Who Is The Hero?

In the movie "Hero" the main character Nameless is played by martial arts action star Jet Li. There are basically four important characters: Nameless, Flying Snow, Broken Sword, and the King. All these characters (except the King) are trained warriors/assassins and represent a danger to the Kings life. Nameless appears before the King with the claim of having slain the other assassins to get within striking distance and finish the job of killing him that Broken Sword and Flying Snow started several years prior. The King is universally regarded as a tyrant. His armies slew Namelesses family years ago and have killed many more. It may seem that the so called "Hero" of this movie would be either Nameless or perhaps Broken Sword for his self-sacrificing actions, but I propose that the Hero that is referred to in the title is actually the tyrant King.

During a pivotal scene in the movie Nameless asks of Broken Sword why he didn't kill the King when he had the chance several years ago. Broken Sword later reveals to Nameless, as he is on the way to assassinate the King, that his reason is based on the meaning of a sentence he writes in the sand. He wrote merely the following: "All Under Heaven." At first Nameless does not understand but he later comes to realize that Broken Sword has seen the intentions of the King as an attempt to unite "All Under Heaven." Though the Kings actions at first seem to be a power mad quest to rule over as much of the world as possible he also has many positive sociological aims such as the standardizing of the Chinese language. As Broken Sword puts it: "What is the pain of a few compared to the good of the
many." When concerned with the good of the masses the ends can sometimes justify the means.

Near the end of "Hero" as Nameless reveals to the King why Broken Sword didn't slay him years ago, the King is deeply moved that someone else recognizes his intentions. He turns his back to Nameless and says he can die happy that another understands him. Nameless lunges at the King but stops at the last second from slaying him. Though Nameless showed mercy the King still has him slain to protect the goal of "All Under Heaven." Cruelty is sometimes necessary to protect an ideal. Nameless did not disagree with the Kings decision as he allowed himself to be shot. Outside the palace too Broken Sword gives his life to prove his agreements with the Kings goal. Flying Snow cannot bear to be parted from him and commits suicide also.

So how does all this translate into the tyrant King being the Hero of the movie? The King is the hero of the movie because his actions though seemingly cruel are an attempt to bring peace and unity to the world. Even his assassins see him as an honorable man and stop before slaying him. The King is the hero because despite being hated and reviled he still stands for what he believes in. The other characters in the movie gave their deaths to aid in his cause but the King gives his life for the cause. That is the real definition of what a hero is.