

Peaceful National Qualities and Unique Martial Spirit

—Comparatively Exploring the Aesthetic Psychology on War in the Heroic Epic *Lifeng* of Dai People

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Abstract

How does a writer of a nation describe or evaluate wars in the field of literature to show the unique cultural psychology and spiritual temperament of the nation? In the context of the communication and integration of the world literature, the interpretation of the heroic epics of the Chinese minorities can be helpful to identify the unique value of varieties of national literature and contributes a lot for us to better understand the rich Chinese multi-ethnic literary world. Comparing *Lifeng*, the representative of the heroic epics of Dai nationality, with *Iliad*, the ancient Greek epic poem, I can find that the Dai people has the unique cultural psychology of advocating strength, taking pride of courage, denying the plundering, and longing for a peaceful life. Her martial spirit with no smell of blood was born from the integration of frequent fights and the agricultural civilization in history.

Keywords: Heroic epic, Dai people, *Lifeng*, Aesthetic psychology on war

How the people and writers of a nation describe and evaluate wars in the field of literature can show the unique spiritual temperament and characters of that nation, which is an important way to understand the cultural psychology and literary spirit of the nation. The heroic epics, which record the historical legends and praise the heroes of a nation, can most express the masculinity, heroism and national pride. So, every nation regards the heroic epics as her irreplaceable treasure. In the developing process of Chinese mainstream literature, “The Book of Songs” is difficult to undertake the task of fully describing the wars because some texts in it are short and they stress parts of the fights or express particular emotions.

Although *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, *Zuo Zhuan* and other works described more about wars, they are more political and ethical than literal. Because literature of the minorities has been neglected for a long time and it did not enter the field of literary history, as results in a bias for quite a time that war description in Chinese literature is moral and ethical. The process of globalization calls for the re-understanding and re-consideration of the national culture and national characteristics. In the context of the communication and integration of world literature, the interpretation of the heroic epics of the minorities, an indispensable part of the Chinese nation contributes a lot to the unique value of kinds of national literature and helps us better understand the rich multi-ethnic literary world of China.

Among the literatures of Southwest minorities, heroic epics of Dai people are of highest achievements. The representative, *Lifeng*, is closely related to Dai's history, life, culture, tradition and customs. It is the crystallization of the spirit of the Dai people. Comparing *Lifeng* and the ancient Greek epic poem, *Iliad*, we can find the distinctive artistic features and national spirit in the Dai heroic epics. The unique aesthetic psychological description of war provides a good evidence for the rich multi-ethnic literary world of China.

Lifeng, also known as, *Story of Feng Gai*, has two styles of rhyme and prose, which are widely spread in the area of Dai people. It has the similar plot to that of Homer's *Iliad*. A prince (or king) taking away the princess of another country caused the war. Women's appearance and emotion became the direct cause of feud between the Kings. (Wang, 2000. p.42). Many gods participated in the two wars. And the wars lasted for a long time and ended in collapse of the country that took the princess away. However, due to the different historical and cultural environments, the two works had different understandings about the different war.

1. The god image shows the feature of peaceful characters of Dai people

The god image is an important symbol of the spirit of a nation. To understand the war psychology and the unique approaches to treat the subject of war in Dai literature, first, we should have a full understanding of the god image, the role and the position in the war. In the epics of *Lifeng* and *Iliad*, there were gods in the wars. However the images and roles of them in the war were quite different.

In the folklore of the Dai people, the highest god was Ba Ying. He created all the things in the world with the mud in his body. The sweat from his forehead became the lakes and seas. He was the image of industrious laborer. He was full of love for the world. In the folk tale Bayasamudi, he was moved by Bayasamdi for his unswerving resolution of building house. Ba Ying changed into a phoenix and gave Bayasamdi a nudge to complete a high-tilted bamboo house, which could shelter people from wind and rain and moisture from the ground. In the Greek mythology, Zeus overthrew his father Cronus and became the new master of the universe. He was able to rule the gods due to his powerful force. And no other gods could be rivals against him. Different from Ba Ying, who was full of love for the world, Zeus was an image with strength as his rule basis.

As the images of the gods of the two nations are quite different, therefore, the roles and functions of the gods in the two works are different too. In *Iliad*, the gods led by Zeus determined, based on their preferences or the size of sacrifices they received, to give help or punishment. The will of gods completely determined the direction of the war at every stage and the final result. Agamemnon insulted the priests of Apollo so Apollo spread plague in the coalition. Zeus promised Thetis to make Achilles get a higher honor so he let the Greek forces defeated in the attack by Hector and suffered heavy casualties. All Olympus gods ruled the world according to their own preferences and determined the direction of wars. Blood and death in the mortal world could not arouse their heart of much sympathy. There existed the ancient Greek thought of gods determining the fate of human beings. It also reveals the principle of survival of all determined by force in hard living circumstances.

In *Feng Gai*, Ba Ying was more like an elderly person and mediator. Feng Gai had an inextricable fight with Hai Han and Sang Luo because he seduced E Bing and Nan Beng. Ba Ying determined to banish them together to the mortal world. Feng Gai did not change his nature in the world of human beings and once again snatched E Bing and Sang Luo away. Facing the contradictions between Hai Han and Feng Gai, Ba Ying first resorted to the means of peaceful mediation. He ordered Orga to the human world to let Feng Gai return Nan Beng and apologize to Hai Han. Feng Gai did not follow Ba Ying's order. He even said disrespectful words to the gods. Although Ba Ying got angry, he did not spread any disasters and plagues or determined that Feng Gai should have a tragic fate in the fights. He only promised to send soldiers to help Hai Han. In the works, all Ba Ying's wills could not be obeyed, and his image was not terrifying. This shows that the Dai people living in beautiful natural and agricultural environment had calm and peaceful heart despite the unavoidable wars in the transitional period from the primitive society to the private ownership system. The peaceful national character determines the unique features of Dai's heroic epics, as is quite different from the Western heroic epics.

2. The denying of plundering was hidden in the image network

Apparently, the two works are very similar in the plot structure. Both were about the war caused by a story that a country's prince (or king) snatched away the princess of another country. However, due to the different network, understandings of the two nations about the wars were not the same.

In *Iliad*, Paris and Helen's former husband, Menelaus, were not the principal protagonists in the works. The central characters of both sides in the war were Hector, Agamemnon and Achilles. This made the emphasis of the war sway from the initial offset of Helen. As for Hector, defending his country and preventing his tribe from becoming slaves became his fighting goal. And for Agamemnon, power and wealth were his fundamental purpose. As far as Achilles and other Greek soldiers were concerned, their main motivation was access to wealth and honor. In *Feng Gai*, Hai Han and Feng Gai were the leaders of both sides and the cardinal figures of the war. The fighting concentration was about Nan Beng from the beginning to the end. Therefore, the ending part in *Iliad* shows the tragic death of Hector. The ancient Greek heroes won their reputation, wealth and power in the war. But *Feng Gai* ends with the conclusion of the war. Hai Han took Nan Bang's hand and led his army to return home. It was a scene of celebration for all. Fighting in *Lifeng* aimed at a happy life.

In the two epics, Paris and Feng Gai were the leading characters snatching the princesses and caused the wars. But their roles in the two epics were not of the same importance. Feng Gai was all the time the leading figure and had the dominant power over his army. However, Paris had much lower place than Hector in the Trojan army. In addition, the two epics had different attitudes to the snatching of the women. In *Iliad*, Paris was promised and helped by Aphrodite, a god of love, and succeeded in abducting Helen. Olympus gods did not condemn the act, which suggested that such a behavior was legitimate in the cultural environment of ancient Greece. But it is not

in *Lifeng*. When the heaven troops attacked Feng Gai's country, he cursed the god of sun for the interference. God of sun replied, "you robbed women and even snatched the princess. For this we will kill you"

Visibly, such behavior as Feng Gai's was not affirmative in the society of that time. In addition, both sides in the war were put in a strong contrast to highlight a powerful and tyrannical Feng Gai. In *Lifeng*, Feng Gai was in a strong side all the time. When he was in heaven, he seduced the wives of the gods. And when he came to earth he forced small countries to present him beautiful women, gold and silver and elephants. "If there were countries disobedient, he would send troops to attack it." All small countries resented him in silence. Sang Luo's wife E Bing was snatched away by Feng Gai and he sent army to fight against him but suffered the ridicule and contempt, and returned in tears. When Hai Han led his army to attack the city of Mengjinghan, Feng Gai was still arrogant. He said, "my elephants are as many as the bees and my place is as broad as the sky. How can Hai Han win me!" Highlighting the powerfulness and arrogance of Feng Gai and putting the coalition of Hai Han and Sang Luo in the weak position can easily arouse the readers' sympathy for Hai Han and negation for Feng Gai.

3. The unique martial spirit revealed in the describing war scenes

In history, Dai people experienced a development period from clan, tribe, and tribal alliance to the establishment of a local government. Numerous brutal annexed wars were throughout the periods. The emergence of Dai heroic epics was closely linked to the social and historical environment of that time. (Li, 2001, p. 46). In the social context of frequent wars, tears and morality can not maintain the survival and development of a nation or a tribe. Only power can be relied on fundamentally. Therefore, *Feng Gai*, does not stress the description of sadness brought by war unlike some texts of *Book of Songs*, depicting the sorrowfulness of soldiers and their wives. It does not adopt moral criteria, a clear attitude of good and evil, to evaluate the battle or fights. Instead, it takes the course of the war as the main line to pay more attention to the description of the intense ancient battlefield and the grand situation of war and create a series of brave and powerful heroes with the splendor of heroism and pride.

From the beginning to the end, *Feng Gai* focused on the war and few other events were involved and even the soldiers homesickness were rarely mentioned. Of the generals in the war, only those who had outstanding performance on the battlefield got precisely depicted. For example, Sang Luo was a son of god Ba Ying but he did not perform well in the war, so his position in the epic was much lower than general Gang Xiao and other persons. Although Gang Xiao was not born to be as noble as Hai Han and Sang Luo, he was depicted more in the epic. Gang Xiao was encircled alone because of Hai Han's great eagerness to win. His image of fighting to death was the most tragic in the poem.

In the whole poem, Feng Gai was depicted the most vividly. When he was "born, he was wearing armor, holding a fairy flute, carrying a sword on his back and riding a nine knees flying horse", full of masculinity. He was arrogant and tyrannical. He grabbed the beauties every where and had a strong vitality. He was heroic and even fearless in the face of the heaven troops. The god of sun was not his rival. He cherished love more than life. At the critical moment in the war, Nan Beng stole his magic flute, which was the most important weapon for him to defeat the enemy. He got fury and wanted to lift up his sword to kill Nan Bing. But in the end they laughed and went to the battlefield.

In the end when he was defeated and captured, he did not change his heroic and romantic qualities. "You can kill me if you want. But do not destroy my face. It will be left to be kissed by my girls... You can destroy my back where my hands can not reach when it is bitten by fleas." Paris in *Iliad* was not condemned for his abducting other's wife but despised because of cowardice of escaping from the battlefield. On the contrary, Feng Gai, in *Lifeng* was not recognized morally for his snatching other's wife, but was loved by people because of his braveness and romantic emotions.

Feng Gai created a series of heroes and sang high praise for their valor. However, whether Feng Gai or Hai Han, Gang Xiao, Gang Heng or Sang Luo, were not the same as ancient Greek bloodthirsty heroes of Menelaus or Achilles, who were eager to fight for happiness and honor brought by victory.

War scenes were described together with the creation of heroic figures. But sometimes, the epic did not depict the scenes completely from the angle of war, but highlighted a kind of magnificence or humor. For example, when Hai Han and his army set out, it was described as, "in the day, rows of white ivories are shining in the sun; at night, torches in the forest are like stars in the sky... He (Hai Han) is riding a white elephant, pearls and agates suspending from his head. The girth embroidered with golden thread is shining." Here what we see is the gorgeous colors and grand scenes instead of pre-war tension or the wild enthusiasm for battles. Fights between Jiemuwen and Sang Ben are another example. There is no lifelike description of the wound and death of

Jiemuwen to stress the horror of death. There is still no depiction of the pride and joyfulness when Sang Ben defeated Jiemuwen. Instead, the funny and ridiculous elephant was depicted greatly. Compared with the intense battle scenes in *Iliad*, it seemed blood here could not be smelt.

It can be seen from the method of shaping heroes and depicting the war scenes, that although *Lifeng* describes grand battle scenes full of martial spirit, it is not like Homer epics, in which, absolutely controlled by the pure martial spirit, sufferings and pains from the wars had been sublimated into the beauty of heroic tragedy and greatness and become the source of spirit to inspire people's passion for war. (Ni, 1998). The martial spirit is the one that has no smell of blood for it is born from the integration of historical era of frequent wars and agricultural environment.

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