



Hero and Father: Contrasting Leadership Styles in the USA-China Rivalry

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Abstract

The competition between the USA and China spans many levels. This article examines the differences in leadership between the two countries through Jungian psychology. The USA embraces the hero archetype influenced by ancient Greek ideals and also incorporates the father archetype to a limited extent due to its Christian heritage. In contrast, China, deeply influenced by Confucian culture, maintains the significant role of the father archetype even under Communist leadership. Through comparative mythology and discussion of political discourse, this research illuminates how archetypal narratives continue to shape power dynamics in the twenty-first century. The commentary ends with criticism of some of the excesses generated by over-identification with the two patriarchal archetypes.

Keywords Leadership · Hero · Father-figure · USA · China · Carl Jung

Introduction

What fundamentally underpins competition between the USA and China? This commentary adopts a comparative perspective through the framework of Jungian psychology, proposing that the rivalry between the USA and China, particularly at the leadership level, represents a confrontation between two distinct archetypes: the Hero and the Father. I will explore these contrasting archetypes within Western and Chinese historical contexts and analyze their contemporary political manifestations, including the excesses that can lead to problematic results.

In ancient Greek culture, the Hero and the Father were two distinct archetypes, each representing different values and principles. This distinction is vividly illustrated in Homer's *Iliad*, particularly in the iconic duel between Hector and Achilles. Hector, the tragic hero of Troy, embodies the archetype of the

Father, symbolizing duty, family, and the protection of his city. In contrast, Achilles, the greatest warrior of the Greek army, represents pure strength and individual heroism. In their confrontation, Hector faces the overwhelming might of Achilles, ultimately succumbing to defeat and suffering the tragic fate of being slain and his body desecrated. This scene not only highlights the conflict between the archetypes of the Father and the Hero but also deeply reflects the tension in Greek culture between the duty to family and the pursuit of heroic fame.¹ Hector's tragic demise further illustrates the marginalization of the Father archetype in a world dominated by heroism.² Today,

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¹ In the tradition of ancient Greek epic poetry, there is a fundamental distinction between the concepts of *kleos* (κλέος) and *nostos* (νόστος). The former refers to the immortal glory or fame gained through heroic deeds, especially acts of bravery on the battlefield, while the latter symbolizes the ultimate return to one's homeland and family. See Nagy, Gregory. 2020. "Hour 1" and "Hour 9". In *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours: A New Edition*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Achilles had neither a wife nor children, yet he sought immortality through the pursuit of eternal fame, which differs from achieving immortality through procreation. This distinction is discussed in Plato's *Symposium*, 208c-209a.

² The Greek epic tradition does indeed feature heroic figures who embody paternal roles, such as Ulysses in the *Odyssey*. However, these characters are ultimately memorialized within the heroic paradigm. This persistent framing, even for narratives emphasizing domestic and civic responsibilities, highlights the cultural primacy of *kleos*-oriented heroism in ancient Greek culture. For detailed analysis of Hector's and Odysseus' dual roles as both fathers and heroes, see:

we can observe the aesthetic differences between the USA and China regarding these two distinct types of leadership. For the USA, Father-type leaders are often perceived as weak and conservative, while Hero-type leaders are regarded as full of conviction and courage, fearlessly facing crises and challenges, always ready to take on their enemies. In China, by contrast, the emphasis has been placed on the Father archetype in both imperial and post-revolutionary times, and Hero-type leaders are often downplayed or viewed as tyrants.

To be sure, these archetypes are not all or nothing. The political culture of both countries includes expressions of both archetypes. In *The American Political Tradition*, the historian Richard Hofstadter famously recognized the tendency towards “hero worship and national self-congratulation” that had characterized progressive accounts of American political culture and of its political leaders.³ In the past, political leaders in the USA have at times embodied aspects of the Father model. American political culture has also been influenced by a form of Christianity that emphasizes compassion for the people rather than heroic deeds. The whole language of “Founding Fathers” suggests as much, though the Founders were motivated first and foremost by “love of fame” and “a passion for secular immortality.”⁴ They are respected more for the historic act of founding the nation than the virtues demonstrated by their domestic policies (and the presidents who made it to Mount Rushmore were selected partly, if not mainly, because of their important military victories). Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “fireside chats” can be seen as providing fatherly-like comfort to the people. The leadership style of some Presidents fits neither archetype so neatly: President Obama, for example, manifested eloquence and intellectual brilliance above all else (though perhaps his most popular achievement was the killing of Bin Laden).

In modern China, Confucian-style father figures were often the target of attacks (especially in the Cultural Revolution). The self-proclaimed First Emperor Qin Shihuang (259–210 BCE) as well as Chairman Mao embodied the Hero archetype by virtue of their success in war. However, Qin Shihuang was heavily influenced by the Daoist/Legalist strategy of not revealing oneself unless absolutely necessary, which means leaders enhance their awe and authority by doing nothing, maintaining a mysterious presence, and avoiding manipulation by subordinates, which contrasts with the typical Hero archetype. Chairman Mao was referred to as

“The Great Savior” and “The Red Sun,” but there was a popular saying “My father and my mother are not as dear to me as Chairman Mao” which better fits the Father archetype. In addition, although China’s “Sage Kings” were often founders of new dynasties who overthrew the old regimes through violent means, they were praised as “Sage Kings” not for their heroic military achievements, but for their policies of kindness towards the people. War itself was never glorified: it was viewed as a necessary evil. So even the “exceptions” to the rule do not neatly fit the counter-archetypes.

To better understand the dominant leadership styles in the USA and China, we need to clearly distinguish between the two archetypes. The *New York Times* columnist David Brooks argues that American President Donald Trump expresses the pagan ethos of “heroism, might and glory.” Brooks claims the same is true of “greatness-obsessed macho men” like Chinese President Xi Jinping.⁵ But the two leaders manifest different leadership styles. What I would like to convey, in short, is that the American political system, influenced by ancient Greek and Roman hero worship, has a fundamental tendency to give rise to leaders that express the Hero archetype, while the Chinese political system, rooted in a paternalistic form of Confucianism, has a greater predisposition to favor leaders that express the Father archetype. In terms of today’s politics, the current leaders of both countries express the dominant leadership styles of the two countries in extreme form. In Jungian psychology, archetypes possess primal and powerful energy. If a person over-identifies with a particular archetype, such as the father or the hero, it can cause the ego to be overwhelmed by this archetypal energy. Jung referred to it as archetypal inflation, which will lead to a distorted sense of reality and psychological imbalance, often manifesting as delusions of grandeur, paranoia, or messianic fantasies. Let me elaborate below.

Archetype of the Hero

The USA’s electoral system is more susceptible to producing leaders who exhibit a strong identification with the Hero archetype. Firstly, the US presidential election operates on a 4-year cycle. Newly elected presidents also face midterm Congressional elections just 2 years into their term. This mechanism compels party leaders to expend significant energy on matters unrelated to the function of devising policies for the nation’s long-term development. There is thus a tendency to emphasize repeatedly one’s personal superiority over others and to expend time and effort to giving self-idealizing speeches and raising funds for campaigns. The Hero archetype is also manifested in specific symptoms, such as attention craving, an obsessive need

Footnote 2 (continued)

Zoja, Luigi. 2001. *The Father: Historical, Psychological and Cultural Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 85–114.

³ Hofstadter, Richard. 1948. “Introduction.” In *The American Political Tradition: And the Men Who Made it*. New York: A. A. Knopf.

⁴ Adair, Douglass. 1988. “Fame and the Founding Fathers.” In *Fame and the Founding Fathers: Essays by Douglass Adair*, edited by Trevor Colbourn, 34. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

⁵ Brooks, David. 2025. “How to Survive the Trump Years with Your Spirit Intact,” *New York Times*. May 1, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/01/opinion/trump-faith-humanism.html>.

for public and media attention, even at the cost of resorting to vulgar rhetoric to please the masses, and finally achievement addiction: a relentless pursuit of accomplishments through risky endeavors, such as hastily launching wars or implementing radical economic policies.

Secondly, as elections ultimately devolve into direct confrontations between the two major parties, candidates often resort to mutual defamation, a trend that has been exacerbated by the internet age. The bias against defamation, once a symbol of democratic civility, has progressively transformed into a cycle of bitter personal attacks. Carl Jung refers to the struggle between a hero and his adversary as the hero-dragon battle. This universal heroic myth consistently depicts a powerful mortal or demigod who rescues people from destruction and death by defeating evil forces like dragons.⁶ However, when a leader overly identifies with the hero archetype, he may demonize his rivals as dragons, turning opponents into a necessary means of defining his own heroic self-concept. Through this process, opponents are systematically mythologized as the mythical dragons that must be vanquished. It is not only evident in domestic power struggles but also manifests in international relations, where leaders may strategically invoke the threat of external “dragons” to divert attention from domestic issues. A concomitant phenomenon can be the legitimization of coercive actions through noble-sounding political discourse.

Thirdly, the USA’s two-party system is predicated on two fundamentally distinct visions of governance, leading to extreme policies meant to differentiate the leader from the leaders of opposing parties. A current example is the tariff system promoted by President Trump as well as his deportation measures. A psychological symptom associated with this phenomenon is arrogant blindness, in which leaders become deluded into believing they are all-powerful, denying their own limitations and disregarding rational and reasonable counsel.

A more nuanced psychological construct that has been extensively explored in Jungian psychology is the *puer aeternus* (external boy) complex.⁷ It is often used in psychology to describe an adult who desires freedom without constraints and remains emotionally immature. The hero’s journey, as conceptualized in Jungian psychology, must ultimately reach an end. However, when political leaders overidentify with the “Hero archetype,” they often become reluctant to retire or step-down. This tendency is characterized by a yearning to perpetuate the glorified phase indefinitely, stemming from an inability to confront the reality of mortality and the recognition of one’s limits. Joseph Biden’s wish to serve a second term as president could be adduced as an example.

As mentioned above, some American presidents, such as the Founding Fathers and FDR, have also exhibited characteristics of the Father archetype. This is mainly due to the influence of Christianity on American political culture. In *Religion in American Politics: A Short History*, Frank Lambert pointed out that the USA has often viewed itself as God’s chosen nation, the “City upon a Hill.”⁸ The USA has never had a president who openly declared himself to be non-Christian, although some presidents’ religious beliefs have been controversial or deviated from traditional Christian doctrines. According to Christianity, there is only one and true Father, namely God, and no secular political leader can become the Father of the “City upon a Hill.” For American presidents who exhibit features of the Father archetype, they dare not compare themselves to God. This is why some American presidents incorporate the Father archetype, but only to a limited extent. It contrasts sharply with the Confucian tradition. Among Confucian “Ruler-Fathers,” aside from the mythical sage king Yao, all other sage kings were secular rulers. This provided a great temptation for later emperors: if I govern the country exceptionally well, could I also join the ranks of these sage kings? Next, I will discuss how Chinese leadership has been profoundly shaped by the Confucian archetype of the Father.

Archetype of the Father

In the Confucian tradition, the archetype of the Father far surpasses that of the Hero, a reflection of Confucianism’s deep longing for a loving and virtuous father figure. In the legendary story of the founding of China’s political system more than 4000 years ago, Emperor Shun, one of the most revered sage kings in Confucianism, was chosen by Emperor Yao as his successor because of his filial piety: he loved his father deeply even though his father did not love him in return.⁹ According to Sima Qian’s (c. 145–c. 86 BCE) *Records of the Grand Historian*, Shun’s birth mother died early, and his father, who favored his stepmother and their younger son, repeatedly attempted to murder him.

⁸ See Lambert, Frank. 2010. “Providential and Secular America: Founding the Republic.” In *Religion in American Politics: A Short History*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

⁹ An important aspect of the legend of Shun is that it reveals how genuine filial piety can qualify someone to be a political leader, which is also evident in contemporary Chinese politics. In Qufu, near Confucius’s birthplace, officials considered for promotion are evaluated on their filial behavior. If parents indicate a lack of filiality on behalf of the official being considered for promotion, the promotion is likely to be denied. This politicization of filiality differs from the love for parents in other cultures such as Judaism. See Wang, Pei. 2024. “Confucian Filiality Revisited: The Case of Contemporary China.” *Philosophy & Social Criticism*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537241288471>.

⁶ Jung, Carl. 1964. *Man and His Symbols*. New York: Doubleday, 79, 120, 126.

⁷ von Franz, Marie-Louise. 2020. *The Problem of the Puer Aeternus*. 3rd Edition, Toronto: Inner City Books.

Shun managed to evade his father's attempts at least three times. Even in his fifties, according to *Mencius*, Shun was found weeping in the fields, heartbroken that his father did not love him despite his own unshakable commitment to his father. This legendary story, known to most educated Chinese, shows the profound emotional weight of the Father archetype in Chinese culture.¹⁰

At least two other important figures in Confucianism, Confucius himself (c. 551–c. 479 BCE) and Mencius (c. 371–c. 289 BCE), also shared a profound longing for the father figure. According to the *Records of the Grand Historian*, Confucius's father died shortly after his birth, and his mother never even revealed where his father was buried. The psychologically painful absence of a father during his early years undoubtedly had a profound impact on Confucius. Similarly, Mencius also lost his father in his early childhood, and his mother single-handedly raised him through immense hardship.

What is the relevance of the fatherless founding figures of China's political culture? Filial piety is often regarded as the most fundamental virtue in Confucianism and it could be seen as an expression of love and loyalty for the (absent) father. The father-like ruler was a replacement for the absent father. In the Han dynasty text, *The Classic of Family Reverence*, filial piety towards one's parents was extended and transformed into loyalty towards the ruler. In contrast to the love and respect for parents in other civilizations, Confucian filial piety was a way of life created by those who carried the unspoken sorrow of fatherlessness.

Since 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been in power. However, the CCP increasingly draws on ancient Chinese political traditions to secure its legitimacy,¹¹ including politicized references to filial piety. Communism, as a new theory that was initially foreign to the Chinese people, has been adapted by the CCP to incorporate distinct Confucian characteristics which is particularly evident in its family-oriented political discourse. Both in official media reports and in everyday language, familial metaphors are used to describe political relationships. For instance, Chinese media often liken USA-China relations to marital disputes, though without explicitly identifying who plays the role of husband or wife. In the last century, the Soviet Union was referred to as the "elder brother."

In contemporary China, leaders are often affectionately referred to as "grandfather" by the people. In his later years, Mao Zedong was called "Grandpa Mao" by the public, a term

that has also found its way into contemporary Chinese popular culture. In the early 2010 s, young netizens began referring to Renminbi banknotes, especially the 100-yuan notes featuring Mao Zedong's portrait, as "Grandpa Mao." In 2008, then Prime Minister Wen Jiabao rushed to the scene of the Wenchuan earthquake and was affectionately called "Grandpa Wen" by the people.¹² After Jiang Zemin passed away, netizens used the term "Grandpa Jiang" to bypass internet censorship and commemorate him.¹³ A more direct example is the affectionate term "Xi Dada" used for President Xi Jinping. "Dada" is a respectful address for one's father or male elders in Xi's native Shaanxi province. Such political discourse is not abstract but presupposes a familial context. *The New York Times* once reported on a popular Chinese song that praised Xi's love for his wife, Peng Liyuan, who is fondly called "Peng Mama."¹⁴ It is evident that using familial terms like "grandpa" or "dada" to refer to leaders reflects the Father-like expectations and emotional connections that the Chinese people have towards their leaders. The authorities also like to use family metaphors such as "one family under heaven" and "both sides of the Taiwan Strait are as close as one family."

For China, the negative manifestations of the father archetype in the political realm are closely tied to the Confucian traditions of the "Sage King" and the "Ruler-Father." The Sage Kings, represented by Yao and Shun, became known as the founding fathers of China's political culture. In the Confucian view, these Sage Kings were not only virtuous rulers capable of wisely governing the state but also loving fathers who cared for the welfare of the people. As a result, becoming a "Sage King" was viewed as the political ideal by successive emperors. This tradition has shaped the image of rulers as the great patriarchs of the nation and has reinforced the relationship between authority and obedience, providing rich cultural soil for the father archetype in the political sphere.

What are the negative manifestations of the Father archetype in the political sphere? First, excessive control, characterized by the imposition of strict rules and order to enforce comprehensive societal regulation, severely suppressing individual free will and diverse development; second, authoritarianism, whose core features include the worship of absolute authority and the maintenance of unjust hierarchical systems;

¹⁰ A reinterpretation on the legend of Shun through Jungian psychology, see Wang, Pei. 2025. "Reinterpreting The Legend of Emperor Shun: A Jungian Perspective." *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche* 19, no. 1: 14–33.

¹¹ See Shue, Vivienne. 2022. "Regimes of Resonance: Cosmos, Empire, and Changing Technologies of CCP Rule." *Modern China* 48, no. 4: 679–720.

¹² Jacobs, Andrew. 2008. "Call him Grandpa Wen: Chinese official shows a rare soft side." *New York Times*. May 21, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/21/world/asia/21iht-wen.1.13083872.html>.

¹³ Allen, Kerry. 2022. "Chinese bypass censors to remember Jiang Zemin." *BBC*. December 1, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-63813122>.

¹⁴ Ramzy, Austin. 2014. "Musical Ode to Xi Jinping and His Wife Goes Viral." *New York Times*. November 25, 2014. <https://archive.nytimes.com/sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/11/25/musical-ode-to-xi-jinping-and-his-wife-goes-viral/>.

third, dogmatism, where the traditional wisdom represented by the Father archetype, if it refuses to evolve with the times, devolves into ideological rigidity, knowledge monopolization, and the systematic suppression of innovative ideas; fourth, isolationist protection, a form of protectionism justified in the name of security, leading to the implementation of exclusionary policies and the obstruction of international exchange and cooperation; fifth, formalism, such as time-consuming meetings with empty rituals held at various levels of government that serve to reinforce each individual's position within the system and take time away from solving problems.

Finally, I would like to point out another consequence of the father archetype in politics: leaders are often reluctant to retire from their positions. I have already mentioned that similar issues exist in the American system, but the underlying causes are different. In the USA, leaders such as Donald Trump who highly identify with the Hero archetype are hesitant to retire,¹⁵ primarily because they do not want to end their illustrious and accomplished life journey (George Washington, who retired with grace, is a famous exception). However, in China, leaders such as Deng Xiaoping and the current President, who highly identify with the Father archetype are reluctant to retire because Fathers never “retire.” The father assumes long-term and significant responsibilities and authority within the family. Similarly, these leaders perceive themselves as playing an indispensable role in the governance of the country. They also formulate long-term development plans for the nation and believe that their absence from their posts could adversely impact the stability and progress of the country. Consequently, they frequently extend their tenure and continue to exert influence over state affairs even if they formally retire.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the differences, both the Hero and Father archetypes are deeply rooted in patriarchal characteristics and carry the “original sin” of patriarchy: strength and conquest, authority and order. These traits have historically shaped the way leadership is perceived and exercised in both the USA and China. Carl Jung once pointed out that the feminine principle has been systematically devalued throughout history, a suppression that is not only evident in political systems but also deeply embedded in spiritual domains such as religion and philosophy. From the perspective of Jungian psychology, true development in leadership will occur when the feminine principle is fully integrated. This refers not only to the cultivation of more female leaders within the political system (for example, the Politburo Standing Committee of the Chinese

Communist Party currently has no female leaders), but also to integrating the feminine principle, which encompasses emotion, intuition, care, cooperation, and nurturing.

In a male-dominated political system, the reality is that a tiny minority of female leaders is unlikely to change leadership styles, as they could often feel compelled to adopt traditionally masculine traits to survive and thrive. This dynamic is exemplified by figures like Margaret Thatcher and Golda Meir, who were both referred to as “the only man in the cabinet.” To lead effectively, these women had to appear even more rigid and firm than their male counterparts.

Still, the male-dominated political system can be changed, if not challenged. From an ethical and psychological point of view, care ethics particularly highlights that women place greater emphasis on emotions and are more inclined to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships within communities, as well as actively advocate for the welfare of others.¹⁶ Also, there is evidence that social movements composed mainly or entirely of women manifest the feminine principle of care and peace.¹⁷ And increasing the proportion of female leaders may have the effect of reducing corruption in government.¹⁸ So we need to substantially increase the proportion of female leaders in government for feminine styles to challenge the deleterious political effects of both the Hero and Father archetypes.

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¹⁵ Green, Erica L. 2025. “Trump Says He’s ‘Not Joking’ About Seeking a Third Term in Defiance of Constitution.” *New York Times*. March 30, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/30/us/trump-third-term.html>.

¹⁶ Gilligan, Carol. 1982. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. I do not mean to imply that only women leaders manifest the quality of care. For example, the late Pope Francis exemplified the virtue of care.

¹⁷ Baehr, Peter. 2024. “The peace women.” *The New Criterion*, January 16, 2024. <https://newcriterion.com/article/the-peace-women/>.

¹⁸ Bauhr, Monika, and Charron, Nicholas. 2021. “Will Women Executives Reduce Corruption? Marginalization and Network Inclusion.” *Comparative Political Studies* 54, no. 7: 1292–1322.