

# Perceptions of Heroism: Characteristics, Functions and Influencing Factors among Chinese College Students in the Post-pandemic Era

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## Abstract

Heroes play a significant role in shaping the popular perceptions of morality, justice, and social values in general. During the Covid-19 pandemic, people's anticipation for heroes doubles and their heroism may be reshaped by the pandemic. This paper attempts to investigate the perceived heroism of Chinese higher education students (n=847) in the post-pandemic era by means of the online questionnaire. Firstly, we explore the main characteristics of heroes worshipped by Chinese higher education students, which are summarized as diversified, epoch-making and civilian. Then we investigate the functions of heroes, which are categorized as enhancing, moral modeling and protecting. Finally, we analyze the five factors (intrinsic attraction, social reinforcement, education, family background and publicity) that may predict students' heroism worship. As the regression analysis reveals, the five factors have significantly positive influences on higher education students' perceptions of heroism and the weights of intrinsic attraction, social reinforcement, publicity, family background and education are 0.364, 0.316, 0.227, 0.190 and 0.156 respectively. These findings not only provide a theoretical and empirical contribution to the study of heroism, but also help develop Chinese higher education sustainable development in the post-pandemic era.

**Keywords:** heroism, characteristics, influencing factors, functions, Chinese higher education students, multiply regression analysis

## 1. Introduction

Heroism is an enduring theme of human history, and it is generally regarded as the pinnacle of human behavior (Franco et al., 2011). Examples of heroes include the military hero in contemporary revolutionary times (Kulinska et al., 2021), the anti-pandemic hero during the Covid-19 pandemic (Mohammed et al., 2021), the ordinary hero in our daily lives (Gumb, 2018), or the labor heroes in the revolutionary era (Spakowski, 2021). In different contexts, the specific definition of heroism also varies. Despite the divergent perspectives of the image, characteristics and the process of defining heroes between the East and the West, people all over the world share deep respect for heroes since ancient times (She, 2005).

Heroism has received much critical attention and it has reached a new apex since the notion of banality of heroism was put forward by Franco and Zimbardo (2006). Research on heroism in the English-speaking world concentrates on the following aspects: 1) Theories or models of heroism, such as the progression from innovators to distributed heroes (Meijer, 2014), the heroic leadership dynamic (Allison & Goethals, 2016); 2) Group differences in heroism such as gender differences in heroism, heroism promoted by NGOs (Nelson, 2000), and heroism during the pandemic (Cox, 2020). By comparison, studies on heroism in China started much later, though China has a longer tradition of heroes. Previous research on heroism in China has mainly focused on the following areas: 1) Appreciation of heroism in literary works (Zhang, 2021) and artistic works (Yang & Wang, 2019). 2) The philosophical and ethical analysis of heroism, such as the connotations of heroism from the perspective of values, morality and society (Yu & Yu, 2020).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, people's frequent searches for heroes was found to double, showing that their psychological desire for a dependence on heroes became stronger (Kinsella & Sumner, 2022). A large number of emerging heroes in the battles against Covid-19, like doctors, nurses, and volunteers, flooded out of many multimedia sources. Many higher education students in China stood out to fight against the virus, some of whom were infected or

even died from it. Their existence encourages people to fight for a better life in a state of panic.

After nearly three years' struggle, the world has now entered a post-pandemic era, a lasting process of recovery and reconstruction of people's way of thinking and living habits after a major disaster (Li & Huang, 2021), in which our perceptions of heroism may alter. In light of this context, this paper aims to investigate the perceived heroism among higher education students in China, including the characteristics of heroes, the functions of heroes on them and factors influencing their perceptions of heroism.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Definition of Heroism

The ideas of heroes and heroism are popular in most societies (Levy, 1990). The term hero is derived from the Greek word *hērōs*, referring to an entity that is half human and half divine (Boon, 2005). Heroes serve as role models that motivate and guide individual actions and outlooks (Dik et al., 2016) and reflect dominant societal values and behaviors (Campbell, 2008). People often identify heroes as those who have made selfless or courageous accomplishments (Becker & Eagly, 2004). These definitions share the characteristic that heroes are individuals regarded as playing a public role due to certain feats they have accomplished or their personal traits. Accordingly, heroism can be defined on the basis of a higher expectation for the individual's moral worth and selfless commitment (Allison et al., 2016b). As Webster's 1913 dictionary states, "Heroism ... is a contempt of danger, not from ignorance or inconsiderate levity, but from a noble devotion to some great cause, and a just confidence of being able to meet danger in the spirit of such a cause". This definition of heroism in the dictionary is relatively general.

Some scholars have defined heroism as acting in a prosocial manner despite personal risk, adding that heroism is a social attribute rather than a personal one (Franco et al., 2011). In addition to the common attributes, some scholars contend that the social characteristic of heroism lies in "rare and expensive prosocial behavior" (Kraft-Todd & Rand, 2019). "Rare" refers to the difference in behavior among groups, while "high price" refers to the high cost that the actor has to bear. Coincidentally, Allison et al. (2019) also found that the most heroic acts are not regarded as the most beneficial. On the contrary, these behaviors are considered the rarest and most costly for the heroes who perform them. Certain scholars have further explored the social attribution of heroism in the context of Covid-19.

Halberg et al. (2021) regard a hero as an independent individual and that their heroic behaviors should be voluntary rather than being just performed out of a sense of responsibility. This argument encourages us to question our stereotypes of heroes (Le et al., 2013) and begins to respect every decision they make (Shepela et al., 1999). Subsequently, heroism is defined and supplemented as "a kind of altruism, which will cause certain risks to the actors" (Franco et al., 2011).

This definition emphasizes the risks that must be taken by heroes and uses game theory to measure the costs and benefits of heroic acts from the perspective of empirical analysis. These definitions show how people's perceptions of heroes enrich the connotations of heroism, and they highlight the necessity and social value of heroism.

### 2.2 Taxonomies of Heroes

Heroic behaviors can be divided into three categories: civil heroes (physical risk, non-duty-bound heroes), social heroes (non-physical risk, personal sacrifice in social status, etc.), and military heroes (physical risk, duty-bound heroes) (Franco et al., 2011). Civil heroes appear accidentally who could be a passer-by performing emergency rescue. Social heroes are often related to 10 types of heroes, such as religious figures, politico-religious figures, martyrs, political leaders, adventurers, scientific heroes, good Samaritans, underdogs, bureaucracy heroes, and whistleblowers (Zimbardo, 2011). Military heroes mainly refer to soldiers, policemen, and firefighters.

Farley (2011) categorizes heroism into big H (emergency and rare situations) and small h (daily situations) according to the urgency or rarity of heroic acts. The heroes of small h may be linked to personality factors, while the heroes of big H may be due to the interaction between personality factors and situational factors.

Meanwhile, Allison and Goethals (2013) define heroes based on their social influence. The dimensions of heroic influence vary, including weak-strong, short-term-long-term, widespread-limited, waxing-waning, hidden-exposed, and constructed-authentic. Allison and Goethals (2013) also developed ten subtypes of heroes, which includes trending heroes like Lady Gaga, tragic heroes like Tiger Woods and Oedipus the King, and transparent heroes like Dr. Zhong Nanshan, and so on. Transparent heroes, such as nurses, teachers, firefighters, are later called as everyday heroes (Allison et al., 2016a).

Negative heroes are also discussed in the content of heroism. Meier (2021) provides a detailed introduction of the negative heroes in many fairy tales. In his opinion, this kind of hero is conducive to enabling young people to look directly into their hearts and understand the area where desire is suppressed, in order to refresh kindness and conscience

and further improve their emotional cognition.

Research on the classifications of heroes not only reflects that heroes have various excellent qualities, but also allows people to evaluate heroes from different dimensions.

### *2.3 Influencing Factors on Hero Worship*

The factors that shape people's perception of heroism are relatively complex. Scholars tend to focus on the internal factors of individuals and environmental background factors. In terms of individual internal factors, Allison et al. (2019) considered three aspects of heroism: the psychological type of potential leaders, the basic characteristics of people's heroism image, and the role of personal values in shaping heroic perceptions. Moreover, Bronchain et al. (2020) viewed successful individual development as stemming from a combination of temperamental characteristics and parental practices. Thus, heroism and psychopathy may share common roots of fearlessness but could be differentiated by child exposure to protective factors such as a warm parenting style. Also, some studies found that heroism was positively associated with psychopathic fearless dominance (Smith et al., 2013), while self-centered impulsivity components were inversely correlated, or unrelated, to heroism (Patton et al., 2018). Heroism has also been shown to have no gender-related effects (Kinsella et al., 2017).

National identity and mythic archetypes are identified as the external environmental factors that contribute to heroism. Throughout the history, heroic stories have re-emerged in the form of myths (Kempbell, 2004). They have been handed down through oral traditions and repeated until the hero myth became deeply rooted in society (Drucker & Cathcart, 1994). Nowadays, in the Web 3.0 era of information technology development, the mass media have assumed the ancient role of the storyteller in oral cultures to disseminate the stories surrounding heroes (Drucker & Cathcart, 1994; Hu et al., 2021). Some studies have shown how state media influences and popularizes the concept of heroism (Hu et al., 2021).

Combining internal and external factors, Allison et al. (2016a) propose a comprehensive model of moral courage to explain the conditions or factors involved in the formation of a heroic outlook. Accordingly, moral courage involves five stages of psychological development: detecting the situation, interpreting it as a norm violation, accepting one's responsibility, perceiving subjective intervention skills, deciding to intervene and morally courageous behavior. Each of these five steps will influence the public's heroism. This model has laid a theoretical foundation for the follow-up study of heroism to some degree.

## **3. Methodology**

By means of a questionnaire, the researchers aim to investigate the characteristics of heroes, the functions of heroes, and the factors that influence students' perceptions of heroism. SPSS 26.0 was used to process and analyze the data by controlling some demographic variables. Besides, multiple linear regression model was applied to explore the factors influencing students' perceptions of heroism.

### *3.1 Participants*

Via WeChat Moments advertising, 850 Chinese higher education students were recruited through snowball sampling techniques for the current study. These students were invited to participate in the study by completing a carefully crafted and validated questionnaire. The use of both advertising and snowball sampling enabled us to achieve a diverse and representative sample of Chinese higher education students, ensuring the reliability and validity of our findings. Excluding the incomplete questionnaires, 847 participants (418 women, 429 men) were counted. The grade distribution of participants was as follows: freshmen ( $n = 149$ ), sophomore ( $n = 146$ ), junior ( $n = 202$ ), senior ( $n = 162$ ) and postgraduate ( $n = 188$ ). In terms of registered residence, 471 participants originated from urban and 376 participants from rural. The distribution of academic disciplines of participants was as follows: liberal arts (26.8%), science (39.1%) and engineering (34.1%).

### *3.2 Materials and Procedure*

This questionnaire was designed based on the Richter scale, the most widely used scale in survey research to date. It mainly includes three parts: (a) the first part is the basic information of respondents, which consists of five questions; (b) the second part is designed to investigate the characteristics and functions of heroes that students worshipped, which contains seven multiple questions; (c) the third part is a scale mainly to explore the factors influencing perceptions of heroes, which is a total of 28 questions. The scale contains a total of 28 viewpoints from five dimensions: intrinsic attraction, social reinforcement, education, family background, and publicity (e.g., "I think the achievements and deeds of heroes influences my perceptions of heroism"; "I learn from heroes to seek guidance and spiritual motivation."). The content described by the scale was divided into five grades from weak to strong according to the degree of conformity with the actual situation of the subjects: "1" = "completely disagree", "2" = "relatively disagree", "3" = "uncertain", "4" = "relatively agree" and "5" = "completely agree".

In order to minimize the potential for response bias and ensure confidentiality, participants were asked to complete the standardized materials online and anonymously, without receiving any compensation for their participation. Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were explicitly informed of the voluntary nature of their participation and the absence of any right or wrong answers. To further mitigate any possible discomfort or concerns regarding sensitive issues such as personal values or morality, participants were assured that their responses would be kept strictly confidential and that the study was not designed as a psychological test. In addition to obtaining informed consent, written documentation of consent was also obtained from all study participants to ensure ethical compliance. SPSS 26.0 was used to calculate the reliability and validity of the experimental results. Questionnaires with more than 70% of the same options were regarded as invalid samples to ensure the high authenticity of this research. The Cronbach's Alpha values of all the variables exceed 0.750 and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value reach 0.972 and the P-value less than 0.001, indicating that the scale has high internal consistency and validity and the data are applicable for factor analysis.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1 Types of Heroes

Table 1 summarizes seven types of heroes worshipped by higher education students. As can be seen, the top three types of heroes are soldiers or martyrs (25.0%), typical cases in point include Chinese famous soldiers and martyrs Huang Jiguang and Zhang Fuqing; dedicated workers (23.5%), which are represented by Dr. Zhong Nanshan, and Tu Youyou; good Samaritans (15.3%), such as Lei Feng and Oskar Schindler. Entrepreneurs, parents and friends, and heroes in literary and artistic works are also perceived as heroes by Chinese higher education students. There are significant differences among the seven types of heroes by Chi-square test ( $P = 0.000 < 0.001$ ), showing that higher education students are more willing to worship soldiers or martyrs, dedicated workers and good Samaritans as shown by the positive residual. Especially with the outbreak of Covid-19 in early 2020, more medical individuals like Dr. Zhong Nanshan, who made due contributions, are named as heroes more frequently according to the answer to Question b.

Table 1. Types of heroes worshipped by the subjects

Items	Response		Penetration Rate (n=847)	Desired Value	Residual
	n	Response Rate			
Soldiers or martyrs	653	25.0%	77.1%	373.4	279.6
Dedicated workers	615	23.5%	72.6%	373.4	241.6
Entrepreneurs	322	12.3%	38.0%	373.4	-51.4
Good Samaritans	401	15.3%	47.3%	373.4	27.6
Parents and friends	252	9.6%	29.8%	373.4	-121.4
Heroes in literary and artistic works	343	13.1%	40.5%	373.4	-30.4
Others	28	1.1%	3.3%	373.4	-345.4
Total	2614	100.0%	308.6%	/	/
The Chi-square value				736.188	
Degrees of Freedom				6	
Asymptotic Significance				0.000	

Description: (a) The residual refers to the difference between the observed frequency(n) and the expected frequency (desired value) in each item. A positive residual value indicates more subjects agree with this item, and vice versa. (b) The chi-square test was used to test whether the differences between the items is obtained by accident or with statistical difference.

The main characteristics of heroes can be classified into seven categories (Table 2). Higher education students tend to worship heroes for their loftiness (20.4%), patriotism (20.3%), responsibility (18.5%), selflessness and devotion (16.5%), excellence (13.0%), talents and appearances (11.4%). There are significant differences among the 7 categories of characteristics by Chi-square test ( $P = 0.000 < 0.001$ ), showing that loftiness, patriotism, responsibility, selflessness and devotion are important characteristics of heroes by the subjects as each residual of those categories is positive.

Table 2. Characteristics of heroes worshipped by the subjects

Items	n	Response Response Rate	Penetration Rate (n=847)	Desired Value	Residual
Loftiness	643	20.4%	75.9%	450.4	192.6
Talents and appearances	358	11.4%	42.3%	450.4	-92.4
Patriotism	639	20.3%	75.4%	450.4	188.6
Responsibility	582	18.5%	68.7%	450.4	131.6
Selflessness and dedication	520	16.5%	61.4%	450.4	69.6
Excellence	409	13.0%	48.3%	450.4	-41.4
Others	2	0.1%	0.2%	450.4	-448.4
Total	3153	100.0%	372.3%	/	/
The Chi-square Value				679.668	
Degrees of Freedom				6	
Asymptotic Significance				0.000	

#### 4.2 Functions of Heroes

Table 3 shows the seven categories of functions provided by heroes. The categories of hero functions that were identified are as follows: to devote him/herself to the country (21.3%), to build up moral values (18.0%), to enhance national confidence (17.8%), to improve social responsibility (17.7%), to achieve ambitions (13.6%), and to promote self-improvement (11.6%).

Table 3. Functions of heroes

Items	n	Response Response Rate	Penetration Rate (n=847)	Desired Cases	Residual
To Enhance national confidence	548	17.8%	64.7%	514.3	33.7
To devote to the country	657	21.3%	77.6%	514.3	142.7
To improve social responsibility	546	17.7%	64.5%	514.3	31.7
To build moral values	557	18.0%	65.8%	514.3	42.7
To achieve ambitions	420	13.6%	49.6%	514.3	-94.3
To Promote self-improvement	358	11.6%	42.3%	514.3	-156.3
Total	3086	100.0%	364.3%	/	/
The Chi-square Value			112.085548		
Degree of Freedom			5		
Asymptotic Significance			.000		

We averaged each item, processed the residuals, and calculated the chi-square value and degrees of freedom. The chi-square value = 112.085548 and the  $P = 0.000 < 0.001$ , indicating that there are statistically significant differences in functions of heroes among the subjects. The functions of heroes on higher education students are mainly manifested in encouraging their devotion to the country, forming moral values, and enhancing national confidence, as shown by the positive residuals. Achieving ambitions and promoting self-improvement are deemed to have fewer impacts on higher education students, as shown by the negative residuals.

#### 4.3 Factors Influencing the Perceptions of Heroism

In order to ensure the high authenticity and reliability of this research, we employed a strict criterion whereby questionnaires with more than 70% of the same options in the third section were regarded as invalid samples and were thus excluded from the final analysis. This measure was taken to minimize the possibility of response bias and to increase the accuracy of our findings. By adopting such a rigorous approach, we were able to obtain a sample of responses that truly reflected the perceptions of Chinese higher education students regarding heroism, and to avoid any potential confounding factors that could compromise the validity of our results. Ultimately, this methodology helped to ensure that our research findings are robust and credible, and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complex factors that shape students' perceptions of heroism in contemporary China.

The main channels of learning about heroes are shown in Table 4. As can be seen, higher education students have significantly different ways of learning heroes ( $P = 0.000 < 0.001$ ). Moreover, our findings indicate that higher education students in China primarily acquire their knowledge of heroes through four main channels, namely historical materials (24.8%), media (22.9%), literary and artistic works (22.4%), and textbooks (19.5%), as demonstrated by the positive residual.

Table 4. Channels of learning about heroes

Channels	n	Response Rate	Residual
Media	543	22.9%	147.2
Textbooks	462	19.5%	66.2
Literary works	531	22.4%	135.2
Historical materials	589	24.8%	193.2
Retelling	243	10.2%	-152.8
Others	7	0.3%	-388.8
Total	2378	100.0%	/
Chi-square		647.163	
Degree of freedom		5	
Asymptotic significance		.000	

Table 5 shows the reason for hero worshipped by Chinese higher education students. There are significant differences among them ( $P = 0.000 < 0.001$ ). Students worship heroes mainly because of their outstanding deeds and noble spiritual qualities (27.6%), family and school education (20.0%), and the culture of hero worship in society (17.0%) as shown by the residual being positive. Fewer higher education students admire heroes for the influence by their friends and classmates (10.2%) and other reasons (0.1%), as shown by the residual being negative. The findings reveal that higher education students are more likely to worship heroes for their personal charisma, followed by external influences.

Table 5. Reasons for hero worship

Items	n	Response Rate	Residual
The spirits of the hero	573	25.0%	191.5
Outstanding heroic deeds	632	27.6%	250.5
Family and school education	457	20.0%	75.5
The culture of hero worship in society	390	17.0%	8.5
Influence by friends and classmates	234	10.2%	-147.5
Other reasons	3	0.1%	-378.5
The Chi-square value		708.292	
Degrees of freedom		5	
Asymptotic significance		.000	

Based on the results of the pretest analysis, our study identified five factors that may influence higher education students' perceptions of heroism: intrinsic attraction, social reinforcement, education, family background, and publicity. To examine the relationship between these factors and students' perceptions of heroism, we conducted a correlation analysis, which is presented in Table 6. These findings offer insights into the complex mechanisms that shape students' attitudes towards heroic figures and narratives, and have implications for the development of ethical values in higher education. It reveals that there is a significantly positive correlation between perceptions of heroism and the five factors ( $P < 0.01$ ). The correlation coefficient values between higher education students' perceptions of heroism and intrinsic attraction, social reinforcement, education, family background, and publicity are 0.448, 0.390, 0.190, 0.236, and 0.296, respectively.

Table 6. Correlation analysis of the 5 influencing factors and perceptions of heroism

Factors	Correlation Coefficient
Intrinsic attraction	0.448**
Social reinforcement	0.390**
Education	0.190**
Family background	0.236**
Publicity	0.296**

\*  $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$

The results of the scale show that the mean of the five factors (intrinsic attraction, social reinforcement, education, family background and publicity) are 3.9984, 3.9391, 3.7594, 3.7121 and 3.8524 respectively (Table 7). This indicates that most higher education students agree that the five factors have influences on their perceptions of heroism.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics of the scale

Factors	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.
Intrinsic attraction	1.33	5.00	3.9984	.75045
Social reinforcement	1.00	5.00	3.9391	.80419
Education	1.00	5.00	3.7594	.88804
Family background	1.00	5.00	3.7121	.80593
Publicity	1.00	5.00	3.8524	.79638

Multiple regression analysis, therefore, was used to further investigate the specific relation between the five factors and perceptions of heroism. The five factors were taken as independent variables, and perceptions of heroism as dependent variable for linear regression analysis (Table 8). The five independents (intrinsic attraction, social reinforcement, education, family background, and publicity) can explain 53.9% of changes in students' hero worship, as the R-square

value of the model is 0.539. Also, at least one of the five factors have influences on higher education students' perceptions of heroism, as the F-values equals 83.548 and P-value equals 0.000 in the F-test. In addition, there is no correlation between the five dimensions in the model as the multicollinearity test of the model shows that the VIF values are all less than 5 and the D-W value is near 2.

Table 8. Regression analysis of the influencing factors

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficient	t	Level of Significance	Collinearity Statistics			
	B	Standard Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF		
	Items	4.236	0.05						
Independent Variables	Intrinsic attraction	0.364	0.02	0.448	18.177	0.000	0.895	1.117	
	Social reinforcement	0.316	0.02	0.389	16.125	0.000	0.934	1.070	
	Education	0.156	0.019	0.192	8.090	0.000	0.968	1.033	
	Family background	0.190	0.019	0.234	9.845	0.000	0.964	1.037	
	Publicity	0.227	0.019	0.280	11.687	0.000	0.95	1.052	
Controlled Variables	Gender	Male	-0.110	0.042	-0.068	-2.615	0.009	0.814	1.229
		Freshmen	-0.047	0.068	-0.022	-0.694	0.488	0.541	1.848
	Grade	Sophomore	0.075	0.068	0.035	1.105	0.269	0.544	1.839
		Junior	0.003	0.060	0.002	0.056	0.955	0.549	1.822
		Senior	-0.059	0.062	-0.029	-0.944	0.345	0.595	1.680
Major	Liberal arts	-0.193	0.054	-0.105	-3.557	0.000	0.624	1.603	
	Sciences	-0.118	0.049	-0.071	-2.420	0.016	0.637	1.570	

Dependent Variables: Higher education students' perceptions of heroism

Thus, the model formula of hero worship is established as follows:

$$\text{Hero worship} = 4.236 + 0.364 \text{ Intrinsic attraction} + 0.316 \text{ Social reinforcement} + 0.156 \text{ Education} + 0.190 \text{ Family background} + 0.227 \text{ Publicity} \quad (1)$$

As the model formula demonstrates, the five factors are independent, and positively influence hero worship after excluding the confounding interference of gender, grade, and subject category (Table 8). Among them, the weights of intrinsic attraction, social reinforcement, publicity, family background and education are 0.364 ( $t = 18.177$ ), 0.316 ( $t = 16.125$ ), 0.227 ( $t = 11.687$ ), 0.190 ( $t = 9.845$ ) and 0.156 ( $t = 8.090$ ) respectively. It reveals that higher education students' perceptions of heroism could be promoted with a rise in intrinsic attraction, social reinforcement, publicity, family background and education orderly.

## 5. Discussion

The main characteristics of heroes worshipped by contemporary Chinese higher education students, evidenced by the above empirical analysis, appear to have a certain similarity and universality. They are diversity, epoch-making and civilian respectively.

The diversity of heroism among Chinese higher education students is apparent in the range of heroes they admire, spanning a broad spectrum of professions and personal qualities. Our research revealed that heroes were drawn from all walks of life, including soldiers who defend their motherland, entrepreneurs who create great wealth, workers who demonstrate diligence in their positions, as well as parents and friends who act heroically in their daily lives. This diversity reflects the multifaceted nature of heroism and highlights the complex and dynamic ways in which individuals construct and interpret heroic narratives. Moreover, heroes can be either real, like Oskar Schindler who saved over 1000 Jews in World War II, or fictitious, like Pavel Korchagin in the literary and artistic works. Traits such as patriotism, loftiness, responsibility and selflessness are conceived to be the main qualities of heroes, which is consistent with the types of heroes worshipped by the subjects.

Epoch-making refers to characteristics of those heroes who have contributed immeasurable value to the era or have made great strides that have transformed the social landscape. As what Campbell holds in *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, heroism reflects dominant societal values and behaviors in each era (Campbell, 2008). Confronted with the unknown but fierce Covid-19 virus, extraordinary medical experts, such as Dr. Zhong Nanshan, Li Wenliang and Zhang Dingyu, tried every effort to work out a solution against it. Their courageous deeds and dauntless spirits have made great impacts on the higher education students. Consequently, heroes with this characteristic are the most popular ones among the subjects.

Civilian means that heroes in our lives are ordinary people doing heroic things. Everyday heroes like doctors and nurses, and volunteers in the pandemic and transparent heroes like deliverymen, policemen and other dedicated personnel are conceived as the heroes of this age. This heroic ideal help guide a person's behavior in times of trouble or moral uncertainty (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006).

This research investigates the functions of heroes on higher education students. The 6 main functions of heroes can be mapped into three categories: enhancing (to devote to the country, to enhance national confidence, and to achieve ambitions), moral modeling (to build moral values, to improve social responsibility) and protecting (to promote self-improvement) Kinsella et al. (2015). Participants have demonstrated positive feeling when thinking of heroes like, "inspiring them to devote themselves to the country", "helping people to live safe and sound in the pandemic" and "providing moral goals for society". These findings present empirical support to the hero functions framework by Kinsella et al. (2015).

The research has also shown that heroism is significantly correlated with five factors: intrinsic attraction, social reinforcement, education, family background, and publicity. These findings suggest that heroism is not only linked to the heroic individuals themselves, but also to the active roles played by families, education, and social involvement in cultivating and promoting heroic behaviors.

Specifically, the intrinsic attraction of heroes outweighs other factors, indicating that heroes themselves have a prime influence on higher education students' perceptions of heroism. This is strongly supported by the types and characteristics of heroes. Only those who sacrifice themselves for the country and the public, especially soldiers and martyrs during wartime, doctors and nurses in the pandemic, are conceived as heroes. Higher education students are attracted by their lofty ideals and heroic deeds and tend to learn from them and become one of them.

Meanwhile, the society also plays a significant role in reinforcing perceptions of heroism on higher education students. Heroes should be awarded and commemorated in varied ways so that their deeds and spirits can be learned and imitated by the public. In recent years, China has legislated laws and acts to protect heroes and commemorate those who sacrificed their lives for national independence and prosperity. September 30 has been approved as Martyrs' Day of China since 2014, and grand ceremonies are held each year. The study demonstrates that social reinforcement like these measures do enhance higher education students' perceptions of heroism.

The media also has positive role in telling compelling stories about heroes and cultivating a social and cultural atmosphere for hero worship (Hu et al., 2021). As the study reveals, media ranks the second channel for higher education students to learn about heroes. The popularity of We-media such as Tiktok, Weibo and WeChat can be used to increase the publicity and promotion of youngster's favorite heroes and heroic deeds.

Besides, it is necessary to carry forward the role of family to help higher education students form correct views of heroes (Bronchain et al., 2020), and the key is to create a good family atmosphere in which they encourage admiring heroes. Universities and colleges are the main grounds for teaching higher education students to learn from heroes. Thus, the educational sectors should actively integrate hero-related symbols into students' textbooks, lectures and daily activities to help build up moral values.

A primary goal of this research is to explore the perceptions of heroism of Chinese higher education students in the post-pandemic era, including characteristics of heroes, factors influencing the perceptions of heroism and functions of heroes. Heroes are fascinating to people in everyday life (Allison et al., 2016a). Teenagers, in the state of physical and psychological development, are more inclined to embrace the behaviors and ideas of social representatives appreciated by the public, i.e. "the role model and pioneers that everyone acclaims, and may even follow suit and be influenced, subconsciously (Keczer et al., 2016)". Heroes, as role models, serve fundamental human needs (Allison & Goethals, 2014). Their functions will spur higher education students to learn from heroes, imitate them and become one of them. And that is what society calls for.

## 6. Implications

The findings of this research have significant implications and shed light on the perceptions of heroism among Chinese higher education students in the post-pandemic era. The study emphasizes the importance of understanding the characteristics of heroes, the factors that influence individuals' perceptions of heroism, and the functions that heroes serve in society. One notable insight is that heroes hold a captivating allure for individuals in their everyday lives. This suggests that heroes play a vital role in inspiring and influencing people, especially teenagers who are in a crucial phase of physical and psychological development. As society's esteemed role models and pioneers, heroes become a source of admiration and aspiration for young individuals who may subconsciously emulate their behaviors and ideas. Moreover, the research highlights the fundamental human need fulfilled by heroes. By embodying certain traits and values, heroes serve as a source of inspiration, guidance, and motivation for higher education students. They not only provide a

benchmark for personal growth but also foster a sense of purpose and direction in individuals' lives. Lastly, this study demonstrates that both the characteristics of an era and significant events have a substantial influence on individuals' definition of heroes and the types of heroes they worship. This implies that governments and societies should take the lead in guiding the people, especially higher education college students, to actively resolve moral crises and maintain a positive and healthy alignment with the mainstream ideals of the time.

the research holds significance for society as a whole. It emphasizes the collective call for individuals to learn from heroes and make positive contributions to their communities. By promoting heroism among higher education students, we foster a culture that values integrity, courage, and selflessness. This, in turn, can lead to the cultivation of future leaders who possess the qualities necessary to address societal challenges and promote social progress.

## 7. Limitations

Heroism, the pinnacle of human behavior, has dynamic and complex interrelationship and interactions, with a variety of determinants. One limit of our study is that only five factors were taken into consideration in analyzing the influence of perception of heroism, which may not be sufficient in accounting for it. Follow-up researches can further explore heroism with more psychological and sociological factors included. Another limit lies in the fact that it fails to probe into heroism by analyzing the backgrounds of the subjects. Gender, places of birth, grades and academic disciplines may have influences on their perceptions of heroism. For example, higher education students from liberal arts might possibly know more about heroes, and have more active thinking towards heroism. Comparative studies on heroism can be carried out among different identities including race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and class.

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