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**The General Spirit and Characteristics of the Images  
of the Mythical Heroes Yi and Hercules**

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**Abstract.** Myth carries the earliest cultural memory of human beings. It is a way of thinking and a spiritual form for human beings to grasp the external world. As a type of myth, hero myth is a very important cultural phenomenon, and it is an integral part of the development of human spiritual form. The ideal sustenance has had a profound impact on the social and cultural life, religious morality, political history and other aspects of later generations. Yi and Hercules are famous heroes in ancient Chinese and ancient Greek mythology respectively. They are the embodiment of wisdom and strength. They have achieved extraordinary and similar performance. Although they have different personalities and different shapes, since they are all called heroes, it shows that they have a common characteristic, and this characteristic is personality, in other words heroic quality and heroic spirit. They have lofty ideals and personalities, and they have become the spiritual sustenance of the ancestors, the carriers of the national spirit and cultural symbols. By comparing the heroic images of Yi and Hercules, this article explores the common brilliance of different heroic images by using the method of literature research and comparative research, which is beneficial to inherit and carry forward the noble heroic spirit sung in myths and legends. Heroes are always representatives of society, and their beautiful qualities and characteristics that conform to or surpass the times are actually a model and social appeal of human beings. The study of heroic images will never lose its meaning. It is a special angle to study the essence of phenomena and a special cultural vision.

**Keywords:** myths; legends; hero images; value orientation; cultural spirit

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**Общий дух мифических героев и особенности образов  
Йи и Геркулеса**

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**Аннотация:** Миф несет в себе самую раннюю культурную память людей. Это способ мышления и духовная форма постижения человеком окружающего мира.

Как разновидность мифа, миф о герое представляет собой важный культурный феномен и является неотъемлемой частью духовного развития человечества. Идейная основа мифов оказала серьезное влияние на социальную и культурную жизнь, религиозную мораль, политическую историю и другие аспекты жизни последующих поколений. Йи и Геракл – знаменитые герои, соответственно, древнекитайской и древнегреческой мифологии. Они являются воплощением мудрости и силы, для них характерны схожие экстраординарные достижения. Несмотря на то, что они различаются по индивидуальным качествам и внешнему виду, и поскольку все называют их героями, необходимо признать, что у них есть общая черта: их стойкий характер и героический дух. Им свойственны высокие идеалы, и сами они выдающиеся личности, служившие духовной опорой предков, носителями национального духа и культурных символов. На основе сравнения героических образов Йи и Геракла, используя метод литературного анализа и сравнительный метод, в статье исследуются общие исключительные черты различных героических образов, что полезно для наследования и распространения благородного героического духа, воспетого в мифах и легендах. Герои всегда являются представителями общества, а их прекрасные качества и характеристики, которые соответствуют своему времени или превосходят его, на самом деле являются воплощением общественного идеала, образцом для подражания. Изучение героических образов никогда не потеряет своей актуальности. Это уникальный ракурс для изучения сути явлений и особого культурного миропонимания.

**Ключевые слова:** мифы; легенды; образы героев; ценностные ориентации; культурный дух

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## Introduction

As the crystallization of human wisdom, mythology has had a profound impact on the political economy, social culture of China and the West in the process of the development of human civilization and social progress. Myth originated from people's fantasy about the uncontrollable and unaccountable natural and social forces. It is an effort of primitive people to understand themselves and explain nature, and it reflects human's desire for knowledge and the spirit of struggle. Ancient Greek mythology has been inherited and developed in the records of Homer's Epic and Hesiod's Work and Time and Theogony. Ancient Chinese mythology is rich in content, and mythological materials are scattered in various ancient books of the past dynasties, such as The Classic of Mountains and Seas and Huai Nan Zi. The legend of heroes is an important part of myths and

legends. Hesiod divides human beings into those of five ages: golden age, silver age, bronze age, hero age, black iron age (Hesiod, 1997: 110-200). Hesiod believes that while creating human race in the Bronze Age, Zeus invented the fourth generation of human races – the Demigods – “god-like race of hero-men” (Hesiod, 1997: 110-200) – who are more noble and just in comparison.

Heroic races have caught the attention of mythologists. The Greek poet Pindar further divided the life forms in the universe into three categories in his poem The Second Olympus Games, gods, heroes and humans, heroes become a category of existence that coexists with gods and humans. British cultural anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor divided myths into four types: natural myths, philosophical myths, etymological myths, and heroic myths (Tylor, Lian Shusheng, 2005: 3-4). Among them, hero

myth is a kind of myth with the theme of expressing the heroic behavior, spiritual power and noble quality of mythical heroes. The mythic hero refers to the outstanding person who is brave and fearless, determined and heroic, bravely dedicated, and has extraordinary abilities.

As the greatest demigod hero of Greece, Hercules is not only the patron saint of Mount Olympus, but also a model of men. He punishes evil and promotes good in the world, and upholds justice. His most famous cause is to complete 10 drudgery, and his heroic performance has been widely circulated and worshiped by people.

Throughout Chinese hero myths, most of the protagonists are male. From the creation myth of the goddess Nuwa to create a man from earth to the heroic myth of the establishment of great achievements, it is actually a transformation from the matriarchal system to the patriarchal system of social history, so the heroes are mostly sage kings and worthy ministers. Yi is a heroic image created by people based on the harsh real environment. His credit is to do 7 things for the people, of which Shooting the Sun to Eliminate Harm is the most classic case.

### Methods

Started, as it is widely accepted, within Romanticism with the works by the great playwright Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller and brothers Schlegels (Cook, URL), developed in the folklorist studies of Brothers Grimm and later improved significantly in the frame of Russian Mythological School, the research in Mythology has been flourishing over the centuries. Among the most significant moves there were Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach, C. G. Jung's archetypes, and Frye's theory of myths (Myth Theory, URL). Nevertheless, comparing myths, created in different cultures still proves to be useful and important.

In primitive society, due to low productivity and underdeveloped technology, people

cannot explain natural phenomena and fantasize about a transcendent power.

Nature has the same objectivity, for Morgan, as it has for the great philosophers of the seventeenth century. It provides the basis for the development of man, society and its various institutions (Morgan, 1944: 14)<sup>1</sup>. Chinese scholar Yang Lihui proposed: Myth is a narrative about gods, ancestors, cultural heroes or sacred animals and their activities, which explains the initial origin of the universe, human beings – including gods and specific ethnic groups and culture, as well as the current world order of the initial establishment (Yang Lihui, 2009: 5). The images of many mythical heroes are imagined as the seamless integration of man and nature, reflecting the infinite worship of natural vitality and the hope of transcendental mysterious power. The spirits of the mythical heroes such as Pangu, Nuwa, Yandi, Emperor, Chiyou, Xingtian and Houyi have become heroic epics and ageless legends of life (Zheng Chunmiao, 1994: 18). In the contemporary age when science and technology are so developed and brilliant, we can still interpret the spiritual characteristics of the ancestors in the struggle between man and nature by re-examining ancient myths and legends. We can carry forward the educational value of mythical heroes and inspire contemporary people to build cultural self-confidence and creative spirit.

At present, the existing literature, classics and academic research results have laid a solid foundation for the smooth development of this research. For example: Liu Cheng made a preliminary analysis of the worship of Hercules from three aspects: the origin, propagation and evolution of Hercules, and the reasons for its close relationship with the kingship (Liu Cheng, 2018: 99-104). Guo Ling analyzed the heroic virtues in Greek mythology, pointing out that heroic generations carry the moral qualities of courage, honor and temperance (Guo Ling, 2019: 72-75). Zuo Danhong and Wang Yaguang compare the hero images in

<sup>1</sup> Compare: (Coldstream, 1976; Graf, 1993; Harrison, 1963; Rose, 1930; Segal, 2004; Strenski, 1987) etc.

Chinese and Western mythology and discuss the reasons for the differences in hero images (Zuo Danhong, Wang Yaguang, 2015: 376-380). Chen Jing analyzed the basis for the existence of heroic exorcism as a mythic motif in ancient Greek mythology (Chen Jing, 2016: 44-45). The above articles analyze the heroes of ancient Chinese mythology and Greek mythology from different perspectives, focusing on their differences and cultural characteristics in comparison.

From the perspective of cultural anthropology, philosophy and mythology, this paper discusses the heroic image and cultural spirit of Yi and Hercules, the representatives of mythical heroes. Mainly with the help of the existing academic research results, using the method of literature and comparative research, it discusses the common characteristics of different hero images from three aspects: hero's performance, hero's value orientation, and hero's cultural characteristics.

## Results and Discussion

Marx pointed out that myths are forms of nature and society processed by unconscious artistic methods in the imagination of the people. Engels said that the original gods arose because the forces of nature were personified (Engels, 1972: 220). God was endowed with supernatural and surreal abilities in the imagination of the ancestors. The power of the gods is reflected in the mythical hero images created by the ancestors.

### 1. Hero image and performance

Yi and Hercules, the two heroes in Eastern and Western mythology, both defeated their opponents with superhuman courage and wisdom. They established immortal achievements and created heroic images with their own national characteristics, which were widely praised by later generations.

#### 1.1 Yi's image and achievements

As a legendary hero in mythology, Yi's deeds are scattered in some ancient Chinese literature and classics. The Book of Mountains and Seas records the origin and mission of Yi: "King Jun endowed Yi with a red bow and arrows with white feathers so that he would bring relief to the people down on the earth. Hence

Yi was the first to show pity for people and rid them of a hundred evils" (Liu Xin, Chen Cheng, Wang Hong & Zhao Zheng, 2010: 321). This is the earliest known record of Yi mythology, which provides the basic form of Yi mythology and also proves Yi's divinity.

Huainanzi records that Yi had a long-left arm and was good at archery (Liu An and his followers, Chen Guangzhong, 2014: 614). Mozi's Collected Solutions records that ancient Yi made bows and arrows (Zhang Chunyi, 1988: 252). Yi was good at archery (Li Xueqin, 1999: 183). This all shows that Yi has the identity of the god of arrows. His exploits are inseparable from the bow and arrow. In the development history of primitive culture, bow and arrow is a great invention. The invention of bows and arrows is of great significance to both the acquisition of food and the protection of human life. The myth of Yi not only expresses the admiration of the early people for bows and arrows, but also vividly reflects the reverence of the early people for the marksman.

Yi's achievements were mainly to shoot the sun and rescue the people. Yi shot down nine suns with a bow and arrow (Lin Jiali, 2010: 78). According to the records in Huainanzi "When Yao ruled, ten suns appeared in the sky at the same time, and the crops withered and the flowers and trees died. The people didn't even have anything to eat. 猼訑、凿齿、九婴、大风、封豨、修蛇, all kinds of monsters came out to harm the people. So Yao sent Yi to kill 凿齿 at the place of *Chouhua*, killing 九婴 in *XiongShui*, shot to death 大风 in the swamp of *Qingqiu*, Yi shot down the nine suns in the sky, kill the 猼訑 underground, cut off the 修蛇 in *Dongting Lake*, Captured 封豨 alive in *Sanglin*. The people were very happy and unanimously supported Dai Yao as the emperor. At this time, roads were being built all over the world" (Liu An, Chen Guangzhong, 2014: 194). From this, the 7 things Yi did were:

1. Kill 凿齿 (zao chi) at the place of *Chouhua*.
2. Killing 九婴 (jiu ying) in *XiongShui*.

3. Shot to death 大风 (da feng) in the swamp of *Qingqiu*.
4. Yi shot down the nine suns in the sky.
5. Kill the 猼狴 (ya yu) underground.
6. Cut off the 修蛇 (xiu she) in *Dongting Lake*.
7. Captured 封豨 (feng xi) alive in *Sanglin*.

We find that the seven major events that Yi did have obvious social significance. He starts from the interests of the people and benefits the whole society, and he rescues the people from suffering.

### 1.2 Image and performance of Hercules

Hercules is a demigod hero. He was the son of Zeus and Alcmene, the adopted son of Amphitryon. Hercules was named Alcides in honor of Alcaeus, the father of Amphitryon (Apollodorus, Frazer, 1921: 5). Hercules once personally went to Delphi to seek oracles. For the first time, a priestess named Pythia called him Hercules, meaning Hera's glory, in order to seek Hera's forgiveness. The priest also told him that he would serve Eurystheus for twelve years and complete ten drudgery, after which

he could become an immortal god (Apollodorus, Frazer, 1921: 11-12). Hercules accomplished ten tasks that ordinary people could not do:

1. To strangle the lion.
2. A doe with golden horns and bronze hooves captured alive.
3. Catch wild boars that harm people and animals.
4. Drive the birds of prey on the lake.
5. Tame the mad bull.
6. Subdue the man-eating horses.
7. Capture the belt of the Amazon Queen.
8. Bring back the giant's herd.
9. Outsmart the golden apple.
10. Take the three-headed dog from the underworld.

There are different versions of the amount of Hercules' drudgery. The version of Apollodorus believed that Eurystheus denied Hercules the slaying of the Hydra and the cleaning of the oxen of Augras, so in his book it was recorded that Hercules completed ten tasks. Hercules has the potential of God, and in order to gain freedom, he did things that are difficult for ordinary people to do. He became a representative of collective strength and wisdom.



Fig. 1. Hou Yi shot the sun<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 2. Hercules. Take the three-headed dog<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://baike.so.com/doc/5383207-5619598.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://baike.so.com/doc/5441387-27327677.htm>

## 2. The Value Orientation of Hero Image

Since the beginning of human history, the efforts of human beings to pursue the value of their own life have not stopped. As the embodiment of the realization of their own life value, the hero has become the spiritual yearning of people. A hero is a spiritual symbol. Yi and Hercules have different personalities and different forms, but since they are both called heroes, it means that they have a common trait, which is personality, or heroic quality and heroic spirit. From a philosophical point of view, personality is the synthesis of a person's ability, temperament, character and other elements, and is the basic stable position, belief and morality formed by people in long-term practice and cultural and moral edification (Wang Yuliang, 1989: 190). The core of personality is the person's ideological awareness, spiritual realm and moral quality. Personality is both the subject of social activities and the subject of self-realization.

Both Yi and Hercules are mythical heroes who kill evil for the people. Their performance has many similarities: Yi captured 封豨 in *Sanglin*, and Hercules captured the wild boar of Mount Erymanthus. Yi shot 大风 in the swamp of *Qingqiu*, and Hercules shot the strange bird with iron beak in Lake Stynfa. Yi killed the 猼狴 underground, and Hercules subdued the man-eating mare. Their achievements satisfy people's fear of nature and their worship of heroes. The similarity of their images is that they are all portrayed as male gods, and their biggest common feature is the image of the combination of man and god. Whether it is Yi, who was deified by man, or Hercules – God is personified, both are based on the character of man. In the process of conquering nature, man's challenge and transformation of nature has changed from passive to active, and this process is exactly the process of the birth of heroes, which fully demonstrates the ability of man.

From the perspective of mythology, different ethnic groups have created different mythological heroes, and thus formed different hero worships, which are accumulated as the

cultural genes of different ethnic groups. Hero worship is passed down from generation to generation on the psychological structure of national culture, thus condensing into hero complexes containing the cultural characteristics of different nationalities, reflecting the initial value orientation and cultural concepts of different nationalities. Yi and Hercules were the representatives of ancient Chinese and ancient Greek mythological heroes, and people worshipped heroes. Due to the influence of different environments and cultures, their value orientations are different, but the cultural spirits they reflect are similar.

### 2.1 Advocating strength

The birth of Hercules has extraordinary significance. Zeus once received an oracle, which told Zeus that in order to defeat the Titans, he must get the help of a mortal. Hercules lived up to his father's expectations, established countless achievements in his life, helped Zeus defeat the giants, and finally enjoyed the immortal life of God. The descendants of Hercules, who also lived up to their father's name, finally conquered the entire Peloponnese after untold hardships. The kings of the Hellenistic era and the Roman Empire all regarded themselves as the sons of the gods, preached the divine empowerment of the monarchy, and longed to establish immortal achievements in their lifetimes, and after death they entered the pantheon and became gods. Alexander always considered himself Hercules, a mortal hero who ascended to the pantheon after his death (John Boardman, 2015: 139). The system of passing on the throne from father to son also makes these kings hope that their descendants can be like themselves and ensure the prosperity and stability of the country. Hercules' own experience coincided with the dreams of these kings, and it was natural to be worshiped. The Greeks lived in a strong atmosphere of advocating force.

Hercules conquered ferocious beasts with extraordinary courage, and also returned victoriously on many expeditions to other countries, so he was regarded as the national hero of Greece and became the ideal symbol of male power in ancient Greece. Homer praised

him as the son of Zeus, the greatest of mankind and far greater than anyone else. Therefore, people often praise him exactly like Zeus. The fact that Hercules is so revered in Greece epitomizes the cultural spirit of the power of worship in Greece.

## 2.2 Advocating morality

China is a country that attaches great importance to ethics. In ancient social consciousness, people worship brave heroes, but they trust more virtuous heroes with benevolence and righteousness. Yi relieved the disasters for the people, and the people did not regard Yi as the emperor, but recommended Yao as the emperor.

Sima Qian recorded this in the Records of the Grand Historian-The Chronicle of the Five Emperors “Di Yao is Fang Xun. He is as virtuous as heaven and wise as God. Approaching him is as warm as the sun; looking up at him is like a cloud covering the earth. He is rich but not proud, honorable but not indulgent. He was wearing a yellow hat, black clothes, sitting in Tong Che driven by a white horse. He can respect people with good virtue and make the nine generations of the same family love each other. The people of the same clan were already in harmony, and they went to investigate the officials. Hundreds of officials have made remarkable achievements, and all the vassals and states can live in harmony” (<https://baike.so.com/doc/6586724-6800496.html>).

Therefore, a hero like Yi can at best be an assistant to a wise sage in China. The core of ancient Chinese ethical consciousness is the admiration of virtue, which makes the Confucian school of people reject power to a certain extent. As a student of Confucius, Nangong Shi once asked his teacher, why Yi was good at archery and Ao was good at water warfare, but they did not end well. Both Yu and Ji planted crops themselves, but became emperors. Confucius did not answer at that time. Later, Confucius praised Nangong Shi as a junzi (exemplary person, virtuous man) who respected morality. Confucius was a moralist, he despised force and power, and advocated simplicity and

morality. Nangong Shi believed that Yu and Ji possessed the world with virtue, but Yi and Ao did not get good results in the end. Confucius said he was very virtuous and a junzi. In Chinese history, it was not those who possessed *power* who conquered the world, but those who possessed *virtue*.

To sum up, due to the fact that people's ideas are always affected and restricted by the cultural environment in which they live, Yi and Hercules as heroes have become the spiritual sustenance of the ancestors. Mythological heroes have become the carriers and cultural symbols of the national spirit, and gradually formed a nation's hero complex, demonstrating the beauty of transcendent vitality. Looking at these hero images, it is not difficult to find the common characteristics of them. First, the hero images are more specific, flesh and blood and soul, living in the real world, living around people, more real, people are grateful for their achievements. When shaping the image, although fictional elements are added, the characteristics of human are basically maintained, with the characteristics of realism and figuration. Second, the essence of a hero is an ideal personality that carries social values. Heroes meet people's psychological needs for worship. Heroes are not only leaders in the real world, but also spiritual leaders who transform and conquer nature. Whether it is advocating strength or advocating morality, heroes represent the determination of human beings not to yield to nature.

## 3. Cultural Spirit Contained in Hero Image

Both Eastern and Western mythology have their own cultural characteristics. As the representatives of Eastern and Western mythological heroes, Yi and Hercules showed the spirit of their respective nations.

The myth of Yi embodies the moral standards and humanistic spirit of the traditional Chinese nation. One is the spirit of struggle. Yi has the ability to conquer natural disasters, never bowing his head in the face of all difficulties. In the face of the poisonous beasts that appeared in the sky for ten days and

harmed the people, he completely conquered them with his superb archery skills and indomitable courage. The second is dedication. Nothing Yi did was not for the benefit of the people, reflecting the quality of collective interests over individual interests. He obeyed orders, never considering his own great gains and losses. His actions tell us that, in his heart, the interests of the people are above all else.

The myth of Hercules basically embodies the cultural spirit of the Western nation.

First, it has the spirit of exploration. Advocating adventure is one of the distinctive features of Western nations. This is very prominent in Hercules. Before he became Eurystheus's servant, he had already started his first adventure, killing the lions on the mountain alone, and fighting the giants in return for the gift of God. Of the ten great things he did after becoming a servant, most of them were risky actions. And when he got rid of Eurystheus's enslavement, the deeds he did, such as the duel with the river god and the expedition to Okalia, were all risky behaviors out of self-interest. The image of Hercules, an adventurer, has been revered as a great hero and worshiped by Westerners for thousands of years, which is enough to show that advocating adventure is the most representative national tradition of Westerners. And this tradition has always inspired Western nations to make bold progress and exploration.

The second is to have an enterprising spirit. Hercules's life is constantly enterprising. When he was just an adult and walked on the road of life, facing the choice of happiness and virtue, he chose virtue, and the true meaning of virtue lies in the unremitting enterprising spirit. This unremitting enterprising spirit has been inherited by the Western nations and has maintained a great momentum of development in history.

Therefore, as ideal personalities carrying social values, heroes deeply root their pain and joy in the soil of society and history. Carlisle even said in his book *Heroes and Hero Worship* that human society is based on hero worship. Hero worship is an external manifestation

of people's strong feelings for heroes, a common phenomenon in human society, and an inexhaustible spiritual power of a nation. Both Yi and Hercules had heroic feats and deeds, and were respected and worshiped by people. As Joseph Campbell said "The hero, therefore, is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms. Such a one's visions, ideas, inspirations come pristine from the primary springs of human life and thought. Hence they are eloquent, not of the present, disintegrating society and psyche, but of the unquenched source through which society is reborn. The hero has died as a modern man; but as eternal man-perfected unspecific, universal man - he has been reborn." (Joseph Campbell, 2004: 18). Yi and Hercules have become the carriers and cultural symbols of the national spirit. Their words and deeds reflect the dreams and pursuits of a nation and carry rich humanistic and spiritual values.

### Conclusion

To sum up, let's summarize the common characteristics of Yi and Hercules as mythological heroes of the East and the West.

Great achievements are a prerequisite for becoming a hero and the touchstone for testing a hero. Yi and Hercules, as heroes in Eastern and Western mythology respectively, have outstanding achievements and appeared as conquerors in the harsh natural environment in ancient times. They overcome difficulties and disasters with extraordinary will and wisdom, reflecting the strong desire and tenacious will of mankind to overcome nature. They became symbols of the strength and wisdom of ancient peoples. Campbell believes that starting from the world of everyday life, the hero ventures into a supernatural and magical realm; in that magical realm, encounters various unbelievably powerful supernatural beings, and wins a decisive victory; and the hero completes the A mysterious adventure that returns with powers that can benefit his kind (Joseph Campbell, 2004: 31). Ye Shuxian also pointed out that the monsters conquered by heroes vary in number



and appearance, but from the symbolic meaning of mythological thinking, the function of the plot of killing monsters and killing demons is completely equal. The performance of the hero is actually the process of narrating the hero's use of limited life to resist the difficulties and obstacles in the fate and maximize the realization of his own value (Ye Shuxian, 1991: 131).

Heroes are practitioners of lofty ideals and great personalities. A hero is essentially a value carrier, representing a typical rational ought and embodying the national spirit. They incorporate the destiny of the individual into the destiny of mankind, evoking the strong desire in contemporary people to transcend reality and overcome difficulties. In the process of following heroes, people constantly deepen their understanding of heroes, regain their understanding of the meaning of life, and realize the self-remodeling of human beings. The heroic myth preserves and continues the noble vitality, makes it rooted in the national cultural psychology, and provides the people in distress with the courage to resist and the strength to move forward. Yi and Hercules have become the carriers and cultural symbols of the national spirit. Their words and deeds reflect the dreams and pursuits of a nation and carry rich humanistic and spiritual values.

When the catastrophe comes, the mythical heroes can face it with a fearless spirit and pay huge sacrifices, even at the cost of their lives. Heroes are celebrated not only because they play an important role in advancing human civilization, but also because they are spiritual beacons that illuminate human history. In real life, they can give people the strength and courage to overcome all kinds of difficulties. People's value orientation and spirit.

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