

Yearning for a Hero

There is a large but declining population of Taiwanese in Dongguan, mostly from factories set up when labor was cheap and plentiful. I work in a Taiwanese factory, and hang out with my Taiwanese friends often. I also have access to the [notoriously salacious](#) Taiwan media, which I often wish I didn't. Why? Because media influences our thinking, even though we don't like to admit it. So, instead of debunking a myth or dubious product this month, we turn our gaze inward and do some introspection. Judgments can be clouded by emotion, and nothing brings out emotion like a highly charged event. This is such an example, inspired by a conversation with friends.

On Feb 4, 2015, TransAsia flight 235 ran into trouble shortly after takeoff and [plunged into a river](#), clipping a taxi and bridge in the process. In total, 15 people survived and 43 perished, including 28 from mainland China.

The media spin

In the immediate aftermath of a catastrophe, people will naturally look for anything to lessen the pain or divert attention. What people want, is something different to focus on. A silver lining. A hero. After all, it changes the narrative from an outright tragedy to a hero fighting to the end.

In the following days, the Taiwan media pushed the hero angle with reckless abandon. The media praised the pilot for flying along the river, avoiding populated areas, and making it less tragic than it could have been. He was [framed as a hero](#), a saint who gave his life to save others. The general public, eager to shift their focus, gobbled it hook, line, and sinker. Anyone even remotely questioning that narrative quickly experienced the viciousness that only online anonymity can engender.

Did the pilot deserve to be called a hero?

The first point to examine is whether the pilot was at fault to any degree. If pilot error caused the flying tube to inadvertently engage a lakebed, it would take a [Stockholm Syndrome](#)-type of twisted logic to call the pilot a hero. By declaring the pilot a hero, however, Taiwan's media practically precluded the possibility that he was at fault. Evidently, their favorite sport is jumping to conclusions.

The final investigation report is not published yet, but preliminary reports seem to indicate that the pilot might have [turned off the wrong engine](#) (apply palm to face). This two engine plane can fly on one engine, but definitely not with zero. This is sadly reminiscent of the surgeon who [amputated the wrong leg](#).

For argument's sake, let's assume the pilot had no fault whatsoever. The question is, were his actions so extraordinarily courageous and altruistic to qualify him as a hero? Did he go above and beyond what is normally expected or required, and significantly risking personal welfare for the benefit of others?

The pilot seems to have maintained composure in the face of mechanical problems, and flew the plane along a river to minimize collateral damage. Some argue, *that alone* qualifies him as a hero, as a normal person would not be able to. This is fallacious, as a pilot should not be compared to a layperson. By that line of reasoning, a doctor would be a hero for not fainting when he is elbow deep in a patient. And a similar logic applies to prostitutes.

Pilots are trained specifically to handle emergencies; to first stay calm, then aviate, navigate, and communicate. The bar is set high, and we rightfully expect our pilots to meet that standard. Choosing to fly along an open, flat area with emergency landing potential is a basic part of pilot training, based on the [FAA emergency procedure manual](#). This is a no-brainer; any sane person would choose an open river over a highly populated concrete jungle, with or without pilot training. Calling the pilot a hero simply for not committing mass murder cheapens the word and renders it meaningless.

The last reason is a bit more subtle. In the “[trolley problem](#)” moral thought experiment, you see a runaway trolley barreling down the tracks. Tied to the end of the tracks are 5 people, certain to die if no action is taken. There is a lever that can cause the trolley to go down an alternate track, at the end of which lies one person. The moral dilemma is a difficult choice between causing 1 to die through action or 5 to die through inaction.

In this case, the pilot is the decision maker, but in a sad twist, also sitting in the metaphorical trolley. His own life is on the line, which muddies the line between self-preservation and altruism; he is not risking anything more than he already has. I suspect that every reasonable person would do the same out of altruism, if not self-preservation, with few [notable exceptions](#).

To summarize, the pilot should not be called a hero because:

1. He was doing his job (nothing extraordinary)
2. His life was on the line (anatomy preservation)
3. He very possibly was significantly at fault (shut off wrong engine)

Why we love heroes

The love for heroes appears in every culture, and can be [explained](#) by evolutionary psychology. Simply put, we yearn for heroes. Genuine altruism touches upon our innermost sense of morality. It tells an inspiring narrative of fellow beings who voluntarily risk life and limb for others; it triggers the hope that, when the day comes, we ourselves might find the courage to do the same. It is a compelling narrative indeed.

However, looking for a silver lining that isn't there is like forcing an explanation that doesn't fit. Both are emotionally appealing but serve no real purpose, because in the end, a false hero provides no comfort, and a poor excuse does not exculpate.

We would not be human beings if we did not have emotions, and emotions can be manipulated to affect judgment. False narratives affect our judgment by providing an emotional comfort zone, somewhere we can take shelter and recuperate. Although we can never be fully immune against manipulation, as long as we are willing to venture out of that comfort zone, a little skepticism can go a long way.

渴望英雄

在东莞住着一群为数可观但逐渐减少的台湾人，他们主要是跟随者追逐廉价而充裕的劳动力的工厂搬迁而来的。我在台湾工厂工作，也经常与台湾朋友聚会。我也可以接触到因[腥膻味而臭名远](#)

[播](#)的台湾媒体，虽然经常后悔，宁愿接触不到。为什么呢？因为媒体会影响我们的想法，即使我们不愿意承认。因此，这个月我们不检视什么流言或令人怀疑的产品，把目光转向自己，检视自己的想法。判断力会因情绪影响而薄弱，而我们正是要看看勾动情绪的事件是如何蒙蔽我们的判断力。这个例子源于一个朋友间的讨论。

在 2015 年 2 月 4 日，台湾复兴航空 235 班机在起飞后不久发生故障，并在撞到一座桥梁与出租车后[坠毁于基隆河里](#)。有 15 人生还，43 人死亡，死者中包含 28 名中国内地游客。

媒体扭曲

重大灾难发生后，人们自然而然地会想要寻找任何可以减少伤痛或引开注意力的事。他们要的是一个新的角度，新的焦点。一个乌云外面的光环。是了，一个英雄。毕竟，一个英雄可以把故事从纯粹的悲剧改成壮烈成仁的血泪故事。

空难之后的几天，台湾媒体无所忌惮地猛推这个英雄角度。他们对于机长沿着河道飞行，避免市区高楼，减少伤亡的做法大加赞扬。他被媒体造神，[定位成](#)牺牲自己的英雄。急于转移焦点的社会大众，不假思索，全盘接受这个新神。任何对于这个新神有些微怀疑的人，很迅速地感受到只有在匿名网络上才看得到的恶毒。

机长真的称得上是英雄吗？

首先，应该要看看机长有没有任何的疏失。假如因为机长的错误导致这个载人的飞行管和河床打架，那么要称机长为英雄就确实需要有[斯德哥尔摩症候群](#)的扭曲逻辑了。然而台湾媒体直接宣称机长为英雄的行为，就已经摒除了机长有任何疏忽的可能性。未审先判，莫此为甚。

最后的调查报告虽然还没有完成，但是初步勘验的报告似乎指向机长错误地把还在[工作的发动机关掉](#)(请将脸埋于双掌)。这个双发动机的飞机可以用一个发动机飞行，但很确信地不能用零个发动机飞行。这个让我联想到医生[截肢截错腿](#)的悲惨案例。

就算我们假设机长没有任何疏忽，问题是，他的行为真的有超乎常人的勇气及无私，可以称为英雄吗？有超过我们正常工作要求的标准，为他人的福祉置自身安危于不顾吗？

迹象显示机长在面对设备故障时保持冷静，沿着河道飞行，避免造成无谓伤亡。有些人说，这个一般人办不到，所以他是英雄。这是不合理的，因为飞行员不能与一般人相比。按照同样的逻辑，医生手术时在病人体内挖来挖去不会作呕也可以算是英雄了。同理可证，妓女也是。

飞行员的专业训练中针对异常紧急事件的处理有明确要求：首要冷静，再则保持飞行(aviate)，导航(navigate)，通讯(communicate)。最基本的标准就被设定在高空，而且我们也很合理地要求飞行机师达到这个标准。根据美国 [FAA 紧急处理程序手册](#)，在紧急情况下选择在一个空旷平坦，有紧急降落潜质的航道是飞行员的基础训练。其实不论是否有专业训练，任何心智正常的人都会选

择河道，不会选择都市丛林。因为没有刻意把飞机栽进大厦林，谋杀更多无辜群众就称机长为英雄，是对英雄这个词的侮辱。

最后一个理由比较微妙。在一个著名的道德实验“[火车难题](#)”里，有一部火车正冲向绑在铁轨上的 5 个人，如果不做干预，必然会被压扁。在你身边有一个拉杆，可以把火车导向另一个岔路，但在岔路的尽头绑了一个人。这个道德难题是要在因为动作而使一人直接死亡或不动作而使 5 人间接死亡。

在这个案例中，机长就是无奈的决定者，但很不幸的是，他自己也坐在这个火车里。他自己的性命也在线上，使得自我保护和无私的界限被模糊了；他并没有比自己现有的处境冒更多的险。我相信任何合理的人都会这么做，即使不因为无私的心态也会因为自我保护的本能，很少[有例外](#)。

归纳来说一下，机长不应该被称为英雄，因为：

1. 他只是履行他的工作（没有特别英勇）
2. 他自己的生命也受到威胁（自我保护）
3. 他很可能有很大的疏失（关错发动机）

我们为什么喜爱英雄

对英雄的崇拜在每个文化中都有，而且可以用进化心理学来[解释](#)。简而言之，我们渴望英雄。真正的无私触动我们内心深处的道德感。它诉说着一个陌生人会为了别人心甘情愿地冒生命危险的动人故事；它唤醒一个我们沉淀在心底的愿望，也许在某年某日，我们自己也能鼓起勇气当别人的英雄。这是一个难以抗拒的故事。

然而，寻找乌云外不存在的光环就如同编织一个牵强的理由。两者都有短暂的心理满足功能，但实际上没有作用。因为最终，一个虚构的英雄并不能提供任何安慰，而一个牵强的理由也不能脱罪。

没有情感就不是人类，而这些情感可以被操纵来影响判断力。虚假的故事用的就是一个情绪上的避风港，一个我们能撤退的虚拟世界来影响我们的判断力。虽然我们无法完全对情感操控免疫，但只要愿意驶出避风港，些许的存疑就能带来很大的效果。