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Warfare: East vs. West

Last year recorded 162,000 conflict related deaths. This was the second highest toll in the past 30 years, with the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza accounting for nearly three-quarters of the world's war deaths. In the first four months of 2024, there were 47,000 conflict-related deaths worldwide. If this rate continues for the remainder of the year, it will result in the highest number of conflict deaths since the Rwandan genocide in 1994 (reliefweb). War has arisen ever since people could talk. Conflicts arise and by nature, humans want to be correct and do as they wish. If you put these behaviors on a global scale, it can be dangerous. Innocent people can die and towns with rich history can be destroyed. The view on war is not uniform, though. These views can range from strongly encouraging to complete avoidance. A country or nation's outlook on war heavily depends on the dynamic of their historic culture. This paper will aim to explore the foundational beliefs that yield the outlook on war in early America and pre-modern China. America's independence began proceeding their victory against Great Britain in the Revolutionary War. Also, the country's first president, George Washington, was a Major General Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. Early America viewed higher ups in the military as honorable figures. Compared to pre-modern China, where the view is entirely different. Confucius, the highly influential philosopher in mainland China, eagerly spread his disapproving views on warfare. These ideas were not only followed by his older pupils, but also taught

throughout ancient Chinese schools to children. This contrast highlights how deeply ingrained cultural attitudes toward war can shape societal values and perspectives. War persists globally, an enduring reality that will only cease when a universal perspective is embraced. America's history has yielded a culture that glorifies war, while Confucian tradition in pre-modern China regards it as a great crime. These opposing views are evident in the media, culture, and literature of both regions.

On July 4, 1776 the thirteen American colonies gained their independence from Great Britain's tyrannical rule. Although independence was bestowed, America fought on from 1775-1783. It is estimated that anywhere between 25,000-70,000 American patriots were killed during this war either during combat or suffering from living conditions. Many Americans today celebrate this victory for its role in creating a new republic based on democratic views and principles of liberty. Huge contributors to this war like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin today all are granted the privilege of being a part of the Patriotic Legacy. Patriotism is defined as, "love for and devotion for one's country". America takes this concept even further and ties it to those who contribute greatly in their wars or complete some honorary service in the military. One of the greatest patriots in American History, George Washington, became president of the United States on April 30, 1789 - just under six years after the completion of the Revolutionary War. With the Revolutionary War being such a praised and honored win and George Washington setting the presented and foundational laws for the United States, the nation was bound to idealize war.

Ever since Americans are born, the nation's pride is evident. Starting in elementary school, the majority of public school students start every morning with the reciting of the nation's pledge of allegiance and followed by a combination of several songs or poems affirming

pride. On top of this, they are taught about how the nation was founded. The same story is told year after year with little change up until 2023-2024. Christopher Columbus founded our nation via the Mayflower and upon entering, killed off the Native population. It is ingrained in America's youth at an early age that killing and war is necessary to get what their country needs. There is a very popular activity practiced in public schools called "The Wax Museum". This museum consists of elementary school students dressed up as a range of American Patriots. These people can consist of anywhere from the Founding Fathers to Betsy Ross - who made the first American flag. Students will prepare a speech and explain to the guests at the *museum* why their character was so important to America. More often than not, these characters are war "heroes". Furthermore, almost all high school sports start their games with the singing of the national anthem. Before the song begins, veterans of war are asked to stand first. Once the crowd finishes applauding the vets, the rest stand, remove their hats, put their hand over their heart, and turn to the flag while the song starts to play. These ideas of war glorification and extreme nationalism are not just seen in day life, though. These beliefs have overflowed into the nation's literature and media.

There are several pieces of literature in American media that honor war heroes and glorify the act of war. A prime example of this is Stephen Crane's 1895 novel *The Red Badge of Courage*. The novel takes place during the American Civil war and follows the character development of future soldier Henry Fleming. Henry yearns to enter war at a young age with dreams of gaining glory and praise in return. He begins his career afraid and weak. After turning away from his first experience in combat he grew determined, he wanted to earn his "red badge of courage" which is also known as a battle wound. With experience at battle came courage and discipline. Although Henry never experienced a battle wound, he was granted an honorary

badge of courage by seizing the enemy's flag during battle and capturing four enemy soldiers at the same time. The quote from the novel, "He had been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death. He was a man" (Crane), exemplifies the idea that soldiers are deemed as heroic when participating in war. They are honored and praised for contributing to their country's battles. One of the greatest things a man can do for his country is fight for it. "The Killer Angels" by Michael Shaara (1974), is a historical novel about the Battle of Gettysburg. Even in just the title it glorifies the idea of war, but Shaara furthers this idea by honoring and praising soldiers for their strategic brilliance throughout the novel.

America's national bird is the bald eagle. The eagle is seen in a lot of things in day to day life: coins, flags, stamps, etc.... The eagle symbolizes the strength and freedom of the nation. China views eagles in a negative light. Their reasoning for this is that it intentionally kills and the specific problem is that it kills domestically. The Chinese prefer the goose 鹅, e 大雁. To them, geese are known for their monogamous nature. Geese are known to have one partner and remain with them for life. Because of this characteristic, Chinese culture uses the animal to symbolize family, loyalty, and love. The goose is a deeply rooted animal associated in Confucian Philosophy.

Confucius (551-479 BCE), was an ancient Chinese philosopher whose ideas are greatly appreciated and practiced by a large population throughout eastern Asia. His wisdom and discoveries has yielded him a culturally symbolic figure that can bring peace and harmony into a

follower's life. Confucius has shared many philosophical concepts but one to highlight is his opinion on war. First, under Confucianism it is said that war is a sign of weakness. He believed that war was a last resort. He had suggested conducting negotiations and moral persuasion as potential alternatives. For it shows that if you must resort to war, you could find no logical or rational way to solve your problem; which also implies ignorance. Second, war is a form of evil. War tactics are intended to kill, which disrupts peace and can destroy families. Although at times it may be seen as a necessary evil, disturbing family life is extremely frowned upon in Chinese culture. In his Analects, Confucius stated, "In war, there should be no thought of profit", what this means is that there should be no personal gain coming from the battle, but only that the battle is performed for necessary reasons. To tie this into another philosophical concept, Zhuangzi has expressed ideas to add another level of depth to pre-modern China's view on warfare.

Zhuangzi (369–286 BCE) was the most significant interpreter of early Chinese Daoism. A point Zhuangzi had expressed to his following is the importance of the years that Heaven gave us (天年). Zhuangzi explains that when we are born, our years are predetermined by Heaven; or in other words, at birth we are gifted the years of our lives by 天. These years are to be considered the greatest gift and we must honor them. One of the greatest accomplishments we can achieve to thank the Heavens is to complete these years – for there are only two ways we cannot. First, we can harm ourselves by consuming unnatural substances like smoking or drinking. Second, someone can

harm us; specifically in war. Zhuangzi had considered being called to war a great crime, due to the fact that it jeopardized the selected being's chance of completing their given years. Combining the Confucius and Zhuangzi concepts, it is clear that pre-modern China viewed war in a negative light and it can be seen through many pieces of literature.

A copious amount of Chinese literature expresses the resentful feelings towards war and how it can impact families. Specifically in Volume I, *Anthology of Chinese Literature*. To start, the poem, "Recruiting Officer at Shih-hao Village" by Shih hao li, perfectly represents the vicious effects war has on innocent families. The poem begins with a draft officer approaching a family's house in Shih-hao village. The officer arrives, "rounding up people by night. Old man. Climbed over the wall. Escaped" (li). After the husband escapes, the wife is left to talk to the officer asking for the men in the house to show themselves and says, "I had three sons. On the border at Yeh. The first one sent me a letter. My other two sons. A While back. Killed in battle" (li). The officer realizes there are no men in the house and accepts the women's "joking" offer to join the army. The significance of the poem is to show that this family has been destroyed due to war. Two sons have died in war with the implication that the third is already dead or soon to be. Trying to protect her husband, the wife offers herself and her selflessness leads to poor consequences. Now, there are no sons and the peacekeeper of the house has gone off to war. The family is destroyed. The most notable quote in the poem is when the woman says to the draft officer, "survivors. Lucky to be alive at all. The dead. Gone for good. There are no more men in this house" (li). The quote represents a heartbreaking reality that the war is lethal and has no remorse for its victims. Another piece of work that reflects similar ideas is Han kung chiu's

drama titled “Ma Chih-yüan”. This drama discusses the Emperor Kao’s great fondness over Wang Zhaojun, one of the four beauties of China at the time. Emperor Kao says, “ever since I met Chao-chün in the Western Palace I have been inebriated by love for her. It steals my senses away and has kept me from attending court for week” (yüan). Kao is infatuated by this beautiful woman, but unfortunately so is Khan, the lone ruler of the north. Khan explains, “recently I sent envoys to offer my allegiance to the Han to ask in return for a Han princess” (yüan). Khan is demanding the princess, Chao-chün, to be sent to marry him in order to maintain peace between the regions. Khan sends another messenger, in which he explains that if Chao-chün is not brought to him he will release his army on the Han Dynasty. The Emperor Kao is faced with a difficult decision, but in the end gives her up to Khan, “I have agreed with everything you have proposed. Why can’t you in this one point follow my desires?” (yüan). Kao agrees to send off the princess peacefully if he gets to personally send her off to Khan. This action of compromise displays the Confucius idea of trying to stop war by all means. Although he felt deeply saddened, he never regretted his decision because his actions to avoid war were to protect his country. Another point to highlight in this drama is that it is based on a true story. It is true that Chao-chün did go with Khan to the Tartar area, but the emperor never had to sacrifice his feelings. The fictitious spin on the story further proves the pre-modern China’s eagerness to share Confucius ideas through their literature.

To conclude, war is a prevalent issue in our global society today. Thousands of people, innocent or guilty, die everyday due to vicious acts. For we cannot end war if we do not embrace a uniform global outlook. In early America, President Roosevelt spoke on one uniform rule just as Zhuangzi expressed the ideal conditions for pre-modern China were also under universal law. Since then, the two regions have strayed from unison thought and now have drastically different

outlooks on war. Early American culture glorified battle and honored their troops while pre-modern Chinese philosophy influenced by Zhuangzi and Confucius birthed the idea that war is a great crime and should be avoided by all means. All in all, war will never stop or be practiced peacefully until all cultures around the world ingrain practices that promote these peaceful ideas.

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