

Course: CHIN 4010

Author: Emma Hardy

Instructor: Dr. An

Date: March 12th, 2025

Title: Literature Essay Sample

Warriors' Wisdom: Greco-Roman vs. Chinese Philosophy Regarding War

War and the conflict between humans have been around since the dawn of time, going back to when humanity was still cavemen. Since then, different parts of the world have devised different philosophies to understand, rationalize, and set rules for when people engage in war. China's Confucianism strives to avoid war as much as possible since it is deemed a sign of weakness but allows war if there are no other options since it may be a necessary evil. In the Greco-Roman tradition, war is more heavily encouraged, and seeking glory greatly influences their decisions in their debates on starting a war. This paper will analyze the differences between the Greco-Roman and Chinese philosophies regarding their different ethical opinions on war.

It is vital first to distinguish the differences between Greco-Roman and Chinese war rituals. The term "ritual" means "A way of doing something in which the same actions are done in the same way every time" according to the Cambridge Dictionary. In Confucian Chinese society, the ruler is to "...use the Confucian Way (rituals, principles, and virtues) to help sustain, educate and otherwise nurture the people in the essentials of life" (Twiss & Chan, 451). That means that Chinese rulers are expected to set rituals, or precedents that further benefit the people. For example, since the Chinese are much more against war compared to their Greco-Roman counterparts, a ritual may be weeping and saying goodbye to their loved ones, praying for a swift

return where they survive in the outcome. Compared to the Greco-Romans, the Chinese show much more remorse and disdain for war as shown in their rituals and beliefs.

On the other hand, the Greco-Romans are much more fearsome and less peaceful in their rituals. Unlike the Chinese, the Greco-Romans were inherently religious because they worshiped different gods who were in charge of different things. Oftentimes before war, it was a ritual for the leader or an ambassador for the city-state to go to the oracle to consult the gods on whether they should go to war or not. Sometimes the gods also would require sacrifices to earn the favor of the god if the leader or military wanted to ensure that their war would go more smoothly. Additionally, another religious ritual was: "Victors were required to hand over the dead to the enemy upon request...to deny burial was to interfere with the funeral rites required by the gods" (Lanni, 478-479). Therefore, this Greco-Roman religious ritual illustrates that they prioritized their gods over their enemies since the victors simply handed the dead back to the opposition to not anger the gods. This starkly contrasts Chinese Confucian beliefs because although they honored and believed that there was a higher power in heaven, they did not seem to place as much importance on God or heaven as much as the Greco-Romans.

In addition to rituals, the Greco-Romans embraced the arts of spectacle and glory. For example, the Colosseum in Rome was specifically rectified for the sole purpose of entertaining its citizens with violence. Historians even believe that "...Romans thought of arena brutality not as cruel, but as beneficial to the viewer; sympathy was proportional to the sufferer's degree of moral status" (Bergmann, 21). Bergmann illustrates that the Greco-Romans thought that fighting each other to the death may have been beneficial to its citizens because glorifying fighting and war in the arena may have released social tensions, especially if the person chosen to fight in the Colosseum was an immoral war criminal against an upstanding Greco-Roman citizen.

Additionally, watching the fights may have decreased fighting outside of the arena and provided social order since people can experience the spectacle of war just by watching it occur in the Colosseum without actually fighting themselves. Some citizens may have also appreciated not being one of the chosen to fight in the Colosseum. Focusing on the real battlefield and not just the Colosseum's stage, trophies were erected once a victory in battle was achieved. Typically a tree stump, these trophies were created to remember the glory of the battle they had just fought and to warn future enemies of their prowess since the enemy will know who wiped out the city-state or village.

In contrast, the Chinese were adverse, as well as disgusted by the arts of spectacle and glory. As previously mentioned, the Confucian belief is to avoid war at all costs and seek any solution that can rectify any thoughts or threats of war from other Chinese nation-states before resorting to war. For example, the story of King Tang illustrates this very concept. King Tang first tried to gift the other threatening ruler with sheep, oxen, and grain. However, the carriers that were bringing the gift to this other ruler were ultimately killed and the gifts were still taken for the other ruler's benefit. Only the ruler killed King Tang's carriers and still took the gifts did he ultimately determine to wage war. This story serves as a moral teaching of how a Chinese leader should act toward war according to the Chinese tradition because he "... initially used other means other than military force before resorting to it" (Twiss & Chan, 459). Based on this story and the Central Confucian belief, war is to not be glamorized, and rulers are encouraged to even potentially go through the hurdles of gift-giving in order to placate the enemy so that war can be avoided.

Another philosophical difference between the Greco-Romans and the Chinese's differing rules on war. Within Confucianism, "...a true king does not kill the defenseless, does not destroy

or plunder, releases captives, and sets up a new ruler in consultation with the people” (Twiss & Chan, 461). However, interestingly enough, there is a poem called *Recruiting Officer at Shih-Hao Village* that details a story regarding an old woman getting recruited for war instead of her husband. While recruiting an old woman goes against Confucian rules as well since she is frail, should be spared, and would not make for a good soldier, the poetry details the horrific reality of war which does align with Confucian values. The poem says, “I had three sons on the border of Yeh / The first one sent me a letter / My other two sons a while back killed in battle / Survivors lucky to be alive at all / The dead gone for good” (Birch, 239). One can imagine the old woman’s worry for her children while also trying to protect her aging husband, daughter-in-law, and baby by enlisting herself in the war efforts so that maybe the next generation can have a period of peace instead of war in their lifetime. These lines detail the harsh reality of war and express the poem’s cautionary message of the consequences if Confucian war rules are not followed such as breaking the rule of harming the defenseless.

On the other hand, the Greco-Romans completely reject the rule of avoiding war at all costs unless necessary and instead care much less about the consequences of war on others. While there was a religious influence to not harm those within religious temples or their priests, everywhere and everyone else was fair game. Simply put, “There was no convention requiring fighters to show mercy to enemy combatants defeated in battle. This was true even if they attempted to surrender” (Lanni, 480). However, women and children were sometimes an exception to this rule. Instead of killing the women and children, it was common for them to become enslaved, raped, or experience other inhumane treatment. This greatly goes against Confucian rules of “...not trampling down growing crops, not incarcerating those who surrender, and not pursuing those who flee the battlefield” (Twiss & Chan, 461). The thought of enslaving

defenseless women and children while massacring all the men was a horrifying thought that Chinese philosophers heavily rejected but the Greco-Romans accepted.

Although the rules of war differed between the Greco-Romans and the Chinese, their justifications for war were more similar than not in some ways. While consulting oracles to determine whether or not a city-state's people should wage war is not a similarity to the Chinese, they were typically not valid since prominent Greco-Roman philosophers believed that religious superstitions would decline over time. For example, "...The 'superstitious man' was a figure of ridicule in Theophrastus's *Characters*" (Lanni, 475). However, they did have a popular assembly called the Ekklesia which was much more valid and through the people when deciding when it should be time to engage in war. It is said that "...the license to initiate war resided exclusively with the Ekklesia, which stood for the demos (people), which in turn was indivisible from the polis (community)" (O'Driscoll, 2). This means that just like the mandate of heaven, the people had the authority to decide whether or not they would like to go to war with somebody else, but just in a different way by having a proper assembly.

Typically in China, there were many peasant rebellions with no proper assembly besides the peasants fighting in the rebellion for a new leader. Instead, it was typically just one leader who stated that the Mandate of Heaven was shifting and heaven chose them to be the next fair ruler. For example, King Wu was one of the main leaders in overthrowing Emperor Zhou and the Shang dynasty while also starting the belief in the Mandate of Heaven to justify future peasant rebellions in case a future emperor was not worthy to rule. Both the Mandate of Heaven and the Ekklesia were essentially a check and balance for the emperor or king of the time.

Since then, emperors have done good and bad jobs with this institution of the Mandate of Heaven in place. An example of a wise emperor who truly proved that he was chosen by Heaven

and enforced Confucian rules about war was Emperor Han in the *Autumn in The Palace of Han* play. Despite Emperor Han falling in love with Chao Chun, he ultimately decided to give her to the barbarian king so that he could keep his nation in peace. However, in the story of the Trojan War, instead of avoiding war and accepting the fact that Helen could not be recovered from Paris, her kidnapper, the Spartans resorted to war. In the end, although Helen was reunited with the Spartan king, countless lives were lost in the Trojan War while not displaying Confucian values as seen in their actions. If the Mandate of Heaven existed within the western hemisphere like it did in the east, then many of the Greco-Roman citizens of the time would have hated the Spartan king for engaging in war over just one beautiful woman.

Lastly, it is important to discuss the philosophical differences on how to avoid war and philosophical teachings that advise on avoiding war. When looking at the Confucian side's philosophy of avoiding war, there were two different outlooks created by two different people: Mencius and Xunzi. Mencius's main assertion was that he believed that people were inherently good-natured. In order to promote a favorable environment that would not promote war, moral modeling was believed to be utilized to inspire and influence one another's inherent good nature in a domino effect. Essentially, if each person did their social responsibility, others would follow suit. According to Mencius, "By continually influencing others, moral modeling can influence an entire village, society, and country, eventually achieving the goal of world peace" (Yu, 262). However, while this sounds like a perfect world, this belief is just simply not realistic. While people may be inclined to follow suit in enacting good moral behavior, they also have the free will to choose not to good and instead do evil.

This was exactly Xunzi's philosophical difference from Mencius; humans were inherently evil, not good. Xunzi argued that "Human nature causes indolence, self-interest, and

inertia in actively fulfilling social obligations, resulting in selfish utilitarian societies that compete with each other” (Yu, 262). Instead, Xunzi’s remedy was to look towards our external environment to alter human nature. Xunzi believed that if you gave someone a favorable environment like fertile soil to grow abundant food, plenty of water, and political stability, then that person or group of people would become more likely to be good-natured. On the other hand, if you put someone or a group of people in a place with infertile soil that produces little food, droughts occur often, and wars occur quite frequently, then those people will tend to be more evil-natured. This is why having a good ruler is also important because the ruler must know how to communicate effectively and know how to divvy up resources fairly in times of droughts or famines in order to maintain a good external environment. While Xunzi’s beliefs at the time may have been slightly controversial due to its differences from traditional Confucianism (Mencius’s school), it quickly became accepted as another valid school of Confucianism with a more realistic lens.

In contrast, Greco-Roman society did not believe in avoiding war entirely and sometimes embraced war as just an element of life. For example, when the Olympics occurred every four years, there was a halt in any war activity to allow the Olympic games. Once the Olympic games were over, any war activity occurring before the Olympics would back up again. This was because “The truce allowed safe passage to Olympia for athletes and spectators before and after the games” (Crowther, 586). However, this was not a permanent solution to avoiding or ending war from occurring. Holding the Olympics every four years was just a way to stay prepared and fit if war ever occurred. For example, “The philosopher Philostratus claimed the athletes made war a training for sports, and sports a training for war” (Crowther, 586). By having the Olympics as a war of just preparing for war, illustrates that the Greco-Romans have embraced war as an

unavoidable part of life. If Mencius or Xunzi were to hear that the Olympics was a way to glorify physical power and to prepare for war, they would have certainly been horrified by what society has become. Xunzi would have said that this supports his theory on the importance of the external environment. Having an external environment that promotes preparing violence such as holding the Olympics will inherently raise people to become evil-natured and commit evil acts towards others. Mencius would have thought that the Greco-Romans were just always blinded by material desire and greed, leading them to commit wars or engage in a violent lifestyle.

In conclusion, Greco-Roman and Chinese philosophies surrounding war reveal contrasting values of religion, culture, and societal goals. In the Confucian philosophy, it is viewed that war is a last resort while prioritizing peace and moral behavior, thus reflecting a belief in humanity's potential goodness. Leaders such as King Tang and Emperor Han are great examples of the Confucian ideologies of diplomacy, restraint, and minimizing violence. On the other hand, Greco-Roman philosophy was inspired by the gods and cultural admiration for glory which integrated war into their social norms as a pathway to honor or prestige. For example, they embrace the spectacle of violence and physical strength as seen through the Colosseum's gladiatorial games and symbolization in their post-battle trophies. Although Mencius and Xunzi aim to create peace through moral modeling or a better external environment, the Greco-Roman's acceptance of conflict as an inherent part of life ultimately contrasts the Confucian worldview. Each civilization's philosophical differences highlight the differences in how they reconcile the realities with the idea of war which reveals enduring ideas about human nature, humanity, and the morality of conflicts.

Works Cited

- BERGMANN, BETTINA. "Introduction: The Art of Ancient Spectacle." *Studies in the History of Art*, vol. 56, 1999, pp. 8–2. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42622231>. Accessed 11 Nov. 2024.
- Birch Cyril. *Anthology of Chinese literature Vol. 1*. Grove Press, 1965.
- Crowther, Nigel. "Sports, Nationalism and Peace in Ancient Greece." *Peace Review (Palo Alto, Calif.)*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1999, pp. 585–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659908426311>.
- Lanni, Adriaan. "The Laws of War in Ancient Greece." *Law and History Review*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2008, pp. 469–89. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27641604>. Accessed 11 Nov. 2024.
- Ritual*. (n.d.). Cambridge.Org. Retrieved November 6, 2024, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ritual>
- Twiss, Sumner B., and Jonathan Chan. "THE CLASSICAL CONFUCIAN POSITION ON THE LEGITIMATE USE OF MILITARY FORCE." *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2012, pp. 447–72. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23250705>. Accessed 11 Nov. 2024.
- Yu, Y. M. (2016). Military ethics of Xunzi: Confucianism confronts war. *Comparative Strategy*, 35(4), 260–273.

<https://doi-org.libproxy.clemson.edu/10.1080/01495933.2016.1222839>