

A Tentative Comparison on War Poems from *The Book of Songs* and *Homer's Epic*

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Abstract

The Book of Songs and *Homer's Epic* are representative classics in the history of Chinese and ancient Greek poetry. Through the comparison of war poems in the two works, this article finds that there are similarities in the subject and materials of poetry. While the war poems in the two works are different in the purpose, aesthetic standard of wars, the attitude towards war, the figures of heroes and the female images in war poems. On the basis of the comparison, this article also discusses the causes of the differences from the aspects of geographical conditions, political ethics, the roots of civilization and national character.

Keywords

War poems; *The Book of Songs*; *Homer's Epic*.

1. Introduction

War has always been the inevitable activity and topic of mankind. War is not only the "touchstone" used to test the national quality, but also the focus of the whole cultural connotation. Spengler once said that the essence of war is not the triumph but the unfolding of cultural destiny [1]. The 6th century BC was a period when human history entered an epoch of rapid development. The ancient cultures of several nations, such as Greece, China, India and Hebrew, have gradually separated themselves from the primitive cultural model and entered a new historical process. *Homer's epic* and *The Book of Songs*, compiled under this historical background, profoundly reflect the spiritual state of each nation in the important period of human development, and have a great influence on the later historical and cultural development of each nation. The two works are precious treasures of the ancient eastern and western poetry art, all of which are created by the people collectively, collected and sorted out by later generation. There are war poems in both works, which can reflect the understanding and attitude of the nations towards the war. It is an effective way to study the war poems in these two works if we want to know the cultural characteristics of ancient war through time and space.

2. War Poems in *The Book of Songs* and *Homer's Epic*

2.1. War Poems in *The Book of Songs*

The Book of Songs, originally called "Poems", was compiled in the Spring and Autumn period, and collected a total of 305 poems from the beginning of the Western Zhou Dynasty to the middle of the Spring and Autumn period for about 500 years, which were later included in the Confucian classics. *The Book of Songs*, the first collection of Chinese poetry, is considered as the source of Chinese poetry, depicting a vivid picture of social history.

The definition of war poetry can be divided into broad sense and narrow sense. War poetry in narrow sense refers to the poetry in which war is the core content and the poetry describing

war directly. In a broad sense, war poems include all war-related poetry, including poetry with the theme of soldiers' longing for return, women's missing for husband, families' longing for reunion and soldiers' complaining about war [2]. It greatly expands the scope of the war poem and helps to show the meaning and connotations of the war poem in depth. War is a comprehensive event closely related to politics, economy, culture and so on. The war involved not only direct participants in the war (soldiers), but also their families, especially their wives. In order to grasp more comprehensively and accurately the inner world of the people in the era of *The Book of Songs* in the war environment, and to fully appreciate the feeling brought by the war to the ruling class and the ordinary people, this article studies the war poems in *The Book of Songs* in a broad sense.

The war poems in *The Book of Songs* are short but rich in content. There are more than forty war poems in *The Book of Songs*: nineteen poems in "Book of Ballads", eighteen poems in "Book of Odes", and some poems in "Hymns of Zhou", "Hymns of Lu" and "Hymns of Shang" [3]. The war poems in *The Book of Songs* can be divided into two categories from the perspective of the object of war: one is the war between the ruling dynasties in Central Plains (mainly the Zhou Dynasty), the feudal princes, the aboriginal tribes and the surrounding minority nationality, the other is the war among the feudal princes inside the Central Plains dynasty. The style of war poems in *The Book of Songs* can be roughly divided into two types: one is the heroic war song; the other is the sad and desolate poem showing grievance against war. All of these war poems vividly reflects the military conflict within China in the pre-Qin period and the living state and emotional experience of the people of all walks of life during the war.

2.2. War Poems in Homer's Epic

Homer's Epic is about the 12th century BC Greek attack on the city of Troy and the postwar story. The formation and recording of the epic almost went through the whole process of the formation of slavery. After the Trojan War, there were many short songs about war heroes in Asia Minor, which merged with the stories of God in the spreading process, enhancing the mythological character of war heroes. These short songs were arranged by Homer in the 8th and 7th centuries BC, gradually became a grand war legend, and officially recorded in the form of words in the 6th century BC. The epic has been formed for centuries, mixed with the historical factors of various times. It is the precious treasure left by the ancient Greeks to later generations, which provides a valuable reference for later generations to understand Greek civilization.

Homer's Epics include two long epics, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, each in 24 volumes. The theme of the *Odyssey* is the story of Odysseus returning to the kingdom of Ithaca to reunite with his wife after the fall of Troy. However, *Iliad* directly describes the large-scale Trojan War, which has seriously traumatized the warring parties. Therefore, the war poem in *Homer's Epic* mainly refers to *Iliad*. It begins with the quarrel of Agamemnon and Achilles in the tenth year of the Trojan War. The Greek allies besieged Troy for ten years, failing to conquer it, and the conflict in the army gradually intensified. Achilles resented Agamemnon and refused to fight for the coalition until Hector, the prince of Troy, killed his friend Patroclus. Then, Hector fought a duel with Achilles and died heroically. The story of *Iliad* ended when Priam, the king of Troy, begged for Hector's body for a funeral.

3. The Similarities in War Poems between *The Book of Songs* and *Homer's Epic*

3.1. The Subject of War Poems—Emphasis On Human Beings

Gods and heroes in *Homer's Epic* are portrayed as ordinary people with the instincts, emotions, desires and weakness. They also quarreled, deceived, and indulged in wine and pleasure. The ghost of Achilles has said that he would rather be a hired hand on earth than a king in Hades.

The heroes in Homer's Epic are not perfect. They may fail or even die. The fragility of their life makes them closer to common people. Heroes in *Homer's Epic* enjoy wine and beauty, compete for power and interests, and have worldly feelings and desires. Achilles, a hero in *Homer's epic*, is the son of Oceanid Thetis and the hero of human Pagan Milius. He can be regarded as the combination of human beings and gods. When he was born, his mother Thetis grasped his heel to soak him in Styx River. Therefore his whole body is invulnerable except the heel, which is his only but fatal flaw. The epic affirms human dignity, values and strength, and embodies a humanistic ethic of achievement and self-realization. Ancient Greek civilization attaches importance to man's subjectivity in the face of nature, advocates freedom, and affirmed the rationality of man's original desire. The emerging bourgeoisie began to take the all-round development of human nature as its ideal during the Renaissance. However, the humanism written on the flag of their war against feudalism was not their new invention, but the spiritual tradition of human-centered in classical Greek and Roman literature.

The main body of *The Book of Songs* in China is not gods, but ordinary people. Only Hou Ji, the god of agriculture, is mentioned in "Temple Bi" in "Hymns of Lu." *The Book of Songs* gathers the collective wisdom of the people of the time, and shows the life experience of all kinds of people in that time. They are about the lives of ordinary people and feelings of common people. Most war poems do not celebrate a war hero, but show the momentum of the whole army. The major role of war poems in *The Book of Songs* are ordinary soldiers and their family members, whose language and feeling is more sympathetic, such as, "Woodcutter's Song", "Which Grass Never Be Yellow", and "Arrogant and Dissolute". In these war poems, the soldiers cursed the heavy taxes and the endless war which brought suffering and disaster to the common people, expressing the importance and affirmation of the survival value of the common people.

3.2. The Historical Values

The Book of Songs is an important historical material of the pre-Qin Dynasty, which preserves the earlier and more reliable social materials, having important value in the study of historiography. Besides, many other subjects, such as agriculture, medicine, folklore, architecture, botany and so on, can find earlier reliable information in *The Book of Songs*. Historical materials in *The Book of Songs* are more authentic than other ancient books. Although it has some mistakes, but basically completely preserved. The most valuable point is that there are few counterfeit works of posterity. Liang Qichao once said that the existing ancient books of the pre-Qin Dynasty are mixtures of truth and fiction. Almost all have problems. As for the ancient books in which every word can be trusted, *The Book of songs* should be ranked first [4]. The war poems in *The Book of Songs* also describe the wars that have taken place in history. "Good Luck from Heaven" praises the merit of Tang, the ruler of Shang who conquered King Chieh of Xia. "The Displaying of Virtue" mentions the Battle of Muye. "Without Dress in Ballads of Qin" writes about Qin State fighting back Xirong Nationality.

Homer's Epic is the history of society and customs showing the transition from gentile society to slavery in ancient Greece, with high value in history, geography, archaeology and folklore. *Homer's Epic* is the only written history of ancient Greece from the eleventh century BC to the ninth century BC, reflecting the life of ancient Greek in prehistoric times. It can be considered as an important document to study the early Greek society. *Homer's Epic*, based on certain historical facts and combined with myths and legends, broadly reflects the economic, political and military aspects of Greek society at that time, as well as the life and struggle of the Greek people. Historically, the period has often been called the Homeric era. The social-economic conditions of the period have been studied mainly on the basis of the material provided by the epic. For example, in economic terms, the land is owned by the commune, but private ownership is taking shape. People live in the patriarchal national organization. Achilles and Odysseus are tribal leaders with private property. The use of iron has begun, people use iron

tools and weapons to work and fight. The epic description of the forging sites shows the technical level of the metal-making process at that time. There is some historical basis for the legend of the city of Troy. At the end of the 19th century, the German scholar Schliemann excavated the site of an ancient city in the west bank of Asia Minor, the ancient Trojan capital of Iliad. It was burned at least nine times between 2000 and 1000 BC [5].

4. The Differences in War Poems between *The Book of Songs* and *Homer's Epic*

4.1. The Purpose of War

4.1.1. The Defensive Warfare in *The Book of Songs*

In Zhou Dynasty, participating in war and corvee is the duty that people must fulfill. The honor and the spoils of war are all given to the emperor while the honor and the reward of the soldiers are extremely limited. People are forced to enlist. In *The Book of Songs*, only when the war and the defense of the cultivated land are closely and directly linked together, can the enthusiasm and martial spirit of the Han Chinese be stimulated to the maximum extent. Generally speaking, the destruction or occupation of cultivated land is the root cause of the war. Most wars, except for the occasional expansion of force, have arisen from the invasion of land and the protection of land. For example, "The king sends me to build battle wall in the north. So powerfully the general Nan Zhong sweeps away the enemy and makes the border peaceful" [6]. The words in "Driving Chariot in Odes" writes about Emperor Xuan of Zhou Dynasty commanding Minister Nan Zhong's campaign to sweep of Xiongnu and defend their land.

4.1.2. The Offensive Warfare in *Homer's Epic*

Paris, the prince of Troy, abducted Helen, the wife of Menelaus, so the Greek army launched the protracted war to recapture Helen and clean up the shame. The cause of Trojan War is often attributed to Helen's beauty. However, it is not the real purpose of war. When Alexandro offered to return the property, he was rejected by the Greeks. Homer speaks through the mouths of Diomedes: "Let no man accept Alexandro's substance, neither Helen's self; known is it, even to him that hath no wit at all, how that the issues of destruction hang already over the Trojans" [7]. It is not difficult to see that the so-called capture of Helen and shame for the Greeks, are only their ostensible excuse. In fact, the intention of the Greeks is to completely occupy Troy, to seize wealth and honor. For the same reason, the first thing Odysseus did when he returned home was to hide his possessions in a cave. War is directly related to wealth, including land, slaves, necessities of life and luxuries. The women of Troy, the treasure of gold and silver, the rich land, the flocks of cattle and sheep were the real purpose of the war. The priest's daughter was among the spoils of Agamemnon, the commander-in-chief of the Greek allies. The priest's desire to redeem her with gold was met by Agamemnon's refusal, which provoked Apollo. Fearing revenge, Agamemnon decided to return the priest's daughter, but he said, "Only make ye me ready a prize of honour forthwith, lest I alone of all the Argives be disprized, which thing beseemeth not; for ye all behold how my prize is departing from me" [7]. In the eyes of the ancient Greeks, the trophy was the honor given to them by war and the driving force of their battle.

4.2. The Aesthetics Standard of War

4.2.1. The Implicit Depictions without Violence in *The Book of Songs*

The Book of Songs doesn't describe the battle in detail, in which death and blood never occur. On the one hand, Many war poems in *The Book of Songs* show homesickness, love affairs and marital misfortune in the war, pushing the war far away and downplaying the vague background contours. On the other hand, the war poems show the general's majesty and

warrior's pride through the finesse of the horse and the wearing of the bow and arrow. It fully embodies the reserved beauty of the human nature of the East. "The king's troops are so brave that their act is as quick as flying birds. The army is as the following water or the green mountain without movement or the rolling water without hinders"; "The four horses are so fat and strong and the rider holds six reins in his hand. The grey and red are in middle, and the yellow and black outside" [6]. The description of mighty army in "King Xuan of Zhou" and the description of strong horses in "Going on an Expedition" in "Ballads of Qin" both show the war indirectly. Compared with *Homer's Epic*, the inevitable bloody scene in the battlefield was shunned, revealing a modest, gentle, and temperate reserved beauty. The Chinese classical literature opposes to exceed the traditional custom and indulge in sensual pleasures. "Joyous but not indecent, mournful but not distressing" is aesthetics standard of Chinese literature. Therefore, although Chinese poetics advocates lyricism, it also advocates abstinence from emotion. The war poems in *The Book of Songs* are also deeply influenced by this kind of aesthetic style.

4.2.2. The Direct Depictions of Violence in *Homer's Epic*

The Book of Songs shows war through non-war things, while *Homer's Epic* shows war in the war, daring to face up to the tragic war scene. Unlike *The Book of Songs*, which focuses on the expression of the soldiers' inner feelings, Homer gives a holographic picture of the course of the war and reaches a nuanced situation. "So when they were met together and come unto one spot, then clashed they targe and spear and fury of bronze-clad warrior; the bossed shields pressed each on each, and mighty din arouse. Then were heard the voice of groaning and the voice of triumph together of the slayers and the slain, and the earth streamed with blood" [7]. Homer's direct, dynamic ortrayal of the war is strong and vivid, with the extremely powerful action and sound rendering and intersection, making the heroic characters bloody into the reader's vision. Homer used a variety of artistic techniques, such as, metaphor, exaggeration, empathy and so on to play up the tragic war. The ingenious use of the "Homeric metaphor" makes Homer's war full of a savage and bloody poetic meaning. For example, "Thus those leaders of the Danaans slew each his man. But even as robber wolves fall on the lambs or kids, choosing them out of the herds, when they are scattered on hills by the witlessness of the shepherd....." [7]. All of these features are also related to western aesthetic standard. Ancient Greek culture advocates the catharsis of emotion, promoting the revelry like Dionysus, in order to obtain the comfort of the soul in the catharsis of emotion. Aristotle first used the word "Catharsis" to express the efficacy of tragedy. He thought that tragedy is the imitation of action arousing pity and fear, which is meant to effect the catharsis of those same emotions. *Homer's Epic* is an outstanding work that embodies Aristotle's viewpoint on catharsis.

4.3. The Attitude towards War

4.3.1. The Anti-war Sentiment in *The Book of Songs*

The war poems in *The Book of Songs* often express soldiers' boredom at war and yearning for peace with a sad tone. Although the emphasis of these poems is not on the direct description of war, they are deeply touching, making readers feel the cruelty and ruthlessness of war most. These poems convey more complex emotions beyond the tone of sadness. "O Minister of war! You are the head of the king's guards. Why did you send me to be in distress? So I serve without stop. O Minister of war! You are not intelligent so that sent me to be in distress. I have an old mother whom no one feed out" [6]. The soldier in the poem, "Minister of War", protest against the endless military service, because of the hardship and lack of shelter. He cannot bear leaving his mother alone at home with nobody to support her. This kind of contradictory between home and country haunts the minds of the people of the successive generations of our countries and runs through the history of ancient war poetry. The poems like this all show us the resentful of war and the missing of family.

This is the real feeling that the war has brought to the common people. Men's sense of responsibility for the country and family, inner softness and helplessness can be felt in these war poems. At the same time, Women's missing of their husbands and their grudges of war are intertwined in poems, such as, "Male Pheasant in Ballads of Bei", "Elder Brother" in "Ballads of Wei", and "The Seeing off Service" in "Ballads of Wang", etc. It can be seen from the above that the folk's attitude towards war, resentment and weariness of war. Zhu Dongrun once said that since *The Book of Songs*, the people of our country who hate war and do not want to join the army can be seen everywhere....." [6]. This sentence has made a concise summary of the basic tendencies of war poetry in *The Book of Songs*.

4.3.2. The Sublime Spirit of War in *Homer's Epic*

There's also sadness in *Homer's Epic*. The war has taken away thousands of lives, only leaving people trauma and pain, which are immediately turned into the motive force of revenge, becoming the spiritual source to stimulate the enthusiasm of war. In *Iliad*, Achilles's best friend Patroclus donned his armor, carried his shield and dashed off to the battlefield pretending to be Achilles himself. However, Patroclus finally died in battle. The blood of his good friend inspired Achilles's fighting spirit. He returned to the battlefield, stabbed Hector, and avenged his friend. Pain and sorrow are here transformed into indignation and power, not depression or despair. It is a feature of *Homer's Epic* to turn bitter scene into solemn and stirring atmosphere. The misfortunes of war have not formed, as in *The Book of Songs*, an anti-war consciousness and a war-weary mood that rival the martial-minded spirit. On the contrary, they have risen incredibly sublime and tragic power.

4.4. The Heroes of War

4.4.1. The Loyal and Patriotic Hero in *The Book of Songs*

Most of the war poems in *The Book of Songs* are about ordinary soldiers, even their families. There are few characters like war heroes in it. A few Generals occasionally mentioned present a kind of image as a gentleman who determined to be loyal to the Emperor. They fought against foreign enemies to defend their country, not to gain personal interest. They are inclined to overcome enemies with virtue, not to enjoy bloodthirsty killing. In the war poems of *The Book of Songs*, virtue and mighty momentum are the keys to win. It's the best policy to subdue the enemy without fighting. For example, "Rivers both Changjiang and Hanshui roar and roll onwards. The warriors march on towards the tribe in Huai in powerfulness, without rest and loitering.....Roll and roar the rivers and so brave the warriors. They pacify small states around and tell the news to King Zhou" [6]. The poem does not depict the war scene. The description of the course of the war is that the tribes in Huai deterred by the Zhou army's mighty momentum and finally being pacified. Perhaps the poet deliberately omitted the course of the battle, for the purpose of projecting the idea of subduing the enemy with mighty momentum. Naturally, a nation with this kind of viewpoints of war will not have an Achilles-style hero marked by strength and courage.

4.4.2. The Bold and Powerful Hero in *Homer's Epic*

Heroes in *Iliad* regard war as an important way to show their heroism and realize their value in life, showing their superhuman prowess by mass destruction. Two main heroes are portrayed in *Iliad*, Achilles and Hector. The valiant Achilles sees the pursuit of personal honor as vital as life. The oracle once said that he has two fates: if he stays at home and never fight, he'll be able to live long and have many children; if he wants to go to war, he can achieve supreme glory, but doomed to die young. The heroic Achilles chose the second path of life without hesitation. The epic heroes regard personal honor as the first life. Their motives are inseparable from personal honor, property, love, and power, etc. Their adventures always tend to show that they are brave, skillful and vigorous. In their views, they enjoy great and short

pleasures in glorious adventures rather than live long in obscurity. The heroes in *Homer's Epic* are not regarded as heroes because of their loyalty to the monarch and their personal moral integrity, but their extraordinary strength and courage. The heroes can be described as the soul of epic. People living in the age of heroes who wanted to win honor, could go to the fighting field for it. Killing is not a sin, while a shame to be defeated by others is the real disaster. Thus, Ancient Greek society had formed the heroic tradition of the supremacy of honor.

5. The Causes for the Differences in War Poems between *The Book of Songs* and *Homer's Epic*

5.1. The Geographic Condition

The temperament of every nation preserves certain characteristics caused by the influence of the natural environment, which can be changed somewhat by adapting to the social environment, but never completely disappear. The influence of geographical environment on culture is profound and indelible.

The broad plain, fertile land and suitable climate in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River make the region have the natural conditions for the development of farming economy, so the Chinese people has entered the agricultural production mode earlier. Agricultural production emphasizes stability and periodicity and does not need to move around as much as the animal husbandry economy does. This determines the long-term settled lifestyle and fixed social groups which are generally live together in kinship families. Therefore, the Chinese people who grow up in such an environment, will naturally form a nostalgia for their homeland and love for their families. Under the premise of unification, the Han people did not have the strong and lasting desire and impulse to colonize outward like people in Greek peninsula. The area is vast where the product is rich. The production and marketing of daily necessities can be completed in their own living space, so they do not rely on maritime trade. In the self-sustaining economic model, there is no excessive ambition or strong desire for material fame and fortune. Thus, the safety of relatives and the happiness of family become their greatest pursuits. War is a violation of human nature. Life is ruined. Family is broken. The war is no doubt contrary to the good vision of ordinary people.

The Greek Peninsula, which gave birth to *Homer's Epic*, has limited cultivated land and narrow living space, so the people of the Greek Peninsula have a strong need to expand their living space outward. War is an effective means for the strong power to acquire land, slaves, necessities of life and luxury. Colonial expansion was a prerequisite for the survival of the ancient Greeks, which means that war was as important to them as water and air. People seek their livelihood depending mainly on trade at sea. Colonization and maritime trade constitute its unique and self-sustaining way, which is different from the Han nationality. The war of the ancient Greeks was closely linked to the defence of the land, colonial expansion and maritime trade. The ancient Greeks who believed that violent plunder was glorious were full of martial spirit. Therefore, the sports, art, religion and literature of ancient Greek society all permeated this kind of spirit.

5.2. The Politic Ethics

The moral and ethical consciousness is based on the family blood relationship. Its function is to maintain the stability of family. The cohesion of the central authorities and the harmony of the social life both depend on family blood relationship. The role of father and the role of monarch correspond to each other; while the role of federal princes and son correspond to each other. The social and political demand promotes the moral and ethical consciousness originating from the kinship of the family to break through the limits of the family clan and expand into the political consciousness of the whole society, thus becoming the superstructure of the

agricultural farming society. In the era of unification, this moral and ethical consciousness was further extended to the diplomatic consciousness of the relationship with the surrounding barbarians. As the political order of the Han people is derived from family blood relations, war, a tool of politics, has become a tool of moral ethics. The socialization and politicization of consanguinity consciousness and ethical consciousness resulted in the moralization of war. Therefore, war poems in *The Book of Songs* always revealed a strong ethical color.

A city-state is a sovereign political unit that is not subordinate to each other. They form a temporary union in the context of social-economic or military needs, with their members generally equal. The relationship among these hundreds of independent city-states of the Greek peninsula are contractual and legal, so Greek socio-political relations are essentially related to contract rather than consanguinity. As a continuation of politics, war is bound to be related to this kind of ideology. The relationship of law and contract is based on private property. Therefore, war is closely related to wealth in reality, but not to the moral ethics of family blood relationship.

5.3. The National Character

Different social cultures breed different national characters. Under the influence of the natural geographical environment, the Greeks formed a sea character with distinctive national characteristics. The politically independent city-states also gave birth to the social and cultural qualities of the ancient Greeks. They admire freedom, pay attention to humanism, and care about the realization of the value of life. This culture gave birth to the open personality and free spirit of the ancient Greeks which also became the social origin of the bloodthirsty and belligerent spirit of the ancient Greeks. The commercial economy and democratic political system also fostered the Greek national character of adventurous and martial spirit. Their desire for money is undisguised, so it is not disgraceful to plunder wealth with violence. In contrast, the inflexible agricultural society has made Chinese people attached to their native land and unwilling to leave it. In the pursuit of wealth, Chinese people hold that a gentle man makes money in a right way. China's agricultural economy and patriarchal politics have shaped its national character which is totally different from that of the Greeks. It is a kind of conservative national character that make Chinese people contented in poverty and willing to devote to spiritual things.

6. Conclusion

All in all, the continuous history of war between East and West can be regarded to a large extent as the expansion of the ancient war concepts and war culture. *Homer's Epic* and *The Book of Songs* have laid the foundation for the culture of war in both East and West. Till today China still adheres to the traditional view of war to advocate maintaining peace and combating war. The differences in handling political differences and territorial disputes in modern society can be traced back to the origin of their culture in *Homer's Epic* and *The Book of Song*.

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