

A Cross-Cultural Study of Family Power Structures in 'Thunderstorm'

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Abstract. The family tragedy in "Thunderstorm" reveals the characteristics of the power structure under the feudal system. This paper, taking Cao Yu's "Thunderstorm" as its research object, draws on Foucault's theory of power discourse and Spivak's theory of subaltern discourse to analyze the interactions among Fanyi, Lu Shiping, and Zhou Puyuan within the family power system. The study finds that most conflicts in "Thunderstorm" require the cooperation of at least two people. The tragedy of the Zhou family is not the result of individual actions but rather the result of a three-way conspiracy within the power structure. The characters' behavioral patterns (Fanyi's madness, Lu Shiping's silence, and Zhou Puyuan's hypocrisy) create a unique power balance: the more Fanyi becomes insane, the more Zhou Puyuan disciplines and oppresses her, and the more Lu Shiping remains silent. This structural conspiracy ultimately leads to the family tragedy. This study reveals the inherent logic of power operations within the feudal family and provides a new perspective for understanding family relationships in China.

Keywords: Thunderstorm, family power, power structure, cross-cultural research

1. Introduction

Since the May Fourth Movement, a large number of classic works have emerged in modern Chinese drama, such as "Teahouse," "Sunrise," and "Wilderness." These works profoundly reflect the various contradictions of a period of social transformation. Among them, Cao Yu's "Thunderstorm" is hailed as a milestone in modern Chinese drama. Through the interactions between the three main characters, Zhou Puyuan, Fanyi, and Lu Shiping, the play depicts a typical feudal family power structure. Although the feudal system has vanished in contemporary society, the power dynamics presented in the play remain of significant research value.

Existing research on "Thunderstorm" primarily focuses on the portrayal of individual characters, such as Fan Gongli and Lu Wei's analysis of Zhou Puyuan and Song Muyuan's character study of Fanyi [1,2]. However, these studies often lack an in-depth exploration of the power dynamics between family members [1,2]. This limited perspective has prevented a full exposition of the essence of family power relations within "Thunderstorm."

This study aims to break away from traditional analytical frameworks. Drawing on Foucault's theory of power discourse and Spivak's theory of subaltern discourse, and through a systematic close reading of the text, it examines how the characters' behavioral patterns (Fanyi's madness, Lu

Shiping's silence, and Zhou Puyuan's hypocrisy) contribute to maintaining the balance of power within the family. The study will focus on the structural complicity formed by the interactions among these three characters, revealing the inherent logic of power within the feudal family. The author hopes this study will enhance the understanding of the play "Thunderstorm" and provide a new theoretical perspective for the study of power relations within Chinese families.

2. Analysis of family conflict and power structure

Considering the complicity between Fanyi, Lu Shiping, and Zhou Puyuan within the family power structure, the author first identifies the core conflict events in the play. By analyzing the interaction patterns between those directly responsible and those indirectly responsible, the author illustrates how the actions of these three actors strategically coordinate to maintain the power balance.

Table 1. Statistics of the main conflict events in the play

| Conflict Number | Event Name | Directly responsible person | Indirect responsible person | Event Summary | Power Interactions and Consequences |
|-----------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|---|--|
| 1 | Medicine Forcing Incident | Zhou Puyuan | Fanyi | Zhou Puyuan forced Fan Yi to take medicine, and Fan Yi resisted fiercely. | Suppression triggered fierce resistance, and the contradiction was superficially alleviated. |
| 2 | Zhou Ping Avoided Fan Yi | Zhou Ping | Fanyi | Zhou Ping deliberately avoided Fan Yi, causing her to lose emotional control. | Evasion stimulated uncontrollable emotions, and the contradiction further intensified. |
| 3 | Former Lovers Reunited | Lu Shiping | Zhou Puyuan | Lu Shiping recognized Zhou Puyuan and revealed that Zhou Ping and Si Feng were biological siblings. | The silent one spoke out, breaking the power balance. |
| 4 | Lu Gui Was Fired | Zhou Puyuan | none | Zhou Puyuan dismissed Lu Gui, and Lu Shiping accepted it with forbearance. | Direct unilateral pressure was applied, strengthening the class structure. |
| 5 | Fan Yi Locked the Door | Fanyi | Zhou Puyuan | Fan Yi locked everyone in the room, and Zhou Puyuan strengthened control afterwards. | Extreme resistance encountered stronger suppression, and the intensity of control escalated. |
| 6 | Si Feng Left | Zhou Ping | Fanyi | Zhou Ping decided to leave with Si Feng, and Fan Yi threatened to expose their relationship. | Escape provoked retaliation, leading to a full-scale outbreak of conflict. |

As shown in Table 1, a statistical analysis of the six core conflict events in the play reveals that the maintenance of the power structure in Thunderstorm exhibits significant collusive characteristics: Zhou Puyuan initiated three conflicts (Events 1, 3, and 4), his repressive behavior accompanied by strategic coordination from other family members. Fanyi was both the target of discipline and the instigator of escalating conflict in four conflicts (Events 1, 2, 5, and 6), her resistance legitimizing Zhou Puyuan's control. Although Lu Shiping was implicated in only two conflicts (Events 3 and 4), her shift from prolonged silence to sudden revelation reveals the crucial influence of lower-level members on the power system. The data indicates that five out of six conflict events required the behavioral interaction of at least two family members to culminate, confirming that family tragedy is not the result of individual actions but rather the systemic effect of

the collusion of power players through three strategies: repression (Zhou Puyuan), resistance (Fanyi), and acquiescence (Lu Shiping).

3. Character behavior patterns

3.1. Fanyi's madness: performative resistance to power struggles

Fanyi's madness and behavior exhibit clear characteristics of a power struggle. As shown in Table 2, her madness frequently uses cathartic vocabulary, and her sentences are short and threatening. From the perspective of the play's text, this verbal violence is a deliberate imitation of Zhou Puyuan's patriarchal discourse [3]. This verbal violence, in essence, represents the dilemma of "using the master's tools to rebel against the master", exposing the structural limitations of rebels within the feudal family [4].

In stark contrast to her madness, Fanyi's calmness employs numerous negotiating words, maintaining a semblance of respectability through long sentences and a rational rhythm (see the language rhythm section in Table 2). This disjuncture suggests that Fanyi's madness is not a pathological phenomenon, but rather a strategic performance aimed at asserting power through extreme means. As postcolonial theory points out, the oppressed often engage in strategic performances of "mimicking dominant culture," superficially conforming to the oppressor's discourse while simultaneously achieving subversive resistance through exaggeration and distortion [5].

Compared to Medea in ancient Greek tragedy, Fanyi's frenzied resistance exhibits distinct limitations. Medea's discourse of revenge directly targets the core of power, creating a new discourse system through prophecy and curse [6]. In contrast, most of Fanyi's fiery rhetoric is directed at the weaker, such as Zhou Ping and Sifeng (see the "target" column in Table 2), with only a few directed directly at Zhou Puyuan. This is essentially a rebellion directed from below, exemplifying Spivak's "cycle of oppression within the lower class" [4]. This difference reflects the distinct approaches to female resistance in Chinese and Western culture and reveals the vicious cycle of feudal family power.

Table 2. Comparison of Fanyi's discourse characteristics

| Analytical Levels | Characteristics of a state of madness | Normal state characteristics | Comparison |
|----------------------------|--|---|---|
| High-Frequency Vocabulary | Hate, no, revenge | Please, can, ask | Controlling vocabulary; negotiation vocabulary |
| Typical Sentence Structure | (Defiantly) I don't want to drink this bitter stuff. (Suddenly, vindictively) I'm crazy. Take me away, take me away from here, (desperately) | Please sit down! You've been here for quite some time. Don't be sad. Come see me often. (Towards the door) Sifeng, take out those two sets first and ask the master which one he wants. | Self-centered, express directly; indirect and tentative, maintain decency |
| Rhythm of Language | Short, interrogative, threatening sentences | Long, rational, restrained, and sarcastic | The rhythm of frenzied speech reflects a sense of loss of control; normality maintains social etiquette through slowed-down speech. |
| Object of Discourse | Zhou Ping, Sifeng, and Zhou Puyuan | Lu Shiping, Sifeng, and Zhou Puyuan | The power structure is downwardly oppressive. |

3.2. Lu Shiping's silence: implicit resistance through physical action

Lu Shiping's silence constitutes a unique form of resistance. Textual analysis reveals that her nonverbal behavior is highly concentrated in situations of power repression (see Table 3). Physical contact conveys implicit control through physical intervention, while emotional expressions such as "bowing one's head in contemplation" and "sighing" essentially embody the feudal family's dismantling of female subjectivity through passive gestures. More notably, when conflict escalates, her survival strategy is to resolve conflict tension through physical intervention rather than verbal confrontation. This "daily practice of resistance" [7] forms a structural contrast to Nora's discursive awakening in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* [8]: the latter achieves individual liberation through a declarative escape, while Lu Shiping's resistance is manifested at the level of daily practice, maintaining dignity through conflict resolution rather than confrontation. This difference essentially reflects the unique operating mechanisms of the "body politics" of lower-class women in pre-modern society and reflects the survival strategies of lower-class women in Chinese feudal families [3].

Table 3. Statistics and analysis of Lu Shiping's silent behavior

| Scenes | Original action description | The purpose of the action |
|----------------------|---|--|
| Physical contact | Holding Sifeng's hand Holding Sifeng's hand, trembling | Physical contact conveys unspoken care and control. |
| Emotional expression | Holding Sifeng's hand Holding Sifeng's hand, trembling Tears streamed down, head bowed, sighing, dazed Staring blankly at Ping's face, suddenly bursting into tears again Lu Ma looked around, walked to the cabinet, stroked her old furniture, and lowered her head in thought. (Sighs) We're all elderly now, please don't say such foolish things. | Non-verbal emotional resistance: bowing one's head and shedding tears are expressions of a hidden tolerance of oppression; sighing and dazeness are manifestations of powerlessness. |
| Confrontation scenes | Dahai's head was bleeding from the blow: Lu Ma cried out to protect Dahai. | Survival strategies for resolving conflict: Avoid direct confrontation. Physical blocking (the sea): Preventing escalation of violence. |

3.3. Zhou Puyuan's hypocrisy: the maintenance of power in moral discourse

Zhou Puyuan's hypocritical discourse demonstrates typical characteristics of Chinese feudal patriarchy. As shown in Table 4, his discourse strategies primarily maintain power through the following mechanisms: First, moralized control. He uses moral discourse such as "rules" to package oppressive behavior, transforming personal will into moral demands. This strategy is essentially "discipline through moral discourse" [9]. Second, emotional control. Phrases such as "for your biological mother" in the table demonstrate that he leverages familial ties to exert pressure, disguising control as care, leaving the victim both oppressed and mired in moral self-blame.

Compared to Helmer's overt objectification in the Western play *A Doll's House* [8], Zhou Puyuan's discourse is more Eastern: he packages control as care; he embellishes it through nostalgic narratives; and he employs rhetorical questions to create moral pressure. This difference reflects the fundamental distinction between the operation of family power in China and the West: open repression in the West, control in the name of morality and emotion in China. From Foucault's perspective, this discursive strategy exposes rebels to both power suppression and moral dilemmas, thereby consolidating power at a deeper level [9].

Table 4. Analysis of Zhou Puyuan's hypocritical discourse characteristics

| Analytical Dimension s | Specific manifestations | Typical examples | Discourse function |
|------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Moral Blackmail | Using rules to mask personal will | (Pause, takes a breath, then says sternly) I heard you've been very unruly at home these past two years while I was away. | Transforming oppressive behavior into a moral obligation |
| Emotional Control | Using affectionate rhetoric to exert pressure | So, for your biological mother's sake, I ask you to completely change your behavior. | Using emotions to strengthen control |
| Sentence Structure | Using rhetorical questions to create moral pressure | Don't think I'm dead. Do you think someone can just forget something they've done that's unbearable? | Using moral questioning to force self-reflection |

4. Conclusion

This study, through a systematic analysis of family power relations in *Thunderstorm*, draws the following core conclusions:

First, the study reveals the complicit mechanisms underlying the operation of feudal family power. Fanyi resists through madness, mimicking patriarchal logic; Lu Shiping maintains her resistance through silence; and Zhou Puyuan maintains authority through hypocritical rhetoric. These three seemingly opposing behaviors actually constrain each other, jointly maintaining the balance of power in the family. This complicity encompasses not only oppression and obedience but also the rebels' implicit identification with and imitation of the system being rebelled against.

Second, the study finds that the power structure of the Chinese feudal family exhibits unique characteristics of intra-systemic resistance. Unlike Western dramas, where individuals confront the system, the resistance presented in *Thunderstorm* never breaks through the existing power framework. This model of resistance reflects the powerful inclusiveness and self-healing capacity of the Chinese feudal family power structure.

Finally, cross-cultural comparative research reveals that the enduring nature of Chinese feudal family power stems from its unique hidden mechanisms. Compared to the direct confrontation in *Medea* and the conflict in *A Doll's House*, the power model presented in *Thunderstorm* perpetuates the oppressive system through moral obligation and emotional disguise. This discovery not only provides a new analytical perspective for understanding *Thunderstorm*, but also opens up a new theoretical path for the study of family power.

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