

Course Title	:	The Morality of the Water Margin 水滸傳的道德世界
Course Code	:	GEG1002
Department	:	IELL

Synopsis

The Water Margin (水滸傳 Shui Hu Zhuan) is also translated as the Outlaws of the Marsh. It is a martial arts novel which has over 300 years of age. The novel is generally regarded as one of the four greatest novels of ancient China. It describes how the 36 main characters (out of a total of 108 characters) were driven to become bandits because of poor governance and widespread corruption. These bandits were later pardoned by the emperor and turned into generals and warriors; most of them died fighting battles for the imperial court.

Over the years, there were different interpretations of the moral significance of the actions performed by these characters. However, there is a near consensus that they are “heroes and heroines” - despite the fact that these heroes perform wanton killing, over retribution, in addition to (various forms of) cannibalism and an unconcealed desire for personal wealth and material well-being. This will lead us to wonder why these people deserve the moral appraisals as heroes from generations of Chinese intellectuals and readers. What exactly is the concept of hero or haohan (好漢) in the context of traditional Chinese society?

The aims of this course are twofold: First, by analyzing the scenarios of the novel, I will attempt to unravel the layers of cultural and ethical meanings of the behaviour of these outlaws. They include the tendency to involve innocent friends and family in attributing legal or moral responsibility (zhulian 株連), the comparatively low status of husband-and-wife relation in contrast to brotherhood relation, and the importance of maintaining faithfulness to the emperor, etc. From these investigations, students will gain an in-depth understanding of an important aspect of the great work of Chinese literature.

Second, apart from making use of Chinese philosophical thoughts to explain the scenarios, we will make sense of the heroes' actions from the viewpoint of contemporary virtue ethics. Special attention will be paid to Nietzsche, who, in his classic work *The Genealogy of Morals*, explores the difference between the bourgeois “virtue” of obedience and social cooperation, and the heroic virtue of honesty and the courage to face disorder, complexity and an unpredictable

future. In Nietzsche's work, he also provides an analysis of the meaning of punishment, guilt conscience and violence, which suit the situation of the world depicted in the Water Margin.