



A Comparison of Tragic Fates in Chinese and Western Literature

—Taking *Oedipus the King* and *Dream of the Red Chamber* as Examples

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Abstract: The exploration of tragedy and fate between the East and the West has been ongoing for a long time, with significant differences between the two. The tragic fate in Western literature cannot be changed; the protagonist will demonstrate a strong spirit of resistance and individual autonomy through strong resistance and struggle against fate. The tragic fate in Eastern literature is rooted in social reality, and the protagonists are mostly obedient, evasive, or weakly resistant. The difference in tragic fates between Chinese and Western literature stems from differences in culture, religious beliefs, and natural environment.

Keywords: Chinese Tragedy, Western Tragedy, Fate, *Oedipus the King*, *Dream of the Red Chamber*

1 Introduction

Throughout history, tragedy has always been the main way to express human emotions, depict the contradictions between fate, environment, and free will. The tragedy of ancient Greece originated from the songs of the goat and the ode to the wine god, where people sang about the suffering and rebirth of the wine god Dionysus. Later, this kind of drama developed into the performance of stories about human tragic fate. According to the Western tradition, there are types of tragedy, such as tragedy of fate, tragedy of character, and tragedy of society. The tragedies of the ancient Greek period were dominated by the tragedy of fate, which mainly depicted the irreversible tragedy of life caused by supernatural forces, and *Oedipus the King* is a famous example. In Chinese literature, *Dream of the Red Chamber* is also a tragic work of extraordinary achievement.

In *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus' father, Laius, received a divine revelation that his son would kill his father and marry his mother many years later. Therefore, Laius threw the newborn Oedipus into the deep mountains in an attempt to prevent such a tragedy from happening. And when Oedipus grew up, he accidentally killed his father and married his mother, becoming the new king. After learning the truth, Oedipus's mother, also

known as his wife, committed suicide in shame, and Oedipus voluntarily requested exile; The content of *Dream of the Red Chamber* is that the Jiangzhu Fairy, in order to repay the irrigation kindness of Shen Ying, wants to repay her lifelong tears and comes to the human world to go through tribulations. Baoyu Jia was reincarnated as Shenying, Daiyu Lin was reincarnated as the Jiangzhu fairy, and a group of influential figures descended to the mortal world and returned from tribulations. They are like beautiful but fragile flowers, and after blooming, they all lead to tragic endings. Many years later, the stone "Tongling Baoyu" left by the ancient Nü wa to repair the sky records the stories of experiencing the ups and downs of the world.

2 The Differences and Comparison of Tragic Fates of Chinese and Western

We can see that fate dominates the occurrence of these two tragedies. The understanding of fate between China and the West is not entirely the same. The fate of the West tends to be more inclined towards known determinism, which is unavoidable and unchangeable in any case, beyond divine and human power, and is a fixed thing that must be obeyed. The fate of China, namely destiny and fortune, refers to a pattern in which things are combined by fixed and changing factors, and fate and fortune are two different concepts. Fate is fixed, referring to a specific object; Fortune is variable, referring to the transformation of time and space. The combination of destiny and fortune is the process of a specific object transforming in time and space. When fortune changes, fate also changes accordingly. It is both fixed and variable^[1]. And these variables are caused by many factors such as personal talent, character, interpersonal relationships, social systems, culture, etc. Therefore, the tragic connotation of *Dream of the Red Chamber* is far more complex than that of *Oedipus the King*. Our understanding of the tragedy of fate is different, which is the first thing we should pay attention to when analyzing the two works.

2.1 The Clarity and Obscurity of Fate

One of the differences in Chinese and Western literature regarding fate is that in Western literature, the fate of the protagonist is mostly known and clear, while in Chinese literature, the fate is unknown and vague. For example, in *Oedipus the King*, Laius received a clear oracle: his son would kill his father and marry his mother. Later, when Oedipus asked for a divine revelation, he also received a clear answer from the prophet. The drama starts with the glory of Oedipus becoming king, followed by how to seek divine advice, verify reality, self-exile, and finally ends with the declaration of the irresistible fate, logically rigorously verifying the tragic fate of Oedipus. So, the fate of the protagonist was already predetermined from the beginning, and the protagonist himself knew and rose up to resist, but they could not escape this fate for the rest of their lives. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, although the theme was already pointed out at the beginning of the novel, and the first half also hinted at everyone's ultimate tragic fate through various poems and dreams, it is still obscure and not clearly stated. The

characters in the text are also unaware. Only when "there is only a vast expanse of white and clean land left"^[2], and we turn back and look at it at the end can we suddenly understand the meaning of this story. It requires people to explore and comprehend step by step, and finally feel the tragic fate in their hearts. In *Oedipus the King*, fate is a clear clue, and both the reader and the characters in the text are well aware of the tragic fate. Fate drives the development of the entire story, and without the initial oracle, perhaps the entire story would not have happened; The fate in *Dream of the Red Chamber* is an introduction or an ending, only providing readers with vague hints and does not affect the protagonist's behavior or the development of the plot.

2.2 The Protagonist's Different Attitudes towards Fate

The attitudes of the protagonists towards fate in Chinese and Western literature are also different. In Western tragedies, although fate is determined by heaven, the protagonist always strives to resist fate and fight for his own freedom or ideals. For example, in *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus knows that he may kill his father and marry his mother, but he leaves his adoptive parents out of fear. Later, he also wants to avoid this fate by obtaining divine revelation. Although tragedy is inevitable in the eyes of the Greeks, they will not be passive, but actively resist with an optimistic attitude, completing an eternal and grand tragedy of human free will and destiny struggle. In Chinese tragedies, people do not resist fiercely, but rather follow nature and passively evade. Apart from the uncertainty of human fate, there are other noteworthy reasons for this. Xun Lu once said, "The small tragedies in *Dream of the Red Chamber* are common occurrences in daily life. "^[3]It manifests in the trivial details of life, constantly present everywhere, causing people to become indifferent or numb to it, and naturally not to resist fiercely. In addition, the tragedy in *Dream of the Red Chamber* reflects a certain value judgment and has an ethical tragic color. For example, in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a monk said that Daiyu Lin must never cry for a lifetime, otherwise her illness will never be cured. Although Daiyu Lin knew, she didn't take it seriously and still cried all year round. She didn't care about this statement deep down in her heart, or rather, her whole life was meant to repay her tears to Shenying, so her fate was more like a legacy obligation from her past life. The idea of repaying kindness is deeply ingrained in the bones of the Chinese people. In addition, Chinese people are deeply influenced by the ideas of Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Buddhism, emphasizing the importance of following nature and adapting to circumstances. During the first episode of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, when a fire broke out in Shiyin Zhen 's home, a lame Taoist also loudly sang the song of , revealing the fact that people's pursuit of fame, fortune, family love ultimately turned into nothing. Upon hearing this, Shiyin Zhen suddenly realized in his heart that he had left with the Taoist, and everyone was only looking at it as a new thing. Shiyin Zhen and Baoyu Jia both chose to leave society and family and travel around, but this was not entirely resistance, and even more like an escape, an inevitable choice. They knew they couldn't resist the whole society, so they had to leave alone and isolate themselves from the world. And others, let alone others, never realized the teasing and arrangement of fate on them. They could only follow the rules, play their own roles well, and experience their own tribulations. As mentioned at the beginning of *Dream of the*

Red Chamber, "a group of people come to the world together and come back after going through tribulations."^[4] They come precisely to experience all of this, not to rebel against fate.

2.3 The Author's Different Understandings of Fate

The difference between tragic fates in Chinese and Western literature lies in the author's understanding of fate. The author of *Oedipus the King*, Sophocles himself, should also believe in fate and God. He attributes all the causes of these tragedies to fate, rather than the character's own personality and other factors. But if King Oedipus simply promotes determinism, its value will obviously be greatly diminished. The works themselves often overflow the author's intention, which is held by Western aesthetics, while the Chinese say, "The author's intention may not be right, and the reader's intention may not be wrong."^[5] As Aristotle said, "And what he (referring to Oedipus and the like) fell into misfortune was not because he did something bad, but because he made a mistake."^[6] According to Luo Niansheng's annotation, "He made a mistake. It refers to a mistake made due to a lack of understanding (such as not knowing that the other person is one's own relative), not a moral flaw."^[7] In order to win, people must improve their understanding and judgment, which prompts Westerners to develop rationality and wisdom. The development of Western science is also related to this. Although Xueqin Cao, the author of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, wrote a lot about the fate of characters, it is difficult to see that he himself believed that fate is supreme. The tragic fate of the characters in his works is more derived from social, class, and feudal concepts. The previous myth only serves as an introduction and is not the main cause of tragedy. Sophocles believed that the cause of tragedy was the invincibility of fate, while Xueqin Cao believed that the cause of tragedy was the darkness and oppression of society. In other words, if the tragic fate of characters in Chinese literature cannot be changed, it must not be because the gods say it cannot be changed, but because the real society makes it impossible for them to change. In China, even if it is a fantasy novel, its core must be the real society, and the gods are more like a layer of wrapping paper wrapped around the outside. Jiancang Wang believes that the two works *Oedipus the King* and *Dream of the Red Chamber* have similar tragic consciousness, both depicting the absurdity and absurdity of life, which is fatalistic. This fatalistic view may seem too pessimistic for *Dream of the Red Chamber*^[8]. Xueqin Cao has a nihilistic concept in his philosophy, but once he enters the writing of real life, he involuntarily carries out a comprehensive and detailed portrayal of it, allowing us to see how life tragedies occur in the context of social and cultural systems. Moreover, *Dream of the Red Chamber* is not a pure tragedy. The poetic description of the adolescents of the Grand View Garden has touched and envied many readers, while Guowei Wang believes that "*Dream of the Red Chamber* is the opposite of all comedies and a complete tragedy."^[9] This kind of tragic interpretation is not comprehensive^[10].

Of course, there are also similarities in the tragic fates of *Oedipus the King* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*. For example, their fate is unchangeable and cannot be resisted or changed through personal power. Oedipus, no matter how hard he tried, voluntarily left and self-exiled, could not solve the paradox of life. However, Baoyu, Daiyu, Baochai,

and others were unable to use their own weak strength to confront fate and society, and could only be arranged step by step by fate. The spirit that *Oedipus the King* and *Dream of the Red Chamber* mainly praise is also the same: it is the praise of human free will and the courage to resist fate. Oedipus is kind and upright, and his fate is undoubtedly unfair to him. Therefore, his rebellion is fully reasonable and sympathetic. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, young men and women mostly use love to resist feudal ethics. In that strictly regulated dynasty, the emotional outbursts were already enough to shock people, and their love was like a shining pearl in the dark night. Their resistance, although minimal in action, was a significant breakthrough in spirit. Young men and women, for the first time, burst into wonderful love, blooming their youthful years like flowers in the beautiful Grand View Garden, forming a sharp contrast with the dark and oppressive feudal society with the most precious and beautiful love.

3 The Reasons for the Different Fates of Chinese and Western Tragedies

3.1 Different Religious Beliefs

As for the reasons for the different tragic fates in Chinese and Western literature, I believe there are the following. Firstly, the difference in beliefs. In ancient Greece, the people there generally believed in various gods, such as Zeus, Athena, Apollo, and other well-known Greek mythological deities. Due to the backwardness of science and technology, people sincerely believe in these deities and worship their divine power. Therefore, for some coincidences, people attribute them to divine power or fate. So, in their hearts, fate is predetermined, superior to all living beings, inevitable and unchangeable. But China is different. Although there were also religions such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism in ancient China, most ordinary people did not have true religious beliefs. They believe in gods, but they don't completely believe in them. Although many people burn incense and pay homage to the Buddha during festivals, and on ordinary days, they also talk about the gods and Buddha, begging for their blessings, they may not have true reverence for the gods in their hearts. Chinese people have always been quite utilitarian in the matter of gods and Buddhas, attempting to use a few sticks of incense or paper money to gain the favor of the gods. If his wish cannot be fulfilled, he will not repent like Western believers, but rather feel that the gods have not helped him. Therefore, although Chinese people often talk about gods and Buddhas, they often do not attribute all the difficulties or coincidences encountered in life to gods or fate.

3.2 Different Natural Conditions and Geographical Environments

Secondly, the differences in natural conditions and geographical environment have also created differences in the concept of fate between the East and the West. In ancient Greece, three parts faced the sea, and the land was divided into many small pieces by mountains. There were numerous city states, no flat and fertile plains, and agriculture

was backward. But ancient Greece had a winding coastline and numerous bays, with abundant marine resources, so most of ancient Greece developed maritime trade. The ever-changing nature of the sea and many unstable factors gave the Greeks a spirit of bravery, pursuit of freedom, and exploration, while also strengthening their reverence for nature and fate. Therefore, they hold a reverence for nature while hoping to overcome it and transform it. On the contrary, China has vast territory and abundant land resources, with a focus on agricultural civilization. Men cultivate and women weave, with meticulous cultivation and self-sufficiency. Nature is more like a friend of the Chinese people. People adapt to the times and obtain knowledge and resources from nature, so the spirit of the Chinese people is generally optimistic and peaceful, conservative and stable.

3.3 Different Cultures and Politics

Finally, there are cultural and political differences. Ancient Greece revered the beauty of natural health and had a rich range of sports and competitive activities; They love heroes, and Greek mythology and drama have portrayed many impressive heroic characters; They also revered liberalism, which gave rise to heroic figures like Oedipus who relentlessly pursued freedom and changed their destiny. In ancient China, there was a unified centralization of power, with imperial power being centralized and superior to the common people. Any behavior that did not comply with social rules would be regarded as abnormal and punished. At the same time, in ancient times, both money and cultural resources were concentrated in the hands of a few upper-class people, and the lower-class people had no access to fresh ideas. They are ignorant and still must worry about their own clothing, food, housing, and transportation, let alone have the mind to think about spiritual matters. In addition, some dynasties, such as the Qing Dynasty, once implemented "written inquisitions". People will be sentenced to prison for saying or writing things that violate rules and feudal ethics. Therefore, under objective conditions, the ability and interest of literati to freely create will be suppressed, and therefore, characters in literature rarely confront feudal forces directly.

4 Conclusion

Although there are similarities between the tragic fates in Greek literature and Chinese literature that cannot be changed or deciphered, there are also many differences. The characteristics and roles of fate are different, and the attitudes of the protagonists and authors towards fate are also different. We can also glimpse some cultural differences between the East and the West and the reasons behind these differences. Understanding these helps us better understand the cultural background and spiritual connotations reflected in Chinese and Western tragedies, sort out their development context, and also promote the exchange and development of Chinese and foreign literature.

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