

# A Comparative Study on Tragic Conception between Shakespeare and Guan Hanqing

Dong Wang<sup>1</sup>, Guangtao Cao<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>English Department, Foshan University, Foshan, Guangdong, 528000, China

<sup>2</sup>School of International Studies, Guangdong University of Education, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510303, China

## ABSTRACT

As two of the most representative playwrights in the Eastern and Western history of drama, Shakespeare and Guan Hanqing present insightful and brilliant tragic works to the world. In their tragedies, the tragic themes of fate, humanity, and society are intertwined. These tragic works reflect the tragic views of two playwrights on fate, humanity, and society. By comparing and studying the tragic views of these two outstanding playwrights, it is helpful for readers to grasp and understand their tragic essence and connotation.

## KEYWORDS

Shakespeare; Guan Hanqing; Tragic conceptions; Comparative study

## 1 Introduction

Aristotle defines tragedy as follows: "Tragedy is, then, an imitation of a noble and complete action, having the proper magnitude; it employs language that has been artistically enhanced by each of the kinds of linguistic adornment, applied separately in the various parts of the play; it is presented in dramatic, not narrative form, and achieves, through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents" (Bressler, 2007:20). A comparative study of the tragic concepts in the dramatic works of Shakespeare and Guan Hanqing can help readers deeply understand the unique charm and inherent differences between Chinese and Western tragedies, providing a new perspective for cross-cultural drama research.

Research on Shakespeare's and Guan Hanqing's tragedies shows a diversified trend. Domestic academic research on Shakespeare's and Guan Hanqing's tragedies has always been closely linked to the social and historical dimension.

Kang B. C. proposes that the happy ending in Guan Hanqing's tragedies reflects the Yuan Dynasty literati's imaginative reconstruction of institutional justice in the predicament of the abolition of the imperial examination (Kang, 2019:67-98). Song Min compares the female images in *Hamlet* and *The Injustice to Dou E*, arguing that these female characters are in a subordinate position and cannot escape their helpless fate. In a male-dominated society, not only are their autonomy and right to life ignored, but they are also likely to become victims of power struggles controlled by men under the oppression of lust for power and material desires (Song, 2005:26-30).

Research on Shakespeare's and Guan Hanqing's tragedies has formed an interpretive framework of tragedy of character and tragedy of fate.

Through close textual analysis and distant contextual observation of *Hamlet* and *The Injustice to Dou E*, Cong Cong argues that the character development of the tragic protagonists both undergoes three stages of transformation, namely, a state of psychological equilibrium, a state of psychological conflict, and a new state of psychological equilibrium (Cong, 1997:109-118). Meng Yang compares the tragic spirits in *Hamlet* and *The Injustice to Dou E*. Centering his research on historical tragedies and theoretical frameworks, he further compares the similarities and differences in the aesthetic elements and aesthetic styles of the two works. In his view, the tragic characters in *Hamlet* are often shrouded in a sense of fate; their inner struggles and interpersonal conflicts are permeated with a sense of helplessness, thus rendering the tragedy more profound and enduring than that in *The Injustice to Dou E* (Meng, 2007).

In recent years, the research perspective has shifted to the drama itself. Taking *The Injustice to Dou E* and *Hamlet* as case studies, Kong Li identifies inherent and profound differences between traditional Chinese tragedies and Western tragedies through careful textual reading. She argues that traditional Chinese tragedies typically end with the moral principle of "good is rewarded with good, and evil with evil", whereas Western tragedies have adhered to the principle of "unrelenting tragedy from start to finish" since the era of ancient Greek drama (Kong, 2012:154-156).

In cross-cultural comparison, Yao contends that Guan Hanqing's ethical concern and Shakespeare's questioning of human nature and existence correspond to cyclical view of time and linear deconstructive view respectively, but failed to deeply explore the influence of drama systems (Yao, 2018: 156-179). Lin Feng compared the tragic endings of *The Injustice to Dou E* and *Hamlet*, pointing out that the main differences between Chinese and Western tragedies are reflected in the following: Western tragedies always depict the disillusionment of hope, whereas although the plots of traditional Chinese

tragedies undergo twists and turns and hardships, the persistent resistance of the protagonists often allows audiences to see hope and leads to a happy reunion ending (Lin, 1985:38-42). Research in dramatic aesthetics has further revealed that a tragedy without comic elements would appear too rigid and plain, while a comedy without tragic components would seem too shallow and superficial. The mutual infiltration and integration of tragic and comic elements is more conducive to the manifestation of beauty. Precisely for this reason, Shakespeare's courage to break through traditional norms in his creations is not a flaw, but a contribution to the history of drama. Similarly, the comic elements in Guan Hanqing's tragedies and the tragic components in his comedies are also contributions to the history of drama and dramatic aesthetics (Xu, 1990:72-77).

Although existing research has achieved fruitful results, there are still some limitations. Firstly, there exists insufficient three-dimensional analysis of cultural context: there is a lack of systematic connection at the level of social and cultural history between how the marginalization of literati in the Yuan Dynasty shaped Guan Hanqing's bottom narrative and how the commercialization of theaters during the Renaissance affected Shakespeare's narrative perspective. Secondly, the interdisciplinary integration of tragic poetics is weak: most studies stay at literary analysis and do not fully absorb theories such as drama anthropology and cognitive narratology, such as the impact of the formal differences between Guan Hanqing's lead singing system and Shakespeare's multi-voice dialog on tragic experience. Thirdly, there is a lack of consciousness in comparative methodology: traditional parallel comparison is prone to feature listing, and it is necessary to learn from Benjamin's Arcades Project cultural texture analysis method to reveal the deep structure of tragedy as a collective unconscious symbol. Our study intends to start with the idea of cultural grammar of tragedy, cut into it from multiple aspects such as view of fate and theory of human nature, and conduct analysis combining drama sociology and cognitive poetics theory, breaking through the superficial dilemma of Chinese and Western tragedy comparison, and trying to establish a new interpretive framework.

## 2 Comparison of Tragic Concepts in the Dramatic Works of Guan Hanqing and Shakespeare

### 2.1 Views on Fate

In Guan Hanqing's works, characters' fates are often constrained by social environments. Guan Hanqing believes that social darkness and injustice are the main causes of characters' tragic fates. In *The Injustice to Dou E*, Dou E could have lived a peaceful life, but due to social corruption and oppression by evil forces, she is forced into a desperate situation. Her fate is entirely beyond her control, subject only to the manipulation of others. However, the characters in Guan Hanqing's works do not passively accept their fate; they also resist. Dou E's indignant cry before execution is a strong protest against the injustice of fate. Although she ultimately cannot change her destiny, her spirit of resistance demonstrates the glorious subjective awareness of the lower-class people who refuse to submit to fate and dare to resist.

The judiciary of the Yuan Dynasty made tragic fates inescapable. Dou E's tragedy is actually an inevitable result of the Yuan Dynasty's social system. If Dou E's father, Dou Tianzhang, had not sold his daughter to go to the capital for the imperial exam, the tragedy would not have occurred, implying the social crisis of literati marginalization caused by the abolition of the imperial examination in the early Yuan Dynasty. Prefect Tao Wu's confession that "I make money out of my lawsuits" reveals the collapse of the Yuan Dynasty's judicial system.

In Shakespeare's tragic works, fate is often portrayed as a mysterious and irresistible force. Characters seem unable to escape the tricks of fate; no matter how hard they try, they ultimately cannot avoid a tragic ending. Based on this negative perception, human subjectivity is largely lost. In *Macbeth*, Macbeth was originally an upright general, but under the witches' prophecies and his wife's instigation, he is gradually consumed by ambition. He thinks he can fulfill his ambition through murder, but eventually finds himself trapped by fate. Every action of his seems driven by fate, with no way to break free. However, Shakespeare does not completely deny human free will. In his works, characters also struggle and resist when facing fate. When confronting the challenges of fate, Hamlet, though hesitant, ultimately chooses to act, attempting to change his own and his country's destiny.

Fate in *Romeo and Juliet* becomes an invisible manipulator, deconstructing the audience's perception of historical inevitability through fateful contingency. The metaphor of fateful stars runs through the play, showing the following fatalistic logics. Firstly, the pre-existence of family hatred: The age-old feud between the Montagues and the Capulets, as a pre-symbolic order, dooms the lovers' love to be an impossible reality. Secondly, the inevitability of accidental events: Friar Laurence's messenger fails to deliver the letter due to plague quarantine, embodying fate's playful deconstruction of rational plans. Thirdly, the symbolism of the death ending: The lovers' death breaks the cycle of hatred, confirming the tradition of fate punishing evil in ancient Greek tragedies and the logic of oracles.

### 2.2 Understanding of Human Nature

Guan Hanqing's understanding of human nature is characterized by a deep hatred for evil. The characters in his works

have distinct good and evil traits: good people are kind and upright, while bad people are sinister and cunning. In *The Injustice to Dou E*, Dou E is the embodiment of kindness, her goodness and filial piety moving people. In contrast, Old Zhang and his son Donkey Zhang, along with Prefect Tao Wu, represent evil forces, their evil deeds appalling. Through such sharp contrasts, Guan Hanqing expresses praise for human goodness and criticism of human evil. At the same time, he believes that human nature is somewhat malleable. In *Rescued by a Coquette*, Zhao Pan'er, originally a fragile woman, becomes stronger and smarter after enduring various hardships. She uses her wisdom and courage to help her sisters escape difficulties, demonstrating the beauty of human nature.

Mistress Wang in *The Butterfly Dream*, who would rather let her son die than give up the sons of her husband's first wife, also embodies the traditional morality shaped by Confucian ethics. "It goes without saying that she loves her son, and she offers to die in his place; but when the judge insists that one of the young men must lose his life, she sacrifices her own boy. After the release of her two stepsons, she starts to mourn for her own child. But when they mourn for him too, she comforts them by saying that since they are spared she is content. This is a truthful picture of the mixed emotions of this common woman who, despite the heavy blows she suffers, displays such remarkable fortitude and powers of endurance." (Yang & Yang, 1979:5).

Shakespeare's overall view of human nature is relatively negative. He believes that human nature is multifaceted, with both good and just aspects, and evil and selfish ones. In his works, characters' personalities are often complex and diverse, making it difficult to simply judge them as good or evil. Hamlet is both brave and just, yet indecisive and suspicious. In the process of avenging his father, he constantly ponders the meaning and value of life, showing the depth and complexity of cognition. Through portraying human nature, Shakespeare explores the relationships between human nature and society, and human nature and fate. He believes that human weaknesses and flaws inevitably lead to characters' tragic fates, and social environments also have a profound impact on human nature.

*Macbeth* is an abyss-like writing of human nature cognition. This play deconstructs the good-evil dualism through the tragedy of Macbeth. Macbeth's ambition-conscience game reveals the fragility of human nature in the face of the desire for extreme power. His transformation from hero to tyrant reveals that it is hard for a person who no longer believes in God to resist the evil temptation.

### 2.3 Social Significance of Tragedy: Realistic Criticism vs. Cognitive Enlightenment

Guan Hanqing's tragic works have a strong realistic critical significance. By exposing and criticizing social darkness, he expresses sympathy for the lower-class people and pursuit of social justice. In *The Injustice to Dou E (Snow in Midsummer)*, he reveals the corruption of Yuan Dynasty society, the darkness of the judiciary, and the sufferings of the people. Dou E's tragic fate is a microcosm of the society at that time, reflecting the miserable experiences of the broad masses under feudal oppression. "Dou E's struggle with the Zhangs and the prefect is a penetrating exposure of the corrupt state of local politics and the social disorder during the Yuan Dynasty, while her rebellious spirit symbolizes the determined resistance of the common people to their cruel oppressors" (Yang & Yang, 1979:4).

Guan Hanqing hopes that his works will arouse people's attention to social issues and promote social change. At the same time, his works also have a certain moral educational function. By advocating values such as justice and kindness, he guides people to establish correct moral concepts.

*Lu Zhailang* is a pathological report. Guan Hanqing reveals the pathology of Yuan Dynasty society through tragic details. The arbitrary behavior of powerful figures in the play (such as seizing others' wives and killing commoners) is actually a symptomatic presentation of the intensification of class contradictions in the Yuan Dynasty, reflecting the systematic powerlessness of the lower class in the face of the powerful. In this play, achieving justice through ghost revenge to avoid the taboo of directly challenging imperial power embodies the literati's institutional reform in criticism.

Shakespeare's tragic works also have profound social significance. By exploring issues such as human nature and fate, he reveals social contradictions and problems. In *King Lear*, he shows the corruption of power and the ugliness of human nature. King Lear's eldest and second daughters, for power and wealth, do not hesitate to betray their father and fight against each other. This portrayal reflects the reality of British society at that time, namely the decay and degeneration of the upper nobility. Shakespeare's works also have a certain cognitive enlightenment function. By praising human goodness and pursuing freedom and equality, he inspires people's yearning for a better life and promotes social progress.

## 3 Conclusion

By means of textual close reading and cross-cultural research methods, this paper analyzes the tragic concepts of the dramatic works of Guan Hanqing and William Shakespeare from multiple dimensions.

The tragic creations of Guan Hanqing and Shakespeare are like two prisms, reflecting different cognitive dimensions of Chinese and Western civilizations towards human suffering. The former, rooted in the market culture of the Yuan Dynasty,

tears apart the facade of oppression by evil forces through Dou E's three vows, and uses the judicial forgiveness in *The Butterfly Dream* as an ethical compensation. His tragedies are down-to-earth social diagnosis reports—in the suffering struggles of lower-class characters, we see the realistic reflection of Confucian ethics and the spiritual orientation of Yuan Dynasty literati. The latter reflects the confusion of the Renaissance, letting Hamlet question the abyss of cognitive division between life and human nature in the philosophical thought of "to be or not to be", and deconstructing the myth of the upper nobility through King Lear's monolog in the storm. His tragedies are otherworldly cognitive revelation records—in the destruction of the upper nobility, we witness the passion of idealism and the internal rift of rationalism.

The deep texture of this difference lies in the different choices of the two civilizations: The tragic protagonists of Guan Hanqing seek a way out in the ethics-institution improvement model. Even the revenge ending in *Lu Zhailang* relies on the accidental arrival of fate's repairing artifact, embodying the cultural characteristics of improving and repairing tragedies. Shakespeare's tragedies, on the other hand, never stop in the paradox of ideal human nature and reality of fate. Although the death in *Romeo and Juliet* ends the family hatred, it reveals the heavy price of the awakening of subjective cognition with irreversible destruction, demonstrating the cultural characteristics of absurd and disillusioned tragedies. Together, they constitute the cognitive paradigm of human beings facing tragedy: one is the critical and active intervention in the real order, and the other is the philosophical contemplation on the meaning of life.

## Funding

This is one of the findings of the 2023 Guangdong social science project "Research on the English Translation of Yuan Zaju—Taking the English Translation of Guan Hanqing's Zaju as an Example" (NO: GD23XWW01)

## About the Author

Dong Wang (1969-04), male, Han, Born place: Zhengzhou City, Henan Province, Title: Lecturer, Master of English Language and Literature, Research Direction: British and American Literature; English language.

Guangtao Cao (1971-11), male, Han, Born place: Minquan County, Henan Province, Title: Professor, Doctor of Ancient Chinese Literature, Research Direction: British and American Literature; drama translation.

## References

- [1] Bressler, C. E. (2007). *Literary Criticism*. Beijing: Higher Education Press.
- [2] Cong, C. (1997). The Contrasting yet Complementary Portrayal of Tragic Characters: A New Exploration of the Comparative Study of *Hamlet* and *The Injustice to Dou E*. *Foreign Literatures*, (3), 109-118.
- [3] Kang, B. C. (2019). *Cultural Interpretation of Tragedies in Ancient Chinese Drama*. Guangzhou: Sun Yat-sen University Press.
- [4] Kong, L. (2012). "Happy Reunion" vs. "Unrelenting Tragedy": A Comparative Study of Chinese and Western Tragic Paradigms with *The Injustice to Dou E* and *Hamlet* as examples. *Art Review*, (10), 154-156.
- [5] Lin, F. (1985). Shining the Light of Ideal: A Tentative Discussion on the Tragic Endings of *The Injustice to Dou E* and *Hamlet*. *Journal of Liaoning Normal University*, (3), 38-42.
- [6] Meng, Y. (2007). A Comparative Study of Tragic Spirits in *Hamlet* and *The Injustice to Dou E* (Master's thesis, Inner Mongolia University).
- [7] Song, M. (2005). A Comparative Study of Female Images in *Hamlet* and *The Injustice to Dou E*. *Journal of Inner Mongolia University*, (6), 26-30.
- [8] Xu, Z. F. (1990). The Status of Guan Hanqing in the History of World Drama and Literature. *Hebei Journal of Academic Studies*, (03), 72-77.
- [9] Yang, X. Y., & Yang, G. (1979). *Selected plays of Guan Hanqing*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.
- [10] Yao, S. (2018). *Comparative Drama: East and West*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.