

# ***Cross-cultural Collision: Romeo and Juliet vs. Classical Chinese Concept of Love***

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the contrasting concepts of love in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Classical Chinese thought. Through comparative analysis, it highlights how cultural contexts shape understandings of love. In *Romeo and Juliet*, love is depicted as intense and fervent, driving the protagonists to the brink of self-destruction and prioritizing personal emotion over societal norms. This individualistic portrayal emphasizes impulsiveness and selflessness. In contrast, the Classical Chinese view of love often focuses on familial relationships and social responsibilities, advocating a balance between personal desires and communal obligations. Despite these differences, Shakespeare's depiction of love offers a new perspective that can enrich the Classical Chinese understanding of emotional expression. This study not only explores the nuances of love in different cultural frameworks but also suggests that Shakespearean themes can provide valuable insights for enhancing Classical Chinese love narratives. Ultimately, this research serves as a foundational reference for further explorations of cross-cultural love concepts, encouraging deeper understanding and communication between diverse literary traditions. Future studies should expand upon this theme by examining additional works and perspectives to foster greater intercultural dialogue.

**Keywords:** love literature, Cultural differences, comparative literature

## **1. Introduction**

Today, as the wave of globalization sweeps across the world, cross-cultural exchanges have gone beyond mere economic and trade cooperation and political dialogues, and it is like an invisible link that closely connects people of different cultures and countries[1][2][3]. The relationship between globalization and love is mainly reflected in the increase in cultural exchanges and the movement of people around the world, which promotes mutual understanding and emotional integration among people of different backgrounds. Globalization has led to a rapid flow of information and culture, expanding individuals' social circles and life horizons. This enhanced connectivity is not only limited to physical space, but also through digital mediums such as social networking platforms, which allow people to easily reach out to potential partners from different cultural backgrounds. As a result, emotional relationships across borders and cultures have become more common, enriching the diversity and inclusiveness of love. Globalization has influenced people's expectations and expressions of love through the global proliferation of media and entertainment industries. Love

stories and romantic exemplars from different cultures are received and imitated by a global audience through movies, music, and books, thus shaping a more uniform conception of romantic love on a global scale. This kind of exchange has not only changed the world's economic pattern and political landscape, but also penetrated into the core of human emotional experience - the concept of love. Love, as a universal emotion shared by human beings, has taken root in different cultural soils and blossomed with its own unique colors. Take Shakespeare's classic play *Romeo and Juliet* as an example, this work has become an excellent material for exploring cross-cultural concept of love with its profound emotional portrayal and unique artistic charm. In this play, the love story of Romeo and Juliet is depicted as mesmerizing, and they are desperate for love, even at the expense of their lives.[4][5] This obsession and fervor for love is undoubtedly a typical interpretation of love in Western culture. However, when we look to the East, especially to the concept of love in Chinese literature, we will find a very different scene. Looking to Chinese literature, the romance genre has ancient roots extending through several dynasties. For instance, during the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD), poetry often touched on themes of love, longing, and the melancholy of separation. Later, during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the novel "The Romance of the West Chamber" by Wang Shifu was written around the early 14th century. This work is one of China's most celebrated romantic plays, illustrating themes of love against the constraints of social norms. In Chinese literature, love is often imbued with a greater sense of social responsibility and moral restraint. For example, Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu in *Dream of Red Mansions*, although their love is equally deep and passionate, it is constrained and bound by multiple factors such as family, society and morality. This concept of love has deep roots in Chinese culture, which emphasizes the harmony and unity of love and responsibility, love and morality. So how did these two very different views of love come about? What kind of cultural differences lie behind them?[6]

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is undoubtedly a bright pearl in the treasury of Western literature, a work that has crossed the boundaries of time with its unique charm and become an eternal classic. It skillfully depicts an innocent love struggling in the yoke of family hatred, and shows the core values of the Western concept of love: the extreme respect for the free expression of personal emotions and the unrelenting pursuit of happiness. In this play, the love story of Romeo and Juliet is like a magnificent poem, full of passion and tragedy. They come from two families that have been enemies for generations - the Montagues and the Capulets - but their hearts are bound to each other. Their love burns like fire, fearless of the threat of family hatred and the constraints of the world. They bravely pursued the true feelings of their hearts and interpreted the true meaning of love with their own actions. Romeo and Juliet's love is not all smooth sailing. They faced great pressure from the family, society and even fate.[7][8] However, they did not shrink from it, but instead strengthened their belief in love. They bravely stood against the hatred of the family and defended the dignity of love with their own lives. In the end, they chose to realize the sublimation of love at the cost of their lives, and this kind of dedication to love and the spirit of sacrifice is deeply shocking.

The western concept of love shown in *Romeo and Juliet* has far-reaching influence. It emphasizes the importance of free expression of personal emotions and encourages people to bravely pursue their true inner feelings. At the same time, it also reveals that the power of love is infinite, which can transcend the shackles of the world and the hatred of the family, so that people's hearts can be sublimated. This concept of love has a wide influence in Western culture and has become the inspiration for many literary works.

In contrast, the concept of love in Classical Chinese view of love pays more attention to family, social and moral constraints. In traditional Chinese culture, marriage is not only a matter of two people, but also a union of two families. Therefore, love often has to be harmonized with family and social factors, and the free expression of personal emotions is often subject to certain restrictions. This concept is fully reflected in Chinese classical literature, such as Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu in *Dream*

of Red Mansions, and Zhang Sheng and Cui Yingying in *The Story of the Western Wing*, whose love is profoundly influenced by family and social background.

[9][10] Despite the significant differences between the Eastern and Western concepts of love, they do not exist in complete isolation. As a matter of fact, with the advancement of globalization and the increase of cross-cultural exchanges, the Eastern and Western concepts of love are also borrowing and integrating with each other. For example, the persistence and sacrifice of love emphasized in *Romeo and Juliet* are also reflected in modern Classical Chinese view of love, such as Juehui and Mingfeng in *Ba Jin's Home*. Meanwhile, Classical Chinese view of love such as *Dream of the Red Chamber* has also had a profound influence in the Western world, enabling Western readers to understand the Chinese concept of love more deeply.

Through comparative analysis, the influence of *Romeo and Juliet's* concept of love on Classical Chinese view of love is obvious. On the one hand, it inspired Chinese writers to think deeply about love, making the theme of love more widely noticed and explored in Classical Chinese view of love; on the other hand, it also provided Chinese literary creation with the possibility of borrowing Shakespeare's methods of depicting love. For example, when depicting the persistence and sacrifice of love, Chinese writers can learn from the plot setting and characterization techniques in *Romeo and Juliet*, which makes the expression of emotion more real and touching.

In conclusion, under the background of globalization, cross-cultural exchanges have made it possible to learn from and integrate the love concepts of the East and the West. By comparing and analyzing the concepts of love in *Romeo and Juliet* with those in Classical Chinese view of love, we can gain a deeper understanding of the concepts of love under cultural differences and explore the possibility of mutual borrowing. At the same time, this kind of comparative analysis also helps to promote the exchange and integration of Eastern and Western cultures and the common progress of human emotions.

## **2. The concept of love in *Romeo and Juliet***

### **2.1. Review of Plot and Main Characterization**

*Romeo and Juliet* is a dramatic work by English playwright William Shakespeare, written in 1594. *Romeo and Juliet* tells the tragic love story of two young people, Romeo and Juliet. Their love is thwarted because they belong to two rival families. However, they decide to marry in secret and hope to realize their love by peacefully resolving the conflict between the two families. The tragedy unfolds in the midst of inter-family rivalries, misunderstandings and the trickery of fate.

Romeo at first falls in love with Rosaline and teared up over her. His cousin Benvolio persuades him that the sky is the limit and takes him to a masquerade ball hosted by the Capulets. At the ball, Romeo and Juliet fall in love at first sight. After the ball, Romeo hides in the orchard of the Capulets' house, and Juliet, who happens to be on the balcony, spills her love for Romeo, who, upon hearing it, immediately responds to her, telling her that he loves Juliet just as much. So Juliet agrees to go to Romeo at 9:00 the next day, on trust, to discuss the location of a subsequent date.

So the next day, Romeo first went to Friar Laurence, hoping that he would officiate at the wedding for the two of them, and informed Juliet of this decision through the Nurse that Juliet had sent to him. When Juliet learns of the news, she goes to Father Lorence under the guise of penance, and under the priest's auspices, she and Romeo are married in secret.

But on the day of their wedding, Tybalt clashes with Mercutio and Romeo. Mercutio and Tybalt have a sword fight and Romeo tries to stop it, but Tybalt takes the opportunity to stab Mercutio to death. The angry Romeo and Tybalt then continue the sword fight and Tybalt is stabbed to death by Romeo. The death of Tybalt condemns Romeo to exile. Juliet is very saddened by Romeo's exile. Father Laurence advises Romeo to first obey orders and flee to Mantua. When the ensuing events

settle down, the priest will inform the two families of their marriage, reconcile the two families, and finally get the king to lift Romeo's punishment of exile.

However, Capulet, in order to relieve her grief, betrothed Juliet to the young Count of Barris, and forced her to celebrate the marriage, whereupon Juliet came to the priest, and begged him to find a way to avoid this sin of bigamy, failing which she was to end her life in a convent, whereupon the priest, as soon as he could, according to the medical arts which I know, gave her a bottle of sleeping potion, which, as was wished, did effect, and Juliet drank it the day before the wedding and really seemed to have slept for a long time.

[11][12]Meanwhile, the priest writes a letter to Romeo, asking him to come to the cemetery on this miserable night and take Juliet away from the temporary borrowed crypt at the moment when the sleeping potion ceases to take effect. Unexpectedly, Father John, who brought the letter to the priest, was delayed by an unforeseen accident and had to return the letter to Father Lorence on the first night. So Lorence had to come alone to take Juliet from the crypt at the moment when he reckoned she was going to wake up, intending to keep her secretly within the convent and inform Romeo to come.

But Romeo had already learned of Juliet's "death" through his servant Balthazar, who bought poison in grief, intending to come to Juliet's tomb at night to be martyred. Barris also wants to pay tribute to Juliet at night, and Romeo meets him unexpectedly, and he wants to arrest Romeo. Romeo, who has a death wish, fights with Barris and kills him. Then, a few minutes before Juliet wakes up, he drinks poison and kills himself next to Juliet's "corpse". When Juliet wakes up, she learns from the priest what happened and stabs herself with a dagger.

## 2.2. A strong and fervent view of love

A strong and fervent view of love is demonstrated in Romeo and Juliet. These two young lovers ignore the family feud and choose to pursue their love bravely. Their love is so persistent and steadfast that they never waver even when faced with countless difficulties and obstacles.

Every action of Romeo and Juliet is filled with deep love for each other. They marry in secret, hoping against all odds to realize their love. When Juliet learns of Romeo's exile, she is devastated, but remains steadfast in her choice to spend the rest of her life with Romeo. This dedication to love and the spirit of sacrifice is the core of the concept of love in Romeo and Juliet.

Their love is not only an exchange of emotions, but also a manifestation of their love for freedom and life. In their story, we can see that they are willing to pay the price of their lives in order to pursue their happiness. This fervent pursuit of love is undoubtedly a revolt against the shackles and restrictions of real life. The concept of love in Romeo and Juliet is not all about obsession and sacrifice. Their story also reveals the complexity and tragedy of love. It is their fervent pursuit of love that leads to their ultimate tragic end. It also reminds us that in the pursuit of love, we need to think rationally and calmly, and not to let our emotions completely dictate our behavior.

The concept of love in Romeo and Juliet is strong and fervent, as well as full of tragedy and complexity. Their story gives us a deep understanding of the true meaning of love and makes us think about how to better pursue and cherish love in real life.

## 3. The concept of love in Classical Chinese view of love

In May 1954, Premier Zhou Enlai led a Chinese government delegation to an international conference in Geneva, bringing with him the first color (Yueju opera) film made in new China, "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai", in order to let the delegates and journalists know about China's long tradition and culture and the new atmosphere after the founding of new China. Just when the staff was at their wits' end over the fact that "foreigners don't understand Chinese Yueju Opera", Zhou Enlai instructed to write on the invitation, "Please enjoy a color opera film - the Chinese Romeo and Juliet. " As a result,

"Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai" was loved by foreign audiences. An American journalist even said, "This movie is so beautiful, more touching than Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet!"

In comparing Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet with the concept of love in Classical Chinese view of love, it is not difficult to find significant differences between the two.[13] Classical Chinese view of love tends to place family and social relationships at the center of its portrayal of love, emphasizing its important influence on the fate of the individual.[14] Romeo and Juliet is set in the Italian city of Verona and is characterized by a strong European culture. In Classical Chinese view of love, such as Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai and Dream of the Red Chamber, the stories are set in the feudal society of China, reflecting the ethical concepts and customs of the society at that time.

Therefore, in Classical Chinese view of love, love is often intertwined with factors such as family interests and social status, and the individual's emotional pursuit often needs to find a balance between family and social expectations. This is particularly evident in ancient literary works such as Dream of the Red Chamber and The Tale of the Western Chamber, where family, social relations and marriage become key factors in determining an individual's fate.

However, in Romeo and Juliet, we see an extreme portrayal of the individual's emotional quest. This work views love as a supreme being, which transcends family feuds and social restrictions and becomes a symbol of freedom and defiance. Although the love between Romeo and Juliet ultimately leads to tragedy, their persistence and spirit of sacrifice are endowed with extremely high value and become the highest state of love. This difference reflects the difference in values in different cultural contexts. Romeo and Juliet emphasizes the pursuit of personal emotions and rebellion against reality, while Classical Chinese view of love focuses more on the preservation of family and social relationships and traditional values.

However, it is worth noting that the concept of love in Classical Chinese view of love has gradually evolved with the change of time and the development of society. Modern literature has begun to pay more attention to individual emotions and the inner world, gradually breaking away from the constraints of traditional social relationships. This change not only reflects the modernization of Chinese society, but also the pursuit of values such as freedom, equality and independence.

#### **4. The Influence of Romeo and Juliet on Classical Chinese view of love**

##### **4.1. The way of depicting emotional expression**

At the time of the creation of Romeo and Juliet, Romeo and Juliet could not be together because of family feuds, although society had, to a certain extent, accepted the form of public intercourse between men and women. There is a significant difference between Eastern and Western ethical views, and from the perspective of the Western bourgeoisie, the tolerance of love has been progressive. In the opening scene, it is mentioned that "Fate decreed that two family enemies should give birth to innocent lovers, and their tragic fall dissolved the conflict between honored relatives." This suggests that despite the relative tolerance of Western society, inter-family hatred is still an insurmountable obstacle. When Juliet learns that her lover is actually Romeo of the Montague family, she expresses deep concern that eventually comes true.

[15]Meanwhile, "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai" demonstrates the ethical concepts of the East. Influenced by geography, political system and cultural accumulation, the Orient pursues stability, harmony, pragmatism, introspection and writing, in sharp contrast to the Western nation's motion-seeking, competitive, extroverted, aggressive, independent and empirical mentality. In feudal society, free love was regarded as immoral and marriage was often arranged by parents. Faced with the constraints of rituals and customs, some young people began to rebel and were martyred in the struggle for love.



## 4.2. Enriching and Deepening Chinese Literary Creation

In the cultural tradition of the Western nations, the strong pursuit of freedom and struggle, like two parallel and uncontradictory rivers, runs through their history and constitutes their basic philosophy of resolving conflicts and contradictions.[16][17] This spiritual trait is not only reflected in their social practice, but also shown in their literary works, especially the tragedy works, which show the world the courage and unyieldingness of human beings in the face of adversity with their conflictual and solemn styles.

From the point of view of the history of Western literature, the idea of its literary creation is like a fertile soil, deeply nourished by both philosophical thinking and scientific development. Ancient Greek philosophy, in particular, as the source of Western philosophy, has had a profound influence on literature. The ancient Greeks' view of fate is full of reverence and recognition of the gods, and they are convinced of the irresistibility and supremacy of fate; it also highlights the resilience and bravery of human beings in the face of destiny, and they firmly believe that even in the face of great difficulties, human beings are still capable of displaying their unique value and noble spirit.

This spirit of resistance to fate is widely reflected in Western literature.[18] For example, in the ancient Greek tragedy writer Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the protagonist, Oedipus Rex, learns of the curse of his own destiny, but still bravely takes up the responsibility and tries to change his own destiny, and although he fails to succeed in the end, his bravery and perseverance deeply impresses the readers. And in Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet*, the main character Hamlet learns that his father has been murdered by his uncle, although his heart is full of pain and struggle, he still chooses to bravely face the reality and fight against the evil forces, and eventually take revenge for his father.

These tragic works not only show the bravery and unyieldingness of human beings in the face of adversity, but also explore in depth the meaning and value of human existence. They tell us that even if fate is cruel, human beings still have the ability to fight, to pursue and to realize their self-worth. This spirit of resistance to fate is the unique charm of tragic works in Western literature.

In exploring the differences between different cultures, it is not difficult to realize that traditional Chinese culture has been deeply influenced by Confucianism in its long course of development. Confucianism, as a treasure of Chinese civilization, advocates the philosophical concept of "the unity of heaven and mankind", emphasizing the harmonious coexistence of human beings and nature, as well as harmonious coexistence of human beings and society. This philosophical concept is deeply imprinted in the hearts of the Chinese people and has shaped the unique values and code of conduct of the Chinese nation.

Under the cultivation of Confucianism, the Middle Way has become an important part of traditional Chinese culture. The Way of the Mean, or the Way of Neutrality, emphasizes the search for a balance between two extremes, neither too radical nor too conservative. This ideology has been reflected in all areas of politics, economics and culture, and has enabled Chinese society to maintain long-term stability and prosperity. At the same time, the Chinese family system was closely linked to authoritarian rule, with the family seen as a microcosm of society, and family ethics magnified into social ethics, creating a unique model of family-state isomorphism. Under this model, the family became an important force in maintaining social stability and order, while at the same time providing a solid foundation for authoritarian rule.

There are also significant differences between traditional Chinese culture and the West in terms of the concept of fate.[19] The Chinese are more inclined to believe that fate is predestined and that the development of life is influenced by providence and predestination. This notion was particularly prevalent in ancient societies, where people tended to attribute individual success or failure to providence and fate. However, with the development and progress of society, this concept has gradually faded and people have begun to pay more attention to their own efforts and struggles.

### 4.3. Commonalities between Romeo and Juliet and Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai

#### (1) The pursuit of the ideal of love

Both Romeo and Juliet and Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai show the persistent pursuit of the ideal of love.[20] In Romeo and Juliet, the two main characters overcome their family feuds and bravely pursue love until the last moment of their lives. In "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai", although Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai experienced parting in life and death, they were eventually transformed into a pair of butterflies, symbolizing their yearning for beautiful love.

#### (2) Influence of family concept

In both works, the family concept has an important influence on love. In Romeo and Juliet, Romeo and Juliet's family feud leads to their tragic end. And in "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai", Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai's family concepts caused great resistance to their love, but eventually they succeeded in crossing the family barrier in the netherworld.

#### (3) Tragic ending

Both Romeo and Juliet and Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai adopt tragic endings, reflecting the helplessness and struggle of love in the real society. In Romeo and Juliet, the two main characters are not allowed to end well because of their family feuds, and eventually bid farewell to the world with death. And in Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, although the main characters succeed in reunion in the netherworld, they still cannot change their tragic fate in real life.

#### 4.3.1. Commonalities between Romeo and Juliet and Dream of the Red Chamber

#### (1) The struggle between love and fate

Both Romeo and Juliet and The Dream of the Red Chamber show the protagonists' struggle against love and fate. In Romeo and Juliet, Juliet resorts to faking her death to escape from her family's bondage for the sake of love. And in Dream of the Red Chamber, Lin Daiyu, though ill-fated, always keeps her faith in love until the last moment of her life.

#### (2) Conflict between love and morality

The conflict between love and morality is also a common theme in both works. In Romeo and Juliet, the love of the two main characters is bound by the morality of the family, which puts them in a dilemma. And in Dream of Red Mansions, the love of Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu is also oppressed by worldly morality, which finally leads to their tragic end.

#### 4.3.2. Summary

#### (1) Love expression

The expression of love in Romeo and Juliet is more direct, as the two main characters bravely pursue their own happiness without hesitating to fight against their family and society. In Classical Chinese view of love, the expression of love is relatively more implicit, such as Zhu Yingtai in Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, who never dares to express her love for Liang Shanbo directly until she reveals her heart before her death.

#### (2) Characterization

The main character in Romeo and Juliet is more independent and brave, and dares to challenge the traditional constraints of family and society. In our literature, the characters are relatively conservative, such as Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu in Dream of Red Mansions. Although they are persistent in the pursuit of love, they still seem helpless and hopeless in the face of family and social pressure.

## 5. Conclusion

Taking *Romeo and Juliet* as an example, this Shakespearean classic tells the love story of two young lovers who defy all odds. They bravely break free from the shackles of society and family to pursue their true love. However, due to various reasons, their love ends in tragedy. The reason why this work can become a classic lie not only in its sincere emotion and compact plot, but also in its profound revelation of the contradictions and conflicts between the liberation of human nature and the real society.

Love, the eternal literary theme, has touched the heartstrings of countless people since ancient times. Countless literati have fallen in love with it, and they have composed a moving hymn of love with their passionate emotions. Although we all sincerely wish that all lovers in the world will be happily married, but in the history of literature, but left a lot of poignant and sorrowful love stories.

One of the major reasons why these works have endured is that they reproduce the theme of one world, one dream - breaking free from the social shackles and seeking liberation of human nature - in a remarkable literary form. Interpreting these classic plays from the perspective of humanism, we can deeply explore the literary charm embedded in them.

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