

A Tentative Analysis of Difference of Revenge Between Chinese and Western Classical Literature: In the Case of *Hamlet* and *The Orphan of Zhao*

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Received 18 July 2016; accepted 4 September 2016
Published online 26 October 2016

Abstract

Revenge is a cultural phenomenon that almost prevails in the various nationality ethics. There are many tragic works with the theme of revenge in Chinese and Western literature. The tragedy of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the drama of Ji Junxiang's *The Orphan of Zhao* in the Yuan Dynasty are outstanding representatives of the classical Western and Chinese tragedies with common theme of revenge.

Although Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Ji Junxiang's *The Orphan of Zhao* have the same revenge theme, people are more aware of big differences about the theme, tragedy aesthetics and cultural backgrounds, which differentiate the periods of social development, cultural traditions, national aesthetic awareness, historical cultural backgrounds and other aspects. This paper will employ the Parallelism Methodology to compare these two tragedies from four aspects, including the tragic theme, tragic figure, tragic conflict, and tragic ending. The purposes of this paper are to help readers gain a deeper understanding of characteristics and significance of these two kinds of tragedies and to delve into the effect of cultural background of literary works to explore some common laws about development of all national literature.

Key words: *Hamlet*; *The Orphan of Zhao*; Parallelism methodology

Ding, A. L. (2016). A Tentative Analysis of Difference of Revenge Between Chinese and Western Classical Literature: In the Case of *Hamlet* and *The Orphan of Zhao*. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 12(10), 52-57. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/cc/article/view/8938>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8938>

INTRODUCTION

The river of Chinese and western tragedies runs a long course from a remote source. There are many great writers as well as tragedies with their own characteristics. Throughout history of Chinese and western tragedies, Shakespeare is one of the greatest dramatists in renaissance time in England, while Ji Junxiang is a famous playwright in the Yuan Dynasty of China. *Hamlet* and *The Orphan of Zhao* are their classics respectively.

Hamlet is a British work of brilliant Shakespeare. This masterpiece finished writing during the later part of Renaissance in Europe. It is in a special period that country was going to collapse. During the early time of the 17th century, the country was undergoing a generational power shift, which directly influenced every aspect of the society. It was a regime change between Queen Elizabeth I and James I.

Ji Junxiang wrote the drama *The Orphan of Zhao* in the 13th century in Yuan Dynasty. At that time the backward China was in imperial times. The life of people was full of backwardness of production technology, feudal exploitation and frequent occurrence of natural disasters. Loyalty is the theme of the history play, *The Orphan of Zhao*, which wrote in the second half of the 13th century. In it, the hero sacrifices his son to save the life of young Zhao so that Zhao can survive, then he revenges the death of his family. It is the first Chinese play known in Europe.

From the perspective of parallelism study, the author will manage to find out the common literature value and cultural diversities between *Hamlet* and *The Orphan of Zhao* to explore the diversities between the literary traditions of China and western countries.

This paper will be divided into four parts. First part makes a main introduction of *Hamlet* and *The Orphan of Zhao* and the structure of the paper. Second part will introduce the research backgrounds at home and abroad and analyze theory of this paper, that is, parallelism

methodology. Third part will employ the parallelism methodology to compare these two tragedies from four aspects, including the tragic theme, tragic figure, tragic conflict and tragic ending. Last part is the conclusion of the paper.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 The Research Backgrounds at Home and Abroad

The scholars have been doing researches about *Hamlet* unceasingly since it was presented to the public. Delay and motivation of revenge are the most scholars' focus on their researches. Coleridge believes that the reason for Hamlet's delaying the revenge for his father is just his indecision, which is due to the careful consideration over the mind and thinking habits. Coleridge says that: "He is a man living in meditation, called upon to act by every motive and divine yet doing nothing but resolve." Goethe, the great Germany writer, thinks it is Hamlet's delay that attributes to his weakness in the 18th century. Hazlitt also holds the same thought that Hamlet does not act decisively, but likes to refine his thoughts. However, Russian critic Anikst doesn't think so. He praises Hamlet's inaction, because he thinks Hamlet will accomplish great achievements. Chinese scholars have done a lot of deep researches about *Hamlet* and got many fruitful research results from the study. Zhang Chong is different from other scholars. He explains Hamlet's delay from the political, social, religious and ethical aspects through analyzing his soliloquies.

A Jesuit missionary first introduced *The Orphan of Zhao* to Paris. He worked in China at that time and published a letter without signature on the Mercury magazine, of which a few sections had been translated into French. Then *The Orphan of Zhao* was translated into English and French, and was spread widely in Europe. However, its adoption is the main resource for researchers at abroad to study. Many commentators such as Feng Zefli, Fei Bingxun believe that *The Orphan of Zhao* is a revenge tragedy that contains nature justice. There are also some scholars considering that it includes the national ideas of against the Yuan Dynasty and supporting the Song Dynasty.

The researches about the comparative study between these two works, the author only finds one book refers to this area, which was written by Xiao Zhang Yang (1996, p.26) among the foreign countries. Huang Jichao also wrote a master's thesis about these two works from a point of cultural backgrounds in May 2012.

1.2 Parallelism Methodology

The so-called parallelism methodology refers to the analogy or contrast between of those writers and literary works from different nations which are lack the direct

connection, but has great comparability. With the analyses of the similarities and differences between them, a more valuable conclusion can be generalized.

Theoretical premise of Parallelism methodology is that human beings have many things in common, such as their emotion, psychological and mental structure, living needs, etc.. It focuses on the "nature of literary" and aesthetic value in the works. In this way, the literary works reflect these things that have some similarities and commonalities beyond the limit of space and time. It also gives many similar aesthetic standards for literature appreciation and the basis for the "comparability". Through using the parallelism methodology to study literary works from different nations, we could further deepen our understandings of the works to explore more deeply their aesthetic value and common law so as to better grasp their unique characterizations.

From the perspective of parallelism study, the author will manage to find out the common literature value and cultural diversities between *Hamlet* and *The Orphan of Zhao* to explore the diversities between the literary traditions of China and western countries. Before doing the parallel researches about two works, it is necessary for us to establish the comparability of them, that is to say, we must find out the differences between the two works first because the two works come from two different countries and times.

2. A TENTATIVE ANALYSIS OF DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HAMLET AND THE ORPHAN OF ZHAO

2.1 The Comparison of Tragic Theme

Hamlet and *The Orphan of Zhao* are both historical revenge stories. However, tragic themes of two works reflect different social consciousness and ideological trend.

What *Hamlet* shows is analysis of existing problem in terms of humanity. *Hamlet* is based on the medieval Denmark that the reality of England in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The story takes place in the situation in which feudalism was falling apart while capitalism was rising. The collision of feudalism and capitalism explode into all kinds of problems. On the one hand, the feudal autocracy ruling further strengthens and already shows its decay and approaching death; On the other hand, capitalists accelerate the speed of primitive accumulation for the deprivation of the peasants. The great Renaissance had brought into the Europe a new era—the age for people to wake up. People have shaken faith in God under one banner of personality emancipation, leading to thoughts of liberation. *Hamlet* embodies deep thinking and aesthetic review of author under this kind of great time background. Claudius is an extreme egoist who tries to sell his soul for

personal gain; Hamlet is a rational performer and skeptic. He has progressive ideas and courage to challenge the old society and the system which have been revealed in the work. Therefore, the struggle between the two sides and inner conflict run through the plot of the whole tragedy, which shows the spirit of introspection. The book deeply exposes the social evils. The kindness, love, virtue and other good things in life have changed into evils. Hamlet pretends to contend with hideous society. Finally, he died with evil forces. *Hamlet* shows the humanistic thought of bourgeoisie. His conflict reflects the struggle between humanist of bourgeoisie and evil forces of the feudal class. So *Hamlet* is a tragic work of criticism of humanity.

What *The Orphan of Zhao* shows is morality and ethics. *The Orphan of Zhao* develops the plots in the struggle between the good and evil. The whole story criticizes the evil and treacherous and praises loyalty and filial piety. The theme of *The Orphan of Zhao* contains distinguishing features, such as political struggle and class contradiction in the Yuan dynasty because it is written in this period. Tu Anjia killed the Zhao family even the baby for his own selfish interests. His savage acts evoked strong opposition of people with a conscience. Thus there is a couple of irreconcilable conflict. It performs a solemn tragedy: Cheng Ying repays the Zhao for their kindness, saved the baby, sacrificed him to save mortal beings, sacrificed his son and brought up the orphan. Author describes the contradiction and conflict in a feudal loyal perspective. Then there are heroic deeds of Cheng Ying and orphan's determination to avenge because this is his duty from which he has no choice and can not escape. *The Orphan of Zhao* shows the traditional virtue of favoring justice and honesty and hating evil and fraudulence through the conflicts between the good and evil. It is a criticism of feudal ethics, meanwhile, reflecting national struggle of Yuan Dynasty. Ji Junxiang lived in the Yuan dynasty, which is a special unified period. However, the grand unification was under the brutal reign of the ruler and people were no longer free. Ji Junxiang's work intensively reflects massacre of Yuan Dynasty and the struggle between the good and evil. It is a pity that Chinese have become stupidly loyal and still obeyed the rule. The ruled hardly tried to break the social system for several thousand years, which is reflected in the literature.

Hamlet reflects two class conflicts that the bourgeoisie has no capacity to overturn the feudal system. So the tragedy of hamlet is not only a tragedy of individual but the time and the bourgeoisie humanism that has the deep social meaning and the tendency of the day. Revenge of *The Orphan of Zhao* has the probabilities of history according to the times in which they lived. This is the struggle between loyal officials

and treacherous ones, which are in the fundamental interests of the ruling class.

2.2 The Comparison of Tragic Figure

2.2.1 Character Depiction

Many figures in *Hamlet* are multifaceted performances, such as hamlet's double willpower. He hates the real conspiracy, but he is reluctant to accept it and avoid the harsh reality; he has a deep-seated hatred and avenges his father's death, but he cannot make up his mind due to his education of humanism and rational thinking; he strives to take action for revenge but he has no end of misgivings; he is a brave humanism fighter but a melancholy prince who is suffering a huge spiritual crisis. The psychology with ambivalence shows us a man with a sound mind, who is noble but humble, brave but irresolute. If the western literature focuses on character depiction, Chinese literature regards promoting and praising a spirit as important. So it will become the value criterion of the Chinese nation.

Protagonist in *The Orphan of Zhao* is sharp and innocent, so writer shows perfect personality traits of protagonist from a social or moral judgments perspective, while protagonist in *Hamlet* is shown by describing the complexity and diversity of personality traits. Characterization in *The Orphan of Zhao* has the obvious tendency of stereotyping the character. The figure tends to have a single character, such as a treacherous court official, a heroic hanger-on of an aristocrat, a man who is warm and loyal to friends and a protagonist who sees everything as black and white. The character of every figure is fixed to be a positive character or negative character. Writer makes it a typical example to take the personality traits to the extreme. For example, Cheng Ying is an incarnation of loyalty and a representative of justice with an innocent and distinct personality. He is kind, brave and endowed with the spirit of self-sacrifice. It is an extremely tough choice for him to make protect the orphan, serve faithfully in the country or protect his son. Cheng Ying took on the huge risks that the whole clan is implicated when he commits a crime in the ethical crevice of intension and conflict. He ensconced the orphan in the medical kit to escape the heavily guarded house. He cast himself on the Tu Anjia's house, endured humiliation and disgrace and raised the orphan for over 20 years. He had the enormous pressure and his entire body and mind was withstanding the huge energy suffering. Finally, he adhered to the highest ethical standards at the cost of sacrificing himself by going through the misery over and over again and getting away from the suffering.

2.2.2 Social Status of Figure

The figures in classic Western tragedy are largely king, duke and so on, while common people only appear in the comedy. There are a few special arguments that Aristotle has offered in the *poetics*. He thinks the ideal figure

is the one who is the highly privileged and prominent between the extreme perfect and common people. The protagonist in *Hamlet* is a noble prince because the style of Western tragedy is sublime, which values heroic spirit. Only a person from a very respectable family is allowed to be a protagonist in the tragedy. Only a noble cause can be the source material of tragedy. Prometheus, King Oedipus in the ancient Greek tragedy and protagonists in the Shakespeare's works are all in a senior position such as king and general. These protagonists will deeply touch the audience when they suffer the misfortunes due to their higher status. The sufferings and death will have more touching effects.

The figure in Chinese tragedy is always a person with the characteristics of kindness and innocence. Protagonist in the tragedy *The Orphan of Zhao* is not the orphan Zhao who has a blood feud but the officials led by the doctor Cheng Ying who is loyal to their sovereign and sacrifice their life to save the orphan. In the theory of Chinese traditional tragedy, the figure can be anyone and the choice of figure is unlimited. It can be an emperor, a general as well as the common people. The misfortunes of the weak and the innocent may induce sympathy more readily. So the styles of Chinese tragedy are weak and delicate as a whole. They are often content to be reactive in the relationships and place themselves unreservedly in evil's power. Because the Chinese tragedy has the unreservedly moral purpose and the ruling class needs it to educate the ruled, protagonists in the traditional Chinese tragedy are largely innocent people, their perfect character and morals make them an embodiment of a certain ethic. Cheng Ying is an example of those figures.

2.3 The Comparison of Tragic Conflict

Hamlet is a personality tragedy in the center of personality. In the works of Shakespeare, having high ethical and moral standards is not the only idea to express. There is more complicated content besides the tragedy root of the conflict between the good and evil, which is mainly embedded in the complicated human nature caused by the certain personality traits of the tragedy character. Hamlet is not satisfied with individual revenge in the play of *Hamlet*. He thinks it is his responsibility to disclose the deepest root and deal with the fundamental problem. His revenge is a disavowal of the whole old social orders. However, he, as a humanist, combines individual revenge with social benefit. First he puts the fact that whether his uncle killed his father and thinks what's the harm if it is not the truth and what he should or should not do if it is the truth.

It can demonstrate Hamlet's character building process in two ways.

From external factors, the contest occurs between two sides with a great disparity in strength, and the force of evil led by Claudius owns that match-up over the years. As such Hamlet endowed the character of a madman to delay

for finding the best time to avenge. At the same time, Hamlet is portrayed as a prudent and lenient character. The Act 3 scene 3 is the best opportunity for Hamlet to kill Claudius when he is praying and repenting through the ideological struggle of pain and sufferings. Hamlet makes a firm decision for revenge, and then hesitates. Finally he uses "wait for a better time" as an excuse for giving up the best opportunity. The Hamlet's decision has relation with the western revenge ideas that stress breaking the spirit rather than the body, which shows that Hamlet has tolerance, generosity and love. Though Claudius killed his father and still possesses the throne, Hamlet sees the inclination to goodness of Claudius and overflows with the milk of human kindness.

From internal factors, Hamlet's hesitation is externalization of internal awareness of doubt. His first filter is love. He witnesses his empress mother remarrying his uncle, the present king, after his father's death in less than a month. He is not ready for the sudden change at all, falls into deep despair and has a radical idea "frailty, thy name is woman", which suspect the feminine purity and virginity, noble love, and perfectness of human nature. If his empress mother's remarry is the beginning of Hamlet's doubting the love, Ophelia's refusing to love and temptation abetted by the present king further deepen his distrust and desperate love. Hamlet cast doubt upon the ghost of his father. When Horatio and other people told him that the ghost of his father had appeared, the idea of doubt dawned on him. When he saw the ghost of his father with his own eyes and knew the cause of death, he didn't believe what he saw. Finally, Hamlet believed that the ghost of his father said of the present king's gaffe when seeing a play. The hard realities and fickleness of the world made him distrust the humanity even self. Since Hamlet has seen his father's ghost, he always thought of the dead father and commitment that he made. He became sadder each day. He was not a young, merry prince as he used to be. As a merry prince who had a good fantasy for humanity with a humanitarian educational background, he offered enthusiastic praise to grace and beauty of humanity. But the hard realities made him become disillusioned about the life and he began to doubt and rethink the humanity, and then recognized the ugliness human nature.

The Orphan of Zhao is a social tragedy in the center of stories. The conflict in *The Orphan of Zhao* is not because the tragedy character itself has some failings to cause the tragedy, but between the tragedy characters and the forces of evil. Justice may be done by punishing the forces of evil. An atmosphere of intensity and thrill pervades the fight between Zhao Dun and Tu Anjia. Cheng Ying fights against traitor Tu Anjia to protect the orphan and other kids in the country. The conflict in *The Orphan of Zhao* has definite critical properties, becoming the only contradiction in the play. The chivalrous person and loyal minister's fight bravely, fear no sacrifice, advance wave

upon wave of the avenging and wipe out the enemies. Their stirring events become a major part of the play.

Since there are differences upon traditional custom, social regulations and legal ethics, the Chinese literature was not fully identical with the west literature on the theme of revenge. The literature on revenge has recorded the moving and tragic scene of personal struggle and social experience in the history. The tragic conflicts of Guan Hanqing are not expressed in certain tragic figure but the historical course of justice strength winning over evil force. Chinese tragic figures are perfect morally for any flaws. They make no mistakes, not providing a vital role in the formation and conflict of tragedy even if they are wrong sometimes. Because the conflict this is going to create is the struggle between good and evil. That is to say, the tragic conflict of Guan Hanqing is the story of heroes in exterior conflict rather than the tragic figure's own interior conflict. Let his exterior conflict to be the mirror of the protagonist's own interior conflict and his own strength against his own weakness.

Hamlet reflects protagonist's intrapsychic conflict. The western culture emphasizes conflicting to witness a harmonious scene. Westerner displays a rebellious spirit in the face of the suffering. *The Orphan of Zhao* reflects the contradiction and conflict between loyal court officials and treacherous court officials. However, the conflict will be reconciled due to the doctrine of being mean in practice.

2.4 The Comparison of Tragic Ending

The ending of *Hamlet* is disastrous. He was stabbed to the death by a poisonous sword. His mother died from doing the mistake drinking poisonous wine. When hamlet knew the truth, he assassinated the present king and was poisoned to death. In the end, the orphan of Zhao has grown up and Cheng Ying told the orphan the whole thing more than 20 years ago when the time was right. The orphan was filled with indignation and avenged his family immediately. Finally treacherous court official Tu Anjia received a just punishment which he deserved. The Zhao family restored the title and Cheng Ying gained his reward. The people who sacrificed for Zhao family were to be commended.

The different endings between Chinese and Western tragedies have following three reasons. Firstly, each has different value orientation. The ancient Chinese tragedy presses moral educational effect, which is indoctrination. The main content of indoctrination is loyalty and righteousness spirit. The essence of tragedy is stable social order. So it spreads the ideas of "a royal and righteous man should be rewarded" to further strengthen the despotic feudalism. What western tragedy advocates is affectional purification. Good person's suffering can cause fear and pity of the audience, focusing on misfortune of figure's character weakness. The essence of tragedy is concerned for living condition of human

beings. In addition, Chinese focus more on collectivism and its power while the western focus more on the individualism and its power. It has a lot to do with what kind of context the author's writing in. One is a work in the feudal autocratic monarchy; the other is that of the renaissance. The former contains the human desire while the latter hunts for personality liberalization. Hamlet is a humanist who is free from prejudice and superstition, what he thinks most is his country because he knows what a ruthless and tyrannical king means to the country.

Secondly, China and the West have different national aesthetic psychologies. National culture of China is optimistic culture. Chinese believe that virtue is always rewarded and evil punished. The spirit of optimism is dominant in Chinese aesthetic psychology. The potential aesthetic psychology requires a happy ending in drama writing. Dramatist creates a happy ending to meet the aesthetic delight of people and wants it to come to its grand finale. The western culture is a quilt culture due to the ideas of original sin and redemption in Christian culture. The ideas of original sin and redemption make death a magnanimous act with a spirit of sacrifice, which thinks one's soul, can be saved after death. The aesthetic taste is the reason why westerner like the tragedy with a sad ending of great man's death and the good things' destroy.

Thirdly, it reflects different tragic views in Chinese and Western cultures. Western society has the tradition that emphasizes commercial. Its national psychology includes the spirit of venture, contend and exploration that stress individual, benefit and prosperity. The humanism ideas that Renaissance brings about engender a value of individualism and individual personality and dignity. Individual is the base and the starting point of society and strives for the interests of the individual. China emphasizes agricultural economy of self-sufficiency. It can maintain society justice and strives for society and others. A closed society advocates self-love, self-respect and the idea of "put up with poverty and enjoying suffering". Therefore, the western produces the tragic ideas that regard the tenacious struggles and oppression of personal destiny as beauty, While China produces the tragic ideas that regard loyalty, filial piety, chastity, righteousness and spirit of self-sacrifice as beauty. The Chinese tragedy is an ethical culture. The spirit of punishing the evil and praising the good leads people to build the confidence to defeat the enemy. The western tragedy is a philosophic culture. It is prospect of life significance that gives up wicked self and dirty soul. The Chinese tragedy denies from the outside, the force of evil will not repent him. The western tragedy denies from the inside, tragic figure will repent himself to disclose and criticize the wickedness. Chinese tragic figure is perfect, unifying the whole story by denying and refusing the wicked.

The revenge of the orphan of Zhao has the people's support; his revenge is a part of rebellious spirit of the oppressed. Hamlet steps further away from merging with everything: friends, his family and his love due to his revenge plan. He has become an independent warrior who is walking on the road of avenging his father's death without support and understanding.

CONCLUSION

By comparing and analyzing two tragedies, *Hamlet* and *The Orphan of Zhao*, the author has some findings. The similarity between two tragedies is the theme which describes revenge. The differences between two tragedies are tragic theme, tragic figure, tragic conflict and tragic ending. As for tragic theme, *Hamlet* reflects humanity while *The Orphan of Zhao* reflects morality and ethics. When it comes to tragic figure, they are different in character depiction and social status. The figures in Hamlet are multifaceted performances, but the figures in *The Orphan of Zhao* are sharp and innocent. The social status of figures in Hamlet is noble, such as king, duke and so on. The social status of figures in *The Orphan of Zhao* is common. Referring to tragic conflict, *Hamlet* is a personality tragedy in the center of personality while *The Orphan of Zhao* is a social tragedy in the center of stories. The endings of two tragedies indicate the differences in value orientation, national aesthetic psychologies and tragic views. The reasons why they are so different are historical period writers live in, cultural tradition, national aesthetic consciousness, social development degree and other aspects.

The author uses parallelism methodology to compare these two tragedies, whose purposes are to gain a deep understanding of features and significance of two tragedies, explore impacts of culture backgrounds on literary works and different value orientation rather

than to show the superiority of one tragedy over the other or one culture over the other. This paper shows that two tragedies are both excellent works formed by different ideas, with their own merits and demerits. They both have irreplaceable charm that they have different internal meanings, which mean that they surpass the simple revenge plays to become one of the tragedy representatives between the western world and China. All in all, when we appreciate classical tragedies of Chinese and western works, we, guided by scientific tragic theories and proper background culture, should start from national culture rather than make great efforts to go after cultures of the western world and China, or else we will lose cultural values of our national tragedies.

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