
From Returning Home to Returning to the Way: Comparative Philosophy of *Odyssey* and *Li Sao*

Zheng Zhong*

Baoji University of Arts and Science, Baoji 721007, Shaanxi, China

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: Centered on Homer’s *Odyssey* and Qu Yuan’s *Li Sao*, this study reinterprets the “return” motif through a philosophical comparative lens, examining its divergent conceptual frameworks and value systems in Chinese and Western traditions. The *Odyssey* employs the narrative core of nostos (return) to depict heroes maintaining direction amidst temptation, violence, and contingency. Through the “recognition-acknowledgment” mechanism, it restores subject identity and ultimately legitimizes return by clearing transgressors and reconstructing familial-state order. Here, return signifies not merely spatial reintegration but a comprehensive event of identity restoration and social order repair, presupposing the reality’s “restorable” habitability. *Li Sao* elevates return to “returning to the Way” in contexts of exile and disorder: when political communities lose legitimacy, spatial return becomes invalid. Subjects can only preserve integrity through normative inquiry (“seeking up and down”) and moral steadfastness (“though dead nine times, I still do not regret”), presenting a tragic structure of “homeless return.” This reveals the philosophical divergence and complementary value between “return” and “returning to the Way.”

Keywords: Nostos (return to one’s hometown); Dao (the path of life); The *Odyssey*; *Li Sao* (The Lament)

Online publication: October 26, 2025

1. Introduction

“Philosophy is essentially a homesickness—a primal urge to return to one’s roots.” The German poet Novalis profoundly revealed the deep connection between philosophical contemplation and the concept of “return.” The human longing for home and the instinct to return often give rise to profound inquiries into the meaning of existence. At the intersection of literature and philosophy, the narrative of “returning home” has become an eternal theme^[1]. From the dawn of human civilization, two major cultures have produced masterpieces centered on this theme. In the West, Homer’s *The Odyssey* chronicles the hero *Odysseus*’ decade-long journey home after the Trojan War. In the East, Qu Yuan’s *Li Sao* poetically captures the persistent pursuit of the Dao by exiled scholars. While *The Odyssey* ostensibly tells the legend of nostos (homecoming), *Li Sao* expresses the poet’s yearning for the path of return. Yet beneath these two narratives of “return,” rich philosophical questions emerge that share common ground while revealing distinct cultural characteristics.

2. Nostos in the odyssey: the hero's home-coming journey

The *Odyssey* centers on the concept of nostos (return to homeland), framing the hero's glory through his journey back to his homeland and reintegration into normal social life. The word "nostos" appears three times within the first twenty lines of the epic, underscoring the central theme of "return." During the long odyssey after Troy's fall, Odysseus endured a decade of perilous sea voyages and near-death experiences: he faced obstacles from the Cyclops, the Sirens, and the Sea Monster, with some tempting him to forget his homeland while others tried to keep him forever in exile^[2]. Yet, his longing for Ithaca and sense of mission sustained him. He even rejected the immortal promise of eternal life from the goddess Calypso, choosing instead to return to his homeland as a mortal destined for death. This decision highlights the Greek hero's steadfast commitment to earthly home: he would rather forsake divine immortality than abandon his duties as a human, king, and patriarch^[3].

Odysseus' journey home is not merely a geographical return, but a profound rediscovery of self-identity. During the prolonged war years, he served as a valiant and resourceful general in Troy; while adrift at sea, his comrades perished and his identity vanished, leaving him as an anonymous wanderer stripped of social standing. Only by returning to his homeland could he "reclaim his status as king of Ithaca, husband of Penelope, and father of Tlemacos," reasserting his role as a political leader and family patriarch. After his return, Odysseus infiltrated his own court disguised as a beggar, gradually revealing his true identity through childhood scars and archery contests—a process of "subjective restoration": the hero, weathered by trials, was once again recognized by society as himself^[4]. Notably, during his wanderings, Odysseus had used the alias "Anonymous" to deceive the Cyclops, a detail symbolizing the protagonist's ambiguous and lost identity during his exile. It was only upon returning for vengeance that he declared his true name and regained honor. Thus, nostos for Odysseus signifies not just a geographical return to "home," but a profound recovery of self—only within his own civilization and society could he become his complete self^[5].

Odysseus' journey home is rich with metaphysical symbolism. On an existential level, his exile is portrayed as a "third state between life and death." In the epic, Odysseus descends to the underworld to converse with the dead. This journey not only grants him a divine revelation of his homeland but also rekindles his resolve to return. It reveals how unsustainable a life of wandering is—those who remain detached from the human world exist as wandering spirits, neither belonging to the living nor truly dead. Thus, returning to his homeland and the living society becomes crucial for Odysseus: only by reuniting with his family can he escape the liminal state of "neither born nor dead" and reclaim a fully lived existence^[6].

3. The "return road" in "Li Sao": the poet's search for the way

"*Li Sao*" is the first large-scale lyrical epic in the history of Chinese literature. Qu Yuan wrote this poem to express the sorrow and determination of a loyal minister exiled. On the surface, "*Li Sao*" narrates personal misfortunes, but in reality, it embodies the adherence to the "Way" and the indirect expression of an ideal political vision. From a philosophical perspective, the "Way of Return" pursued by Qu Yuan can be understood as a return to the ideal moral principles of the world when there is no Way to follow in reality^[7].

In his poetry, Qu Yuan crafted a lyrical protagonist who steadfastly upheld noble virtues and refused to compromise his principles. The poem begins with his self-narrative of family heritage and ideals of virtuous governance, declaring his unwavering patriotism. It then depicts the era of slanderers and petty critics who persecuted the virtuous^[8]. Despite these adversities, the poet remained resolute, declaring: "What my heart holds dear, I would die nine times without regret." This profoundly reveals how Qu Yuan's identity was rooted in moral ideals: no external coercion could alter his inner convictions, and even death would not betray his original aspirations. Unlike Odysseus, who sought to reclaim his social standing through return, Qu Yuan's self-identity transcended external status (having been exiled and unable to hold office). It manifested in his unwavering commitment to the path of virtue.

The *Li Sao* is rich in fantastical hues, where the poet breaks free from reality's constraints to embark on a spiritual journey of relentless pursuit. Qu Yuan repeatedly employs the imagery of "road" and "path" in his verses: He first declares,

“Though I possess inherent beauty, I must further cultivate my virtues,” expressing his commitment to self-improvement despite his innate virtues. Then he writes, “Guided by the southward gaze,” and “The road is long and arduous, yet I shall seek high and low.” These lines vividly depict the poet’s unwavering spirit in pursuing ideals, undaunted by hardships, and exploring every direction^[9]. Here, the “road” transcends physical geography to become a spiritual path toward truth and ideals. The phrase “high and low” implies that regardless of the heavens or the earth, the poet will persistently seek without yielding. This embodies the concept of returning to the Dao—when the earthly path is lost, one must instead explore the vast universe to find the invisible yet eternal righteous way^[10].

4. Comparison dimensions: subject identity, legitimacy and the habitability of the world

The above analysis shows that the “return home” in the *Odyssey* and the “return to the way” in the *Li Sao* respectively interpret the spiritual course of human seeking belonging from different aspects.

4.1. Subject identity: social role and moral personality

The protagonists in *The Odyssey* and *Li Sao* develop their identities through fundamentally different frameworks. Odysseus’ self-identity is deeply rooted in his social roles and familial bonds: his status as king, husband, and father only solidifies upon returning to his homeland and rejoining his community. During his prolonged journey, he was cut off from his original social network and status, remaining largely “unknown and unrecognized” for much of the time, even resorting to calling himself “an anonymous figure” to survive—a state of existential dislocation. Only when he is once again acknowledged by his wife, children, and servants, and regains control of Ithaca, does his personality achieve true fulfillment^[11].

In contrast, Qu Yuan’s sense of self-identity was primarily rooted in his inner moral character, rather than relying on recognition from the real world. After being exiled and losing his official position, he was isolated from his homeland, yet he did not experience a crisis of self-identity. On the contrary, in “*Li Sao*,” Qu Yuan consistently appears in the first person, strongly positioning himself as a loyal man^[12]. His identity did not require the approval of the rulers and ministers of Chu but was guaranteed by the conscience of heaven and earth and his own integrity. It can be said that the ideal personality in China’s culture emphasizes an inner transcendence, meaning that the value of a person does not depend on their social status but on whether they align with the metaphysical principles of righteousness. It was precisely this inner value that enabled Qu Yuan to endure the years of exile and wandering. Despite lacking the company of like-minded colleagues, he wore fragrant shoes alone, maintained his purity, and linked his personal life with eternal goodness, beauty, and truth, preserving the essence of “I” as “I.”

4.2. Legitimacy of returning home: family and state duties and moral adherence

The legitimacy of Odysseus’ actions differs between the narratives of “returning home” and “returning to the path.” From the perspective of Greek values, his desire to return home is entirely justified and reasonable: as a hero who has been away for years, he has both the duty and the right to return to his homeland, reunite with his family, and reclaim his kingship^[13]. This return aligns with ancient Greek family ethics—reuniting after long separation and enjoying family bliss were considered life’s greatest blessings. As the legitimate ruler of Ithaca, Odysseus has the obligation to return and purge the usurpers to restore normal order to the state. The gods’ attitude further validates his righteousness: Athena assists him in various ways, while Zeus allows him to punish the suitors, demonstrating the gods’ support for the just army in combating the usurpers^[14]. Even when Odysseus employs cunning and violence during his revenge, these actions are morally justified within the epic context. Thus, *Odysseus’* nostos (return) is not only emotionally sympathetic but also ethically justified. Through Odysseus’ story, Greek epics promote the idea that heroes who have left their homeland must return to uphold justice in order to rebuild the destroyed social order, with their actions supported by both societal moral norms and

religious beliefs.

Qu Yuan's "return to the path" was rooted in solid ethical foundations, yet manifested in strikingly different ways. On the surface, he never truly "returned home"—neither recalled by the king nor reinstated in Chu's political arena. Instead, he chose a irreversible path of severing ties with reality. This decisive act, however, became his ultimate defense of higher moral legitimacy. First, in terms of loyalty and patriotism, Qu Yuan embodied the virtue of devotion throughout his life^[15]. He devoted himself to assisting King Huai of Chu and proposed political reforms, only to be exiled due to slanderous officials. After exile, rather than betraying his country, he composed the "*Li Sao*" (The Lament) with profound concern, continuing to serve through poetic satire. From the Confucian ethical perspective since Confucius and Mencius, Qu Yuan fulfilled his duty as a minister with utmost benevolence and righteousness. Second, at a higher moral level, he made a more challenging choice than mere loyalty: when the ruler's path conflicted with righteousness, he chose to uphold justice over blind obedience. This reflects the delicate balance between "loyalty" and "righteousness" in traditional values. In Confucian ideals, true loyalty means not blindly flattering the ruler but courageously offering harsh truths for the nation's long-term stability, even at the risk of offending the emperor. When King Huai fell prey to slander and the state descended into darkness, Qu Yuan knew blunt advice would be futile. Instead of seeking temporary comfort through flattery, he chose to sacrifice himself, transforming his concern for the state into a soul-stirring lament.

4.3. A habitable world: the reconstructed worldly home and the transcendent ideal destination

The narratives of "returning home" and "returning to the path" both point to ultimate destinations, reflecting distinct philosophical beliefs about the habitability of the world. The story of Odysseus concludes with his reintegration into earthly life: after prolonged turmoil, his homeland Ithaca is restored to peace through divine and human efforts, allowing him to share a peaceful daily life with his wife and children. This perfect ending mirrors the ancient Greeks' faith in the real world: even in the wake of war and trauma, as long as justice prevails and order is restored, the human world remains a place worth cherishing and where happiness can be found.

In stark contrast, Qu Yuan in "*Li Sao*" gradually rejects the habitability of the real world, embracing a transcendent vision of spiritual home. Initially, the poet retains hope for his ancestral homeland Chu, recalling past ideals of good governance and wishing the king would heed loyal counsel. He even fantasizes about the Heavenly Emperor ordering the exile of slanderers and the repentance of villains. Yet as the narrative unfolds, he becomes acutely aware of reality's irredeemability: villains retain power, like-minded souls vanish, his talents remain unfulfilled, and the nation's future hangs in the balance. With the lament "No one in the land understands me," Qu Yuan realizes his homeland can no longer serve as his spiritual anchor. He questions: "Why cling to the old capital?"—if born in the wrong era, what remains worth clinging to in this mortal world? This reveals the sorrow of an uninhabitable world. The poet then shifts focus. When the earthly home becomes a "mire where all are drunk except me," and the sole pure soul feels alienated, survival itself becomes exile. Thus, Qu Yuan finds salvation in death, escaping the filth of the present. The latter half of "*Li Sao*" dedicates extensive passages to a fantastical realm—a "habitable paradise" the poet constructs. Free from slander and injustice, it contains fragrant herbs, beautiful women, and wise rulers and virtuous ministers, his longed-for spiritual sanctuary. Yet this utopian Peach Blossom Spring remains unattainable in reality—it exists only in poetic illusion.

5. Conclusion

The nostos in the *Odyssey* and the "return path" in the *Li Sao*, though belonging to different times and genres, both respond to humanity's eternal question of "what constitutes a home." From returning home to retracing the path, they reflect the similarities and differences in philosophical thinking between two ancient civilizations. On one hand, Odysseus and Qu Yuan, as exiles, experience crises and reconstruction of their identities, yearning for and encountering setbacks in the pursuit of justice, and their arduous quest for ultimate fulfillment. Their stories demonstrate the profundity of the proposition that "philosophy is a form of nostalgia"—whether in Greece or China, the impetus for thought often stems

from the pain of losing one's homeland and the longing to reclaim authenticity. On the other hand, these two works also project the distinct spiritual temperaments of Greek and Chinese civilizations: Greek epics achieve their completeness through the hero's triumphant return and the value of human order, as well as the reunion and realization of justice in this life; the Chu Ci of China, on the other hand, allows the wise to lament the world's intolerance, ultimately entrusting their ideals to a higher heavenly order and the afterlife, transforming tragedy into a form of moral immortality.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Ban G, 1962, Book of Han. Zhonghua Book Company.
- [2] Wang Y, 2017, Commentary on the Songs of Chu. Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House.
- [3] Qu Y, Yang YQ, Huang XD, 2019, Li Sao. Tsinghua University Press.
- [4] Yang BJ, 2006, Analects. Zhonghua Book Company.
- [5] Homer, Wang HS, 2015, The Odyssey. People's Literature Publishing House.
- [6] Ye L, 2020, Insights from Odysseus' Homeward Journey in the Odyssey on the Formation of Contemporary Life Values. *Theater House*, (04): 204-205.
- [7] Giermansky VM, Zhang JJ, 2023, Epic Legends of Alpamisi and Homer's Odyssey. *Journal of Inner Mongolia University for Nationalities (Social Sciences Edition)*, (05): 96-109.
- [8] Xiao YZ, 2020, Wealth, Skill and Justice: From Homer's Odyssey to Aristophanes' The God of Wealth. *Foreign Literature*, (01): 81-89.
- [9] Du W, 2019, A Preliminary Analysis of the Character Images in Homer's Odyssey by Penelope. *Young Writers*, (35): 137.
- [10] Lin Y, 2010, Interpretation of the Symbolism of Man and God in the National Spirit of Homer's Epic-The Odyssey. *Anhui Literature (Second Half)*, (06): 63-64.
- [11] Yan M, 2024, "Shen Si" in Qu Yuan's "Li Sao". *Youth Literary Writers*, (14): 164-166.
- [12] Hao M, 2023, Examining Qian Chengzhi's Reception of Qu Yuan's Image through the Lens of "Qu Gu: Li Sao Jing". *Journal of Huaibei Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, (06): 72-79.
- [13] Zhou X, 2023, On Qu Yuan's Moral Personality from the Grandeur of "Li Sao". *Chinese Selected Works (Traditional Culture Teaching and Research)*, (04): 4-6.
- [14] Cheng BX, 2022, A Study on the Inheritance of Li He's Poetry from Qu Yuan's "Li Sao". *Baihua*, (08): 25-28.
- [15] Dong KY, Yan DP, 2022, The Spiritual Breakthrough in Qu Yuan's "Li Sao". *Middle School Chinese Teaching Reference*, (09): 15-16.

Publisher's note

Whoice Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.