



# A Comparative Study of the Protagonists in Ba Jin's *Family* and Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*

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**Abstract.** Ba Jin's *Family* and Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* are both acknowledged as classic pieces of realist literature in the 20th century. This article concentrates on the main personas, Gao Juexin and Thomas Buddenbrook, dissecting their societal and historical contexts, domestic living conditions, and psychological interiority to discern the analogous facets shared by the two personas. Furthermore, by delving into the archetypes that inspired the characters, alongside the authors' creative objectives and affective stances, this study endeavors to unravel the underlying causes for these resemblances.

**Keywords:** *Family*; *Buddenbrooks*; Gao Juexin; Thomas Buddenbrook; universal human spirit

## 1 Introduction

Ba Jin's *Family* and Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* are both classic works of realism in the twentieth-century literary world. *Family* focuses on early twentieth-century Chengdu, depicting the decline of the feudal bureaucratic landlord family Gao; *Buddenbrooks* portrays the rise and fall of the bourgeois family Buddenbrook in Lübeck, Germany, in the mid-nineteenth century.

Gao Juexin and Thomas Buddenbrook share similar fates: as the eldest sons of their respective families, they were held in high hopes during their youth but ultimately failed to save their families from ruin. Both authors came from large families similar to those depicted in their novels, with Thomas Mann hailing from a prestigious family in Lübeck, and Ba Jin from a feudal landlord family in Chengdu. Both novels carry a strong autobiographical tone. This article will analyze the social and historical backgrounds, family life conditions, and inner psychological states to explore the similarities between the two characters. By examining the character prototypes, the authors' writing intentions, and emotional attitudes, this article attempts to explore the reasons behind the similarities between the two characters, thereby deepening the understanding and appreciation of these two masterpieces.

## 2 Contradiction and Struggle: the Eldest Son in the Turn of the Times

Both Gao Juexin and Thomas Buddenbrook live in the midst of a similar era of transition. In the early 19th century, capitalism in Germany experienced rapid growth, with a flourishing economy and booming trade. Through the efforts of several generations, the Buddenbrooks secured a solid position in Lübeck in both economic and political terms and rose to become the elite of the city. However, difficulties soon followed. The transition from free competition capitalism to monopoly capitalism meant that the Buddenbrooks faced significant challenges in their business rivalry with competitors like Hagenström. The failure of the German bourgeois revolution in 1848 led to a pervasive sense of decadence in society, where the thoughts of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Wagner, and others gained popularity<sup>[1]</sup>. With the company struggling, an unreliable brother and son, and growing estrangement from his wife, Thomas found himself in an unprecedented predicament<sup>[2]</sup>.

Despite being in a similar state of flux, the era facing Gao Juexin was changing even more rapidly and dramatically. The violent impact of the Xinhai Revolution led to the collapse of the old feudal social order. Juexin's ancestors and father were officials during the Qing Dynasty, having accumulated considerable wealth over time. In school, Juexin was an outstanding student and a modern youth; at home, however, he was the young master of a feudal household. The fresh thoughts from the New Culture Movement got him excited, but he also found ways to justify living an old-fashioned life. He complied with the demands of his elders regardless of right or wrong; when it came to his siblings' struggles against the family, most of the time, he merely tried to placate from the elders' perspective.

The death of their fathers thrust Gao Juexin and Thomas, as eldest sons, into the heavy responsibility of their families during their youth, with family life taking on an increasingly large role. However, the conflict between family interests and personal desires constantly hindered them, filling their hearts with contradictions and struggles.

Thomas had his wild and indulgent years when young, but after taking over the company, he prioritized family interests in everything he did, thinking from a businessman's perspective. When faced with familial affection, he placed the family's reputation and interests above all else. When his sister Toni suggested divorce for the second time, his first reaction was "Don't make a big fuss about this", preferring to avoid trouble. Gao Juexin, however, faced sharper contradictions and clearer choices. After his father's death, as the eldest grandson of the main branch of the family, Juexin should have reconciled the differences between the older and younger generations, as well as those between the nuclear and extended families. However, in the era of the May Fourth Movement, the possibility of reconciling the stark contradictions between the old and new forces was slim to none. Caught in a difficult position, Juexin chose to give up, sacrifice, and retreat. He gave up the struggle, sacrificed his own happiness, and in exchange, he achieved temporary peace at home<sup>[3]</sup>.

Family will was placed above personal desire, and they themselves voluntarily gave up their right to choose. Gao Juexin's love story could be described as a bumpy tragedy,

and this tragic love life is part of the broader tragedy of his existence. In Ba Jin's passionate writing, there is a sense of Chinese-style resignation—"Even if we stand shoulder to shoulder, it's hard to find peace of mind"<sup>[4]</sup>. The resolution of Juexin's love story also reflects Ba Jin's hope for a new era filled with promise for people like Juexin, that they might no longer be solitary and move towards a new, hopeful life. Thomas' love life was not filled with the kind of coercion from elders and systems that Juexin experienced. He saw himself as a link in the chain of family and company, and with a profound sense of responsibility towards his family, he voluntarily gave up his personal love in favor of a higher dowry or a more prestigious marriage alliance. Thomas was adept at disguising himself; he concealed his true feelings behind an array of unusual airs and unique tastes. The Buddenbrooks could not truly be free in love.

### 3 Rebellion and Failure: Victims with Similar Hearts

Gao Juexin and Thomas Buddenbrook, despite being born into vastly different times and spaces and experiencing unique events, share strikingly similar inner conflicts and pain. They both endeavor to maintain their facades, striving to satisfy everyone in and outside their families, and to control their lives to prevent drastic negative changes. However, their efforts are unsuccessful. On one hand, it is impossible for an individual to control the fate of a large family, and on the other hand, they lack the abundant vitality, willpower, and enterprising spirit needed to alter their family's destiny. The gradual deterioration of their living conditions torments them internally. They are acutely aware of their current state of existence, yet they can neither escape nor do they wish to. As Juexin confesses to his brothers, "I have no hope of obtaining happiness anymore. My life will end just like this. I do not resist because I am unwilling to resist; I am willing to be a sacrifice".

Yet, they were not born so defeated and weak. When Juexin first married and entered family life, "he was angry, he struggled, he believed his actions were just. However, the result of the struggle only brought him more troubles and more enemies." Thus, he quickly retreated, opting for meaningless sacrifice and continuous perfunctory compliance. Thomas, in his youth, also led the company further. He obtained the title of senator, moved into a new house, and everything seemed to be thriving. However, before reaching forty, he rapidly showed signs of aging inconsistent with his age. Nor did they fail to seek answers to break free from the prison of life. Juexin's long-lost youth was awakened by the May Fourth Movement, while Thomas sought answers about life and death in Schopenhauer's works. Yet, their will had already been destroyed by the day-to-day perfunctory and insincere life, and trivial matters filled their time. Therefore, in the end, Juexin chose a new "doctrine of bowing" and "non-resistance" to make his old-fashioned life seem more acceptable; while business activities, civic life, and a tormenting vanity made Thomas quickly abandon Schopenhauer, giving up that brief moment of enlightenment and contentment one afternoon. He "collapsed once again, returning to the beliefs and images familiar since childhood," ultimately leaving everything "to God's arrangement".

However, giving up resistance does not mean one can gratefully enjoy the present life. In such murky lives devoid of hope, mental health is inevitably compromised. For Thomas and Gao Juexin, both novels contain direct descriptions of mental illness. Yet in *Buddenbrooks*, it is not Thomas but his brother Christian who leaves the deepest impression as a mentally ill character. The young Thomas was rational, seemingly standing on the opposite end from his idle and incessantly chattering, neurotic brother. However, "as he aged, he became increasingly neurotic and pretentious", changing outfits several times a day, always proper and fastidious, constantly suspicious of others for fear of being ridiculed. Similarly, life in the large family caused Gao Juexin's mental state to deviate from its course. When Juemin was scolded by an elder, he knelt before his aunt, crying, "I don't want to live anymore"; after midnight, sitting in his sedan chair, he shattered all the glass, telling Juemin, "Everyone will be happy if I die."

Amidst the contradictions, struggles, wanderings, and pain within their own spiritual worlds, these two protagonists ultimately met their ends. Thomas's death is undoubtedly filled with a sense of ironic mockery. He, who pondered death daily, died on an ordinary workday from a tiny toothache, collapsing in the middle of the road, usually so dapper, now covered in mud. Gao Juexin, on the other hand, had a hopeful ending: after the family split and moved into a new house, Juemin got engaged, Juexin married Cuihuan, relatives and friends lived harmoniously, and everything prospered. Such an ending brings comfort to readers, and in the tumultuous era of the early 20th century, where old and new clashed, it inevitably brought hope to many who suffered similar fates. Regarding the prototype for Juexin, his eldest brother Li Yaomei, who took his own life at a young age, Ba Jin also "really could not find a reason why he must die"<sup>[4]</sup>. If one is aware and determined, even a fallen person can turn back and embrace a bright future. Perhaps in Juexin, Ba Jin also entrusted such a notion.

#### 4 Realism and Fiction: the Humanity of Emotional Connection

*Family* and *Buddenbrooks* both possess a strong autobiographical hue. Like the Buddenbrook family in his novel, Thomas Mann hailed from a prominent family in Lübeck, with the Mönckeberg house in the story being modeled after the Mann residence on Mönckeberg Street. Ba Jin came from a feudal landlord family in Chengdu. His early experiences closely resembled those of Juehui; his father was the county magistrate of Guangyuan, and the family was very wealthy. The era depicted in the novels corresponds to the authors' own life experiences. They reminisced and wrote about their childhood and youth from the perspective of witnesses to the changes of the times.

*Family* was written when Ba Jin was twenty-seven, and *Buddenbrooks* was completed when Mann was only twenty-six. As works from their respective youths, the two authors had different writing objectives. Mann, who had no interest in business and witnessed the closure of the family firm due to the lack of successors, projected his self-observation and reflection onto three characters: Christian, whom he feared and detested becoming; the noble Thomas he aspired to be; and Hanno, his poeticized self-image. Deeply influenced by Schopenhauer's philosophy, although Mann had a profound sense of class consciousness and emotions, his artistic genius allowed him to

transcend class limitations, enabling him to observe and narrate the spiritual evolution of his class with a cool and cautious gaze <sup>[1]</sup>.

Unlike others, Ba Jin's writing never strayed from the theme of "love". He loved his elder brother and sympathized with those in his family who were persecuted by feudal ethics. He aimed to denounce the dying system and the cannibalistic rituals, proclaiming "I accuse." With a fervent and impassioned tone, Ba Jin vehemently condemned these practices, yet his love for life, hope for the youth, and passion for vigor consistently leaped off the page. *Family* was written for his brother, hoping that upon reading it, he would come to a realization and distance himself from the painful old family life<sup>[4,5]</sup>. Unfortunately, Li Yaomei committed suicide at the age of thirty-three, right before the novel's publication. Perhaps due to Ba Jin's regret and reluctance to let go of his brother, Juexin was given a hopeful ending. For the same reason, he created vibrant and ambitious young characters like Juemin and Shuhua in *Spring* and *Autumn*.

*Buddenbrooks* uses society to reflect the soul, while *Family* attacks the system through its characters. Along two seemingly opposite paths, we can still discover the same affection both authors hold for their characters. This emotion is not simply love or hate, like or dislike. In times of rapid change, facing unprecedented difficulties, they are like sailors in a storm, helpless against the runaway helm, powerless to change their fate or save their family's decline, until they are pushed onto the ultimate cliff by the tides of history, forced to make a choice between life and death. In the end, they choose life with immense courage, choosing to live on despite hardships, striving desperately to maintain their family's dignity amidst others' incomprehension and ridicule. Within the storm-tossed family, they stand as tragic yet generous pillars of strength.

Ba Jin was not that kind of person; he was an innocent, passionate, and idealistic observer beside Gao Juexin, unable to comprehend the choices his elder brother made. Thomas Mann was not that kind of person either. Thomas Buddenbrook was how he idealized what a member of the Mann family of his generation should be, yet he, who chose the path of art, did not dare to make the same choices as Thomas Buddenbrook. They did not fully understand or agree with such lifestyles and states of being, which is why Juehui and Juemin repeatedly tried to persuade their elder brother, and why Thomas Buddenbrook met a comical and undignified death in his tumultuous and hasty middle age. However, both authors sympathize with and admire the perseverance and struggles of these eldest sons. With a sympathetic tone, they wrote the stories of the lives of these heads of household, allowing all their kindness and noble qualities to shine like stars in the night sky. Their stories hold significant weight in the books, and the complexity and three-dimensionality of their characters allow countless readers to touch upon the depths of humanity and the pulse of the era.

## 5 Conclusion

Wandering in a turbulent society, struggling between family and individuality, such characters are too numerous to count throughout the history of literature. Looking at real society, there might be even more of such people. Ba Jin and Thomas Mann, as witnesses of the eras they described, used their own experiences as a blueprint, blending

their insights into human nature, their understanding of society, and their perspective on history into one, contributing two classic and thought-provoking literary figures to the world. Gao Juexin and Thomas Buddenbrook are similar, and we seem to vaguely realize that this similarity has transcended the boundaries of Chinese and German literature, culture, and geography, reflecting a certain universal human spirit.

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