

The Orphan of Zhao to The Orphan of China: A Comparative Study on the Portrayal of Tragic Heroes by Ji Junxiang and Voltaire

Lin Kuang¹, Miaomiao Pan^{2*}

¹*Faculty of Law, Zhongnan University of Economics and Law, Wuhan, China*

²*College of Humanities, College of Science & Technology Ningbo University, Ningbo, China*

**Corresponding Author. Email: hoshi20230201@gmail.com*

Abstract. Yuan Zaju *The Orphan of Zhao*, a classic of Chinese classical tragedy, was adapted into *The Orphan of China* by the Enlightenment thinker Voltaire in the context of the rise of “China fever” in Europe in the 18th century, becoming a landmark event in the history of literary exchanges between China and the West. This article focuses on a cross-cultural comparison of the portrayal of tragic heroes in the two works, aiming to go beyond the limitations of previous studies that focused on plot adaptation and delve into how different ethical systems shape the core of tragic heroes, revealing the deep cultural logic of character image reconstruction in cross-cultural adaptations. The study found that the core similarities in the portrayal of tragic heroes between *The Orphan of Zhao* and *The Orphan of China* mainly include the core plot framework, ethical choices against power, the tragic nobility of the spirit of sacrifice, and the defense of “civilized values”; The core differences between the two works are mainly reflected in ethical motives, types of conflicts, heroic endings and heroic narratives. From this, the article concludes that the tragic heroism in the two works profoundly reflects the different ethical systems and demands of The Times behind them. The tragic hero in *The Orphan of Zhao* is the product of collectivism, Confucian ethics and the concept of karma; The tragic hero of *The Orphan of China* embodies individual rationality, humanitarianism, and the adherence to moral ideals amid civilizational conflicts.

Keywords: *The Orphan of Zhao*, *The Orphan of China*, Tragic Hero, Cross-cultural adaptation, Comparison

1. Introduction

Yuan Zaju's *The Orphan of Zhao* is a representative work of Chinese classical tragedy and holds an important position in the history of Chinese and world drama. In the 18th century, with the rise of the “China fever” in Europe, *The Orphan of Zhao* was translated and brought into the Western view by the French missionary Joseph Marseur. The great figure of the Enlightenment, Voltaire, adapted it into the five-act play *The Orphan of China*, aiming to serve the dissemination of Enlightenment ideas through Chinese stories, criticize despotic rule, advocate Enlightenment values such as reason, love and tolerance, and put forward the ideal appeal of “enlightened despotism”.

Based on these two works, the academic community at home and abroad has accumulated rich research results. In terms of independent research, studies of *The Orphan of Zhao* have mostly focused on textual structure, thematic ideas, historical background and its position in the history of Chinese opera; Research on *The Orphan of China* focuses on Voltaire's adaptation strategy, enlightenment ideas and their significance in the history of European drama. In terms of comparative studies, the academic community has mainly focused on the superficial contrasts of plot structures, relatively neglecting the deep cultural logic contrasts of character development. The study of the differences in the intrinsic motives, action logic and ethical cultural codes carried by tragic heroes such as Cheng Ying, Gongsun Chujiu and Idame is still weak [1].

Based on this, this paper goes beyond the previous paradigm of comparing plot similarities and differences and focuses the research subject on the core dimension of "tragic hero creation". Centering on the research topic, this paper focuses on three questions: First, what are the core traits of the tragic hero reflected in the two works? Second, how do cultural differences between China and the West lead to differences in the portrayal of tragic heroes? Third, how do the two works reflect the ideological demands of their respective eras through the portrayal of tragic heroes? To answer the question, this paper will combine comparative research, textual research and cultural research methods.

This paper will start from the characters and reveal the deep cultural logic of character image reconstruction in cross-cultural adaptation by exploring how different ethical systems shape the core of tragic heroes.

2. A brief analysis of the portrayal of tragic heroes in the two works

In Ji Junxiang's *The Orphan of Zhao*, Cheng Ying is the core tragic hero whose sacrifice and revenge are rooted in the responsibility of the clan and Confucian ethics, while Gong Sun Chujiu is the embodiment of the "loyalty and righteousness" spirit of the scholar class, and their heroism is manifested in the sacrifice for the collectivism of "loyalty and righteousness". In Voltaire's *The Orphan of China*, Genghis Khan is portrayed as a contradictory figure struggling between reason and emotion, savagery and civilization; Idame carries motherhood, constancy and honor, symbolizing the humanitarian moral ideals of kindness and tolerance advocated by the Enlightenment, and her heroism is embodied in her adherence to individual rational beliefs and moral principles.

Ji Junxiang lived in the Yuan Dynasty. Under the support of the Confucian ethics of "family and state in the same structure" of loyalty and filial piety, his works profoundly reflect the Confucian view of loyalty and righteousness, and his heroic deeds serve the ethical framework of blood revenge and cause-and-effect retribution. Voltaire, who was in the Age of Enlightenment, adapted this play to promote Enlightenment ideas and the ideal of "enlightened despotism", to explore civilizational conflicts through Eastern stories, and to infuse the core demands of reason and humanitarianism.

3. A cross-cultural comparison of the portrayal of tragic heroes in the two works

3.1. Core similarities in the tragic hero in the two works

Although Ji Junxiang's *The Orphan of Zhao* differs from Voltaire's *The Orphan of China* in terms of historical background, core heroic roles, and heroic core, a deeper analysis of the logic of their tragic

hero creation reveals similarities in the core plot framework, ethical choices against power, the tragic nobility of the spirit of sacrifice, and the defense of the values of civilization.

3.1.1. Core plot framework: the survival of infants and the sacrifice of adults

At the core of the dramatic conflict in both works lies the survival of the infant, and the course of fate depends on the self-sacrifice of the adult character, thus creating a strong tragic tension.

The tragic heroes Cheng Ying and Gongsun Chujiu in *The Orphan of Zhao* are driven by the core force of their actions to ensure the survival and revenge of *The Orphan of Zhao*. After Tu'an Gu "killed out more than three hundred members of the Zhao family", the only hope for the continuation of the Zhao family's bloodline was placed on the infant orphan. Faced with the threat of "killing all the infants of the same month in the country if the orphan is not handed over", Cheng Ying offered his own son to pretend to be an orphan of the Zhao family, and Gongsun Chujiu, after being accused of harking the "orphan", jumped into the steps and killed himself to cut off the clues of the investigation. Cheng Ying endured the pain of losing his son and raised the real Zhao orphan in the house of his enemy Tu'an Gu, waiting for the opportunity to take revenge. In the play, Cheng Ying sings: "Seeing Cheng Ying's heart like hot oil, tears dare not be thrown to anyone. "Behind the scenes, one's own flesh and blood, for no reason to let go, is cut three times". It shows the torment in his heart and the brutality of his sacrifice. It is evident that the survival of the Zhao orphan was entirely based on the voluntary sacrifice of their own flesh and blood and their own lives by the two righteous men.

Voltaire's adaptation of *The Orphan of China* retains the setting of the infant as the core of the conflict. Genghis Khan's capture of Beijing, the downfall of the Song Dynasty, and the royal orphan become the key to sustaining the lifeblood of Chinese civilization. At this time, Idame and her husband Zhang Ti were faced with a life-and-death decision: handing over the orphan would bring them safety and even glory, but refusing would lead to death. Idame refuses to hand over the orphan and cries out: "Tyrant! Shall I sacrifice an innocent man, a child entrusted to me by my king? Death is a thousand times better than this disgraceful, mere living!" Her husband, Zhang Ti, was equally unyielding and spoke passionately: "My blood belongs to my king, and I have to give up this sacred commission?" You have no trouble!" In the end, Zhang Ti drank the poisoned wine and committed suicide. It is evident that the Idame couple's spirit of sacrifice and will to protect are no less than in the original work.

Both works place the life and death of the baby at the center of dramatic conflict. Around this focus, the key adult characters both make self-sacrifice (sacrificing their own flesh and blood or life), the only way for the baby to survive. The fragility and helplessness of the infant contrasts sharply with the heroic sacrifice of the adult, and the choice of the adult character is precisely to protect those helpless lives. Their sacrifice not only intensifies the tension of the tragedy, but also endows the characters with lofty moral strength.

3.1.2. Ethical choices against power

The tragic heroes in both works are under near-overwhelming violent oppression. Their heroism is reflected in their unwavering moral beliefs in the face of tyranny and power, as well as their ethical choices that go beyond the survival instinct.

The ethical choices of the tragic heroes in *The Orphan of Zhao* are a rebellion driven by the Confucian spirit of "loyalty and righteousness". Cheng Ying, Gongsun Chujiu and others rebelled against Tu'an Gu, a powerful and treacherous minister. Facing Tu'an Gu, who represented political

violence and “killed the loyal as grass”, Cheng Ying and others’ resistance was rooted in the Confucian ethics of “loyalty and righteousness” - loyalty to the Zhao family, upholding justice, and the sense of righteousness of a man dying for his friend. Cheng chose to abandon his son to save the orphan because his “loyalty” and “righteousness” towards the Zhao family exceeded his “love” and “kindness” towards his own son. Gongsun Chujiu’s heroic sacrifice is an embodiment of “sacrificing one’s life for righteousness”, a symbolic expression of the spirit of loyalty and righteousness of the scholastic class. Their struggle was a tragic defense of the value of “loyalty and righteousness” at the cost of their lives when power tried to erase justice and ethical order.

The ethical choices of the tragic heroes in *The Orphan of China* are a struggle driven by “humanitarianism” and “natural emotions”. In the Enlightenment thought represented by Voltaire, “natural emotions” (such as compassion, love, maternal love) are inherent moral instincts of human nature, while “humanitarianism” is an ethical principle developed based on natural emotions, emphasizing respect for the dignity and rights of the individual, and the two are closely linked. The Idame couple’s resistance against the savage conquerors represented by Genghis Khan was not violent in nature, but based on the core of Voltaire’s enlightenment thought - “humanitarianism” and “natural emotions”. The most important reason for Idame’s rejection of Genghis Khan’s demands was not political loyalty, but her duty to protect the innocent and her adherence to honor and the covenant (entrusted by the previous dynasty), which she declared: “The law of nature gives me the right to protect the innocent. I swear to protect him, and this vow is inviolable [2]”. The struggle of his husband, Zhang Ti, was more focused on loyalty to the monarch, demonstrating the rational individual’s resistance to autocratic will through the choice of death rather than surrender in the face of violence.

Both Tu’an Gu’s brutal rule and Genghis Khan’s military conquest posed a fatal threat to ethical order and civilizational values. The tragic heroes of both works are placed in the extreme of “to live or to perish”, facing the cruel choice of handing over the orphan (betrayal of ethics) or death (adherence to belief). Their heroism is embodied in choosing the latter in the face of life and death - an unyielding struggle against tyranny and power. This struggle is a declaration of war by moral forces against physical violence, and a commitment to higher ethical goals.

3.1.3. The tragic sublimity of the spirit of sacrifice

Self-sacrifice is the inevitable way for the tragic heroes in both works to fulfill their heroic missions. Although the specific forms and cultural connotations of the sacrifice are different, the spiritual core of both points to the moral pursuit beyond individual life, thus endowing the tragedy with a soul-stirring sense of sublimity.

The sacrifice of the tragic hero in *The Orphan of Zhao* is grand and tragic in the Confucian style. Cheng Ying’s sacrifice is a long and enduring pain. Not only did he abandon his own son, but he also bore the moral stigma of being a traitor to his Lord and endured humiliation in his enemy’s residence for twenty years. The play describes much of his inner torment: “Daily anxiety, when will it end?” “Watching one’s own child die an unjust death, a bloody fake orphan claiming to be one’s own”. This sacrifice is not only the abandonment of one’s own child, but also the long-term deprivation of reputation, family affection, and inner peace, filled with the tragic color of the Confucian ethical framework. The sacrifice of Gongsun Chujiu was even more direct and heroic. He chose to die voluntarily, defending secrets and loyalty in the most intense way of taking steps. His sacrifice is a direct representation of the spirit of “killing for one’s own life”, with a strong, tragic tension. By depicting the heavy price of sacrifice and the indomitable spirit of the hero, Ji Junxiang evokes the audience’s high respect and deep compassion for the value of loyalty and righteousness.

The sacrifice of the tragic hero in *The Orphan of China* is a rational sacrifice under the spirit of enlightenment. Idame's sacrifice is reflected in her resolute rejection of the temptation of survival and power (becoming the queen) and her choice of the path of guarding the orphan together with her husband. Her sacrifice, which stemmed from maternal love and her commitment to honor and covenant, also prompted her to influence Genghis Khan with natural emotions and moral beliefs. Zhang Ti's sacrifice was reflected in his decision to drink poison in the face of the threat of death and to practice moral principles with his life ("My life belongs to my king"). His death was solemn and dignified, demonstrating the dignity of dying calmly for rational beliefs and the rational commitment to his duties. Through this sacrifice, Voltaire aimed to demonstrate the power of humanity, reason, and virtue itself to influence and overcome barbaric violence.

The tragic heroes in both works have achieved the transcendence of individual survival instincts through active self-sacrifice. Their sacrifices are not senseless destruction but point to a higher moral goal - to preserve the bloodline, to continue the tradition, to protect the civilization. This act of integrating the value of individual life into higher ethical goals is the core source of the tragic Sublime. While the audience and the reader are shaken by the brutality and solemnity of the sacrifice, they can also feel the elevation of the heroic spirit and the brilliance of humanity, thus obtaining the unique Catharsis experience of tragedy.

3.1.4. The defense of "civilized values": "orphan" as a symbol of cultural continuity

In both works, "orphans" are not only vulnerable individuals in need of protection, but also highly symbolized important symbols of the continuation of civilized values, as well as metaphors against barbaric tyranny and the breakdown of civilization.

The orphan in *The Orphan of Zhao* is the embodiment of patriarchal ethics and Confucian tradition. In Ji Junxiang's original work, the Zhao orphan is the sole inheritor of the Zhao clan bloodline. Tu'an Gu's act of destroying the Zhao family was intended to "cut off his roots and eradicate the grass". Cheng Ying and others risked their lives to protect the orphan, with the most direct aim of "preserving Zhao sacrifices" - preserving the sacrificial rituals of the Zhao clan. On a deeper level, the Zhao family represents loyal ministers and good generals, while Tu'an Gu is a traitor who brings disaster to the country and the people. Therefore, "preserving Zhao sacrifices" not only concerns the survival of a family, but also symbolizes the continuation of the Confucian spirit of loyalty and righteousness, justice and order, and ethical norms. As the embodiment of these values, the survival of the Zhao orphan means that the Confucian ethical order, interrupted by tyranny, has the possibility of being restored in the future. To protect the orphan is to protect the Confucian ethical order that is about to be destroyed by barbaric violence.

The orphan in *The Orphan of China* is a symbol of rationality in Chinese civilization. Voltaire made a crucial transformation of the symbolic meaning of the orphan. He downplayed the specific royal bloodline revenge meaning of the orphan and abstracted it as a symbol of "Chinese civilization". In the eyes of Voltaire and many of the Enlightenment thinkers, Chinese civilization represented an advanced form of civilization based on reason, morality, tolerance and good governance, while Mongolian conquerors such as Genghis Khan symbolized savagery, violence and despotism. Therefore, the Idame couple vowed to protect the orphan, with the intention of keeping the spark of Chinese civilization from being extinguished by barbaric violence. The "rationality of Chinese civilization" represented by the orphan is reflected in the long debate between Idame and Genghis Khan - Idame used the "etiquette, law, morality, rationality" of Chinese civilization as the core argument against barbaric violence, and she saw the orphan as the only hope to carry and pass on this rational civilization. As Genghis Khan eventually said, "With the law of wisdom and the art

of nobility, this child will educate my people”. It is evident that in Voltaire’s writings, the orphan became an important symbol of the triumph of rational civilization over barbaric violence, and the process of its survival and protection vividly demonstrated the victory of the enlightenment values centered on reason that Voltaire praised over autocratic violence.

The ultimate significance of the self-sacrifice of the tragic heroes in both works lies not only in saving the life of an infant, but also in safeguarding and continuing the civilized values carried by the orphan. The orphan is a fragile symbol of the continuation of civilization, and protecting the orphan is a resistance to the crisis of the disintegration of civilization. By binding the fate of the orphan to the grand values of civilization, the two works elevate the struggle to protect the orphan to a confrontation between civilization and barbarism, endowing the heroic sacrifice with a deeper historical and cultural significance and tragic weight.

3.1.5. Summary

Through an in-depth analysis of the four dimensions of the core plot framework, the ethical choice against power, the tragic loftiness of the spirit of sacrifice, and the symbolic defense of “civilized values”, it is evident that *The Orphan of Zhao* and *The Orphan of China* have a consistency that transcends cultural differences at the core level of tragic hero creation.

The tragic heroes in both works follow a similar path of heroism: triggered by the survival of the weak individual, in the desperate situation of oppression by power, they make ethical choices of sacrificing their lives for justice with firm moral beliefs, and through noble self-sacrifice, ultimately complete the redemption and protection of the values of civilization. The commonality of this narrative logic reveals the universal yearning and heroic expression of humanity in the face of tyranny, civilizational crises and moral dilemmas for safeguarding life, defending justice and passing on values, which is the inner force that enables the two works to transcend time and space and resonate with readers of different cultural backgrounds.

3.2. The core differences in the portrayal of tragic heroes in the two works

Despite the similarities between Ji Junxiang’s *The Orphan of Zhao* and Voltaire’s *The Orphan of China*, a deeper analysis of the core of the tragic hero reveals differences in ethical motives, conflict types, heroic endings, and heroic narratives. These differences are not accidental but are rooted in the different ethical systems and demands of The Times between China and the West.

3.2.1. Comparison of ethical motives: obligatory versus rational

The ethical motives of heroic acts are at the core of shaping the image of tragic heroes. Ji Junxiang and Voltaire injected different spiritual sources into their tragic heroes, which directly determined their distinct ethical motives.

The ethical motives of the tragic heroes in *The Orphan of Zhao* are Confucian “loyalty and righteousness” ethics, which are external, hierarchical, “obligatory”, that is, the individual must obey the requirements of the established social role. In the conflict between “loyalty” and “filial piety”, Cheng Ying follows the value order of “loyalty is greater than filial piety”, sacrificing his own son in exchange for the survival of the Zhao orphan and the continuation of the patriarchal order. This reflects that the collective value of the continuation of the clan and the moral inheritance is higher than the individual value of life and kinship, and the individual value has to give way to the continuation of the clan and the moral inheritance. Gongsun Chujiu, on the other hand, committed

suicide by ramming the steps with the belief that “a man should die for his friend”, and his sacrifice was highly ritualistic and symbolic, not only a symbol of “sacrificing one’s life for righteousness”, but also a “moral martyr” driven by ethical duty and sacrificed for the collective value.

The ethical motives of the tragic heroes in *The Orphan of China* are rational choices driven by the enlightenment of “humanitarianism” and “natural emotions”. The heroic deeds of Idame and Zhang Ti stem from inherent, universal, human-based emotions and rationality (such as compassion, maternal love, contract spirit, individual dignity), mainly manifested in the universal values of protecting innocent lives, upholding dignity and keeping promises. Idame’s heroic deeds originated from motherhood, compassion and dignity. She resisted power with rational judgment and educated savagery with civilization; Although Zhang Ti was loyal to his monarch, he confined himself to reason, and his martyrdom was a self-proof of noble character and the spirit of contract. Compared to the “moral martyrs” in *The Orphan of Zhao*, they are more like “human educators”, demonstrating the power of reason and emotion through the education of savagery.

3.2.2. The evolution of conflict types: violent revenge and civilized education

The core conflict in both works revolves around the survival of the orphan, but the nature of the conflict, the way it is resolved, and the ideology it carries are quite different.

The core conflict in *The Orphan of Zhao* is the opposition between political power and clan ethics. Tu’an Gu subverts the code of ethics with power and killing, while Cheng Ying and Gongsun Chujiu uphold the clan ethics with loyalty and righteousness. Their goal was clear: not only to “avenge three hundred people”, but also to restore the damaged Confucian ethical order. To achieve their goal, they had to resort to violence in response. After twenty years of forbearing, Cheng Ying finally made the Zhao orphan kill the enemy with his own hands, completing the dramatic conclusion of “blood revenge” and “cause-and-effect closed loop”, emphasizing the absoluteness of moral order and the certainty of cause and effect that “good and evil will be punished”.

The core conflict of *The Orphan of China* is the opposition between barbaric violence and civilized rationality. Voltaire elevated the core conflict to an abstract confrontation of “civilization and barbarism”, making it possible for the two sides to reconcile through dialogue and education. Genghis Khan represents the might, savagery and despotism of the Mongolian conquerors; While Idame, Zhang Ti and the orphan symbolize the rationality, morality, law and humanity of Chinese civilization. The way the two sides resolve the conflict is through rational debate, emotional influence and virtue demonstration, not physical annihilation. The final outcome leads to “reconciliation and symbiosis”, emphasizing that violence can be restrained by reason and leading to a new order of enlightened despotism.

3.2.3. Symbolic implications of the hero’s ending: justice closed loop and rational utopia

The ultimate fate of a tragic hero and the outcome he achieves are important manifestations of the ideological main idea of the work. The different endings of the two works give the tragic hero distinct historical and cultural implications.

The Orphan of Zhao ends with “successful revenge - clear of injustice - restoration of the clan”. In the end, the Zhao orphan successfully killed his enemy Tu’an Gu, and the heroic sacrifice of Cheng Ying and Gongsun Chujiu was compensated, and the audience received the psychological confirmation that “the order of justice can be restored”. This “happy and tragic” ending conforms to the traditional Chinese narrative of “karma”, not only achieving a closed loop of traditional justice, but also emphasizing the stability and unalterability of the Confucian ethical order.

The Orphan of China ends with “Pardon the orphan - reconciliation and coexistence - learning civilization”. In the end, under the influence of Idame, Genghis Khan transformed from a barbaric conqueror to an “enlightened monarch” willing to accept and learn advanced civilizations, declaring: “Let law and reason rule! Let virtue be our only guide”. This ending, through the reconciliation and symbiosis of civilization and barbarism, achieves the victory of rational civilization, highlighting Voltaire’s utopian imagination of “enlightened despotism” [3].

3.2.4. Adaptation strategies for heroic narratives: native presentation and instrumentalized reconstruction

Voltaire’s adaptation of The Orphan of Zhao was not a simple transplanting of the story, but an active process of screening, reshaping and instrumentalization based on the demands of his era, and his narrative strategy directly served the dissemination of enlightenment thought [4].

The Orphan of Zhao shows Ji Junxiang’s localized narrative presentation. Rooted in local historical legends and the social context of the Yuan Dynasty, The Orphan of Zhao presents a tragic heroic story that conforms to Confucian ethical cognition and the aesthetic expectations of the audience. The story revolves around “loyalty and righteousness” and “revenge”, with the tragic hero taking on the roles of “the victim” and “the executor of revenge”. The presentation of violent elements in the story serves the theme expression and dramatic effect, and there is no obvious intention to instrumentalize the other.

The Orphan of China reveals Voltaire’s “creative misinterpretation” and instrumentalization strategy [5]. Voltaire actively screened and reshaped the adaptation, “deleting, adding, and reinterpreting” the original work. One of them is to cut out violent scenes that conflict with the values of enlightenment, such as Cheng Ying sacrificing his own son, to make the story conform to the humanitarian concern and “proper” principle of neoclassicism. Second, add humanized plots of the debate between emotion and reason, enhance the interaction between Idame and Genghis Khan, expand their debate on law, reason, morality and art, and shape Chinese civilization into an ideal moral utopia. Third, translate the ethical motives of heroic deeds from “loyalty and righteousness” to “humanitarianism” and “natural emotions”, and replace the solution to the core conflict from “violent revenge” to “dialogue and education”. The result of the adaptation is that the tragic hero is transformed from a “moral martyr” who justifies himself through death to a “human educator” who convinces people with virtue. From this, it can be seen that Voltaire’s use of Chinese stories to criticize European despotism, to spread Enlightenment ideas, and to construct “China” as a utopia of reason and virtue embodies a typical “creative misinterpretation” and instrumental reconstruction.

3.2.5. Summary

Ji Junxiang’s The Orphan of Zhao and Voltaire’s The Orphan of China show distinct core differences in the portrayal of tragic heroes, and these differences are deeply imprinted with the genetic code of Eastern and Western cultures and the imprint of the spirit of The Times. The core differences between the two works are as follows: Ji Junxiang’s The Orphan of Zhao drives revenge with Confucian loyalty and righteousness, creates a binary opposition between political power and clan ethics, and ultimately achieves traditional justice through violent revenge; Voltaire, on the other hand, reconstructs the conflict through enlightenment humanitarianism, reconciles barbaric violence with civilized rationality through dialogue and education, and ultimately achieves the victory of rational civilization.

4. Analysis of the reasons for the differences in the portrayal of tragic heroes in the two works

4.1. Ethical motives for heroic acts

The story of *The Orphan of Zhao* is set in the State of Jin during the Spring and Autumn Period, while Voltaire's *The Orphan of China* shifts the story to the late Song and early Yuan dynasties. Although there are some connections in the plots of the two works, there are obvious differences in the ethical motives behind the heroic deeds [6].

Ji Junxiang's *The Orphan of Zhao* emphasizes the ethics of "loyalty and righteousness". When Princess Zhuangji completed the entrustment by suicide, Cheng Ying's personal behavior was strongly bound by the social role and moral responsibility. Cheng Ying's act of sacrificing his own son to protect the Zhao orphan was an inevitable sacrifice for maintaining the same ethical order of the family and the state, a heroic act driven by identity. This ethical motive is demonstrated through the sacrifice of Cheng Ying and Gongsun Chujiu in the play, reflecting the ethical constraints on individual values imposed by Confucianism during the Song and Yuan dynasties [7].

Voltaire's *The Orphan of China* pays more attention to "humanitarianism" and "natural emotions". Idame's motivation to resist coercion and inducement with maternal love is rooted in universal human compassion rather than Confucian ethics of loyalty and righteousness, which aligns with the idea of the Enlightenment that natural humanity is the foundation of morality [8]. Voltaire's logic of constructing heroic identity, a shift from traditional ethical identity to the essence of humanity, is essentially a rational deconstruction of the Confucian view of loyalty and righteousness by the Enlightenment.

4.2. Conflict-type ideologies

The core conflict of *The Orphan of Zhao* is the confrontation between political power and clan ethics. This pattern of confrontation reflects the moral anxiety of Han scholars under Mongol rule during the Yuan Dynasty. Ji Junxiang attempts to respond to the social and political reality of the time, uphold the moral teachings of Confucian ethics, and complete ethical redemption under violent rule through the sharp confrontation between good and evil in the play and the revenge of the blood relatives of the Zhao orphan.

In *The Orphan of China*, Voltaire reprocessed the core conflict, transforming it into a confrontation between "civilization and barbarism". Voltaire deliberately downplayed the violence in the original work and added humanized dialogue and education, transforming Genghis Khan from a barbaric conqueror to an admirer and learner of Chinese civilization. The opposition between "civilization and barbarism" in the play is essentially an externalized manifestation of enlightenment rationality and despotic criticism. By reconstructing the Chinese story, Voltaire presents the enlightenment narrative of "civilization over barbarism", serving the realistic demands of criticizing despotism and promoting reason.

4.3. The aesthetic form of the heroic ending

The orphan of the Zhao family in Ji Junxiang's works ends the story in violent revenge, and the ending profoundly reflects the "tragic" nature of Yuan Zaju. This closed-loop structure of cause and effect, through violent reckoning, restores and reinforces the Confucian ethical order, and its aesthetic power stems from dramatic compensation for real suffering and has a distinct moral admonishing function.

In contrast, Voltaire's ending is a reconciliation and symbiosis of "civilization and barbarism". The survival of Idame and the royal orphan, as well as the transformation of Genghis Khan's role, profoundly reflect the "sublime" of French neoclassicism. Voltaire's final conversion of the barbaric and violent Genghis Khan to rational civilization downplays violent revenge and emphasizes the enlightenment of rationality on barbaric power, creating an idealized aesthetic effect.

4.4. The historical context of cross-cultural adaptation

The local nature of Ji Junxiang's original work is rooted in the historical trauma of the transition between the Song and Yuan dynasties. Ji Junxiang's creative background was deeply influenced by the political and cultural changes during the Song and Yuan Dynasties, especially the Yuan Dynasty's barbarian rule and the abolition of the imperial examination system, which led to the decline of the social status of Han literati. The portrayal and narrative of tragic heroes such as Cheng Ying in the play are essentially an artistic expression of the psychological trauma and collective anxiety of Han literates over the breakdown of patriarchal ethics and changes in their own social status.

Voltaire's adaptation, in the context of European "China fever" culture, shows more of an idealized projection of "Chinese civilization" [9]. Voltaire rewrote Cheng Ying's narrative of enduring humiliation, gave Genghis Khan a rationalized image, and turned the epic of revenge into an enlightenment textbook [10]. This cross-cultural misinterpretation and adaptation is essentially Voltaire's use of Chinese stories to convey enlightenment values, and his instrumentalization of the East to promote the dissemination of ideological enlightenment and satisfy Europe's self-criticism.

In the final analysis, the core difference in the portrayal of tragic heroes in the two works stems from the cultural divide between the "obligatory" Confucian ethics and the "rational" enlightenment thought. This leads to the transformation of tragic heroes in cross-cultural adaptations from Cheng Ying-style "moral martyrs" to Idame-style "educators of human nature".

5. Conclusion

This paper, taking Ji Junxiang's *The Orphan of Zhao* and Voltaire's *The Orphan of China* as subjects, conducts a cross-cultural comparison around the shaping of tragic heroes and draws the following core conclusions:

Firstly, the essence of the differences in the shaping of tragic heroes lies in the conflict of ethical systems. The fundamental difference in the portrayal of tragic heroes in the two works stems from the distinct ethical systems that underpin the heroic deeds: The driving force of the heroic acts in *The Orphan of Zhao* is rooted in the Confucian "obligatory" ethics. The heroism of Cheng Ying and Gongsun Chujiu stems from their commitment to the obligations of "loyalty to the monarch, repaying kindness, and taking righteousness" in their social roles as "righteous men" and "subjects". Their individual life values are realized in the process of integration and sacrifice to the collective, and they are tragic "moral martyrs". The driving force of the heroic acts in *The Orphan of China* is rooted in the "rational-based" ethics of the enlightenment. The heroism of Idame and Zhang Ti stems from humanitarianism, natural emotions and the spirit of contract. They firmly defend the universal values of "humanity and reason" and are active "humanists". This cultural divide in the ethical system directly leads to fundamental differences in the core of the tragic hero, the logic of action, and the source of the sense of sublimity.

Secondly, Voltaire's adaptation reveals selective reconstruction in cultural acceptance. Voltaire's adaptation of *The Orphan of Zhao* was not a simple transplanting of the story, but a self-criticism

serving the European Enlightenment. He selectively reconstructed the original work by cutting out violent plots, adding humanized plots, and translating “loyalty and righteousness” into “humanitarianism” and “natural emotions”. The core purpose is to use “China” as a mirror of the other to advocate the enlightenment ideas of “reason over violence” and “civilized education of barbarism” and the ideal demands of “enlightened despotism”. From this, it can be seen that Voltaire’s adaptation of the original work reflects the selectivity, reconfigurability and instrumentality of cultural acceptance, that is, the recipients purposefully screen, reshape and utilize the source text based on their own cultural needs and ideology.

In terms of the study of influence, this paper, through the cross-cultural comparison of the shaping of tragic heroes, not only offers implications for understanding the logic of reconstructing heroic narratives in different cultural contexts, but also attempts to provide new analytical perspectives and case support for cross-cultural dramatic adaptation studies, the comparison of Chinese and Western tragic aesthetics, and cultural acceptance theories.

Looking ahead, the research can be advanced in three ways: First, expand the scope of comparison by incorporating other important adaptations of *The Orphan of Zhao* into the comparative perspective to explore the diverse interpretations of “tragic heroes” and their cultural implications in the context of time and space; Second, by combining contemporary theoretical perspectives and using contemporary theoretical tools such as postcolonial theory, gender studies, and semiotics, re-examine the orientalist discourse, the shaping of female characters, and the meaning evolution of the “orphan” symbol in Voltaire’s plays; Third, explore contemporary implications for cross-cultural adaptation, based on the “creative misinterpretation” and instrumentalization of this study, to provide historical lessons and theoretical implications for exploring more equal, deeper, and more reflective cross-cultural artistic exchanges and adaptation practices in the context of globalization.

Authors contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

References

- [1] Shin, J.-S. (2012) Celebrated Helper and Disappeared Hero: The Orphan of Zhao and Voltairean Adaptation. *Journal of Chinese Language and Literature*, 53: 259-265.
- [2] Fang, B. (2019) Empirical Foundations and Limits of the Theory of Natural Rights: A Critical Comparison of Hobbes and Locke. *Zhejiang Academic Journal*, (01): 134-143.
- [3] Fang, H. (2008) Voltaire: From Sacrificial to Judicial System in the Play *The Orphan of China*. *Theses and Dissertations*, 25-26.
- [4] Huang, H. (2002) A Comparison between *The Orphan of Zhao* and *The Orphan of China* - Also analyzing Voltaire’s misinterpretation of Confucianism. *Chinese Literature Studies*, (01): 78.
- [5] Wang, L. (1991) *The Orphan of Zhao and The Orphan of China : A Dialogue between Two Ideas and Art*. *Foreign Literature*, (02): 45.
- [6] Ge, Y. (2008) The Transformation of Zhao’s Orphan and Chinese Orphan in Cross-cultural Communication. *Journal of Shaoxing University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, (03): 39.
- [7] Xu, X. (2025) The Yuan Dynasty Turn of Neo-Confucianism in the Two Song Dynasties and Its Ethical significance. *Inner Mongolia Social Sciences*, 46(02): 61-62.
- [8] Yu, Y. (2019) A Brief Analysis of the Causes of the Formation of Tragic Heroes in Historical Literary Creation: A Case Study of Cheng Ying in *The Orphan of Zhao*. *Peony*, (35): 95-97.
- [9] Yan, J. (2000) The French Characteristics of the “China Fever” and Its interpretation. *The First Encounter between China and the West, Part II: Cultural Exchanges between China and Western Countries during the Transition from*

the Ming to the Qing Dynasties. Department of History, Zhejiang University Chinese Society of the History of Foreign Relations, 9-10.

- [10] Tang, G. (2024) The Ethical Writing in Voltaire's *The Orphan of China* and an Exploration of His Pragmatism. *Forum for World Literature Studies*, 15(05): 847-848.