

# A comparative study of Chinese and Western tragedies——Take “The Orphan of Zhao” and “The Orphan of China” as examples

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## Abstract:

The miscellaneous opera Orphan Zhao, written by the Chinese Yuan Dynasty opera singer Ji Junxiang, has undergone a long period of circulation and adaptation. The work contains the traditional Confucian moral spirit and the values of advising the good and punishing the bad influencing the French writer Voltaire to write Orphans of China, which promoted the exchange of Chinese and Western cultures and the spread of the Chinese culture to the rest of the world. These two classic literary works reflect the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western cultures behind them. This paper uses the comparative research method to study these two works, based on cross-cultural theory, combining the texts of the two works, analysing the cultural differences from collectivism and individualism, the change of antagonists, dissecting the causes of the cultural differences, and analysing the cultural similarities from the comparison of Confucian morality and the values of good and evil.

**Keywords:** The Orphan of Zhao, The Chinese Orphan, A Comparative Study,

## 1. Introduction

“Whether there is a tragedy in China” has been a topic debated by many scholars. The Western tragedy theory holds that Chinese tragedies can not be considered as tragedies in the strict sense because they always have a “reunion” ending in the end, rather than a complete tragedy like Western heroes. Indeed, that the Western tragedy originated earlier than the Eastern tragedy, and its textual richness and theoretical completeness are slightly more than that of the Eastern tragedy. However, it is undeniable that the Chinese people have created many excellent tragic literary works in their daily labor practice, such as Dou E Yuan and The Orphan of Zhao, among which the Orphan of Zhao was introduced into Europe during the period of European Enlightenment. It was adapted into The Orphan of China by Voltaire, a thinker of enlightenment, and was highly praised. Based on previous studies, this paper will take the contrast between Zhao’s Orphan and China’s Orphan as the starting point to make an in-depth interpretation. Using the method of parallel comparison, a cross-culture comparative study of the two works is carried out from various aspects, to reveal the differences and similarities between Chinese and Western tragic works. It should be pointed out that the comparison made in this paper is not to determine which is higher or lower or worse in Chinese and Western tragedies, but to distinguish each other’s characteristics, find the differences in the output of works in different cultural contexts, and promote mutual

understanding, mutual exchange and mutual reference between Chinese culture and Western culture.

## 2. Adaptation of The Orphan of Zhao in Europe

In 1698, the French Jesuit Joseph Marie de Prémare (1674-1736) came to China and lived there for 38 years, during which time he was imbued with Chinese culture and became greatly interested in it. After reading The Orphan of Zhao, he was impressed by this masterpiece which embodied the spirit of the Chinese nation and was determined to translate it and send it to Europe. In translating The Orphan of Zhao, Marusset took into account the reading ability of French readers at the time, streamlining the script but retaining the core concepts of Chinese culture conveyed in the play.

The publication of The Orphan of Zhao attracted a great deal of attention in the 18th century, a time of “China fever”, when many advanced thinkers were deeply interested in Chinese culture. After reading the play, Voltaire, the leader of the Enlightenment, adapted the story twice, changing the setting to Genghis Khan leading the Mongol army into the Middle Kingdom, and the orphans were changed to descendants of the royal family. In order to save the orphans, Zang Ti (Zamti), a loyal official in the play, convinces his wife that he is ready to sacrifice their biological child to die in place of the imperial son. In the end, Genghis Khan is so moved by the virtues of stead-

fastness and self-sacrifice demonstrated by Zamti and his wife, Idami, that he finally abandons his intention to kill the orphan. Voltaire devised such a plot in which the conqueror is subjugated by civilisation, on the one hand from his knowledge of Chinese history, and on the other hand in order to infuse the play with the idea of Enlightenment, to preach the triumph of civilisation over barbarism, and to transmit the spirit of benevolence and love. In the preface to *The Chinese Orphan*, Voltaire declared unmistakably that he wanted to use this “morality play in five acts” to “boldly teach the morality of Confucius” on the European stage. [1] At the end of the play, when Genghis Khan is asked what transformed him and made him renounce barbaric slaughter, he replies, “Your morality.” [2] In other words, Voltaire ingeniously made the barbaric conqueror lay down his butcher’s knife because he was inspired by the spirit of advanced civilisation, thus embodying the leading role of morality and ethics for human society to get rid of obscurantism and move towards progress.

### **3. The difference: Individualism and collectivism.**

In the long process of dissemination of a literary work, it is often infused with the spirit and regional characteristics of the era in which the adaptor lives. In *The Orphan of Zhao*, the two works were produced in different cultural backgrounds and naturally have different spirits. Traditional Chinese culture is a typical agricultural culture centred on patriarchy and the family, and is therefore strongly collectivist; while Western culture promotes openness and freedom, and is centred on individual values. Therefore, the difference between collectivism and individualism can be reflected in many episodes of *Orphan Zhao* and *Chinese Orphans*, such as the performance after “saving the orphans”, the reaction to the imminent loss of their parents and children, in *Orphan Zhao*, although Cheng Ying is sad, but under the collectivist values, he can only cry out in pain and lament the injustice of fate; in the story of Tu Gan Jia, who ordered that if he did not find any more orphans, he would not be able to save them. When Tu Shuan Jia ordered to kill all the children of the same age in the country if Zhao’s orphans were not found, Cheng Ying gave up his personal safety in front of the children of the country and identified himself with the society as a big collective, giving up his own son to protect the children of the country. This spirit of self-sacrifice and selflessness reflects the values of collectivism.

On the other hand, Zangtie, treats “saving orphans” as a task, believing that reason is more important to the individual than to the relationship, and that the fulfilment of the task is sacred, saying: “I have cut off my love and given up my son, too unfortunate father! I have heard too kindly the heart cry out. God! Cover up the wounds of my heart! “Ida Mae, fulfilling the duties of a mother,

and at the same time, as an independent self, when she hears that Zangtie is going to take the child in the place of the Emperor’s orphan to death, she resolutely opposes it, “Will your rescue work? People don’t want your son, but you are going to sacrifice him. How could you kill your own son?” [1] In summary, in Ji Junxiang’s *The Orphan of Zhao*, Confucian culture is deeply reflected in the characters’ words and actions in the characters’ words and actions. In order to achieve the goal of saving the orphans, Cheng Ying and the main characters use their lives and strong will to fulfil their mission. In Voltaire’s *The Chinese Orphan*, Idami and Zangtie focus more on immediate benefits and on taking responsibility for society.

In addition, at that time, France was shrouded under the rule of the Church, the king’s power continued to decline, and people’s thoughts were forbidden to attack the reality, thus Voltaire rewrote the image of the villain as well. Voltaire set up the character of Turgid as an emperor, Genghis Khan. Genghis Khan as a Mongolian king, from the initial barbarism embodied in the fight to see Ida Mae’s tenderness and affection, and finally by Zhang Tigui couple of probation and transformed into a full of benevolence and morality of the gentleman - this transformation process is undoubtedly in the expression of Voltaire’s enlightenment ideas. “The things which the Chinese understand most deeply, cultivate most carefully, and endeavour to perfect are morality and law. A son or daughter honouring his father is the foundation of a nation ..... while the emperor is the father of a nation. “Voltaire hoped that the French emperor would be as sacrosanct as his father, and that kingship would be revitalised and the power of the Church suppressed.

*The Orphan of Zhao* focuses on the life-and-death struggle between the good and the evil through the tragic figure of Tu Shuanjia, so as to glorify the invincible power of justice. On the other hand, “*The Chinese Orphan*”, due to the transformation of the tragic figure of Genghis Khan, highlights the contradiction between love and reason, and praises the great power of morality in reason. The tragic hero is put to the test in the contradiction between emotion and reason, so that his reason can overcome his emotion. Thus, Genghis Khan, the historical hero, was transformed from a murderer into a rational king. He expressed many Enlightenment ideas and became the spokesman of Voltaire. On the other hand, Tu Shuanjia in *Zhao* always writes according to his feelings and persecutes the innocent to fulfil his selfish desires, he is an irrational antagonist.

### **4. The same: Confucian morality and The value of the triumph of good over evil**

The protagonists in the *Chinese Orphan* all start from themselves and make decisions that benefit them Similar-

ities: Both novels affirm Confucian ethics. From the perspective of Confucian moral culture, *The Orphan of Zhao* contains the moral spirit and cultural spirit of the Chinese people to punish evil and promote good. In Ji Junxiang's *Orphan of Zhao*, Cheng Ying's Confucian moral values with "benevolence" and "righteousness" as the core accomplish the mission of saving orphans. When explaining why he needed to save these children, Cheng Ying said: "It is to repay the kindness, why I should explain?" The characters in Voltaire's *Chinese Orphan* also shine with the light of traditional Confucian virtues. It vividly reveals a brand new interpersonal relationship and a brand new moral concept, a Confucian moral concept based on benevolence, to the French people who are eager to understand their own social values and seek new social and religious patterns. For example, Zang Tihuai said to IDA Mei: "You do not have the love of mother and son, but you have the justice of king and minister first. The righteousness of the king and minister is more important than the kindness of the father; I should sacrifice everything to serve the king and the country in a time of danger. I gave birth to this child, so it is nothing more than a prince." Both works promote Confucian culture as an important tool to educate the world.

The values of the victory of good over evil: Cheng Ying in "*Zhao's Orphan*" is a grass doctor, although he comes from a humble background, he is the embodiment of justice, with the qualities of forgetting life and death, helping the needy, loyalty and benevolence. Han Ju, Gongsun Pestle and others, as righteous men who "saved orphans", finally defeated the evil Tu Anjia, reflecting the values of justice defeating evil. In the work, there is an obvious emotional orientation to Tu Anjia, and he uses Han Ju's mouth to say, "Tu Anjia, you are all like you who damage Zhongliang, when is it!" [4] Finally, Tu Anjia was also sentenced to death, and their subsequent fate reflected the author's values of the triumph of justice over evil. Voltaire also has the values of the triumph of good over evil in "*The Chinese Orphan*". Idame firmly believes that good will eventually triumph over evil, that the survival of the nation is only bad luck, and that people's faith cannot be destroyed; With a righteous heart and no fear of evil, Zang Ti faced the martyrdom of the emperor and said: "Death, only sinners are afraid, but the unfortunate pursue it, and the brave can despise it even more, so they can be generous; The sage cultivates himself to save his life, so he can calmly serve righteousness." [5] Voltaire criticized the embodiment of evil represented by Genghis Khan, and the tortured Zang Ti and Itami sympathized, and finally Genghis Khan was also touched by justice, and justice triumphed over evil.

## 5. Conclusion

As a classic case in the history of Chinese literature transmitted to the West, the story of "*The Orphan of Zhao*" brings us thinking in many ways. From the spiritual point of view, "Chinese stories" not only encompass literature, but also accumulate a wealth of moral ethics and political and historical implications, condensing the Chinese nation's ideas and spiritual temperament. Although the "Chinese stories" adapted from Western literature are influenced by contemporary western political, economic, cultural and other factors, reflecting different western understandings of Chinese culture from the perspective of others, they disseminate Chinese values and serve as an important means for Chinese culture to go global, as well as an important link for exchanges and mutual learning between Chinese and Western civilizations. A parallel study of Chinese and Western tragedies shows that although they are the tragic cultures of different peoples, they are also closely related, and they reveal the real human condition and the constant confusion of existence. Tragedy is the common resource and wealth of mankind, and its sublime and tragic aesthetic characteristics reflect the dignity and value of human nature. The ultimate goal of comparing Chinese and Western tragedies is not only to discover and study cultural heterogeneity, but also to re-understand our own national literature and to learn from the cultures of other peoples, so as to achieve mutual benefits and complementarities, and to better develop our own national culture. In today's society, where the spirit of tragedy is rapidly declining and "entertainment is king", the spirit of tragedy will have a significant impact on moral construction and national spirit, and the eternal charm of tragedy and the value of bringing people continuous thinking will continue to influence the spiritual development of human beings.

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