

This is an essay that I wrote as a university student quite a long time ago. The file could still be opened, so I cleaned it up a bit to post for your interest. I just found it while cleaning up my files on the computer. I don't remember the particular point of the essay, I think it may have been a language course, so the references would be my own translations. I always tried to slide martial arts into my course work.

THE QUEST OF THE HERO:

THE MARTIAL HERO IN CHINESE HISTORY AND LITERATURE

by Andrea Falk

All nations have cultural heroes, and China is no exception. It has a rich panoply of historical, fictional and mythical heroes ranging over thousands of years. Ancient martial heroes such as Wu Song, Pigsy, and Sun Wukong (the monkey king) are instantly recognizable by the modern Chinese public. Martial artists involved in Chinese styles also know and love these heroes, often from watching kungfu films without being aware of who they were about. What makes these martial heroes so enduring, and how have they leapt the cultural gap to become popular in the West? This study examines the martial hero, also known as the knight errant, or wandering hero, in the context of his meaning to Chinese society and the individual, whether Chinese or Western.

The characteristics of a martial hero, as outlined by James Liu in the Chinese Knight-Errant, show him to be an individualistic wanderer, free from the constraints of societal thinking. In general, his behavior is seen by Liu to be based on eight tenets: righteousness, justice, individual freedom, personal loyalty, courage, truthfulness, honour, and generosity.

Heroes of this type entered literature because their actions struck a responsive chord in the Chinese people. Stories of heroes were popular in all classes of society, as is evidenced by their appearance in both literary short pieces and story tellers recitations which existed side by side in the Tang dynasty (618-906). Stories of heroes also made up a large portion of the story tellers trade during the Song dynasty (960-1280). Story telling in the market place was a popular entertainment for a largely illiterate population. The story tellers could write, and would make prompt books to remind themselves of the storyline. The well-known novel 'The Water Margin' grew from Song dynasty storytellers' prompt books that were partially based on historical figures. Like their real life counterparts, the martial heroes of the Water Margin and countless short stories and recitals do more than fight. They embody the will to live with honour and generosity, acting righteously, loyally, truthfully and courageously in search of freedom for oneself and justice for others.

These qualities raise martial heroes above brigands and thieves, so that biographies of both assassins and wandering heroes were included in Sima Qian's Records of the Historian. As the dynastic recorder, Sima was supposed to emphasize Confucian values, but felt these assassins were perfect examples of upright moral behavior, even though

this behavior differed from the norm. He praised their conduct in his chapter on wandering heroes:

"Although the conduct of the wandering heroes was not always regulated by (Confucian) righteousness, what they said could always be trusted, they were resolute in their actions, and always kept their pledges. They were not afraid to die, and would go to the aid of others in trouble. They lived fully aware that they could die anytime. They neither boasted about their abilities nor talked about their virtues, although there was much that was worthy of praise." (Sima Qian, 124, 64, p. 3181)

As Sima Qian noted, Chinese heroes were not to be judged by normal Confucian or societal standards. The success or failure of their lives was not to be judged by social position or wealth, but by their ability to act according to their sense of right, and live up to their principles. One of the earliest recorded heroes was Jingke, one of the assassins included in the Records, who died in his assassination attempt. His biography includes other heroes, Tian Guang, Gao Jianli, and Fan Wuqi, who gathered around prince Dan. These four men also exemplified the eight qualities of heroes, so studying Jingke's biography can show how five heroes put their beliefs into action.

Heroes did not see righteousness in the usual Confucian sense, but in the sense of doing what is right regardless of the personal or social consequences. This meant doing what was right in their minds, of living up to their self-made standards. This often resulted in altruism, or helping others with no thought of reward. This altruism called for helping the poor against those in power. Jingke agreed to help prince Dan out of his troubles, even though this meant certain danger or death. Prince Dan was an underdog, his country was far weaker than Qin, so aiding him was unlikely to bring reward. As the task was one of assassination, it is clear that killing someone, which in a normal sense is wrong, did not in itself bother the hero. What counted to heroes was whether or not the prince was worthy of aid by their standards. Prince Dan won Jingke's respect by taking in General Fan Wuqi when he was in danger, even though that action would bring the displeasure of a greater power. Prince Dan proved he, too, was a hero, by saying, "General Fan is in trouble wherever he goes, he came to me, I can never send him off to the hinterlands, discarding a sympathetic friendship to avoid the strong Qin; If I had done that, that would be when I should die." (Sima Qian, 86, 216, p. 2529)

Heroes were concerned with individual justice, not the broader social picture. The heroes would openly defy laws to arrive at what they felt to be true justice, and would not trust the government to mete out justice by law. They were quick to a fight, and their form of justice was sometimes rough, but it was based on a strong sense of personal fair play. All the agreements made by Jingke were on this basis of personal relationships, he was not concerned with the battle between states. Prince Dan had called the powerful state of Qin down on his head by taking in General Fan, as a friend, against the advice of

his councillor. Another hero, Gao Jianli, allows himself to be blinded to get near enough to the king to attempt to avenge the death of his friend Jingke.

"The emperor liked how well he played the zhu, so pardoned him, blinding him instead; he had him play the zhu, and he always played well. Gradually he was able to come closer. Gao Jianli then put lead in the body of his zhu, and when he was able to get close again, he came up and raised the zhu to strike the emperor, but missed. Thereupon the king killed Gao Jianli and never again let friends of Dan or Jingke come close to him." (Sima Qian, 86, 216, p. 2537)

The heroes were above all free individuals, they would speak and act as they saw fit, and did not take their morals from the general society. Jing Ke was known to make friends with those he felt to be worthy men, whether they be dog-flesh vendors like Gao Jianli, or scholars like Tian Guang. He gave no thought to what others thought of him in his daily behavior, as is evidenced in his walking out on men such as Gai Nie and Lu Goujian after arguments, without trying to explain himself, or in his drinking bouts with Gao Jianli, when he would sing in the streets:

"After they were half drunk, Gao Jianli would play the zhu and Jingke would sing in harmony in the streets. They would amuse themselves, then they would cry, as if there was no one else around. Although Jingke moved in the circle of drinkers, ... he always made friends with highly principled people." (Sima Qian, 86, 216, p. 2528)

In this same line, loyalty was given to individuals because of character, not social position or wealth. This loyalty, once given, was stronger than that deserved by a parent or ruler, because it was freely given by choice. Jingke agreed to help prince Dan largely out of loyalty to his friend Tian Guang. Tian, a great hero, had killed himself to ensure that Jing would take the mission, knowing the sense of loyalty to a friend would make him accept. Fan, in another act typical of a hero, was happy to kill himself to help advance the assassination attempt, to repay the prince for his friendship:

"Jingke said 'I want to take your head to present to the king of Qin. He will certainly be happy and see me and I can grab his robe with my left hand and stab him in the chest with my right...!' Fan Wuqi came up, baring half his chest and holding his wrist... then he killed himself." (Sima Qian, 86, 216, p. 2532-3)

The heroes showed great physical and moral courage. In choosing the martial life, they had to constantly face death, and demonstrated that they were at ease with death. First Tian Guang, then Fan Wuqi, Jingke himself, and finally Gao Jianli, all went to their deaths quickly and without regrets. Jing's words and actions on his failure to kill the king of Qin, and his imminent death, were not to stave off death, but to taunt those about to kill him. This shows more than bravery, but almost a welcoming of death.

"Jingke knew his mission had failed, he leaned on a pillar and laughed, then squatted awkwardly and swore at them all, 'The reason I didn't succeed is because I wanted you alive, to ensure I would get an agreement to repay the crown prince.' Thereupon everyone went forward and killed him." (Sima Qian 86, 216, p. 2535)

Heroes were truthful in word and action, and expected others to be the same. They said what they meant, even if it seemed abrupt, and did what they said they would do, even if it meant their death. Once Jingke had accepted the mission, he awaited a friend who may have made it possible to pull off. But when the prince suggested that he was backing out of his promise, he was angered at this insinuation and immediately set out, although with a helper who made the mission an obvious suicide.

"The crown prince was disturbed by his belatedness, and was afraid he had changed his mind, so he repeated his request, 'It's already too late, do you plan to go? May I send Qin Wuyang ahead?' Jingke got angry and yelled at the crown prince, 'How could you send him ahead! He will go without being able to return, that's useless! ... Now since you are concerned about my belatedness, may I bid you farewell!" (Sima Qian, 86, 216, p. 2533)

Heroes sought honour and fame, especially in their deaths. Their desire for fame was more in the sense of being known as a brave and honourable person, than of being famous for any benefit that may bring. They often died in obscurity, as they would not go out of their way to seek fame. Jing's singing at the riverside on setting out on his mission was a fine show of bravura, certain to be talked about by the men there. His song and actions would ensure his name was spread as a true hero after his death.

"He went forward singing 'The wind blows, the Yi river is cold, a brave man leaves never to return!' Then he sang the same tune again in a stirring, martial key, and the men all opened their eyes and their hair stood on end, pushing up their caps. Thereupon Jingke got in his cart and left, not even looking back." (Sima Qian, 86, 216, p. 2534)

Heroes showed a contempt for wealth, and neither sought nor refused money. Living free from the need to live richly, they were free from the power money has over people. They were generous when they had money, and would accept what was given when they did not. Jing made friends with people from all levels of society, and seemed happy without money, as he would drink and sing with the dog-flesh vendor. By the same token, although he lived off the prince as he awaited his mission, this did not seem to make him feel obliged to obey the prince, as he obtained the death of Fan even though the prince had refused to accept this plan:

"The crown prince went to his door every day, and supplied him with banquets and a variety of delicacies, and from time to time sent chariots and beautiful women. ... Jingke knew the prince would not tolerate [his plan to

present Fan's head], so he went himself to see Fan Wuqi." (Sima Qian, 86, 216, p. 2531-2)

In his book, Liu lists these characteristics without connecting them to a common theme. They could, however, be seen as growing from the same root. Heroes were first and foremost fighters. As fighters, they had to live with the constant possibility of their own deaths. The key to much of their moral code and behavior lies in this acceptance of death. Realizing and living a life which could end at any moment ensured that they could not live by normal societal standards. Living fully cognizant of imminent death, the hero lived up to the standard that every minute counted as their last, so had to be lived to its fullest potential. This understanding of life and death was the practical one of a fighter, not based directly on any philosophy or religion. In this way, living each moment to its fullest resulted in this range of behavior from supra-moral to drunken singing. The eight tenets posited by Liu were the logical outgrowth of the reality of the hero's existence. All the hero asked for his courage, truthfulness, loyalty, and help to others was that his name be remembered.

It may be suggested that the hero was engaged in a personal quest, to come to terms with himself, his true character, and ultimately, his death. The personal quest and the mythic quest are one. As Fu (1977; p.20) states in his analysis of 'The Journey West',

"When the hero of the novel strives to attain a goal, he is also in search of his true character. ... The basic pattern of the novel as a whole is essentially a form of endless metamorphoses which make the growth of the self a perpetual myth. When the self encounters the objective universe, myth is created."

The individual quest thus becomes the mythic quest, and the mythic hero undertakes it that the hearer may partake of it. The mythic quest, holding many commonalities between cultures, attempts to deal with life and death, delving into and explaining the mysteries of life and preparing for death.

The elements of the heroic quest, as elucidated by Joseph Campbell, entail a separation or departure, trials and victory of initiation, and a return and reintegration with society: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons to his fellow man." (Campbell, 1949, p.30) This quest can be traced in many myths and stories of heroes. The 'Journey to the West' shows these elements most clearly, though there are many other works which show at least some elements.

The mythic pattern is a striving for everlasting life, the hero being transformed from a "victim of fate" into a "victor with faith." In real life, this pattern can still unfold, although in a less fabulous form. Thus, in real life, the mythic quest is life itself. The hero is on a quest all his life, preparing for the final meeting with death. The true hero does not return from his decisive victory, and dying a "victor with faith" is his final

victory. For his victory is death, how he goes to his death represent his success in his quest. The finer his death, and the finer his acceptance of it, the greater his victory over it. The value of his death is in its telling, and his story may inspire others to attempt the quest. The story becomes greater with each telling, and many are moved to tell and retell it. As with the death of Jingke, it is told and retold in many forms, and taking on more and more epic proportions:

"Prince Tan excelled in retaining knights;
His aim was vengeance on the powerful Ying.
He chose one man out of a hundred
And late in the year obtained Master Ching.
A gentleman dies for one who appreciates him;
Holding a sword, he left the capital of Yen.
...
He knew that he would never return again,
But would leave his name behind for ever.
...
He plunged forward over ten thousand miles,
Winding his way past a thousand towns.
When the map ended, the event occurred;
The powerful King was startled and shook in fear.
Alas, his swordsmanship was not perfect,
And so the great enterprise failed!
Though this man is dead and gone,
His passion will remain for a thousand years."
(Tao Qian or Tao Yuanming, in Liu, 1967; p.78)

Notice how in this retelling the journey itself has become longer and more dangerous - over ten thousand miles and past a thousand towns. This addition of trials before the final assault serve to make the victory greater. As a true history gradually becomes a mythic or heroic quest, more elements of the quest are thus attributed to it. As can be seen in other instances, the hero may eventually become deified by this process. Guan Yu, a general in the Three Kingdoms period, started out as a general, became a popular hero and eventually after his death, the god of war. This process is possible because society needs such heroes to fulfill its dreams, even though those dreams may be unconscious.

The value of the hero to a society is as a symbol of the personal quest of all members of that society. He shows the way to others, such that they may follow or simply watch and admire. The hero acts outside of society, so that the participants in the society of his time may not understand his value, but the story of the hero eventually becomes a myth to later societies. As the hero passes into history, fiction or myth, his true worth is felt, although not necessarily on a conscious level. The quest is open to everyone to attempt, and again the heroes aid the needy. They serve as examples in how to live true to oneself and how to die with grace. As Campbell sums up:

"Furthermore, we have not even to risk the adventure alone; for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero-path. And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world." (Campbell, 1949; p.25)

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