

The Paradox of Ideal and Reality: A Comparison between the "Chivalry" in Don Quixote and the "Chivalrous Spirit" in The Three Heroes and Five Gallants

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Abstract: This paper takes Cervantes' Don Quixote and Shi Yukun's The Three Heroes and Five Gallants as the core texts to explore the profound paradox of ideal and reality contained in the "chivalry" and "chivalrous spirit" shaped by the two. Through comparative analysis, it is found that Don Quixote's chivalry, with its extremely idealistic and "crazy" attitude out of touch with reality, constitutes a sharp satire on the outdated feudal knight system, revealing the tragic collapse of pure ideals in the face of hard reality. Although the chivalrous spirit in The Three Heroes and Five Gallants also pursues fairness and justice, it shows a stronger reality embeddedness and strategic compromise, and realizes its ideals by relying on the clean official system, which reflects the adaptation and survival wisdom of ideals in the real structure. The two together reflect the eternal tension in human spiritual pursuits, and show different paradox resolution paths due to differences in cultural soil: the West pays more attention to the revelation and criticism of the illusion of ideals, while the East tends to seek the limited realization of ideals in the real order. This paper aims to deepen the understanding of the expression of idealism and its real dilemma in Eastern and Western literature.

Keywords: Don Quixote, The Three Heroes and Five Gallants, Chivalry, Idealism.

1. Introduction

Literature profoundly reflects the pursuit of the human spirit for an ideal state and its eternal conflict with the reality. Cervantes' Don Quixote and Shi Yukun's Three Heroes and Five Gallants, as classics of Eastern and Western literature, have respectively shaped the ideal personality symbols of "chivalry" and "chivalrous spirit" with great cultural representativeness. They are not only the crystallization of social psychology in a specific historical period, but also concentrate on the universal tension between ideal and reality.

Chivalry originated from the feudal system and Christian ethics in medieval Europe, advocating loyalty, bravery, and helping the weak and the poor. However, the social transformation during the Renaissance made its creed seriously out of touch with reality. The protagonist of "Don Quixote" is obsessed with chivalrous novels, and forcibly implants outdated ideals into ordinary reality with absurd "chivalry". Its tragicomedy deeply reveals the gap between ideal and reality. In contrast, the chivalrous spirit of "Three Heroes and Five Gallants" is rooted in the Chinese folk justice concept and dissatisfaction with official corruption. Although the knights "violated the law with force" and "acted on behalf of heaven", the realization of their ideals often depended on the justice forces within the system represented by the honest officials, which reflected the compromise of ideals in the real political framework.

This article aims to systematically compare the paradox of ideals and reality displayed by these two spiritual forms, analyze its causes, manifestations, solutions and cultural implications, reveal the different wisdom of the East and the West in dealing with this eternal proposition, and deepen the understanding of idealism in literature and its real dilemma.

2. Don Quixote: The Absolute Idealization of Chivalry and its Realistic Deconstruction

Don Quixote's spiritual world is completely based on his obsession and fantasy with the legend of medieval knights. He regards the long-gone golden age of knights as his guiding principle, calls himself the "Lion Knight of La Mancha", and firmly believes that he shoulders the sacred mission of "eradicating violence, avenging grievances, and helping the widowed and orphaned". This idealization is absolute and exclusive: he regards windmills as giants that must be challenged, flocks of sheep as warring armies, and transforms the crude village girl Aldonza Lorenzo into the noble and perfect Miss Dulcinea. Cervantes uses extreme exaggeration to shape Don Quixote into an idealist immersed in the lofty order of his own construction. His spiritual core is the pure embodiment of the rules of chivalry, and refuses to accept any realistic logic that does not conform to it.

However, once this absolutely idealized spirit is thrown into the melting pot of reality, it encounters a thorough and almost cruel deconstruction. Every "feat" of Don Quixote based on the chivalric creed almost always ends in a miserable failure: he was thrown up by the windmill blades and fell to the ground with bruises all over his body when he challenged the windmill; he was ridiculed and attacked by the convicts when he released them; he intended to uphold justice but often did bad things with good intentions, bringing troubles and even disasters to others. As the embodiment of realism, Sancho Panza's pragmatic admonitions are in sharp contrast to Don Quixote's obsession, constantly highlighting the absurdity of the protagonist's behavior[1]. More profoundly, Cervantes reveals the general attitude of the whole society towards "chivalry" through the attitudes of the people around Don Quixote - from the initial worry and treatment to the later

teasing and exploitation: it has been regarded as an inappropriate madness or a funny play for people to amuse themselves. Don Quixote's tragedy lies in this: he embraced a lofty ideal, but the foundation of the times and the social structure on which this ideal was based had already collapsed, and his persistence could only become a lonely fantasy of fighting against windmills. In the end, he was broken and bleeding in front of the solid wall of reality, and only "woke up" at the end of his life, declaring the "scourge" of knight novels. The spirit of chivalry is completely deconstructed here as a false obsession that cannot survive in the soil of reality.

3. "Three Heroes and Five Gallants": Realistic Embedding and Strategic Compromise of the Chivalrous Spirit

The chivalrous spirit shown in "Three Heroes and Five Gallants" also points to the pursuit of justice, the assistance to the weak, and the struggle against injustice. The pride and chivalry of Bai Yutang, the golden-haired mouse of the "Five Rats", the loyalty and responsibility of Zhan Zhao, the southern hero, and the help of the poor and the needy by the two heroes, the Ding brothers, all reflect the core of the "righteousness" of chivalry - seeing injustice on the road, draw your sword to help. However, in stark contrast to Don Quixote, this idealistic practice is not suspended above reality, but deeply embedded in the specific social and political environment and secular human network, and shows a high degree of strategic and compromising spirit.

The knights do not live in a vacuum, and their behavior is constrained and shaped by multiple real forces. First, although individual martial arts are strong, they are often unable to fight alone in the face of a powerful state machine or a complex evil force. Secondly, although pure use of force to break the law can be a pleasure to get revenge, it is difficult to solve the fundamental problem, and may even cause greater chaos or lead to endless pursuit by the government. Therefore, it is inevitable to seek fulcrums and support in reality. The novel vividly describes the process of knights represented by Zhan Zhao and Bai Yutang finally joining the command of the honest official Bao Zheng. As a symbol of "blue sky", Bao Zheng represents the possible justice force within the system. Through the model of "combination of officials and knights", the knights use their force and Jianghu resources to serve Bao Zheng's judicial trials and anti-traitor operations. This is essentially a profound compromise: the knights did not overthrow the existing system, but chose to rely on and strengthen the parts of the system that they believed were worthy of loyalty, and used the power of the system to more effectively realize their chivalrous ideals. Zhan Zhao accepted the title of "Imperial Cat" and served as an official in the court, and Bai Yutang, although proud and upright, eventually worked for Kaifeng Prefecture, all clearly reflected this compromise.

This practice model that combines ideals with reality can be expressed by a simplified relationship to express the practical intensity of the chivalrous spirit in reality:

Practice intensity = ideal value × (realistic fit + strategic flexibility)

Among them: Ideal value: represents the knight's loyalty to "righteousness" and the intensity of his pursuit.

Realistic fit: represents the degree of match between his behavior and the current social rules, power structure, and

actual feasibility.

Strategic flexibility: represents his ability to adjust means, seek alliances, and use rules to achieve his ideals.

The vitality of the chivalrous spirit depends largely on the strategic flexibility and active pursuit of real fulcrums shown by its ideal core in the face of reality. This strategic compromise embedded in reality has enabled Don Quixote to avoid complete disillusionment like Don Quixote and gain the possibility of continuation and development in the cracks of reality[2].

4. The Core of the Paradox: The Difference between Social Functions and Implementation Paths

The paradox of Don Quixote's chivalry and the chivalrous spirit of "Three Heroes and Five Gallants" lies in the fundamental difference in the social function positioning and the path of realization.

Don Quixote's chivalry is a highly personalized heroism with a religious redemption color. He imagines himself as a chosen lone knight, and his goal is abstract "justice" and personal honor. His spirit is introverted and self-perfecting, and the object of confrontation is often imaginary evil or the magnification of minor injustice. He tries to challenge and correct the changed world order with outdated personal standards, and his actions are completely detached from the existing social rules and even conflict with them. As a result, his social function is invalid and negative in reality: the lofty personal ideals are completely "disembedded" and become meaningless destructive impulses. Not only can they not "save the world", but they are mocked and rejected by reality[3].

In contrast, the chivalrous spirit of "Three Heroes and Five Gallants" has an extroverted, communitarian and order-maintaining social function. Although the chivalrous spirit contains personal factors, the core driving force is to respond to specific social injustices. Its "righteousness" points to the suffering of specific victims and the collapse of the real order. The key is that the knights do not challenge the system in isolation. They are in a complex network of relationships composed of the morality of the rivers and lakes, and the brotherhood of teachers and friends, which in itself constitutes an alternative order force. The novel also combines the knight spirit with the honest official Bao Zheng. The knights become Bao Zheng's right-hand man in upholding justice, and their force makes up for the shortcomings of the bureaucratic system when it is inefficient or blocked. The knight spirit is thus integrated into the official order framework, and its function shifts from subversion to auxiliary repair and strengthening. The solution to its paradox is to rely on and cooperate with the power of "good" in the real power structure, and to realize the ideal of justice within the institutional framework or on the edge to a limited extent, so as to obtain the "legitimacy" and effectiveness of a certain social function.

The difference in the path determines the outcome of the paradox: the chivalry spirit is disillusioned in deconstruction, and the knight spirit continues in adaptation.

5. Cultural Roots: Different Soils of the Paradox of Idealism

The difference between Don Quixote's tragic "madness"

and the strategic "embedding" of the knights in "Three Heroes and Five Gallants" is not accidental, but deeply rooted in the different philosophical traditions, social structures and cultural psychology of the East and the West.

5.1. The West: The Legacy of Critical Rationality and Personal Heroism

Dualism tradition: There is a strong opposition between the ideal world and the real world in Western culture, which lays a philosophical foundation for criticizing reality. Cervantes inherited this spirit and used Don Quixote's extreme idealism to satirize the absurd hypocrisy of the Spanish social transition period and reveal the vanity of outdated ideals, aiming to promote people's reflection and call for a more rational and ideal form that fits the times.

Personal transcendence: The Renaissance and the Reformation strengthened personal values and the pursuit of transcendence. The core of Don Quixote embodies the strong impulse of individuals to transcend mediocrity and pursue lofty values. Cervantes shows the powerlessness and tragedy of pure personal heroism in the face of reality, criticizes the rigid past, and warns individuals of the danger of detaching themselves from society and pursuing absolute ideals. This forms an important paradigm for Western literature to reflect on idealism.

5.2. East: The Tradition of Practical Rationality and Order Integration

Confucian practical rationality: Chinese Confucianism emphasizes "practical application" and "moderation". The chivalrous spirit nurtured has a strong concern for reality and action orientation. The chivalrous goals of "Three Heroes and Five Gallants" are specific, and the means strive to find feasible paths within the existing framework. Bai Yutang's proud compromise with the "big situation" reflects the adjustment under the constraints of reality, not absolute resistance.

Interaction between big and small traditions: Chinese society attaches importance to order and stability. The official orthodox "big tradition" and the folk appeal "small tradition" are not in opposition, but interactive penetration. As a "small tradition", the chivalrous spirit is a supplementary correction to the disorder of the "big tradition". "Official chivalrous combination" is a typical interaction: chivalrous knights use honest officials to obtain "legitimacy" and platforms for action, and honest officials use chivalrous knights to make up for the lack of bureaucracy. This model aims to repair order, seek the "limited realization" and "functional embedding" of ideals in the real structure, and embody the Taoist survival wisdom of "harmony with the world".

Therefore, the difference in cultural soil determines the paradox-solving tendencies of the two works: the West focuses on critical deconstruction, revealing the limitations and vanity of ideals and promoting deep reflection; the East tends to seek the reconciliation and limited integration of ideals and order while acknowledging the constraints of reality, and emphasizes strategic implementation paths[4].

6. Practical Significance: The Eternal Echo of Paradox

The paradox of ideal and reality encountered by Don Quixote and the knights in "Three Heroes and Five Gallants" is by no means a relic of history. Its core dilemma still has

strong practical significance and universal value in today's society.

The dual aspect of idealism: The two works jointly warn us of the duality of idealism. Don Quixote shows the tragic consequences of idealism that is divorced meaningless sacrifice or a laughing stock in the eyes of others, or even causing unexpected harm. It reminds us to be vigilant against ideals falling into the trap of "utopia" or the phantom of self-indulgence. "Three Heroes and Five Gallants" shows the other side of idealism: when ideals have realistic concerns, flexible strategies, and are good at finding realistic fulcrums, they can take root in the cracks of hard reality and exert practical transformation power. It affirms the value of ideals as a spiritual driving force for social progress and individual transcendence, but emphasizes that their realization requires wisdom, resilience, and a clear understanding of the complexity of reality.

Tension between individual actions and social structure: Whether Don Quixote challenges the "windmill" alone or the knights try to rely on the "honest officials", they all deeply reflect the eternal dilemma faced by individuals in pursuing ideals and changing reality: the contradiction between the limited power of individuals and the huge inertia of social structure[5]. In contemporary times, this tension is reflected in social activists, reformers, and even every ordinary person with ideals - how to effectively promote change within the institutional framework? How to make necessary strategic adjustments and alliance building while maintaining the purity of ideals? How to avoid the ideal from deteriorating in compromise?

Inspiration from cultural dialogue and solution paths: The different wisdom of the East and the West in dealing with this paradox provides valuable dialogue resources for the contemporary world. In the context of globalization and value diversity, facing common challenges, we need both Don Quixote's critical courage and ideal persistence, dare to expose unreasonable reality, and maintain the pursuit of higher values; at the same time, we also need the realistic wisdom and strategic embedding of the knights in "Three Heroes and Five Gallants", who are good at finding partners, building alliances, and designing feasible action plans in the existing structure to promote the gradual realization of ideals. Pure critical deconstruction may lead to nihilism and powerlessness, while blindly embedding compromise may eliminate the edge of ideals. The two are not either-or, but a dynamic balance should be sought.

7. Conclusion: Eternal Light and Survival Wisdom in Paradox

Don Quixote represents absolute, exclusive, and unrealistic chivalrous idealism. Each of his "chivalry" is a tragic collision of ideals on the barriers of reality, which ultimately ends in complete deconstruction and individual disillusionment. Cervantes used this to satirize outdated systems and revealed a universal dilemma: any pure idealism that is divorced from reality and refuses to adapt, no matter how noble its core is, will eventually collapse tragically in the face of complex and changing reality. Its value lies in ruthless criticism and vigilance.

The chivalrous spirit of "Three Heroes and Five Gallants" shows a different path. The chivalrous men embrace the ideal of saving the world, but are deeply embedded in the structure of reality. Faced with realistic constraints, they choose to rely

on the justice forces within the system represented by the honest official Bao Zheng with strategic flexibility and compromise wisdom. This "official-knight combination" model is a conditional compromise and functional embedding of ideals in the real order. The knights strengthened the "good" part of the system, used the system resources to achieve justice goals, avoided complete disillusionment, and embodied the survival wisdom of the East's "practical rationality" and "practical application".

The two paths are very different, rooted in the cultural soil of the East and the West: the Western critical rationality and personal heroism tradition gave birth to a warning method that reveals the illusion of ideals; the Eastern Confucian practical application, the doctrine of the mean, and the interaction of big and small traditions led to the adjustment and limited realization of ideals in the real order.

This paradox is an eternal theme. The two classics enlighten us: ideals are the eternal light that drives transcendence, but ignoring reality is false; reality is the cornerstone and constraint of action, but abandoning ideals is vulgar. The real wisdom lies in: holding the light of ideals, using Don Quixote's courage as a mirror, clearly recognizing the hardness and complexity of reality, and constantly

exploring the tortuous but possible path of practice between criticism and perseverance, ideals and compromise. Seeking dynamic balance within the tension of paradox is the eternal task of the survival and transcendence of the human spirit.

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