

# Research of "heroism" as a social phenomenon from the perspective of cultural anthropology

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**Abstract:** *The innovation of this paper is that it will examine heroism as a social phenomenon from the perspective of cultural anthropology. The discussion of heroism involves fundamental sociological and cultural anthropological issues such as the relationship between the individual and the social order, the formation of history, the orientation of human behavior, and the formation of culture. The paper clarifies the formation of heroism at various levels and in various cultural contexts and its significance. The paper is concerned with the fact that heroism has a multidimensional character - heroism has a socio-psychological component, a cultural component, an ideological component, and a socio-political component. The paper expects that researchers will study heroism as a social phenomenon from the perspective of cultural anthropology and be aware of the cultural, social, and historical components involved in heroism.*

**Keywords:** *Heroism, Cultural Anthropology, Individual Heroism, Collective Heroism*

## 1. Introduction

The research on heroism is closely related to the research on the origin and development of culture. However, despite it is important of heroism related research, there are few academic studies on heroism as a social phenomenon in domestic and foreign literature at present. Thomas Carlyle <sup>[1]</sup> defined a hero as "a great man written into the history of the world". Archetypal scholar Joseph Campbell <sup>[2]</sup> said in *the Hero with a Thousand Faces* that "the hero of myth is all about the same person, and the hero is a magical figure who brings back power and blessing from mysterious adventures and blesses his own people". *The Extraordinary Behavior of Ordinary People* <sup>[3]</sup> emphasizes that heroic altruism carries greater risks for heroes than traditional altruism. And so on, there are differences and similarities in the definition of heroism. The innovation of this paper is that it will study heroism as a social phenomenon from the perspective of cultural anthropology.

## 2. Summarize and analyze the characteristics of heroism

### 2.1. Similarities and differences of heroism in China and the West

There are many controversies on the origin of heroism in anthropology and culturology. In the prototype theory, Jung believed that the hero is an embodiment of the collective unconscious in the personal image perceived by people in the long-term psychological accumulation. In the dictionary, the definition of hero is the character essence of a great nation, which is striving to overcome and realize the cause of the whole nation. The main characteristic of individual heroism is that it does not rely on the strength of ordinary people to complete a certain task, and highlights the strength of individuals. Individual heroism is opposite to revolutionary heroism and collective heroism. It mainly takes individualism as its starting point and principle and emphasizes the great role of individual in the process of social development, while putting the power of the people and the dominant position of the people in a secondary position.

### 2.2. Look at heroism from multiple perspectives

#### 2.2.1. The characteristics and attribution of individual heroism

Individual heroism has appeared in the early Chinese and Western cultures and is often described as a kind of individual worship for some figures. In the West, the worship of god and the worship of special individuals in wartime is actually a prominent manifestation of individual heroism. This kind of

individual heroism was popular in Europe from the Romantic period until the end of World War II. The heroic image of individual heroism often has many characteristics. Some scholars believe that heroes are progressive forces that drive history. Throughout the history of the development of Chinese and Western civilization, the personal heroes who can be recorded in Chinese and Western history books all have strong appearance and physique.

Individual heroism does not occur in a vacuum. Spencer believed that before the individual hero could remake society, the society in which he lived must first create him<sup>[4]</sup>. The individual hero is the result of his society, system and historical environment. In the process of transmission, the image of the hero has been distinguished from the specific image of the hero himself. Thus, most people are not interested in heroes themselves, but in the assumptions they can make. It can be seen that individual heroism is the symbol and expression of the corresponding social environment and the product of imagination.

In general, individual heroism holds that individual heroes are the cause of social change and their images have many characteristics. The individual hero is born in the social environment in which he is located, which has historical inevitability.

### ***2.2.2. The characteristics and attribution of collective heroism***

Different from individual heroism, collective heroism focuses on social ideology and social political structure.

With the development of social theory, the study of collective heroism has been transformed from functionalism to social constructivism, from static thinking to process thinking. From the perspective of static thinking, collective hero is a kind of social type embedded in language and a way to maintain the operation of social system. Its role is to reduce the degree of social disorder, promote the maintenance of order and form the basic moral consensus in the society. Collective heroism can explain the common cognition of a collective and define the collective itself to some extent.

Early studies focused on the role of heroes in symbolic and economic communication systems. Since the 1980s and 1990s, different from universalism, most studies have explored the formation of heroism in the broad paradigm of social constructivism, believing that heroism has no cross-historical essence or function. Some modern and contemporary studies have examined how collective heroism is formed under certain conditions. Fecestone, for example, argues that "the meaning of the heroic life comes from the opposite way of living, that is, everyday life. Under specific historical conditions, people's images are tied together, and they try to mobilize all kinds of power resources, constantly fighting"<sup>[5]</sup>. Some scholars believe that collective heroism is formed from the continuous process of social construction, rather than the performance of individual courageous behavior. This process is shaped by many actions and is shaped by many of those who practice them. Therefore, collective heroism will not have a definitive explanation, but must face constant reconstruction.

### ***2.3. Summary***

From the perspective of cultural anthropology, the label "hero" has a specific concept and use value, is a socially recognized part of collective values. Its emergence has specific historical conditions, and has different causes, concepts and connotations in different levels and historical stages.

## **3. Analysis of the behavior motive behind the generation of heroism**

Heroism in different regions and times has different social and cultural properties. Generally speaking, collective heroism tends to be inclusive and mass oriented. Heroic acts are often performed by ordinary people. Some scholars argue that heroism is an extreme form of altruism -- a willingness to help others despite a high risk of injury or death. Empirical studies show that more than half of them practice heroic behavior out of the sense of obligation regulated by their culture. About 30 percent of people practice heroism out of a "sense of mission". About 10 percent were motivated by personal principles.

In recent years, most scholars believe that heroism cannot be regarded as a subtype of altruism alone. Obviously, the factors that shape and influence the generation of heroic behavior not only depend on individual mentality, individual motivation and situation, but also are restricted by social trend of thought and cultural background. Studies have found that heroic actions are rarely spontaneous decisions of practitioners. Instead, cultural and social contexts form a central part of what makes up a particular type of heroic behavior. Because, the hero calls up the reserve of social resources. The formation attribution and behavior motivation behind heroism are worth further study, which is not only related to social

ideology, but also closely related to the historical process.

#### 4. Different forms of heroism in entertainment creation

One of the areas affected by heroism is the film industry. With the continuous development of science and technology, film, as an important part of the cultural industry, has now become one of the mainstream cultural communication media. For the current development of the film industry, a series of industrial films such as Hollywood in the United States occupy a considerable proportion of the global film market. In the capitalist countries led by the United States, the individual heroism shown in their films is also very obvious. Heroes on the Screen in Hollywood, although the forms of expression are not the same, but the core of individual heroism is always the same. The conventional hero has a strong sense of justice and responsibility, and is the defender of good order. In addition, civilian heroes often appear. This kind of hero does not have extraordinary ability, but through an accident or through self-awareness, save the world.

Hero stories are closely related to social organization and culture. The social structure and the corresponding culture influence the expression form of heroism. In Homer's *Iliad*, the nearly perfect individual hero is doomed by fatal flaws. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, the hero witnesses the destruction of an old civilization and the birth of a new one. *Outlaws of the Marsh* shows the "great hero", and "true capacity". The description of Hua Mulan in ancient books creates the image of a heroine who breaks conventions. These heroes embody the core ideas of their respective cultures. In modern times, new heroes represented by bureaucrats appeared in literature of various countries. The existence of this new type of hero expresses an inherent contradiction with a special nature, the conflict between the ideal concept and the actual behavior in the bureaucracy.

#### 5. The problem and future of heroism

##### 5.1. The old subject of heroism

Although there are all kinds of heroic stories based on heroines' personal deeds, such as Meng Jiangnv crying on the Great Wall and Mulan joining the army in place of her father in China, and Joan of Arc's deeds abroad, there are few female figures in the early literature on heroism around the world. Even if there are, female heroes have very distinctly masculine characteristics. This suggests a close relationship between heroism and sociocultural attitudes towards men. In classical literature, the hero is either the bearer of social change or the winner of individual or collective struggles. In this respect, heroism is associated with the physical strength of the individual. In this case, the hero usually exhibits traditional male virtues -- a spirit of adventure, an unyielding will.

With the emergence of feminism in theoretical discourse, scholars argue that the traditional focus on male heroism is a challenge to be overcome.

##### 5.2. The defeat and reconstruction of heroism

With the change of society and the development of culture, heroism gradually loses its popularity and is replaced by grand narrative. Max Weber, a famous sociologist, argued that the fate of heroic leaders "fades away with the development of permanent institutional structures". The spread of all kinds of grand narratives promotes the masses' distrust of heroism. Boorstin claims that "from Plato to Carlyle, hero worship has often been an anti-democratic dogma" and that the spread of democratic belief has led to a distrust of heroism among the masses. In post-war Europe, the cult of the victim was rife, and cynicism and suspicion of heroism were fostered.

It is not so much the disappearance of heroes as the fact that "an ever-changing society produces a variety of heroes to meet its needs"<sup>[6]</sup>. Faced with the prevalence of postmodernism, heroism has lost its significance along with modernization. Heroism will be reshaped with the development of The Times. Instead of talking about the past of heroism, it is better to talk about the future of heroism and study the definition and changes of heroism.

#### 6. Conclusion

In general, the different cultural and social development of different nations and countries further lead

to the different connotation and extension of heroism. The discussion of heroism involves some basic sociological and cultural anthropological problems, such as the relationship between individual and social order, the formation of history, the orientation of human behavior and the formation of culture. This paper illustrates the formation and significance of heroism in various levels and cultural backgrounds. This paper focuses on the multidimensional characteristics of heroism, it has social psychological component, cultural component, ideological component and social political component.

This paper hopes that researchers can study heroism as a social phenomenon from the perspective of cultural anthropology, and realize the cultural, social and historical content involved in heroism. With the development of society, heroism is no longer popular, and the spread of all kinds of grand narratives promotes the distrust of heroism among the masses. Heroism will be reshaped with the development of The Times. Instead of talking about the past of heroism, it is better to talk about the present and future of heroism, and study the changing definition and changes of heroism.

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