of human society. The first part of the “mirror” function reflects people's interpretation of “temporarily uninterpretable” natural phenomena in ancient times; meanwhile, the second part of the “mirror” function mainly reflects people's worship towards the “man-made” exemplars who embody certain virtues (Eliade, 1963, p. 8; Scheler, 1987, p. 190-194). One of the most remarkable exemplars is the hero, a major character in mythology.

No matter in ancient Western mythology or Eastern mythology, the creation of a hero is often related to warfare, since a classical hero is considered a warrior, who transcends ordinary men in skill, strength, and courage (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2006, p. 867). The purposeful creation of such a figure is of two objects: speaking of the “victorious” hero, the purpose is to set an exemplar to stimulate people's desire to fight in wartime, since the hero's victory stress that “bravery and excellence in battle win honor and glory and thus endow life with meaning” (Schein, 1984, p. 67-72). Speaking

of the “defeated” hero or tragic hero, however, the purpose is to promote altruism. Altruism can be expressed as a special form of heroism: the tragic hero conducts a large amount of voluntary work for the good of his community at significant risk to themselves, such as death, without being motivated by reward (Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011, p. 99; Kohen, Langdon, Riches, 2017, p. 1-3; Zimbardo, 2007, p.465-471). There have been some studies on this type of heroism: the research conducted by Asuamah Adade-Yeboah and his fellows examined tragic heroes in the plot of the play (Adade-Yeboah, Ahenkora, & Amankwah, 2011, p. 10). Bernard Knox also gave his contributions to this topic (Knox, 1985, p. 3-14). Meanwhile, Rongnü Chen studied the literature work and gave out her interpretation of heroes in *the Iliad* (Chen, 2009, chap. 2), but all of these studies of tragic heroes concentrate on one single culture: ancient Greece. There is no cross-cultural comparative analysis based on the mythical text, though cross-cultural studies between the Eastern world and the Western world have been conducted on various objects such as scripture (e.g., Feng, 2018, p. 201-202) and opera (e.g., Qi, 2019, p. 17-19).

To identify what similarities and differences emerge in the creation of tragic heroes in Western and Eastern culture, the method of textual analysis (Lockyer, 2008, p.865-866) as well as the idea of comparative historical research (Schutt, 2018, p. 978-988) can be adopted. The focus of this essay is on the duel that happened between Hector and Achilles in *the Iliad* (Homer, 1990, p. 541-558), as well as Xingtian and Huangdi in *Shan Hai Jing* (The Classic of Mountains and Seas, 2011, p. 528; Yuan, 1980, p. 214-216; Zhang, 2007, p. 29-30). Three expressions of mental activities are found to be the most representative activities: motivation, mentality in adversity, and their final wish.

Before the duel: the motivation

Motivation is the reason why somebody does something, in this case, motivation means why heroes fight. The similarity between Hector and Xingtian’s motivation is easy to observe: they are willing to fight for the well-being of their tribe.

Now my army’s ruined, thanks to my own reckless pride, I would die of shame to face the men of Troy and the Trojan women [...] So now, better by far for me

to stand up to Achilles, kill him, come home alive or die at his hands in glory out before the walls. [...] Better to clash in battle, now, at once — see which fighter Zeus awards the glory! (Line 124-155, Page 545, *The Iliad*.)

则刑天者，亦犹蚩尤夸父，奋起而为炎帝复仇，以与黄帝抗争者也。 [...] 「野火烧不尽，春风吹又生」(白居易 草)，是蚩尤刑天诸巨人前仆后继斗争精神之最好写照也。 Zé xíngtiān zhě, yì yóu Chīyóu Kuāfù, fènqǐ ér wéi Yándì fùchóu, yǐ yǔ Huángdì kàngzhēng zhě yě. [...] Yě huǒshāo bù jìn, chūnfēng chuī yòu sheng (Bái Jūyì Cǎo), shì Chīyóu Xíngtiān zhū jùrén qiánpūhòujì dòuzhēng jīngshén zhī zuì hǎo xiězhào yě. (Line 9-13, Page 216, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas with corrections and annotations*.)

In the excerpts above, Hector and Xingtian's spirit concurs with the definition of altruism, since both of them are willing to fight voluntarily for their country or tribe. However, it is significant that Hector cares more about his pride, while Xingtian cares more about his monarch. It is reasonable to infer that, when tragic heroes face a difficult situation, the Greek heroes uphold personal honor, while the Chinese heroes uphold the honor of his leader and his tribe apart their altruism. This difference indicates different preferences in the creation of tragic heroes: the Greeks believe that one should fight for "personal honor" besides sacrificing for his people, while the Chinese tend to preserve "national honor" all the time. It can be further confirmed in the next discussion.

During the duel: the mentality in adversity

The mentality in adversity is the projection of the hero's personality since it appears when a hero is at a disadvantage or facing the danger of death, a time when one can only rely on his instinct. In the following excerpt, Hector and Xingtian both demonstrate their determination to continue fighting.

Hector knew the truth in his heart and the fighter cried aloud, "My time has come! At last the gods have called me down to death. [...] So now I meet my doom. Well let me die — but not without struggle, not without glory, no, in some great clash of arms that even men to come will hear of down the years!" (Line 349-362, Page 551, *The Iliad*.)

巨人一摸颈上没了头颅，心中慌张，急忙放下斧、盾，弯腰伸手，往地上乱摸。[...] 黄帝怕巨人摸着了头颅接上，赶紧手起剑落，将常羊山一劈为二，那头颅骨碌碌滚入山内，大山又合而为一。黄帝得胜回朝了。摸索不到头颅的巨人捡起斧、盾，复挺身直立，他有了一个新的名字，叫做刑天。刑的意思是斩杀，天的意思是头颅。Jù rén yī mō jǐng shàng méiliǎo tóulú, xīnzhōng huāngzhāng, jí máng fàngxià fǔ, dùn, wān yāo shēnshǒu, wǎng dìshàng luàn mō. [...] Huángdì pà jù rén mōzhele tóulú jiē shàng, gǎnjīn shǒu qǐ jiàn luò, jiāng Chángyáng Shān yī pī wéi èr, nà tóulú gūlulù gǔn rù shānnèi, dàshān yòu hé ér wéi yī. Huángdì déshèng huí cháo. Mōsuǒ bù dào tóulú de jù rén jiǎn qǐ fǔ, dùn, fù tǐngshēn zhí lì, tā yǒule yīgè xīn de míngzì, jiàozuò Xíngtiān. Xíng de yìsì shì zhǎn shā, Tiān de yìsì shì tóulú. (Line 2-7, Page 30, *The Modern version of the Classic of Mountains and Seas*.)

Besides the perseverance in the face of adversity, which serves as a common point, Hector demonstrates a passionate pursuit of glory after he knew his fate, while Xingtian shows no attitude towards his glory. The only thing in Xingtian's mind is to find his head and resume his duel with Huangdi. It further confirms that the altruism in Greek mythology is often combined with personal honor, while in Chinese mythology, the hero is always considered a person who is loyal to his ruler, exerting all his efforts in trying to accomplish feats for the good of his community.

After the duel: the final wish

After the duel, there often comes the most tragic scene: the death of heroes. This is also the moment when they say their last words or their final wishes, which reveal their genuine inner thoughts. It can be very informative in textual analysis.

Struggling for breath, Hector, his helmet flashing, said, "I beg you, beg you by your life, your parents – don't let the dogs devour me by the Argive ships! Wait, take the princely ransom of bronze and gold, the gifts my father and noble mother will give you – but give my body to friends to carry home again, so Trojan men and Trojan women can do me honor with fitting rites of fire once I am dead." (Line 398-405, Page 552, *The Iliad*.)

形天与帝至此争神，帝断其首，葬之常羊之山。乃以乳为目，以脐为口，操干戚以舞。 Xíngtiān yǔ Dì zhìcǐ zhēng shén, Dì duàn qí shǒu, zàng zhī Chángyáng zhī shān. Nǎi yǐ rǔ wèi mù, yǐ qí wèi kǒu, cāo gàn qī yǐ wǔ. (Line 1-2, Page 528, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*.)

In this section, Hector and Xingtian behave very differently and there seems to be no similarity. Hector, when at the point of death, acts like an ordinary person instead of a hero, while Xingtian continues to show his altruism and perseverance. This difference has its roots in different preferences when Greek and Chinese people created their tragic heroes. When the Greeks formed the character of Hector, they placed individualism after altruism, which led to Hector's pursuit of personal honor and glory during his duel. However, the Chinese placed collectivism after altruism, which led to Xingtian's constant pursuit of the honor and dignity of his tribe instead of himself.

By examining all of the most representative mental activities, now conclusions can be made. It is obvious that altruism is the trait shared by tragic heroes in different cultures: it appears in their motivation and their mentality in adversity, namely their perseverance of fighting for their people. Apart from altruism, the Greeks tend to highlight individualism, which is centered on individuals' honor, the embodiment of personal value, while the Chinese tend to highlight collectivism, which stresses on the individuals' struggle for collective interests.

The finding on individualism in Western culture and collectivism in Eastern culture also carries some practical implications for the understanding of Eastern and Western culture from a historical perspective. Since ancient Greece is often regarded as the origin of Western civilization, it is not difficult to understand why there were activities such as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment which stress the value of individuals. Meanwhile, the reason why Chinese people choose a party that believes in communism as their ruling party can also be interpreted from a collectivist point of view. Since in Chinese culture, it is a tradition that an individual should be subordinate to their community and be beneficial for the society at large.

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