

Nobility of the Warrior: Etiquette, Empathy, and Emotion

Tao Tan, Columbia University

(Editor's note: This paper by Tao Tan is the winner of the Kendall North Award for the best paper in the 2008 issue of the Agora.)

Common ideas of nobility and civility center on perceptions of personal behavior and attitude. In the environment of courts and palaces, it is easy to arrive at codes of gentlemanly behavior, which are thought to be proper examples of nobility and civility. However, what becomes of nobility in the battlefield? Specifically, how does one reconcile standards of civil behavior with a warrior's mission to attack and kill the enemy? At the very least, warriors deemed "noble" must demonstrate certain traits to distinguish themselves from those who merely take up arms against their enemies.

Epic literature is an instructive genre in which to consider questions of nobility and civility. These stories need not and usually are not works of moral philosophy *per se*, but nevertheless convey strong messages on the standards of character and propriety. Homer's *Iliad* and the *Tales of the Heike* are simultaneously accounts of epic battles for power and control between massive armies and intimate portraits of exceptional men. The mark of a noble man, in Confucius's judgment, is an understanding of "what is moral [instead] of what is profitable" (Confucius IV.16). With warriors, this understanding means the difference between those who steadfastly hold on to their humanity and those who give in to mindless violence. If we view these individuals in the context of the conflicts that they were embroiled in and that were both larger than themselves and out of their control, we find a certain nobility in the ways the warriors conducted themselves and dealt with their unenviable lots, with one group staving off destruction

day by day, and the other fighting an endless war of attrition. The Trojan and the Genpei wars were fought two thousand years and a world apart, yet in both we find three common characteristics of the noble warrior: a sense of etiquette, a sense of empathy, and the ability to freely show emotion.

In these stories, etiquette often takes two forms. First, there is etiquette as a result of ritual decorum. The importance that the Japanese attached to formal decorum is introduced in the second chapter of the *Tales of the Heike*. There, Tadamori, an up-and-coming governor from the Taira clan, was given an unenviable choice: accept a retired emperor's invitation to visit the palace and face a certain ambush, or snub the emperor's invitation and thus "bring grief to both [himself] and [his family]" (*Heike* 10). Had Tadamori entered the palace unarmed, he would have invited certain death. Had he entered the presence of the retired emperor with a concealed weapon, he still would have been attacked, and he would have been accused of deceit and possibly treason. The attackers would afterward claim that they, having caught wind of Tadamori's plans, were only defending the retired emperor. The only way to deter, rather than overcome the ambush, was to lead his attackers to believe that he was armed without being accused of plotting treason.

Tadamori decided to conspicuously show a dagger, albeit one made of wood and wrapped in foil, which averted the attack. Predictably, his outraged enemies accused him of "a gross breach of etiquette that [had] rarely been seen in the past" (*Heike* 12). His case was referred to the retired emperor for censure where Tadamori finally revealed his plan and his reasons for wishing to appear armed. Members of the imperial family in this period of Japanese history did not exercise any real political power, but they were nevertheless widely respected as a source of moral leadership. Therefore, it is significant that the retired emperor did not try to excuse outright or to

overlook Tadamori's admittedly questionable actions, but rather he chose to explain them in the framework of warrior etiquette. Since the first responsibility of a samurai is to look after the safety of his lord, such "resourcefulness is precisely what one would expect from a warrior accustomed to carrying a bow and arrow" (*Heike* 14). The charge of displaying a weapon in the presence of the retired emperor was quietly sidestepped (not dismissed or overturned) on the technicality that it was not a real weapon. Such was the importance of maintaining ritual decorum.

We find a more elaborate, but no less stringent, form of social ritual decorum practiced in Homer's *Iliad*. A common social ritual is the sacrificial meal, prepared whenever momentous decisions are rendered or when notable persons meet. This practice is such a ritualized and standardized protocol that Homer describes it in identical terms whenever it occurs:

And when all had made prayer ... first they drew back the victims' heads and slaughtered them and skinned them, and cut away the meat from the thighs and wrapped them in fat, making a double fold, and laid shreds of flesh upon them [and] when they had burned the thigh pieces and tasted the vitals, they cut all the remainder into pieces and spitted them and roasted all carefully and took off the pieces. Then after they had finished the work and got the feast ready, they feasted, nor was any man's hunger denied a fair portion.

(Homer 71)

Food and hospitality are very important in Achaian culture, and it should be noted that the sacrificial meals are always prepared in concert with asking a god's favor, blessing or approval. However, the sacrificial meal is properly considered a part of warrior nobility because it is the way by which warriors conduct affairs in a civil and politic environment. The offer of

hospitality is both an appeal to one's guest to accept civilized discourse as an alternative to conflict and an appeal to the gods that it be so. Achilleus, for example, orders food and wine to be prepared when Phoinix, Odysseus, and Aias visit him as mediators, putting aside his *menis* or "divine anger" for the moment to greet those who to him are "dearest of all Achaians" (Homer 203). At the very end of the *Iliad*, the emotional meeting of Priam and Achilleus is brought to a satisfactory end when Achilleus reminds his guest "now you and I must remember our supper" (Homer 491). To underscore the significance of the ritual of hospitality, after the conclusion of the meal, Achilleus and Priam agree to the first and only cease-fire of the Trojan War.

The second type of etiquette that we encounter is often a result of *noblesse oblige*. This form of etiquette differs from ritual decorum in that these noble obligations are often more universal and unspoken. This type of etiquette is adhered to not because it is a codified rule or a formal guideline, but rather because it is an expectation of a warrior's character, irrespective of which side he fights on or which lord he serves. It is an irrevocable part and parcel of his identity as a warrior, and ignoring these sacrosanct obligations to allies and enemies alike is a disastrous betrayal of a warrior's identity.

Homer's *Iliad* recounts a chance meeting of Glaukos and Diomedes in the battlefield. Diomedes recognized that what they initially shared was an uncommon courage, calling out to Glaukos that "never before have I seen you in the fighting where men win glory, yet now you have come striding far out in front of all others" (Homer 156). When they in turn related their family histories, Diomedes realized that his grandfather Oineus was a guest-friend of Glaukos's grandfather Bellerophon. It was proper, therefore, to continue that friendship, and "avoid each other's spears, even in the close fighting" (Homer 159). They "[sprang] down from behind their horses, gripped each other's hands and exchanged [first] the promise of friendship" and then

each other's armor (Homer 159). Supposedly, Zeus then "stole away the wits of Glaukos who exchanged with Diomedes ... armor of gold for bronze" (Homer 159). Because of the common link between them, for Diomedes and Glaukos to dishonor the friendship of their ancestors would mean disrespect for the wishes and memories of those ancestors, and in turn a desecration of their own noble characters. It is very possible that Glaukos felt that the importance of honoring his grandfather went far beyond mere material concerns of exchanging "nine oxen's worth [of armor] for the worth of a hundred" (Homer 159).

In a distinct but nevertheless strikingly recognizable parallel, the *Tales of the Heike* obliges us with an account of the capture of Shigehira, a Taira captain who rode into battle with his foster brother and retainer Morinaga. The bushidō code charges retainers to follow their lords unto death, and when Shigehira's horse was wounded, he had every expectation that his retainer Morinaga would offer his horse, and thereby himself in place of his master to the pursuing Genji forces. Morinaga fled instead, leaving Shigehira alone and vainly calling out, "After all those vows you made in past days, are you going to desert me?" (*Heike* 98). When Morinaga deserted his master, he also threw away his honor, his good name, and the respect and esteem accorded to warriors. When he finally dared return to the capital years later, "People of both high and low station in the capital recognized him," called his behavior "shameful," and induced Morinaga, who had exhibited such shameless, cowardly, and brazen behavior in battle, to "[keep] his face hidden behind a fan" (*Heike* 98).

Bushidō code is often described as a form of individual self-cultivation for Japanese warriors, but no form of individual cultivation can fail to affect interpersonal relationships. The story of Morinaga and Shigehira is significant because it chronicles the disastrous consequences of ignoring the relationship between ruler and ruled, one of the five relationships of Confucianism,

and the single highest tenet of bushidō. Nevertheless, relationships need not be formal or hierarchical for unwritten codes of etiquette and honor to assert themselves. The basis of human relationships is the search for a common link between people. A noble warrior who sees his opponents on the battlefield as fellow warriors suffering through the same war rather than faceless enemies will, in Mencius's line of thought, develop a sense of empathy.

What is it about empathy that makes a warrior noble? By the Mencian account, after feeling empathy, a man will develop feelings of shame, then propriety, and finally a sense of right and wrong. Empathy restrains the warrior in the heat of battle and holds him back from mindless violence by appealing to his emotions, while putting him on a path to eventually be able to discern right and wrong by appealing to his wisdom. In the *Tales of the Heike*, after the disastrous defeat of the Taira clan, Kumagae Naozane captured the Taira officer Atsumori. Kumagae's original intention was to cut off the Taira lords' escape. With Atsumori at his mercy, however, Kumagae was suddenly struck by the fact that "[Atsumori] was just the age of his own son Kojirō, and he could not bring himself to use his sword" (*Heike* 99). In the heat of battle, he suddenly imagined his own son in Atsumori's place and himself in Atsumori's father's place, thinking "when my own son Kojirō has even a slight injury, how much I worry about him! Just think how this boy's father will grieve when he hears that he's been killed!" (*Heike* 99). He finally killed Atsumori, but only as a *coup de grâce*: the Genji cavalry was closing in, and for all practical purposes, Atsumori was a dead man. Shamed by his actions, Kumagae began to walk the path that Mencius had laid. Years later, he took the final step of crossing from an emotional to an intellectual platform to consider right and wrong; then he became a Buddhist monk.

In the Homeric tradition, one of the most famous and touching scenes of the *Iliad* occurs in the last book. Priam, the aged Trojan king, went to Achilles as a suppliant, encouraged and

protected by the gods. He entered the tent, catching Achilles off-guard, clasped his knees, and kissed his hands. When he did speak, he beseeched Achilles to “remember your father, one who is of years like mine, and on the door-sill of sorrowful old age” (Homer 488). He then asks Achilles to do three things: “Honor then the gods ... and take pity upon me, remembering your own father” (Homer 488). Up until the last book, Achilles’s anger had not waned; it merely changed from anger at the greed of Agamemnon to anger at Hektor for slaughtering Patroklos. The apology and gifts of Agamemnon did not soothe his anger, nor did his disgraceful vengeance in mutilating Hektor’s body calm the *menis*. Achilles, the great demigod-warrior, whose withdrawal from the battlefield had caused the deaths of countless Achaians, and who hours before had rather frostily told his mother that he would return Hektor’s body only because “[Zeus] himself so urgently bids it,” was moved by an appeal from an aged, grieving father at his knees who reminded him so much of his own (Homer 479).

We cannot apply a Mencian outlook to what went through Achilles’s mind, but after feeling empathy, he expresses admiration for Priam, a “godlike man,” asking “How could you dare to come alone to the ships of the Achaians ...? The heart in you is iron” (Homer 489). Admittedly, he had direct orders from the gods, yet it is undeniable that Achilles admired and respected Priam on his own merits. He admired Priam’s courage; he sympathized with Priam’s plight, and he recognized that both were embroiled in a war neither really wanted to fight. Once his divine anger had dissipated, Achilles was a man who could perceive the suffering of others, be they his close friends or his sworn enemies. Achilles and Hektor were both warriors, both sons of aged fathers, and while it was acceptable for them to fight each other, the common link that both shared made Achilles’s desecration of Hektor’s body as much a desecration of his own character, from which “nothing is gained thereby for his good, or his honour” (Homer 476). By

receiving Priam with courtesy, respect, and sympathy, Achilles made amends for his conduct and reaffirmed his own noble character.

The third and most visible measure of how a warrior may conduct himself with nobility and civility is how willing he is to express emotion. One school of thought holds that the best warriors are the most Stoic; they unquestioningly carry out orders and ruthlessly execute their commanders' will. However, the warriors that we identify with and regard as heroes in epics are not necessarily those who kill the most, but those who cry the most. The *Tales of the Heike* is rife with references of warriors "weep[ing] at the sight" of their dead companions and enemies alike (*Heike* 100).

One story in particular bears note. When the Taira lords were preparing to flee, Palace Minister Munemori assembled his loyal retainers and told them that their cause was all but lost, but he entreated them to continue to serve their emperor. The warriors were in tears when they responded,

Even lowly birds and beasts know how to repay a debt of kindness and show gratitude to those who favored them ... We owe everything to our lord's beneficence ... Therefore, wherever the ruler may go, be it beyond Japan to the lands of Silla or Paekche, Koguryo or Pohai, to the ends of the clouds or the end of the sea, we will never cease to attend him.
(*Heike* 79)

These were strong words, considering that the warriors had freely committed themselves to a fugitive existence that would only end in certain death. Though the Taira lords would all end up killed or exiled, their strength and character are measured by their emotional professions of loyalty, not by their force in arms.

In the *Iliad*, the cold-hearted, reserved, and unfeeling Agamemnon is derided by Achilles as “most lordly, greediest for gain of all men ... wrapped in shamelessness, with [his] mind forever on profit” (Homer 62-63). Agamemnon does not feel, and certainly does not show, shame or empathy. He takes for granted the privilege of nobility as due his high birth and kingly position, with no regard to the *noblesse oblige* that such a position places upon him. When the chaos and carnage of a Trojan counterattack finally compels him to apologize to Achilles, he does not exhibit any real regret or remorse, but rather tries to excuse his inexcusable behavior by pleading temporary insanity, telling his advisors “I was mad, in the persuasion of my heart’s evil” (Homer 201).

Compare the behavior of the king of the Achaians to the king of the Trojans. The *Iliad* is written from the perspective of the Greeks, but some of the most sympathetic treatments are given to the Trojan king Priam. From his introduction as the “beloved father” of the house of Laomedon who comforted Helen as his “dear child” to his final appearance, presiding over the funeral rites of his son, he is portrayed as a gentle, caring man (Homer 104). The death of his beloved Hektor caused him to “groan pitifully,” and come upon the idea to “be suppliant to [Achilleus], who is harsh and violent” (Homer 446). Priam repeatedly weeps for the ravages that the war has caused his people and his once-proud house. Out of love for his son, he undertakes “what no mortal on earth has gone through [and] put lips on the hands of the man who [killed his] children” (Homer 488). There is not a single reference in the *Iliad* to Agamemnon weeping for anyone. It is precisely because Priam and Achilles were able to express emotion that they were able to commiserate and mourn together, one for “manslaughtering Hektor and [the other] for his father, and now again for Patroklos” (Homer 488). Because of a common bond of deep feelings, Achilles and Priam were closer than Achilles and his own king.

Emotion drove Achilles to exact vengeance in an outrageous way, but emotion also allowed him to recognize his disgraceful overreaction and return to the normal cycle of civilized behavior. By the same token, passion is what drove Priam to brave the lions' den in the hopes of receiving his son's body; he had, after all, planned to go to Achilles even before the gods assured him of his safety (Homer 446). Likewise, an emotional appeal and a sense of love and loyalty to the Taira lords are what drove Munemori's motley force to pledge their lives and what remained of their strength to protect the emperor. Emotion drove Achilles, Priam, and Munemori's retainers to actions many would consider irrational, but it is by those actions that they are remembered and commemorated. Thus, a warrior who can feel emotion is capable of extraordinary behavior.

Does this behavior constitute nobility? Most considerations of an ideal warrior place an emphasis on military skill and martial talent, and to be fair, Achilles, Diomedes, Tadamori, Atsumori, and Kumagae were all exceptional soldiers. However, Agamemnon also had the skill to fight nine years' worth of pitched battles. What sets a noble warrior apart from those who merely take up arms against an enemy is the larger picture of the warrior's character.

Warriors who can perform heroic and exceptional actions also have a capacity for humanity. The conduct of warfare is merely a warrior's profession, not what defines him. Characteristics like an adherence to etiquette, a sense of empathy, and an emotional nature, in addition to military skills, are all parts of a fuller depiction of a warrior's noble character. The noble individuals in these epics are all military men, but they also demonstrate very human traits. Nobility and civility, therefore, can be found in the warrior's recognition that, even in the backdrop of combat, he can nevertheless carry on the search for his own humanity.

Works Cited

The Tales of the Heike. Trans. Burton Watson, ed. Haruo Shirane. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

Confucius. *Analects*. Trans. D. C. Lau. New York: Penguin Books, 1979

Homer. *The Iliad of Homer*. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.