

On Zhang Yimou's *Hero*: Counter-response

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Abstract

Zhang Yimou's film Hero is an investigation into culturalism, or the demand, embedded in the nation-state form, that all nations represent themselves through a unique and readily recognizable culture. Hero implies that this demand is a trap, and that the only way to global recognition among the 'family of nations' is through more direct cultivation of political, economic, and military power.

Keywords

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Hero
 China
 film
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Nick Kaldis' thoughtful response to my paper on Zhang Yimou's film *Hero* gives me an opportunity to rethink and clarify parts of my argument, and also to comment on the interesting perspectives that he suggests. Since so much of what I address in the paper hinges on the concept of culturalism, I will begin there. First, culturalism is not cultural nationalism, nor is it simply cultural practice. Culturalism, as I define it, is a structural mandate embedded within the nation-state model (not exactly an 'inherently flawed ideological belief,' although most likely one of the many myths that ideological systems of all stripes require) that applies to *all* nation-states seeking admission to the 'family of nations.' Not only 'third-world' countries, but western political entities that first developed the nation-state model – and stand as its core examples – are also subject to the demand that they have a unique and readily recognizable culture. The difference is, of course, that citizens of those western countries can, to a much larger extent, take their historical culture for granted, even though they too must jockey for position among themselves. By contrast, the broader comparative and hierarchical context within which others are forced to function will immediately highlight this demand to them, leading to the endless discussions of derivative and original culture that have continued unabated, for example, during the twentieth century in China. At one level this is a mundane discussion with which we are all familiar: how can artists, writers, architects and designers express the characteristics of a certain culture in a way that viewers, readers, users, and fellow travelers will recognize and admire, but not isolate and bracket it as secondary (i.e., it is Chinese culture, not culture per se)? On another level, it implies acceptance of this structural mandate as a precondition, as well as attention to reception, in itself a dialectical process that influences the represented culture. And things become even more interesting when the (in this case) film-maker both participates in that process through his historical production and simultaneously reflects on it, as I argue is the case in *Hero*.

Kaldis brings up the fascinating question of rote learning, especially in the case of the calligraphers and their training. Yet there is no contradiction between culturalism, which requires the value of originality (itself an historically limited concept, strengthened in modern times), and the drudgery of incessantly repeating the same stroke of the brush, slash of the sword, or tilt of the head. Originality in culture, which can be appreciated only with the subjective understanding that comes through education, along with historically-developed and generally class-specific 'taste,' can and must emerge from the honing of skill through years of practice. The students at the calligraphy school are in this respect indeed equivalent to the Qin soldiers, although the film does not focus on routine military training for the average soldier. Kaldis calls this rote practice of the calligraphers a 'core rite of culturalism,' but it is actually a core rite of cultural practice or a form of training. Fighting, calligraphy, music, chess, and other cultural forms all involve rote training, and all can be transformed, via well-developed concepts of mystical depth, into practices that support claims to originality, authenticity, and uniqueness. Yet fighting can be directly used to seize power and thus bears the troubling burden of the contradiction that underlies that distinction.

Although the King of Qin surely has excellent fighting skills, only the *xia* have the ability to access deep cultural power and turn simple technical fighting skills into supernatural fighting abilities. The structure in which they are embedded – from the people, home, the landscape, and deep culture leading to its most resilient representatives, the *xia* – is what gives them this uncanny proficiency. It has nothing to do with rote vs. other kinds of learning, nor with fighting vs. calligraphy, nor, at this level, with *wen* vs. *wu* (although this dichotomy still informs parts of the film). It is, however, important to note that the *xia* have achieved such a high level of skill that routine practice no longer does them much good – they must refine their abilities by other means. In *Hero*, the most obvious training of this sort is Broken Sword's effort in calligraphy, an art that intrigues the king, who tries to capture its power for his own endeavors.

Kaldis asks why it is necessarily true that culture deployed as power in the political world, via the *xia*, will be identical to the power it seeks to overthrow. The logic of the nation state is that equality on the global stage requires a strong national culture, which goes forward as the nation's proud but 'soft' representative to win hearts and minds across the world. But what *Hero* implies is that the equality of nations turns out to be elusive, with the performance of culture unable to improve the nation's standing in the world. It is precisely *because* cultural power is a myth and not a reality that political power – a strong state economically, politically, and militarily – turns out to be the only viable option. Were we to take a cynical position, we could say that the myth of power through cultural equality is a ruse formulated by the politically and militarily strong. The deceit implies that they are strong by virtue of their superior culture, while simultaneously keeping contenders from focusing on what truly matters in the competitive, hierarchical global environment.

As for the 'pettiness and extreme mutual cruelty/brutality' of the *xia*, we must keep in mind the multi-layered presentation, in which stories told on behalf of certain agendas come to life as filmic enactments, possibly

imagined, possibly recounted. Without analyzing the film's position on the relationship between these various segments, it is impossible to say whether the *xia* are 'immature and impetuous,' or whether these intrigues spin out of narratives devised to push forward the goals of the storyteller.

And finally, interpreting the film as illustrating the impossibility of individual cultural resistance in the face of hegemonic state power fails to explain the story-within-story structure, the intense spectacle of the narrated scenes, the mysticism of the *xia* world, or, most of all, the decisions by Nameless and Broken Sword to relinquish the assassination of the king at the exact moment when success could have been theirs. Much more than just a sense of futility motivates their decisions. After all, they both could have killed the King of Qin – what stronger resistance is possible? Minimally the power struggle that may have occurred after the king's death could have thrown his kingdom and its imperialistic march into disarray, giving Zhao and other states a chance to consolidate their positions. Also important is the fact that the *xia* are not simply a group of ordinary individuals fighting the invader, but are members of a specially-trained swat team whose supernatural techniques far exceed the strategies of, for example, the crew in the *Mission Impossible* series, or the death-defying gadgets on offer to James Bond.

With due respect to Slavoj Žižek, I have never understood how one can craft a magical escape from being fully in ideology unless it involves submitting to the sky-darkening hail of arrows as was Nameless' fate.

My article on *Hero* is an initial foray into a new project on culturalism. Reading over it with Kaldis' comments in mind, I find it has its own frothy style, a shortcoming that he graciously refuses to mention. I am grateful to Nick Kaldis for his conscientious and intelligent critique of my work.

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