

A Comparison between Chinese Swordsmen Spirit and Western Chivalry

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Abstract: Chinese swordsmen spirit and Western chivalry, as representatives of Chinese culture and Western culture, both embody the spirit of valuing martial arts and the excellent qualities of being kind, honest, brave and justice to others. However, due to the influence of different cultural backgrounds, historical trajectories and national spirits, they exhibit different characteristics. Therefore, this paper analyzes the similarities and differences between swordsmen spirit and chivalry from three aspects: historical origin, social status and the inner power of chivalrous behavior.

Keywords: Cultural difference; Swordsmen spirit; Chivalry.

1. Introduction

Han Feizi, who lived during the Warring States period, was the first to define "swordsmen spirit" as follows: "Confucians use literature to break the law, while swordsmen use martial arts to break the ban". It can be seen that "swordsmen spirit" was closely linked to "martial arts" at the beginning of its formation, and "breaking the ban" is out of place with a mainstream society. After the flourishing development of Chinese swordsmen culture, a similar knight's culture emerged in the Western Middle Ages. They share many common beliefs, such as being ready to help others for an unjust case, cherishing reputation, being generous and light hearted in wealth, and they all exhibit the beauty of strong masculinity. However, the social roots, history of development and social status of this culture are all different although they share similar spiritual cores, which further contributed to the unique characteristics of "swordsmen spirit" and "chivalry".

2. Different Social Roots

2.1. The Social Background of the Emergence of Swordsmen Spirit

The emergence of "swordsmen" in China can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period. During this period, the central rule of the Zhou Dynasty declined, and various feudal lords rose up and established their own vassal states. The society during this period was relatively turbulent, with constant wars between the vassal states, and the people were struggling to survive. Everyone hoped for a peaceful environment for their survival, but the government did not create such an ideal society for them. Hence, some "righteous people" came forward to help others, and such people were called "swordsmen".

With the change of dynasties, swordsmen spirit is also constantly developing. In the Tang Dynasty, due to the strength of the country and the development of the economy, as well as the emphasis on martial arts and recreations, swordsmen spirit made significant progress. But the most special thing is that the swordsman's social behavior in the Tang Dynasty is characterized by diverse stages and gradually becomes negative. Since the middle Tang Dynasty, it had become more common for swordsmen to violate the rules

indiscriminately, causing continuous discussion on "ideal swordsmen". (Pianhong Li, 2022: 314-323) China has a long-standing culture of swordsmen spirit, which has developed to this day. Due to the dramatic lives and diverse personalities of rangers, it is easy to generate various rumors that exaggerate their achievements and sometimes even add magical skills to them. Therefore, rangers have moved from historical facts to novels, but the swordsmen spirit still inspires us.

2.2. The Social Background of the Emergence of Chivalry

Chivalry originated from the knight class, and there is no clear record of the specific time when the knight system emerged. It roughly appeared in the Middle Ages in Europe, where German heavy cavalry fought to protect their homeland. In the following centuries, technological innovation and the need for war created the knight class. From the 11th to the 14th century the knight class reached its peak, and gradually declined around the 17th century due to various factors such as the strengthening of monarchy and economic development.

Knights were originally just a military system, also known as cavalry. In fact, in the process of historical development, knights have undergone two major transformations from a simple branch of the military. The first transformation occurred around the 11th century, and before the 10th century, knights were mostly fierce and brutal warriors, which is far from the inherent image of knights that has now formed. They raided homes, and unarmed civilians and clergy were their main targets of attack. With the gradual strengthening of the power of the Roman Church after the 11th century, the ability of religious forces to intervene and control the secular world gradually increased, and the knight class also began to be subject to various restrictions, mainly reflected in three aspects. Firstly, the church makes the awarding ceremony of knights standardize, and it becomes more complex. Secondly, the Church launched the "Armistice Movement" and "Peace Movement". Finally, the Church began to regulate the behavior of knights, stipulating the eight virtues of knights: humility, honor, sacrifice, bravery, compassion, honesty, justice, and spirit. In this way, the "knight" changed the original image of a rough man and became a positive model of bravery and being resourceful in battle.

3. Different Social Status

3.1. A Swordsman Who Drifts between Civilian and Hero

Swordsmen do not have a formal official position, and their status is only a commoner. The benevolence, righteousness, loyalty, and trustworthiness advocated by them united the lower and middle classes of the working people in feudal society to jointly protect the interests of the weak. At the same time, the aristocratic class, out of the need for governance, sometimes needed the loyalty and righteousness of swordsmen to feudal rulers, and sometimes suppressed local tyrants, making swordsmen always wander between courts and common life. Sovereigns promise to build their ideal society, but they do not guarantee their own future. Even some monarchs will gradually marginalize them from the court after completing their major tasks, in order to prevent their own status from being compromised.

This is because the unity and stability of the country cannot be established in any form other than the law. In the eyes of the monarch, they are a group of people who are not bound by the law and often "use force to violate prohibitions", seeking justice according to their own emotions. This poses a great threat to rulers, so they cannot tolerate swordsmen having high social status.

3.2. Knights Officially Recognized by the State

Compared to Chinese swordsmen, the social status of Western knights is relatively high. Because knights are a class officially recognized by the state, and they are an independent group that does not need to be attached to the powerful people. Some people even have a very noble social status. They have more wealth at their disposal in relation to the penniless chivalrous men. When war comes, they can bring their own warhorses and weapons. Therefore, almost every knight's family keeps several warhorses and also purchases military equipment for themselves.

Chivalry is a moral norm related to the survival of feudal warriors, thus exhibiting strong feudal ideas and religious fanaticism. And chivalry, which is institutionalized and patterned, is the morality and personality spirit based on the superiority of individual identity. Knights are based on political and religious interests, and they belong to the feudal ruling class, such as King Arthur's Round Table Knights. So knights are a group of warriors who uphold the interests and religious spirit of the feudal ruling class.

To sum up, fundamentally speaking, chivalry belongs to aristocratic culture while swordsmen spirit is a common culture. Swordsmen value loyalty between brothers more, while knights value their reputation in society.

4. The Different Intrinsic Motivations of Chivalrous Behavior

Both swordsmen and knights have a compassionate spirit, viewing protecting the weak and helping the poor as their duty. However, due to the different emphases of collectivism and individual heroism in Chinese and Western cultures, their motivations and purposes for such behavior are vastly different.

Swordsmen spirit advocates righteousness, integrity, and generosity, prioritizing the interests of the nation. And, in their hearts, they always have a set of spiritual beliefs independent of the government and their own unique values, essentially a

spirit of altruism with compassion and love for all beings. "Justice" is more important than anything in the minds of heroes, as they use their own strength to resist the injustice caused in a family governed monarchic country.

The Western chivalry focuses more on maintaining the rule of feudal lords, and the real purpose of knights' valiant struggle is actually just trying their best to complete their own duties. We often see scenes of knights fighting tirelessly for glory and disregarding their lives for glory brings not only admiring gazes, but also enormous wealth and higher social status, which is also the driving force for their continuous struggle. Moreover, the righteousness in the hearts of knights is not entirely driven by justice, but also mixed with a desire for personal honor. They hold the belief of making achievements and being promoted to higher ranks, and have strong utilitarianism.

5. Conclusion

Swordsmen spirit and chivalry represent spiritual beliefs in two different cultures. Swordsmen spirit is widely spread in streets and alleys, as well as in novels. With a public base, swordsmen spirit calls for fighting against the injustice of the feudal government. While chivalry parasitized the knight system under Western feudal rule, which demanded loyalty to the feudal regime and obedience to orders as the basic principle. Swordsmen spirit has the essence of collectivism, which involves universal love and saving lives, while the chivalry has the essence of individualism, which involves sacrificing one's life for fame, profit, and beloved noblewomen.

With thousands of years of ups and downs, swordsmen spirit has merged with new cultural and historical connotations, and still exists and thrives. The chivalry has become a passing traveler in history, scattered in the dust of history.

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