

# ***The Differences Between Wars in Ancient China and Ancient Greece***

## ***--The Analysis Based on The Book of Songs and Ancient Greek Mythology***

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to analyze the different views of war in ancient China and ancient Greece, based on *The Book of Songs* and Ancient Greek Mythology. The comparisons are divided into three parts: the distinction of background, views in *The Book of Songs*, and attitudes towards war in Ancient Greek Mythology, and finally conclusion will be drawn. In the first part, the geography factors will be given, and then the analyses of lifestyles, personalities and beliefs that are influenced or shaped by the natural environment follow, also including the comparisons. The second part is on the views of war in *The Book of Songs* where four typical examples are given which represent four genres that indicate four different attitudes towards war in ancient China, also with analyses. Part three is based on Ancient Greek Mythology, the Trojan War especially, which fully exemplifies the western view of war. The analyses of the culture of offensive war and individual heroism follow. Finally, in the last part, some suggestions for nowadays diplomacy will be given based on the analyses and comparisons above. Also, the culture of defensive war and patriotism, as the two most distinct and significant beliefs, are worth highlighting separately, for they still deeply affect nowadays Chinese.

**Keywords:** Views of war, *The Book of Songs*, Ancient Greek Mythology

### **1. Introduction**

The consensus that war is a disaster for all mankind has only been reached in recent eras. Every war is started and stopped for specific reasons. *The Book of Songs* as the first collection of poetry in China, vividly describes how people at that time think of warfare. At the same time, ancient Greece is the origin of Western civilization, and the description of war in ancient Greek mythology largely reflects the western view of war. Now facing the trend of a community with a shared future for mankind, people need to take history as a mirror, analyzing the contrast between Chinese and western views on war to reach an agreement towards peace. Although there are papers on the concept of the war between China and the West, there is no relevant research based on literary materials. This paper aims to provide a tentative comparative analysis of Chinese and eastern views of warfare, based on *The Book of Songs* and Ancient Greek Mythology. Starting from the objective geographical factors, this paper further examines the representative literary works in Chinese and Western history. This paper

primarily employs text analysis as a method to delve into the underlying reasons for the disparities in war concepts between China and the West, aiming to shed light on cultural exchanges and differences while emphasizing the significance of comparative research from a methodological perspective.

## **2. Geographical Factor**

Geography exerts a profound influence on the formation of local culture. Through an examination of the geographical disparities between ancient China and ancient Greece, this section aims to unveil their divergent national objectives and individual motivations for engaging in warfare, thereby establishing a foundation for subsequent comparative analysis of the concept of war.

### **2.1. The Distinction of Geographical Background**

As the saying goes, “One side of the soil and water to support one side of the people”, it is obvious find the geographical differences in China like south-north differences which are widely known as an apparent set of contrasts. These differences are not only manifested in living habits and diet, like “north horse, south boat”, those material lifestyles, but in people's general personalities, characteristics and attitudes, these spiritual lifestyles as well, that actually the core of the different view towards war.

Therefore, it is conceivable that the differences between ancient countries--China and Greece, are more opposing than nowadays Chinese native differences. The ancient Greek civilization was not born on the fertile soil of the open plains with large rivers, but in the narrow plains, rugged terrain, mountainous and sea-rich Aegean world [1]. Compared with the geographical features of the great river basin and fertile soil of ancient Chinese civilization, Greece was characterized by a large number of mountains, long and winding coasts and dense islands. So ancient Greeks did not choose to develop agriculture, mainly because of the limitations of natural geographical conditions. Agricultural production required arable lands, while in Greece's mainland, as an island country, poor soil, lack of natural conditions, made agriculture stalled. Thus, going to sea to do business and robbing wealth through war had become the important choices for people so that they could get enough resources and territorial expansion for space to live which were also considered as their strength. On the contrary, China had vast territory with enough resources and space to achieve autarky. The Yellow River basin, just one of the most important basins, provided a treasury of water irrigation and fertile soil, so agricultural resources were extremely abundant, for people had no urgent need to strive for a living. “China was a big family, she could have several cradles while raising several children. These children grew up with different temperamental habits than only child in a small family” [2]. This essential difference created a set of parallels for two ways of pursuing fortune--the Chinese created while the Greeks strived, which decided their attitude toward warfare.

### **2.2. Country Aims and Personal Purpose of War**

Ancient China, as an agricultural society, with a belief in autarky and self-sufficiency, rarely waged wars on the initiative, though were forced to be involved in defending land against the invasion of barbarians. Therefore, warfare tended to be regarded as a disaster. By contrast, in ancient Greece, an island country with limited resources and space for living, people strongly believed in fighting for honor and fortune and often waged war actively for territorial expansion and resources. Warfare was more likely the word “chance”.

For individuals in ancient China, participating in war and military service was a forced obligation that must be followed. The honor and fortune of war were mainly belonging to the empire, while the soldiers just received limited honor and reward, thus warfare for the most people meant loss and people held a strong anti-war attitude and a pursuit of peace. On the contrary, ancient Greeks often

participated military by their own decision, taking warfare as a chance to seek fortune and honor, as they were born in a confident and optimistic atmosphere where being bold in pursuing desires was penetrated.

### 3. Views on War in *The Book of Songs*

*The Book of Songs*, as the earliest collection of poetry in China, not only reflects the customs and traditions of ancient society but also deeply reveals the worldview and values of ancient people. The war poems in *The Book of Songs* record the scenes of ancient wars and the emotions of the people. These poems not only depict the cruelty and bloodshed of war but also reflect the attitudes and beliefs of people at that time towards war, which can provide a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of ancient Chinese war beliefs.

#### 3.1. Four Genres and Specific Examples about War

The poems about war in the Book of Songs can be mainly divided into the following four common genres:

(1) the hymn of the empire:

“How goes the night? It’s at its height. In royal court a hundred torches blaze bright. Before my lords appear, their ringing bells I’ll hear.” [3].

No matter what kind of war, its fundamental purpose was to consolidate the stability of the government, and to maintain the absolute authority of the empire [4]. Whether a regime could long endure depends on whether the regime could represent the public interest. Zhou’s regime governed the country by virtue, considering invasion as amoral behavior, and attaching great importance to the nature of war, so that they would not offend others actively except for others’ invasion.

(2) homesickness and the pain of parting:

“The silk is green that you, Old mate, dyed all night long; I miss you, old mate, who Kept me from doing wrong.” [3]

“Home is the smallest country, and country consist of millions of homes,” this old saying indicates Chinese traditional thoughts of home-country feelings which is also said as patriotism. Though people got involved in warfare and fought for their country, which could be equal to fighting for their own home, the homesickness and the pain of parting still sharply hurt people, where anti-war sentiments were rooted.

(3) the suffering of taxes and corvee, hunger and death:

“Hunger and thirst Press me the worst. My grief o’er flows. Who knows? Who knows?” [3].

The hardships of military life revealed the pain of the battle, but also the joy of victory against the enemy, and the desire for peace. The harder the war was described, the more desirable for peace people were.

(4) the concerns about country and people, ambition to protect homeland:

“Are you not battle-drest? Let's share the plate for breast! We shall go up the line. Let's make our lances shine!” [3]

This poem is appealing, just like a pre-war mobilization speech, expressing the ambition and aspirations of a poor farmer who responded to the call of the government and decided to defend his country. As soon as the order was given, the whole country's army and people would fight without hesitation and fight to the death for the foreign enemy. This poem shows the strong patriotism of the people facing with invasion.

### 3.2. A Culture of Defensive War and Patriotism

The worship of the wise rule of the empire, the homesickness of the expedition soldiers, the groans of suffering, and the patriotic sentiment of caring for the country and the people all reflect a passive nature of ancient Chinese warfare. People seek stability but are not fond of war, which has formed the fundamental concept of defensive warfare in China. It can be concluded into three reasons that the culture of defensive war establishes:

Firstly, superior geographical conditions provided ancient Chinese people with all they needed to live, thus there was no need to wage war for resources or space, also considering war as a disaster or a robber behavior that was of no virtue. While invaders who were lack of enough resources and space, when discovering such a wonderful land, immediately got the plan of plundering. In ancient Chinese history, most of wars were defensive war. “No warlike elements and warlike forces could be found either in the social structure or the social hierarchy” [5].

Second, during the reign of King Zhou, people worshiped virtues, and warfare as an amoral behavior, was absolutely resisted. Unless they were forced to participate in war, they would not wage actively. Mostly, the nature of war in history was protection.

Third, the idea of "neutralization" in Zhou people's subconscious made them have a peace-loving tradition. While maintaining their own national independence, they did not advocate outward expansion or conquest of other countries and nations by force but realized the ideal of "harmony and universal nations "by "influence" [6].

As the culture of defensive war above, patriotism was a significant spiritual value in the threat of invasion in ancient China, which meant a kind of sacrifice for territorial integrity. Though this sacrifice was not for not whole country, this hazy consciousness finally formed an important part of Chinese traditional culture.

## 4. Views on War in Ancient Greek Mythology

As an important part of ancient Western civilization, ancient Greek mythology is also an important window for exploring Western culture and values. The Trojan War, one of the most famous wars in ancient Greek mythology, reflects the multiple perspectives of ancient Greek society on war, including honor, bravery, revenge, fate, etc. These concepts gradually evolved and developed in ancient Greek civilization, forming unique Western concepts and values of war.

### 4.1. The Story in Ancient Greek Mythology--Trojan War

It is said that the Trojan War was waged to fight for Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world. However, according to the exposition of the General History of the World, Troy was located at the crossroads of transportation, with developed commerce, a prosperous economy and wealthy people. The Greeks had long coveted the richest lands on the Mediterranean coast, and they wanted to have them for themselves, so they used Helen as a pretext to start a war. That was the real purpose of the Trojan War [7].

It is obvious that compared with the ancient Chinese war, the reason for war and the attitude toward war in ancient Greece are greatly different. People's characteristic of taking risks for personal gain was quite common in ancient Greece. They widely believed that taking risks could bring fortune, wisdom, and power, so they considered war as a challenge that could pursue their life value.

### 4.2. A Culture of Offensive War and Individual Heroism

The ancient Greek war concept as portrayed in Greek mythology is notably offensive, manifested in the heroic warriors' proactive fighting spirit and desire for conquest, as well as their strong pursuit of

honor and bravery. These characteristics together constitute a positive and enterprising war outlook in Greek culture.

Firstly, the geographical conditions could not support the requirements of people which forced them to interact with other countries in commerce. But when they couldn't find a balance between supply and demand, they had to strive for survival, starting a war as a tool to dig the treasury. The lack of labor also pushed them to the way of war to get enough labor by capturing defeated soldiers as slaves. Therefore, most of the wars in ancient Greece were offensive wars.

Second, from the moral point of view of that time, there were no strong social restraints on robbery, the Greeks and barbarians along the coast and on the islands shared the trade of sea pillaging, even considering this that could be defined as a kind of robbery in modern society as a career. Therefore, offensive war was a matter of course which was just like a choice equal to agriculture.

Third, the Greeks tended to be more individual or even selfish and sought more personal fortune, the physical and mental pleasure, but not for whole humans that benefit mankind. This was the consensus of the belief of the Greeks which determined that to wage a war was a brave behavior rewarding being praised.

Such influence of the times gave birth to individual heroism, which combined confidence in human power and a desire to get out of the finite life to be the god or hero in the self-world.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper mainly discusses the influence of different geographical factors on the concept of war in ancient China and the West, as well as the war concepts reflected in *The Book of Songs* and Ancient Greek mythology. Ancient Chinese fought for their country by defending, while ancient Greeks fought for fortune by offending. Two disparate forms of wars bred two different kinds of spiritual belief--patriotism and individual heroism, which have no distinction in right or wrong.

With the development of our whole society, it is clear to find the trend for a community with a shared future for mankind that the relationship of country and country must be tightened without options. But that doesn't mean countries with different opinions and beliefs need to devote themselves to each other to become the so-called common term. In this situation, diplomacy, on behalf of a country, to construct the bridge of communication in an official way with counterparts, must reform under the concerns of the continuation of own traditional ideas but following the trend. However, this paper does not fully explore the specific characters and war scenes in *The Book of Songs* and Ancient Greek mythology in the form of literary analysis. The comparison of the two war concepts can be more deeply focused on literary images and scene descriptions.

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