



Understanding Heroes from the Psychological and Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores the creation and significance of heroes from both psychological and cultural perspectives, emphasizing their crucial role in shaping individual identities and societal norms. By examining narratives across diverse cultures, with a particular focus on Chinese traditions, it illustrates how heroes embody universal traits such as bravery, resilience, and moral integrity that transcend time and geography. Through an analysis of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, the study investigates the profound interconnection between personal and cultural identity, particularly highlighting how female protagonists defy societal norms and expectations through acts of courage and resilience. By concentrating on the struggles and triumphs of these protagonists, the thesis illuminates how cultural heroes, especially female ones, challenge conventional gender roles and contribute to broader societal transformation. This cross-cultural examination of heroic figures not only underscores their timeless relevance but also provides insights into how cultural narratives serve as vehicles for questioning, resisting, and reimagining social structures and values. The research further emphasizes how these stories reflect a collective consciousness that evolves with changing times and offers a framework for understanding individual and societal dynamics.

Keywords

Heroes; culture; Chinese traditions

The discussion includes the universal characteristics of heroes, as identified by scholars such as Lord Raglan and Joseph Campbell, who outline common narrative structures and traits shared across diverse mythologies. "The Western hero is a mythic, a new version of Christ who redeems, protects, and punishes" (Scott, 2020). Lord Raglan said it is a set of 22 common traits that were shared by many heroes in various cultures, myths, and religions throughout history and around the world (306). The similar traits of heroes reflect a common knowledge or belief. People regard heroes as role models. Joseph Campbell studied there exists a common pattern among the world myths which is referred to as the hero's journey. The hero in the monomyth or the Hero's Journey follows similar patterns of behavior. There are three stages in the hero cycle including departure, initiation, and return. The use of this kind of archetype can be found in Theseus, an ancient Greek myth, Osiris and Isis, an ancient Egyptian myth, Green Willow, a Japanese folktale, etc. In these great myths and folktales, the heroes play the role of moral examples in their quest. They are brave enough to face fear and overcome challenges; they are powerful enough to risk the adventure alone and defeat the monsters; and they are intelligent enough to triumph over adversity and undertake a task. They go on a journey and return with more power and wisdom. Through the quest, they accomplish self-discovery and self-actualization. Courage, strength, and intelligence are good qualities that are shared by the whole world through the ages. Heroes demonstrate universal virtues and attributes that humans value. The storytellers in the enduring myth shape universal heroes, although the hero creation is integrated by the psychological and cultural perspective. In the Chinese context, traditional heroes reflect Confucian ideals, emphasizing loyalty, filial piety, and moral righteousness. These figures

serve as moral exemplars, reinforcing ethical conduct within their cultural frameworks.

Furthermore, the interplay between psychological factors and cultural narratives in hero creation is examined. Heroes often serve as reflections of societal ideals and psychological benchmarks, guiding individuals toward ethical behavior. The duality of intellectual and martial prowess in Chinese heroism, represented by the concepts of “wen” and “wu”, underscores the multifaceted nature of heroism. Through this exploration, the thesis illustrates that heroes are not merely products of their cultural contexts but are dynamic figures that evolve alongside societal values, ultimately shaping the collective moral landscape.

1. Introduction

This thesis explores the creation of heroes from both cultural and psychological perspectives, analyzing their significance in shaping societal values and individual identities. Heroes serve as mirrors of cultural beliefs, reflecting the ideals, morals, and aspirations of their communities. By examining hero narratives from different cultures, especially within the context of Chinese culture, we can gain insights into their impact on human understanding of morality, identity, and the human condition.

Maxine Hong Kingston's works, particularly *The Woman Warrior*, provide a unique lens to examine the intersection of personal and cultural identity within the Chinese-American experience. Her narratives illustrate how individual heroes are not just figures of physical strength but also embody resilience, moral courage, and the ability to challenge societal expectations. Kingston's retelling of the legend of Fa Mu Lan closely follows the pattern of archetypal “hero myths” (Haque, 2020). Characters like Fa Mu Lan represent a reimagining of heroism, where inner strength and defiance against patriarchy play critical roles. This nuanced approach aligns with broader cultural narratives, especially in Chinese traditions, where moral courage often supersedes physical valor.

By integrating Kingston's exploration of storytelling and memory, we see how cultural narratives can empower individuals to reclaim their sense of self. Her reimagined female heroes reflect a more complex view of heroism, where overcoming internal and external struggles is as heroic as traditional martial feats. This dynamic adds depth to our understanding of how heroism functions as both a personal journey and a cultural phenomenon, highlighting the evolving role of heroes in shaping individual and collective values.

2. Universal Characteristics of Heroes

Heroes transcend cultural boundaries and embody traits that resonate universally. Lord Raglan, in his analysis of myth and religion, identified 22 common characteristics of heroes in various traditions, demonstrating a shared structure that heroes follow across time and geography. These traits, ranging from miraculous births to eventual apotheosis, show that the idea of the hero taps into universal human archetypes, reflecting common desires for justice, courage, and moral integrity.

Similarly, Joseph Campbell's concept of the “Hero's Journey” outlines a universal narrative arc found in myths across different cultures. This journey typically involves three stages: departure, initiation, and return. The hero undergoes trials, gains wisdom or power, and ultimately returns transformed. For instance, in ancient Greek mythology, Theseus faces the Minotaur in the labyrinth, symbolizing the confrontation of fear and chaos. In ancient Egyptian mythology, Osiris represents resurrection and the triumph of moral integrity, while Japan's “Green Willow” folktale highlights virtues like loyalty and resilience.

In these stories, heroes embody universal values such as courage, wisdom, and resilience. They overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges, returning from their journeys with newfound strength and knowledge. These heroic qualities are celebrated across time and cultures, emphasizing humanity's shared admiration for perseverance and moral fortitude.

Moreover, the examination of heroism extends to various forms of artistic expression, including literature, theater, and visual arts. These mediums not only serve as vehicles for storytelling but also facilitate deeper engagement with the archetypal characteristics of heroes. For instance, in modern literature, the emergence of diverse voices challenges traditional notions of heroism, introducing characters that navigate complex moral landscapes. This evolution demonstrates that heroism is not static; rather, it adapts to reflect the evolving values and struggles of contemporary society.

3. The Chinese Heroic Tradition

In the context of Chinese culture, traditional heroes often reflect Confucian values such as loyalty, filial piety, and moral righteousness. Historical and literary figures like Qu Yuan, who sacrificed himself for his country, or Guan Yu

from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, embody ideals of loyalty, honor, and virtue. These heroes are celebrated for their commitment to upholding moral principles, often in the face of personal sacrifice. Their stories serve as moral exemplars, reinforcing the importance of ethical conduct in Chinese society.

Furthermore, the duality of “wen” and “wu”—referring to the balance between scholarly wisdom and martial prowess—is a recurring theme in Chinese hero narratives. Heroes are often expected to embody both intellectual and physical virtues, illustrating the multifaceted nature of the heroic ideal. This duality reflects the broader human experience, where success in life often requires a balance between different qualities. The coexistence of these two elements within the heroic framework emphasizes the need for a well-rounded character, where knowledge complements strength, and vice versa.

Maxine Hong Kingston’s works also touch on this complex heroism within the Chinese-American context. Her characters navigate between traditional virtues and the challenges of modern life, embodying a heroism that incorporates psychological resilience alongside cultural values. This blending of the personal and the cultural provides a richer understanding of how heroes are shaped by both internal conflicts and external expectations. The interplay between traditional and contemporary narratives allows for a more nuanced exploration of identity, particularly in a multicultural landscape where individuals often grapple with conflicting cultural influences.

In addition, the evolution of hero narratives in Chinese culture can be traced through various historical periods, illustrating how societal changes impact the portrayal of heroes. During times of political turmoil or social unrest, heroes who embody revolutionary ideals or resilience against oppression often emerge. Figures like Li Zicheng and Sun Yat-sen serve as examples of how historical contexts shape the heroic narrative, creating symbols of hope and resistance for future generations.

4. Psychological and Cultural Interplay in Hero Creation

Hero creation is deeply influenced by psychological and cultural factors. The great acts that are admired by people are consistent with the psychological structures of goodness and common cultural understanding of virtues (Robert, 2015). These stories of the hero vary from culture to culture. It’s the degree of illumination or action that makes them different. There is a typical early-culture hero who goes around slaying monsters. Now, that is in the period of history when man is shaping his world out of a wild, savage, unshaped world. Therefore, Moyers argues that the hero evolves over time, much like other concepts, ideas, and adventures. Hero evolves as the culture evolves (“Ep. 1: Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth”). “Society is founded on hero worship,” the 19th-century historian Thomas Carlyle once observed. Many people still believe that today and strive to make sure that people who embody the best values of our culture are held up as objects of admiration (Kiger). They inspire people to be a better self and promote society to be a better place. Heroism can be learned, can be taught, can be modeled, and can be a quality of being to which we all can aspire (Zimbardo, 2011), while the research findings in social psychology indicate that the social core values have a strong influence on dominating individual behavior. Heroes serve as representations of the psychological ideals of their societies, embodying traits that reflect what a culture values at any given moment. These figures act as moral and ethical benchmarks, both for the society that creates them and for the individuals who look to them for guidance. For example, in ancient Greece, where strength and martial skill were highly valued, heroes like Achilles and Hercules emerged, celebrated for their physical prowess and bravery.

By contrast, ancient Egyptian heroes such as Thoth and Osiris embody a different type of heroism, one that intertwines spirituality, wisdom, and governance. This demonstrates how cultural values shape the nature of heroism—whether the emphasis is on physical strength, moral integrity, or intellectual achievement, heroes serve as reflections of the societies that produce them. The characteristics of heroes can also shift based on the specific needs of culture at different historical moments. For instance, during times of peace, heroes may be lauded for their contributions to society, innovation, or cultural achievements, while during conflicts, the valor and sacrifice of heroes are celebrated more prominently.

In Chinese culture, the values of loyalty and moral righteousness are central to many hero narratives. Heroes like Guan Yu symbolize these values, celebrated for their unwavering sense of duty and honor. These cultural ideals are mirrored in the psychological expectations of individuals within society, who look to these heroes for models of ethical behavior. The stories of these heroes not only reinforce collective cultural values but also shape the psychological frameworks through which individuals understand concepts like virtue and integrity. As individuals grapple with their own moral dilemmas, the presence of these heroic figures provides a reference point for navigating ethical challenges.

Additionally, the psychological concept of hero worship plays a significant role in how individuals internalize the values represented by heroes. The admiration for heroes can lead to a phenomenon known as the “hero effect,” where individuals are inspired to emulate the positive traits of heroes in their own lives. This effect emphasizes the power of heroic narratives to foster personal growth and ethical decision-making, suggesting that the influence of heroes extends beyond mere admiration to active participation in virtuous behavior.

5. The Role of Hero Narratives in Personal Development

Hero narratives also play a crucial role in personal development, providing frameworks through which individuals can explore their identities and values. Engaging with heroic stories allows people to navigate their own struggles, aspirations, and ethical dilemmas. As they resonate with the journeys of heroes, individuals may find inspiration to confront their fears and pursue their goals, fostering resilience and self-empowerment.

The psychological aspect of hero narratives emphasizes the importance of storytelling in personal identity formation. By identifying with heroes, individuals can construct narratives that affirm their values and motivations. These stories often illustrate that heroism is not just an external phenomenon but also an internal journey, where overcoming personal challenges is integral to the heroic experience. This internal struggle mirrors the external quests of heroes, making it relatable and impactful for individuals facing their own life challenges.

Moreover, hero narratives can act as catalysts for social change. By presenting ideals of justice, equality, and compassion, heroes inspire individuals to take action within their communities. Historical figures like Nelson Mandela and Malala Yousafzai serve as modern-day heroes who challenge societal norms and advocate for justice and equality. Their stories not only inspire individuals but also mobilize communities toward collective action, highlighting the transformative potential of hero narratives.

6. The Influence of Media on Hero Representation

In contemporary society, the representation of heroes has been heavily influenced by media, including literature, film, and television. These mediums shape public perceptions of heroism, often reflecting and amplifying cultural values. The proliferation of superhero films and literature showcases a modern interpretation of heroism that resonates with diverse audiences. Characters like Wonder Woman, Black Panther, and Spider-Man embody values of courage, compassion, and resilience while addressing contemporary social issues.

The portrayal of heroes in media often aligns with societal changes and challenges. For instance, the rise of female superheroes in popular culture reflects a growing acknowledgment of gender equality and the importance of diverse representations in hero narratives. These characters often confront not only physical adversaries but also systemic injustices, highlighting the multifaceted nature of modern heroism. The ability of media to depict heroes who resonate with current social issues underscores the evolving nature of heroism and its role in addressing contemporary challenges.

Media representations also allow for the exploration of anti-heroes, complex characters who embody moral ambiguity. Figures like Walter White from *Breaking Bad* or Tony Stark from *Iron Man* challenge traditional notions of heroism by blurring the lines between good and evil. Their stories provoke critical reflection on ethical dilemmas and the complexities of human nature, reinforcing the idea that heroism is not a monolithic concept but rather a spectrum of experiences and choices. This complexity adds depth to the narrative, inviting audiences to engage with the moral intricacies of heroism.

Furthermore, the global reach of media allows for the blending of hero narratives from various cultures, fostering a more interconnected understanding of heroism. As audiences are exposed to different cultural perspectives, the definitions of heroism expand, challenging preconceived notions and encouraging empathy for diverse experiences. This globalization of hero narratives underscores the importance of inclusivity in storytelling, allowing for a richer tapestry of heroic ideals to emerge.

7. Cultural Context and the Evolution of Heroism

As societies evolve, so do the characteristics and narratives surrounding heroes. The cultural context significantly influences how heroes are defined and celebrated. For instance, during periods of war or social upheaval, the archetype of the hero may shift to emphasize qualities like resilience, sacrifice, and patriotism. Conversely, in times of peace and prosperity, heroes may be celebrated for their contributions to innovation, knowledge, and social justice.

In contemporary society, the heroes we celebrate often reflect our current values and struggles. The climate crisis, for example, has brought environmental activists like Greta Thunberg into the limelight, redefining heroism to include a commitment to sustainability and global responsibility. These shifts in hero narratives illustrate how cultural contexts shape our understanding of heroism and what it means to be a hero in different times.

Additionally, the global interconnectedness brought about by technology and media has allowed for the exchange of heroic narratives across cultures. Individuals can now engage with stories from around the world, broadening their understanding of what heroism can look like. This cross-cultural exchange enriches our appreciation for diverse forms of heroism and challenges rigid definitions based on localized cultural values. The interplay between global narratives and local traditions fosters a more inclusive understanding of heroism that resonates with a wider audience.

Furthermore, the evolution of heroism can also be seen in the rise of grassroots movements, where ordinary individuals become heroes in their communities by advocating for social change. These unsung heroes may not fit the traditional mold of heroism but play crucial roles in addressing systemic issues and uplifting marginalized voices. Their stories emphasize that heroism can be found in everyday actions, showcasing the power of individual agency in enacting meaningful change.

8. The Evolution of Heroes

The definition and portrayal of heroes have evolved over time, shaped by cultural and historical contexts. From ancient myths to contemporary literature, the image of the hero reflects the values and ideals of human society. In various historical backgrounds, the characteristics and actions of heroes are often intertwined with societal needs and human psychology.

8.1 From Antiquity to Modernity: The Transformation of Heroes

In ancient myths, heroes were typically depicted as superhuman beings endowed with extraordinary strength and courage. For instance, in Greek mythology, Hercules is celebrated for defeating numerous monsters and completing twelve arduous tasks, symbolizing physical might and martial valor. Such depictions align with ancient societies' emphasis on individual heroism and martial values.

As time progressed, the definition of heroes expanded to include wise figures, moral exemplars, and individuals of unwavering conviction. The knights of the medieval period, while still embodying martial prowess, were increasingly seen as symbols of loyalty, honor, and moral duty. Unlike their ancient counterparts, these knights were often bound by societal morals and chivalric codes, exhibiting heroic behavior not only in warfare but also in daily life, thereby demonstrating a sense of responsibility toward others and society.

In the modern era, the concept of the hero has become more diverse. Literary heroes now often reflect internal struggles and societal contexts. They no longer represent a singular image of strength; many contemporary protagonists display vulnerability and complexity. For example, Hemingway's characters often embody anti-heroism, questioning traditional notions of heroism and exploring the intricacies of human nature and self-identity.

8.2 The Interplay of Psychological and Cultural Factors

The portrayal of heroes is influenced not only by cultural traditions but also by psychological factors. The human desire for heroes often stems from the pursuit of personal value and meaning. In many cultures, stories of heroes not only celebrate individual achievement but also affirm collective values. Whether in Confucian culture in China or in Christian culture in the West, heroes represent moral ideals, and their actions provide models for societal behavior.

In Chinese culture, traditional heroes often embody strong sentiments of loyalty and social responsibility. A typical example is Guan Yu, who is not just a general but also the embodiment of loyalty and righteousness. His image is venerated and celebrated, symbolizing morality and justice. The worship of Guan Yu reflects the deep-rooted values of loyalty and ethics in Chinese culture.

In contrast, Western culture offers a more varied representation of heroes, encompassing both traditional knightly figures and explorations of anti-heroes. The rise of superheroes in modern media reflects new understandings of heroism. These characters not only possess extraordinary powers but also grapple with inner conflicts and societal challenges. For instance, Marvel's Spider-Man and Batman seek to find a balance between their powers and responsibilities, reflecting contemporary complexities in the understanding of hero figures.

8.3 The Impact of Societal Changes on Heroism

Societal transformations have profound effects on the definition and portrayal of heroes. As social structures evolve and globalization progresses, traditional notions of heroism face challenges. Modern society's expectations of heroes extend beyond personal bravery and sacrifice; they increasingly emphasize social responsibility, ethical conduct, and human compassion.

For example, during the civil rights movement and the women's liberation movement of the 20th century, many ordinary individuals became heroes through their relentless efforts and unwavering struggles. Figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Maya Angelou demonstrated that heroism lies not only in personal courage but also in the moral strength to confront injustice and advocate for social change.

These modern heroes inspire entire generations through their actions. They are not merely cultural symbols but also catalysts for social change. This new understanding of heroism provides people with the possibility of becoming heroes in their own right, whether in their personal lives or through social responsibilities.

9. The Functions of Hero Narratives

Hero narratives serve multiple functions within cultures. They not only convey values and morals but also provide individuals and communities with a sense of identity and belonging. Through stories of heroes, societies can pass on cultural, moral, and historical knowledge to subsequent generations.

9.1 Conveying Morals and Values

Hero narratives often illustrate societal core values and moral beliefs through the actions and experiences of heroes. Heroes facilitate cultural identification for large numbers of the population, emphasizing the traditional values and norms of the dominant social classes (Parry, 2021). Ancient myths frequently showcase courage, loyalty, and self-sacrifice, providing ethical guidelines for social behavior. For example, Prometheus, in Greek mythology, is punished for stealing fire to benefit humanity, symbolizing selfless dedication and the spirit of rebellion, thus becoming an emblem of knowledge and enlightenment.

In Chinese traditional culture, stories of heroes similarly reflect societal expectations regarding morality and ethics. Historical figures like Yue Fei and Guan Yu represent loyalty, righteousness, and justice. Their deeds not only serve as role models for future generations but also shape the spiritual culture and moral codes of the Chinese nation.

9.2 Establishing Cultural Identity

Hero narratives play a crucial role in shaping cultural identity. Through stories of heroes, individuals can find a sense of belonging and cultural affiliation. In many ethnic groups and cultures, heroes symbolize shared memories and collective identity. For example, heroes from the American Revolutionary War, such as George Washington, not only embody the spirit of national founding but also become symbols of American identity, uniting people around shared memories and values.

In contemporary society, especially in the context of globalization, hero narratives help bridge connections between different cultures. Through cross-cultural hero stories, individuals can transcend cultural and historical boundaries, discovering shared values and emotions. For instance, the character of Black Panther in the movie of the same name not only showcases the richness of African culture but also fosters a deeper understanding and resonance of Black culture and history among global audiences.

9.3 Promoting Psychological Growth and Self-discovery

Hero narratives offer individuals opportunities for psychological growth and self-discovery. By connecting with the stories of heroes, individuals can reflect on their lives and values. The experiences of heroes are often fraught with challenges and adversities; it is these struggles that shape their character and decisions. Viewers or readers of these stories can draw inspiration, motivating them to confront their challenges.

In modern society, many hero stories center on personal growth and self-discovery. For instance, in the film "The Shawshank Redemption," the protagonist Andy exhibits perseverance and wisdom during his time in prison, embodying the pursuit of inner strength and freedom. This narrative not only prompts viewers to contemplate the meanings of courage and liberty but also inspires individuals to maintain faith and strive for self-actualization when faced with adversity.

10. Conclusion

Through the exploration of heroes from psychological and cultural perspectives, it becomes clear that heroes, as reflections of societal culture, carry the values, beliefs, and ideals of humanity. From ancient myths to contemporary literature, the portrayal of heroes continues to evolve, mirroring societal needs and psychological changes.

Heroes are not merely significant characters in cultural narratives; they also symbolize personal and collective identity. Their stories communicate morals and values, establish cultural identity, and foster psychological growth and self-discovery. In this ever-changing world, the concept of heroism continues to develop, incorporating greater complexity and diversity, reflecting a profound understanding of morality, courage, and responsibility.

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