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Female Representation in Sino-French Cross-Cultural Adaptation: A Comparative Study from The Orphan of Zhao to L'Orphelin de la Chine

Meimei Liu

Beijing No.2 Middle School, Beijing, China
liumeimeimay1212@gmail.com

Abstract. In 1753, the renowned French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire adapted the 13th-century Chinese Yuan drama The Orphan of Zhao into the French play L'Orphelin de la Chine. This article argues that although Princess Zhuang Ji's suicide demonstrates a certain degree of female autonomy, her actions still conform to the Confucian ideals of "female virtue" and the duty of preserving the family bloodline. In contrast, Idamé exhibits a strong sense of independence, embodying the combined influence of Confucian and Enlightenment thought. Her destiny is shaped by the interplay of both emotion and reason. This study also reveals how Voltaire's adaptation integrates French cultural contexts into traditional Chinese Confucian virtues—such as loyalty and sacrifice—while simultaneously exploring the evolution of female consciousness.

Keywords: The Orphan of Zhao, L'Orphelin de la Chine, Enlightenment, Drama, Feminism

1. Introduction

Ji Junxiang, a playwright of the Yuan dynasty, adapted The Orphan of Zhao from Zuo Zhuan. The play recounts how, during the Spring and Autumn Period, the powerful Jin minister Tu'an Gu orchestrates the extermination of the Zhao family. Only Princess Zhuang Ji, who had just given birth to a son, survives. At her husband's request to safeguard the infant, she entrusts the orphan to Cheng Ying and, to eliminate any suspicions Cheng might have about her leaking the secret, takes her own life. Cheng Ying then raises the orphan in secrecy until the child comes of age and ultimately kills Tu'an Gu, thus avenging his family. Ji Junxiang transforms the historical image of Princess Zhuang Ji—who, according to historical records, incited family conflict through false accusations in an attempt to secure succession for her son Zhao Wu—into that of a "chaste woman" who hangs herself with her sash to preserve the sole surviving bloodline of the Zhao family. In the eighteenth century, the play was translated into French by the Jesuit missionary Joseph de Prémare and introduced to France. Despite omissions of sung passages and mistranslations arising from cultural misunderstandings, the work had a profound impact overseas. Voltaire adapted it into L'Orphelin de la Chine (The Orphan of China), setting the story during the transition between the Song and Yuan dynasties. In his version, the loyal minister Zang Ti seeks to preserve the last bloodline of the Song dynasty by disguising his own son as the orphan and handing him over to Genghis Khan, thereby

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deceiving the Khan and saving the true orphan from execution. However, his plan is uncovered by his wife, Idamé, who tries to rescue their biological son. Genghis Khan, once enamored with Idamé, threatens to spare her family and the orphan only if she agrees to marry him. In the end, Genghis Khan is moved by Idamé's patriotism, loyalty, steadfastness, and courage, and chooses to spare both her family and the orphan.

In recent years, comparative studies of The Orphan of Zhao and L'Orphelin de la Chine have gradually increased. However, direct comparisons between the female figures of Princess Zhuang Ji and Idamé remain relatively limited. Tan Jing argues that Princess Zhuang Ji is "deeply principled and strong-willed," but contends that this characterization largely stems from the prevailing moral superiority of traditional society at the time [2]. Xiang Zhiqing maintains that Princess Zhuang Ji's suicide for the sake of the orphan was considered an inescapable maternal duty under the prevailing ideology. She honored her husband's wish to preserve the family bloodline and refrained from living on alone or remarrying after his death—conduct celebrated as benevolent and righteous in that era. However, this self-sacrifice was entirely a product of feudal ideology, leaving her no space for personal agency or voice [3]. According to Li Xin, Princess Zhuang Ji's familial status was significantly inferior to that of men. Under a patriarchal system, she was confined by a deeply feudal conception of the family, occupying a marginal position [4]. In contrast, the portrayal of Idamé is more multidimensional and complete. Zhong Xiaoxia observes that Idamé undergoes continuous inner conflict, embodying justice, courage, and a profound sense of morality—a fusion of emotional sensitivity and rational strength that represents the artistic union of sensibility and reason [5]. Beyond her emotional complexity, Peng Ruohan notes that Idamé's identity also carries richer and more dramatically charged tensions. No longer limited to the fixed roles of "mother" and "wife" assigned to Princess Zhuang Ji, Idamé simultaneously inhabits the roles of a loyal subject of the Song dynasty, the wife of a fallen official, the mother of a child in peril, and the former beloved of a ruler from the conquering regime. In her character, one can clearly discern Voltaire's interpretation of both Confucian and Enlightenment ideals. She is a striking presence in L'Orphelin de la Chine and serves as a central force propelling the plot forward. Her character embodies humanity, patriotism, freedom, courage, resistance, and profound love [6]. Fan Xiheng argues that Idamé represents the essence of the Chinese spirit and is an extraordinarily rich female figure—one that can even be called a "perfect archetype." [7]

Although current research on the figure of Idamé is relatively comprehensive, analyses of Princess Zhuang Ji remain rather superficial. Few studies return to the dramatic texts themselves to directly compare the representations of these two female characters and to explore the development of female consciousness. This paper incorporates elements of performance analysis related to Princess Zhuang Ji's portrayal in traditional Chinese opera and returns to the original texts to undertake a close comparative study of the images and fates of Princess Zhuang Ji as written by Ji Junxiang and Idamé as crafted by Voltaire. It may be said that Princess Zhuang Ji's martyrdom is not merely a manifestation of maternal love and moral duty; it also reveals, to some extent, a rupture with traditional Confucian moral expectations. Nevertheless, her portrayal remains fundamentally a product of the Confucian ethical and rational order, which constructs the image of the lie nü—the "chaste woman"—and thus imposes certain constraints on female subjectivity. In contrast, Idamé's resistance, shaped by both Confucian culture and Enlightenment ideals, creatively embodies a dual drive of reason and emotion, and to a large extent realizes the liberation of female subjectivity.

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2. The influence of Confucian and enlightenment thought

2.1. Princess Zhuang Ji

Princess Zhuang Ji embodies the quintessential characteristics of Confucian ideology. Both the virtues for which she is widely praised and the tragic nature of her fate ultimately stem from the profound influence of Confucian culture.

2.1.1. Loyalty (zhong) and Trustworthiness (xin)

The historical image of Princess Zhuang Ji stands in stark contrast to her portrayal in Ji Junxiang's drama. According to Zuo Zhuan, "In the fourth year of Duke Cheng's reign, Zhao Ying of Jin had an illicit affair with Zhao Zhuang Ji." The text continues, "In the spring of the fifth year, Yuan and Ping (i.e., Zhao Tong and Zhao Kuo, both elder brothers of Zhao Ying) were exiled to Qi." "Zhao Zhuang Ji, mourning the loss of Zhao Ying, falsely accused Zhao Tong and Zhao Kuo before the Duke of Jin, claiming they were plotting rebellion. Luan and Xi were ordered to attack. In the sixth month, Jin launched a punitive expedition against Zhao Tong and Zhao Kuo. The lands were given to Qi Xi, and Princess Zhuang Ji, being pregnant, was taken into the palace." Historically, Zhao Ying was exiled for committing adultery with his niece-in-law, Princess Zhuang Ji. In retaliation, Zhuang Ji falsely accused Zhao Tong and Zhao Kuo of treason, ultimately leading to their execution. Thus, in historical records, she is portrayed as the principal instigator of the Zhao family's tragedy [8]. In sharp contrast, Ji Junxiang transforms her into a victim of the Zhao family's downfall—more than that, the only survivor burdened with the task of preserving the family's bloodline. Ultimately, she chooses to hang herself for the greater good of the family's survival. From this radical reinterpretation of the historical Zhuang Ji, it is evident that Ji Junxiang, in shaping the only significant female character in The Orphan of Zhao, intended to depict her as strong-willed, courageous, and morally upright—an embodiment of the Confucian ideals of loyalty and righteousness (zhong yi). Ji's aim was to create an idealized image of the mother and wife, a moral exemplar meant to be admired, studied, and even emulated by later generations, thus reinforcing and promoting the central tenets of Confucian virtue.

Beyond her refusal to blindly submit to Duke Ling of Jin, Princess Zhuang Ji also deeply respected her husband and faithfully upheld the marital bond of trust and loyalty. Fundamentally, the courage that drove her unwavering determination—even to the point of sacrificing her life to save the orphan—stemmed not only from her profound maternal love for the child but also from her steadfast loyalty to her husband. As the wife of Zhao Shuo, she shared a deep emotional and moral connection with him, bound by affection and mutual devotion. Were it not for her royal status shielding her from death amid the family's tragedy, she would likely have perished long ago. Having narrowly escaped death, Princess Zhuang Ji was overwhelmed with grief and likely harbored a desire to join her husband in death. Yet Zhao Shuo's dying wish was singular: to protect the orphan and enable the Zhao family's revenge. Out of loyalty and fidelity to Zhao Shuo, she resolutely dedicated herself to safeguarding the child. When Cheng Ying—the only person capable of rescuing the orphan—expressed fear that Princess Zhuang Ji might reveal their plan, she did not hesitate to commit suicide, dispelling Cheng Ying's doubts. In the end, she preserved her promise to her husband with her own life, elevating her existence from mere survival trapped within the confines of the imperial harem to a heroic realm of sacrifice for her husband, her son, and her love.

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2.1.2. Patriarchal society valuing obedience as virtue

From another perspective, Princess Zhuang Ji's loyalty and fidelity to her husband can also be understood as reflecting Confucian ideals that emphasize a wife's obedience to her husband. Mencius stressed that "obedience is the proper way of concubines and wives" (yi shun wei zheng zhe, qiefu zhi dao ye), meaning that, in his view, a wife's duty is to comply with her husband's wishes. To listen attentively and never disobey him, without independent thought or female subjectivity, was regarded by Confucian scholars of the time as a woman's responsibility under traditional feudal society and a symbol of the virtuous, gentle wife. After prescribing these moral norms for women, Mencius even expressed disdain for this "way of concubines and wives," deeming it far inferior to the "way of a true man" (da zhangfu zhi dao): "to occupy a broad place under heaven, stand in a proper position in the world, and follow the great path of the world," meaning that men should embody benevolence, uphold ritual propriety, and act according to moral principles. In a society already marked by profound gender inequality, Princess Zhuang Ji's heroic self-sacrifice to save the orphan was ultimately reduced to "what a woman ought to do." Indeed, she commits suicide in the very first act, and no female characters appear in the subsequent four acts. This adaptation further flattens and simplifies her character, reducing her entirely to a woman defined by and subordinate to the patriarchal order.

Moreover, although Princess Zhuang Ji demonstrates a certain degree of rebellious spirit beyond that of an ordinary woman, this resistance is nonetheless a product of her time and the influence of Confucian indoctrination. Due to the impact of Confucian and feudal family values, preserving the orphan carried additional critical significance for Princess Zhuang Ji. As the sole male heir of the entire Zhao family, protecting the orphan—this singular "root"—meant safeguarding the family lineage and ensuring its continuation. [3] At that time, the Zhao family was essentially reduced to Princess Zhuang Ji, who had married into the family, and the Zhao orphan. Within a patriarchal society, the entire moral framework compelled Princess Zhuang Ji, above all else, to preserve the bloodline. Though she held the high status of a princess, in the feudal era her position was far inferior to that of a newborn male heir. Therefore, although it might seem that Princess Zhuang Ji had no reason to commit suicide, in reality she had no other choice. She was forced to sacrifice her life to secure the survival of the entire family. Her profound maternal love was thus reduced to a mere instrument for the continuation of the bloodline, and she was compelled to become a sacrificial victim under patriarchy.

2.2. Idamé

2.2.1. Obedience to and respect for Confucian culture

Under the influence of Confucian thought, Idamé holds profound admiration and reverence for this esteemed culture. This cultural framework not only shapes her moral values but also deeply influences her worldview and value system.

When Idamé becomes aware of her feelings for Genghis Khan, her reflection transcends personal emotion; she approaches the matter from a higher perspective, contemplating how this relationship might serve as a means to achieve deeper cultural and ethnic integration. Idamé regards Chinese culture as a civilization of greater depth and breadth. [7] This civilization is not merely a collection of customary rites and regulations but a powerful moral force capable of "enlightening" and "restraining" a male leader like Genghis Khan, who comes from a nomadic background. In her view, spreading Confucian culture does not impose shackles on the nomadic peoples or erode their

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civilization; rather, cultural integration represents an enrichment and elevation resulting from the fusion of traditions. The concept of "elimination" more accurately reflects Idamé's preference for the inclusiveness and resilience of Chinese culture and her confidence in the thoroughness of cultural synthesis. Thus, her emotions are not limited to personal attachment but encompass profound hopes for ethnic fusion and cultural respect. Although her vision ultimately unfolds not through marriage but through resistance—leading to Genghis Khan's transformation and his acceptance of many Confucian institutions and values—this process nonetheless attests to Idamé's reverence for and internalization of Confucian culture.

Although Idamé harbors affection for Genghis Khan and voluntarily assumes the heavy responsibility of breaking down ethnic barriers, she ultimately submits to her parents' arrangement and marries Zang Ti instead of uniting with Genghis Khan, who is from an outside ethnic group. [7] Compared to traditional Chinese women, Idamé indeed exhibits a certain degree of autonomy and free thought; however, she remains unable to fully break free from the constraints of Confucian ritual norms. This ritual culture, centered on the "moral duties of human relationships" (lun chang zhi yi), regards a woman's marriage primarily as a tool for family interests and never respects her personal will. Although Idamé possesses a spirit of resistance, she ultimately must yield to this "solemn and ancient" cultural tradition. [7] Nevertheless, within her marriage to Zang Ti, Idamé demonstrates a certain moral consciousness. Despite lacking love for Zang Ti at first, she is able to cultivate respect and affection after marriage, showing great fidelity and loyalty to her husband—even willing to sacrifice her life for him. [7] The epithet "virtuous wife" (xian fu) and the transformation of Idamé's feelings reflect her acceptance of the Confucian role of "good wife" within traditional marriage and embody the Confucian concept of marital fidelity (cong yi er zhong). This reveals that women in Confucian culture lack subjectivity in marriage and must internalize feudal marital norms to believe that their respect and obedience to their husbands constitute the highest moral virtue. Thus, Idamé's ultimate peaceful resolution through resistance alongside her husband can be seen both as a critique of Confucian ritual norms and as a subtle safeguard of this ancient, immutable institution.

2.2.2. Enlightenment concerns with "equality," "individuality," and "freedom"

When Idamé discovers Zang Ti's plan to sacrifice their own child by substituting him for the orphan, she expresses profound anger. Idamé vehemently rejects the idea that people are born with distinctions of "nobility and baseness" [7], especially the imposition of such unjust hierarchical divisions on a newborn infant—her own child. Before her child has developed subjectivity, decision-making capacity, or even been exposed to Confucian doctrine, he is already expected to give up his life for the title of another child. She incisively points out that these titles are merely "temporary social statuses" [7], artificially constructed and inherently meaningless. As human beings, we should not sacrifice our own flesh and blood for such baseless notions. At this moment, the Song dynasty has already been overthrown, and the master-subject relationships that defined its political order have ceased to exist. Yet Zang Ti clings to Confucian ritual and hierarchy, intending to perpetuate the "lord and subject" civilization through their child. This compels the protective Idamé to proclaim the powerful declaration that "all people are born equal." The Enlightenment ideal of universal equality, as promoted by Voltaire, is thus voiced through a female character who not only advocates breaking cultural and ethnic boundaries but also challenges class distinctions. Idamé's call for social equality, rejecting the idea that bloodline determines rank, resonates strongly with Enlightenment critiques of the feudal despotism in contemporary France and its oppressive modes of thought. [9]

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This critique simultaneously addresses the irrationality of Confucian ethics, opposing its doctrine of "the ruler is the ruler, the subject is the subject; the father is the father, the son is the son." [3]

Subsequently, Idamé and Zang Ti clash over her efforts to protect their child. Zang Ti scolds her, accusing her of "deliberately inviting Genghis Khan to execute me," of undermining "our moral order," and ultimately of jeopardizing "the royal lineage." [7] He escalates Idamé's maternal desire to save her child to the level of murdering her husband, severing the royal bloodline, and destroying centuries-old Confucian principles, demonstrating the intense pressure Zang Ti exerts on her. Yet Idamé merely seeks to protect her only biological son, wanting his life to be free from the dictates of power and blind loyalty; she is simply fulfilling the basic responsibility expected of a mother. Moreover, she deeply respects Zang Ti and has consistently pleaded for him before Genghis Khan. Nonetheless, Zang Ti's cold words—"If you act this way, you will not easily be satisfied" and "Your unfilial hand is stained with your husband's blood" [7]—pierce her heart. Idamé's intentions have always been to protect everyone through her own efforts; everything she does is for her husband, her child, and the royal offspring. She never once considers her own life or death. This devoted wife, who has shared years of mutual respect and affection with her husband, is nonetheless branded with the heinous accusations of regicide and uxoricide simply because she did not conform to her husband's wishes and defied the stringent Confucian patriarchal ethics. However, Idamé's actions reveal an awakening of female subjectivity. She ceases to be a mere appendage to male authority and instead courageously and resolutely challenges the established order of the world. While her resistance may still be limited by the constraints of her era, it serves as a prelude to the awakening of female consciousness that has been evolving over millennia.

At this point, an ordinary woman would likely succumb to fear and relinquish her child, but Idamé does not. When she realizes that her love for her husband and son only provokes harsher verbal abuse from her husband, she begins to fight back assertively. Despite being profoundly wronged, Idamé refuses to be shackled by baseless moral and ethical norms. She possesses a strong will and subjectivity, boldly asserting that these fabricated titles cannot compare to the authentic identities of "husband" and "father," [7] which are grounded in genuine love. Such real interpersonal bonds and moral order form the foundation of human relationships and are key to the continuation of a people. After Zang Ti's ruthless and unfilial remarks, Idamé still empathizes with him; she "pities him," recognizing him as an "unfortunate father" [7] and understanding the sorrow he feels in sacrificing his own child. To ease her husband's pain, she even "kneels to plead" with him [7]. All of this reflects Idamé's profound concern for "individual" emotions and, more broadly, for the feelings of every individual. She considers her child, the orphan of the royal family, her husband, and her own emotions. She refuses to allow any individual to suffer unfair or unreasonable treatment, embodying the Enlightenment's deep respect and emphasis on the individual. Thus, Idamé demonstrates a high degree of subjectivity and free will, showing that women can exercise a certain degree of agency in major decisions and events, and can work to change the world's established norms and perspectives for themselves and others. Idamé's greatness stands in stark contrast to Zang Ti's conservatism and verbal abuse, ironically exposing the irrationality and chauvinism of feudal society.

3. Comparison of fate and views on fate

3.1. Princess Zhuang Ji

After the massacre that wiped out her entire clan, Princess Zhuang Ji escaped death due to her noble status as a princess. However, she could only helplessly watch her husband and relatives perish in

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this political persecution; her royal status was powerless to save her loved ones from their tragic fate. [3] Traditional Confucian doctrine further enshrines the principle that "before marriage, a woman follows her father; after marriage, she follows her husband; if the husband dies, she follows her son." Even as a princess, she could not protect her child and was forced to bind her own fate to that of an infant who had no agency and was constantly at risk. Within this predetermined fate, maximizing one's subjective value requires fulfilling moral duties and pursuing ethical ideals despite numerous unknown factors. [10] Princess Zhuang Ji was well aware of and accepted this fate. In her conception of destiny, her only recourse was to entrust the child to Cheng Ying, thereby increasing the child's chances of survival. Beyond this, she could no longer control the child's destiny and could only do her best and leave the rest to fate.

When Princess Zhuang Ji entrusted the orphan to Cheng Ying, Cheng Ying expressed his concerns about the possibility of Princess Zhuang Ji leaking the secret in just two brief statements. In response, Princess Zhuang Ji committed suicide to alleviate Cheng Ying's doubts and to protect the orphan. The repeated utterance of "Enough, enough, enough!" [2] poignantly conveys Princess Zhuang Ji's profound sorrow and resignation. The six repetitions of "enough" express the inevitability of her tragic fate. Before making such a momentous decision about her destiny, upon hearing Cheng Ying's hesitation and worry, she immediately declared, "His father was born under the sword and died by it; as his mother, I also follow to death." [2] While Cheng Ying was still concerned for the safety of his own nine clansmen, she directly took her own life. Though a woman, her courage and resolve surpassed that of a loyal and righteous man. However, this also indicates that although she took her own life, her fate and life were constantly intertwined with that of the orphan; whether she should live or die was determined solely by what would better protect the child. Notably, at this moment, Princess Zhuang Ji refers to her husband and herself as "his father" and "as his mother," [2] without ever mentioning "I." She had already regarded the child's fate as everything, and her own self-awareness had been eroded. Her noble spirit of sacrifice and sense of familial duty were in fact a moral veneer that covertly upheld the patriarchal society. Although her status was far higher than Cheng Ying's, she reinforced Cheng Ying's moral authority through her suicide, becoming a stepping stone for male triumph. Cheng Ying's suspicion of Princess Zhuang Ji also indirectly reflects the prevailing male perception of women as inherently weak, doubting that a woman—even the child's mother—could keep the orphan's secret.

3.2. Idamé

3.2.1. Autonomous control of fate

Faced with inevitable death, Idamé emphatically asserts control over her own destiny. She boldly proclaims, "Every true hero masters their own life." [3] In Idamé's view, those truly called heroes are those who can govern their own fate, unrestrained by anyone—not even their lord. The phrase "every true" [3]directly highlights Idamé's self-identification alongside heroic figures throughout history, rather than as a weak woman hiding behind history, subjected to others' will. With this forward-thinking and precise self-positioning, she directly challenges Zang Ti's fatalistic and passive view of destiny. [3] The individual should actively resist fate, opposing any form of oppression or threat imposed by others on personal destiny, refusing to submit to their will. As a woman, she no longer passively accepts the arrangements of fate but actively strives for freedom and dignity. Her final declaration, "Life demands freedom; death must be according to one's own will," powerfully expresses Idamé's profound pursuit of selfhood and free will—where both life and death are determined by oneself, not by others or by heaven.

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When Genghis Khan decreed that Idamé's child, her husband, and herself would be spared if she married him, she resolutely refused. Although her husband also urged her to sacrifice herself to save three lives—the best possible solution anyone could conceive at the time—Idamé broke away from the social expectations imposed by traditional ritual norms. She firmly asserted her own choice of fate, refusing to equate her destiny with that of the other three men, and declined to become a mere sacrificial pawn in a male struggle. This demonstrates that women's wisdom can fully contend with male authority. In the course of this resistance, Idamé even leads the traditional male conception of fate, persuading Zang Ti to join her in embracing free will.

4. The harmony of reason and emotion

4.1. Princess Zhuang Ji

In the pre-Qin Confucian view, reason is explained as "nothing other than a calm and clear psychological state within ourselves." Reason is described as "clarity, tranquility, and harmony," while "foolishness, stubbornness," and "violent impulses" are seen as contrary to reason [11].Reason thus entails facing life's various circumstances calmly and objectively, exercising self-restraint when battling complex inner emotions. Princess Zhuang Ji, at the moment she entrusted the orphan to Cheng Ying before her death, fully embodied this Confucian ideal of reason.

Since there is no recorded film or television adaptation of the Yuan dynasty drama version of The Orphan of Zhao, this paper will analyze the scene in which Princess Zhuang Ji entrusts the child to Cheng Ying in the Peking Opera adaptation, performed by Wang Huifang:

Yearning with longing eyes, I implore you all to quickly rescue the orphan from the palace.Alas, my entire family has perished; the newborn child must be separated far from his mother.Mother and child, you and I are as distant as the heavens apart [12].

Firstly, the aria is structured in the Erhuang Sanban style—original version, Sanban melody variation—which vividly expresses the bone-deep pain of mother-child separation [12]. The phrase "望眼欲穿" ("yearning with longing eyes") is sung relatively slowly, with a low and subtly varying pitch, reflecting Princess Zhuang Ji's heavy mood and the long, agonizing wait for Cheng Ying. During this waiting, her only concern is when Cheng Ying will come to rescue the orphan. The following line, "快救孤儿出宫廷" ("quickly rescue the orphan from the palace"), contrasts sharply in rhythm, suddenly accelerating, with the first few characters each articulated with two distinct notes. This shift conveys the great emotional fluctuation of Princess Zhuang Ji, expressing urgency and a desperate hope for Cheng Ying to quickly take the orphan away. However, the phrasing does not feature excessive note variation on a single character because Princess Zhuang Ji is balancing her profound grief with rational deliberation on the process of entrusting the orphan, thus exerting control over her emotions. This indicates that she has weighed the pros and cons and that reason guides her actions, leading to her decision to entrust the orphan. This passage is in the Erhuang Sanban style, characterized by the absence of a fixed rhythmic pattern, conveying intense emotional storytelling led primarily by feeling. Princess Zhuang Ji's emotions burst forth at the moment she meets Cheng Ying, blending the maternal pain and reluctance of sending her child away with anticipation for Cheng Ying's arrival. The emotions are intense and conflicted.

After a section of spoken dialogue, the melody transitions from Erhuang Sanban to Erhuang Yuanban. The Erhuang Yuanban style is steady and structured, primarily narrative in nature, establishing a solemn tone that reflects Princess Zhuang Ji's profound grief and helplessness. The phrase "可怜我一家人俱把命丧" ("Alas, my entire family has perished") is sung in a relatively low pitch, expressing Princess Zhuang Ji's anguish. The phrase "俱把命丧" ("all perished") employs a

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drawn-out note with considerable pitch modulation, producing a choked, sobbing effect that conveys the painful despair she feels in uttering the tragedy of her family's annihilation. Words like "可怜" ("alas") and "命丧" ("perished") carry strong tones of sorrow, illustrating her helplessness. The following line, "初生儿他就要远离亲娘" ("the newborn child must be separated far from his mother"), features a melody with greater pitch variation and a higher tone than the previous line. The rising pitch reveals her inner sorrow and the uncontrollable surge of hatred toward Tu'an Gu. The overall tempo accelerates here, employing a faster rhythm. In the last two characters, "亲娘" ("dear mother"), the mother's torn emotions are expressed through a prolonged note, reaching an emotional climax as Princess Zhuang Ji's affection for the child and deep sorrow converge. Confronted with her family's misfortune, Princess Zhuang Ji, as a mere woman, can only reconcile her grief through her profound maternal love and her familial mission.

In the phrase following the aria, "娘与你，你与娘" ("Mother to you, you to mother"), the two characters for "you" (你) and "mother" (娘) are both emphasized on their initial syllables, expressing the deep bond between mother and child. The first and last "mother" characters share the same pitch, while the middle characters exhibit minimal tonal variation, reflecting Princess Zhuang Ji's intense yet restrained inner emotions and suppressed feelings. Excessive tonal variation here would risk exposing too much emotion, which would be inappropriate in front of a servant like Cheng Ying. The phrase "天各一方" ("Heaven and earth apart") is driven to a climax through the use of tremolo and sobbing tones. The sudden high note in the middle of the character "各" shocks the listener, breaking the previous calm and restraint of the melody, pushing the emotion to its peak. This abrupt outburst resembles a heart-wrenching cry against fate. The tremolo further intensifies the tragic and sorrowful nature of Princess Zhuang Ji's plight and the Zhao family's annihilation. The stark contrast between this sudden high pitch and the preceding low tones creates a sense of rupture, symbolizing the violent separation of mother and child under Tu'an Gu's cruelty and embodying Princess Zhuang Ji's profound hatred. The final note descends slightly, resembling a sigh against the injustice of fate. The entire phrase is rich in layers, reflecting the vast emotional turmoil within Princess Zhuang Ji and evoking a deep, complex sorrow. The weakening final syllable of "方" conveys helplessness in the face of an uncontrollable destiny and the unending, relentless nature of her grief.

Princess Zhuang Ji's aria embodies a coexistence of sorrow and restraint, profoundly reflecting the dual interplay of emotion and reason through the alternation of rhythmic patterns in Peking Opera. Her grief is not expressed as endless weeping but is tempered with a distinctive restraint characteristic of Eastern aesthetics. Within this harmonious balance, female subjectivity does not arise from confrontation but is born out of the endurance of suffering and the ultimate guardianship of life's continuity.

4.2. Idamé

From Voltaire's perspective, reason means "not blindly obeying irrational authority, neither despising the world nor humiliating oneself" [13], embodying a strong sense of morality. Idamé holds four intertwined identities: she is a subject of the Great Song dynasty, the wife of a fallen official, the mother of a child in peril, and the first love of the new dynasty's ruler [6]. These conflicting roles make each of her choices directly significant not only to herself and her family but also to Genghis Khan. Amid these complex and difficult decisions, she consistently and skillfully balances reason and emotion, successfully resolving contradictions through a profound moral sensibility.

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When a servant reported Idamé's situation to Genghis Khan, he described her as "running," "stretching out her arms," and "shouting desperately" [7]. This series of rapid actions vividly expresses the urgent, instinctual drive of a mother—at times somewhat unrestrained—with an intense emotional outburst. The shock of those around her highlights the overwhelming emotional impact of Idamé's frantic efforts to save her child. Her commands, "Stop!" and "Do not carry out the execution!" [7], repeated with two imperative sentences and two exclamation marks, reflect her emotional loss of control and the fierce intensity she cannot suppress. "Those agonizing cries, that mad despair," combined with "tears streaming down" [7], deeply moved Genghis Khan's followers. This is a full expression of Idamé's intense internal struggle and uncontrollable emotional eruption. When she "once she spoke, she shouted out 'son' and 'treasure'" [7], her maternal instinct under desperate circumstances brought her emotional intensity to a peak. Yet beneath this passion lies a rational resistance to irrational authority—an awakening of self-consciousness grounded in reason. Her judgment that "this must never be true" stems from the purity of her maternal love. Such an emotional expression, striking the hearts of invaders, compelled them to use their own rational logic to acknowledge the authenticity of Idamé's feelings. This sensibility, which even moved the invaders to sympathy and supplication on her behalf, propelled the rational core of her inner resistance against both the ruling power and her husband's authority. The warm harmony of this reason-emotion interplay jointly shapes the greatness of Idamé.

When Idamé pleaded with Genghis Khan, she said, "A thousand hates, ten thousand hates, can only hate me alone" [7], a powerful emotional outburst revealing her willingness to shoulder all responsibility. This reflects a strong awakening of self-consciousness driven by emotion. The two short but forceful exclamations, "Cruel man!" and "How could you!" [7], vividly express her intense hatred toward Genghis Khan at that moment. Her question, "Can your heart not move with a little mercy?" is an appeal to awaken compassion and benevolence in Genghis Khan, a brutal invader of vastly higher status confronting and even begging him. Her plea is not only for herself but also for her entire family. This overwhelming sense of familial responsibility compels her to speak this soul-stirring sentence. Idamé's greatness lies in this desperate state—amid her most passionate words, she still upholds the banner of reason. She neither blindly obeys Genghis Khan's orders nor succumbs to despair and relinquishes her life. Instead, she uses morality to understand her husband and appeals to Genghis Khan with rationality, aiming to awaken his mercy and compassion.

5. Comparison

Within the context of patriarchal culture, the similarities and differences between the images of Princess Zhuang Ji and Idamé reflect the transformation of female subjectivity from a traditional literary symbol to an independent individual. Princess Zhuang Ji embodies the sacrifice to feudal ethics through conformity to the feudal social order, while Idamé continuously resists oppression and pursues a breakthrough toward personal independence and autonomy.

5.1. Similarities

5.1.1. Neither is blind loyalty

First of all, neither Princess Zhuang Ji nor Idamé exemplifies blind loyalty. Princess Zhuang Ji does not blindly obey the supreme ruler's orders; her act of sacrificing herself to save the orphan demonstrates her profound attachment to the family bloodline and represents a subtle form of resistance within a male-dominated society. When confronted with the demands of the state and

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family, imperial decree and maternal love, she is not overwhelmed by the inviolable mandates imposed by feudal rites. Instead, she remains loyal to her own identity as the mother of a newborn child and the wife of her deceased husband, striving fiercely to protect her child.

Similarly, Idamé is not blindly loyal to her husband or the oppressive traditional culture. Although she exists within a ritualistic environment steeped in sacrifice and self-denial, Idamé refuses to accept the conventional notion of loyalty that demands sacrificing her own child to preserve the royal bloodline. On the contrary, as a woman, she actively breaks the shackles of traditional "loyalty to the sovereign," attempting to rescue the orphan by appealing to Genghis Khan with both reason and emotion, as well as seeking refuge for the child with other forces. She rejects blind loyalty and instead pursues a path that harmonizes rationality and feeling, driving change and striving to find a balance between preserving family honor and saving the child's life.

The images of these two women reveal an important theme: even within environments of oppression and constraint, women still possess their own thoughts and wisdom. Although these may not always be overt or forceful, their choices constitute a powerful response not only to external authority but also a profound commitment to their families, bloodlines, and lives. It is evident that in extreme circumstances, women can not only create possibilities for themselves through their own efforts but also resist and enact change for the sake of familial love, life, and their ideals and futures.

5.2. Differences between the two

5.2.1. The essence of protecting their children

Although Zhuang Ji Gongzhu actively resists the imperial decree, her choice is not simply driven by personal emotional free will or loyalty to maternal love for the orphan. Rather, it is grounded in her acceptance of the patriarchal social order and her sense of family responsibility. Ultimately, she still conforms to Confucian ethics, embodying the woman's role of obedience to her husband and as a tool for continuing the family lineage. In Zhuang Ji Gongzhu's view, the continuation of the family and the preservation of the Zhao bloodline are paramount. Although her protection is infused with profound maternal love, this love is constrained by societal expectations, becoming an instrument within a patriarchal society. This tragedy reflects the oppression of women's roles by social structures, conveying a sense of powerlessness in adversity and compromise with reality.

In contrast, Idamei's protection of her child fundamentally centers on the concern for the "individual" and "equality." She not only refuses to submit to her husband's will but also strongly opposes his attempt to decide their child's fate arbitrarily, emphasizing the importance of her own personal will and feelings. She directly challenges her husband's notion of the "nobility and baseness" of the two infants, rejecting the sacrifice of her own flesh and blood for the sake of temporary titles of ruler and subject. Her protection of her child goes beyond the mere continuation of the family bloodline; it stems from a respect for the child's right to life and a pursuit of individual dignity and equality. She believes the child should have the right to determine his own destiny rather than have it dictated by others. No longer upholding "loyalty and martyrdom" as a female virtue, she attempts to break free from the constraints of traditional fate, seeking more reasonable ways to realize individual dignity, marking a significant awakening of female consciousness.

The differing fates and choices of Princess Zhuang Ji and Idamei reflect two fundamentally distinct portrayals of female roles, illustrating their contrasting responses to traditional society and familial obligations. Although Princess Zhuang Ji's heart is full of maternal love, her decisions demonstrate a woman's obedience and sacrifice to family under the feudal system, revealing the deep-rooted influence of patriarchal culture on female consciousness. In contrast, Idamei's words

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and actions directly break through the shackles of traditional society, embodying rebellion and transcendence. She not only cares about her child's survival but also values the child's independence, autonomy, and her own personal will and feelings. This contrast reveals how societal norms and expectations shaped by different cultural contexts influence female behavior, highlighting the limitations and helplessness of women under traditional Confucian culture versus the struggles and pursuit of equality and freedom inspired by emerging Enlightenment thought, thereby reflecting the evolving female subjectivity across cultures.

5.2.2. Different attitudes in protecting their children

In the Peking opera adaptation of The Orphan of Zhao, Princess Zhuang Ji's act of protecting her child is largely shaped by the constraints of Confucian ethics, demonstrating profound rationality and self-restraint. Despite the immense pain of losing her husband and the terror of her family's massacre, she manages to remain relatively calm and finds the only possible way to save her child's life. Although she is a princess, Zhuang Ji occupies a marginalized female role in the play without much voice, forced to suppress her emotions silently. Her sensibility must not obstruct the continuation of the family bloodline. This restrained maternal love also serves to highlight the heroic qualities of male figures like Cheng Ying: only by silencing the great sacrifices of a woman like Princess Zhuang Ji—who sacrifices for her child, husband, family, and Confucian rites—can Cheng Ying's perilous rescue, clever protection, and painstaking care for the orphan be fully and dramatically realized. Consequently, when Zhao Wu ultimately takes revenge, he remembers only his father's and family's misfortunes and Cheng Ying's hardships, while this mother who gave everything is completely forgotten by the patriarchal society.

Unlike Princess Zhuang Ji's silence, Idamei's maternal protection is expressed through a multifaceted emotional spectrum, combining profound yet uncontrollable motherly love with rational reflection. When confronted with Genghis Khan's orders, Idamei does not suppress her emotional outburst; instead, she integrates emotion and reason, using highly charged language to persuade him. On one hand, she vehemently reproaches Genghis Khan, the victorious invader, through passionate appeals. On the other hand, she pleads for the lives of the two most important men in her life. She alone withstands Genghis Khan's ruthless power, attempting to logically defend the three people condemned to death by his command. Through reason and heartfelt emotion, unwavering and dignified, she moves and influences a ruthless dictator, even convincing an invader to reflect on his actions. Her proposal to sacrifice herself in place of the infant is itself a demonstration of wisdom—using rational persuasion to secure the child's chance for survival.

In the comparison between the two, we observe two distinct constructions of female roles: Princess Zhuang Ji embodies the restraint and silencing of female emotional expression under Confucian ethics, whereas Idamei exemplifies the coexistence of reason and emotion characteristic of the Enlightenment era. Although their actions differ greatly in form and manner, both women, through their respective approaches, strive to secure survival opportunities for their children amid adversity, reflecting the complex choices women face within traditional cultural frameworks.

5.2.3. Differences in fate and views on fate

When confronted with the fate of her child, Princess Zhuang Ji made every effort to change the child's destiny. Not only did she bravely and cleverly secure a path for survival while Tu'anjia violently searched for the Zhao heir, but she also attempted to exchange her own noble life as a princess for that of the uncertain fate of the infant. Her view of fate was one of "doing all one can

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and then leaving the rest to Heaven," demonstrating her acceptance of destiny even as she tried her best to act. Interestingly, although her own life could have been spared, she hastily chose to commit suicide to alleviate Cheng Ying's fear that she might reveal the secret. According to Confucian moral standards, after her husband's death, she could not live on, and thus had to follow him in death. Although her death appeared unnecessary from a purely practical standpoint, her sacrifice was inevitable from the perspective of upholding Cheng Ying's, the orphan's, and her husband's patriarchal authority. Her choice to end her life represents the inevitable outcome of her powerlessness to break free from the constraints imposed on women by the era, symbolizing the tragic fate and unbreakable shackles binding women of that time.

In contrast, Idamei's view of fate is far more independent and self-aware. Her demonstration of "autonomy over fate" greatly surpasses Princess Zhuang Ji's passive attitude of "leaving it to Heaven." When challenging fate, she displays a strong sense of self-determination and an unyielding spirit. Even when her husband Zang Ti was ready to give up and accept Genghis Khan's massacre of their family, she boldly asserted that her master could not decide her fate — only she herself had the right to determine her destiny. Her death was a choice she made autonomously, never defined or constrained by external forces. From initially refusing to sacrifice her child's life, to negotiating with Genghis Khan for an exchange — offering her own life to save her family — her fate was not fully controlled by others but was ultimately self-chosen, reflecting a more modern and independent conception of fate. In the end, the lives of the three she sought to protect were also transformed because of her actions.

Princess Zhuang Ji and Idamei represent two distinct views of fate and attitudes toward life. Princess Zhuang Ji's fate appears powerless and resigned; despite her utmost efforts, she cannot escape the constraints imposed on women by the society of her time. In contrast, Idamei embodies a more independent and proactive conception of fate, actively challenging traditional morals through her own choices. Nonetheless, regardless of the great differences in their destinies, both women were ultimately driven by maternal love and succeeded in protecting their children, fulfilling their most fundamental purpose.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the fate and choices of Princess Zhuang Ji and Idamei reflect the evolution of female roles across different cultural contexts. Princess Zhuang Ji's decisions were largely shaped and constrained by traditional Confucian ideology, whereas Idamei embodies the awakening and liberation of female subjectivity under the influence of Enlightenment thought. This contrast not only illustrates women's destinies across distinct historical periods but also reveals the profound impact of culture on individual choices. Furthermore, the liberation of female subjectivity requires not only breaking free from the constraints of traditional ethics but also finding a path to self-realization through the interplay of reason and emotion. Idamei's figure offers a paradigm for achieving female subjectivity liberation amid cultural collision, carrying significant academic and practical implications.

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