

# Analyzing The Peony Pavilion and Romeo and Juliet from a Comparative Perspective of Chinese and Western Cultures

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**Abstract:** Literature, as an important part of culture in terms of ideology, is the most convenient material to study the characteristics of different cultures. This paper selects the masterpieces "Peony Pavilion" and "Romeo and Juliet" of the two great Chinese and Western dramatists, Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare, and compares and analyzes them in four aspects, namely, the background of the creation, plot design, main characters' image, and the ending of the love, so as to analyze the differences between the two works in the spirit of the Chinese and Western cultures, the way of thinking, the concepts of human beings, and the understanding of tragedy.

**Keywords:** The Peony Pavilion, Romeo and Juliet, Comparison, Chinese and Western cultural differences.

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## 1. Introduction

Literature, as an important part of culture in terms of ideology, is the most convenient material for studying the characteristics of different cultures. Literary comparison is the earliest developed field in cultural comparison, and it is also one of the most important ways for people to contact and understand the spiritual and cultural connections and differences of different civilizations. In this paper, the masterpieces of two great Chinese and Western dramatists, Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare, "The Peony Pavilion" and "Romeo and Juliet", are selected to explore the differences between China and the West in terms of the spirit of Chinese and Western cultures, Chinese and Western ways of thinking, Chinese and Western conceptions of human beings, and Chinese and Western understandings of tragedy. The two works are chosen for comparison for the following reasons: firstly, both works were written at the end of the 16th century; secondly, both works are themed on eulogizing free love and opposing feudal ethics. Despite the similarity in the time of creation and ideological theme, the two works still show different characteristics in terms of the background, plot design, main characters, and the ending of love, which trigger the readers to think deeply about the cultural differences between China and the West implied in them.

## 2. Synopsis of The Peony Pavilion and Romeo and Juliet

### 2.1. Synopsis of The Peony Pavilion

The story takes place in the Southern Song Dynasty. Du Liniang is the daughter of Du Bao, the governor of Nan'an and the descendant of Du Fu. On a spring day, Du Liniang secretly visited the garden, fell asleep in sleepiness, dreamed of a scholar and his pleasures, and woke up after a good deed, but the scholar was gone. From then on, Du Liniang missed the scholar day after day, and fell ill. Before her death, she asked her family to put her portrait under the Taihu Lake stone of Peony Pavilion. At this time, the Jin soldiers sent Li Quan to attack Huaiyang, Du Bao buried Du Liniang in Plum Blossom Pavilion and was ordered to go to defend the town.

The scholar in the dream is Lingnan Liu Mengmei, after Liu Zongyuan, after the death of his parents and the fall of his family, he decided to go to Beijing to take the examination, and when he passed by Nan'an, he stayed in the Plum Blossom Pavilion, and picked up the self-portrait of Du Liniang. That night, Du Liniang's ghost to meet with him, learned that she was inhuman Liu Mengmei was not frightened, but managed to obtain the elixir, dug open the grave, so that she came back to life. Afterwards, Du Liniang accompanied Liu Mengmei to Lin'an to take the examination, and when the list was announced, she encountered Li Quan's rebellion, and Du Bao was besieged. After the rebellion was quelled, Du Bao was promoted to prime minister and refused to recognize Liu Du's marriage, which eventually went to the court, and with the help of the emperor, Liu Du and his wife finally became a couple.

### 2.2. A synopsis of the story of Romeo and Juliet

The two families, the Montagues and the Capulets, have a long-standing feud and often fight. Romeo, the son of a Montague, falls in love with Rosaline, a Capulet girl. In order to see Rosaline, Romeo went to attend the Capulets' banquet, but became infatuated with his only daughter Juliet, and could not help but show her his heart, the two heart to heart, and fell in love from then on. Due to the two families of the grudge, the two can not be combined, Romeo went to the monastery to ask the priest for the two presided over the wedding, without the order of the parents were married. Romeo kills Juliet's cousin and is banished by the rulers and has to leave his new wife. Meanwhile, the Capulets decide to marry Juliet to the Earl of Paris. Juliet fakes her death with the assistance of a priest in order to escape the marriage. The priest informs Romeo of the fake death, but he fails to receive it and, believing his wife to be truly dead, digs up his lover's grave and kills himself in a fit of grief. Juliet wakes up to find Romeo dead and is devastated, and kills herself.

### **3. From The Background of The Creation of Chinese and Western Cultural and Spiritual Differences**

#### **3.1. The background of the creation of The Peony Pavilion**

The Peony Pavilion was created in 1598, at the end of the Ming Dynasty (26th year of the Wanli reign of Emperor Shenzong of the Ming Dynasty), when feudalism and authoritarianism had reached a climax during the Wanli reign, and feudal culture and ideology were deeply rooted. Nevertheless, the advanced literary trend was not suppressed, but on the contrary, it was very active. Tang Xianzu was 31 years old when he won the bachelor's degree and then became an official in the imperial court. In less than ten years, he retired from the imperial court because of his dissatisfaction with the corruption of the court, and then he took up writing and created "Four Dreams of Linchuan". Many of the episodes in The Peony Pavilion are a glimpse of his satirizing of the imperial court.

From the Zhou Dynasty onwards, both society and the family considered marriage to be a major event that "serves the clan and the temple above, and succeeds the next generation below", and that it was necessary to go through "the order of parents and the words of matchmakers" in order to form marriages that were in line with the above purposes. The Zhou Dynasty also stipulated that the "six rites" must be performed when marrying, namely: Nacai, asking for the name, naji, nazheng, please period, and kissing. If these rituals are missing, the marriage between a man and a woman is not recognized by the society and the family. It can be imagined that people at that time were basically unlikely to be united through free love. Based on this, Tang Xianzu created this dramatic work against feudal marriage and in pursuit of the freedom of marriage.

#### **3.2. The background of the creation of Romeo and Juliet**

Shakespeare lived in the Renaissance (14th-17th centuries), a period when feudal society in Europe was gradually disintegrating and the capitalist mode of production was being nurtured within the feudal matrix. At this time, the trend of "humanism" emerged, which was not only the ideological weapon of the emerging bourgeoisie to fight against the religious forces, but also the central idea of various literary genres. Its main contents were: first, to oppose theocracy with humanity; second, to oppose asceticism with the liberation of personality; and third, to oppose obscurantism with reason. Among them, the liberation of personality was proposed against the asceticism preached by the feudal society, which required the working people to restrain their desires, give up the struggle, and give up the happiness of the present world; it affirmed the life of the present world, and believed that the happiness of the present world was higher than everything else, and that the purpose of life was the pursuit of personal freedom and personal happiness. Shakespeare's early works mainly promote this humanist thought, "Romeo and Juliet" is a love tragedy with anti-feudal consciousness produced in this background.

Chen Duxiu discussed "the difference between the fundamental thoughts of the Eastern and Western nations" in Youth Magazine in 1915, pointing out that the difference between the Eastern and Western civilizations lies in the

following: "One is natural and the other artificial; one is negative and the other positive; one is dependent and the other independent; one is intuitive and the other rational; one is imaginary and the other experiential; one is spiritual and the other carnal. ; one is imaginary, one is experiential; one is spiritual, one is carnal ..... "From this, it can be seen that the difference between The Peony Pavilion and Romeo and Juliet in terms of the background of their creation reflects the difference between China and the West in terms of culture and spirit:

Du Liniang in "Peony Pavilion" has an affair with Liu Mengmei in her dream, but in reality, she does not violate "the order of parents and the words of matchmakers", which reflects a "natural, negative, dependent, intuitive, imaginary and spiritual" cultural spirit, while in "Romeo and Juliet", she rebels against the family arrangement in reality to pursue free marriage, which reflects an "artificial, positive, independent, rational, experiential and carnal" cultural spirit. Romeo and Juliet" is a rebellion against the arrangement of the family in pursuit of free marriage in reality, reflecting a "man-made, positive, independent, rational, experiential, and carnal" cultural spirit. The reason for this is due to the different types of economy and production activities between Chinese and Western peoples. China is a traditional society based on blood family ties, while the West is a city-state community based on geopolitics. This determines that the spirit of Chinese culture is somewhat dependent and emphasizes the interests of the group, while the spirit of Western culture is independent and focuses on individual rights and interests. Therefore, Liu Du did not break away from the court and his family after all, while Luo Zhu broke away from his family by his death, which demonstrated the independence and freedom of individuality.

### **4. Differences between Chinese and Western Cultures in The Way of Thinking from The Design of The Plot**

#### **4.1. Plot Design of The Peony Pavilion**

As mentioned above, The Peony Pavilion is a love story about the pursuit of free love based on a "dream" created by Tang Xianzu. The reason why the author used "dream" as a blueprint is that under the constraints of the feudal marriage system, it is impossible for Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei to fall in love with each other in the real world, and it is impossible for Liu Mengmei, who is a poor scholar whose parents are dead and who has not yet made a fortune, to marry Du Liniang through the open marriage, so they can only complete the process of ordinary lovers' acquaintance, acquaintance, and love in their dream world. They can only fulfill the process of ordinary lovers from meeting, knowing and loving each other in the dream world. Tang Xianzu set up the plot of "meeting in a dream" to satirize the control and restriction of the feudal marriage system on people's thoughts in real life, reflecting people's yearning and pursuit of free love at that time. Because Du Liniang could not meet her beloved, she became sick with lovesickness and died on her bed, and she could only meet Liu Mengmei, who was going to the capital to take the examination, and renew her relationship with him after the King of Hell authorized her to return to her soul. It can be seen that in The Peony Pavilion, Du Liniang's pursuit of ideal love is realized mainly through

dreaming. And after Du Liniang's resurrection, the author designed Liu Mengmei to be a high school scholar, but Du Bao did not recognize Liu Du's marriage, once again setting up obstacles for the pair of lovebirds, until the matter was reported to the emperor before the lovers could be reunited.

#### 4.2. Plot design of Romeo and Juliet

Compared with the storyline of The Peony Pavilion, which is based on a dream, the plot of Romeo and Juliet is designed to express the criticism of feudalism by the way of martyrdom of two people who fail to fall in love with each other. In Romeo and Juliet, the young man and woman fall in love at first sight, and then get involved in a relationship. In the face of the obstacles of reality, the two people have always been steadfast, and finally expressed their loyalty and persistence in love by martyring themselves.

It can be seen that the difference in plot setting between The Peony Pavilion and Romeo and Juliet reflects the difference in thinking between Chinese and Western cultures:

The "love in a dream" and "meeting in the soul" of The Peony Pavilion is a supernatural plot setting, which is not in line with rational thinking, and can be said to be a kind of illogical "intuitive thinking". It is not in line with rational thinking and can be said to be a kind of illogical "intuitive thinking". Such as Du Liniang can only be in a dream and love love, after death soul in the city of death, by the King of Hell to return soul, these are not logical plot settings. And "Romeo and Juliet" in reality against the obstruction of the family, bravely love each other and even martyrdom to accuse the reality of the plot setting, it reflects the way of thinking of Western culture - heavy logical reasoning. So the plot settings are done in reality, they are logical, is the development of things to a certain stage will inevitably happen phenomenon, such as Romeo killed Juliet's cousin was expelled, the priest to Romeo to send a letter and he did not receive, things are happening after the things that are following a kind of logic in the process.

It can be seen that the difference between Chinese and Western ways of thinking is the difference between "intuitive thinking" and "logical thinking". The reason for this has much to do with the language and writing used in China and the West. American linguists Sapir and Wolfe put forward a hypothesis that people with different languages have different thinking modes, and that language determines people's thinking, which cannot exist without language. This is the famous "linguistic determinism". Later, this hypothesis was upgraded to "language influence theory". However, no matter whether it is language-determined or language-influenced, we cannot deny that language does dominate and limit people's thinking. The difference between Chinese and Western languages lies in the fact that Chinese emphasizes on meaning and harmony, without any strict morphological changes, and expresses grammatical meanings mainly through word order and false words. English, on the other hand, has strict variations of name, number, form, time, body and state, and a strict grammatical system. This determines that Chinese can say whatever it wants, as long as the words are "round", while English must be logical. Specifically to the plot of the two works can be seen, Tang Xianzu wrote Du Liniang dead and then come back to life, while Shakespeare followed the logic of step by step will be written Luo Zhu two dead, will be "dead" as the ultimate end.

## 5. Differences Between Chinese and Western Concepts of Human Beings as Seen in The Main Characterizations

### 5.1. Dolores and Juliet

Du Liniang is a typical Chinese classical beauty, born in a family of officials and eunuchs, she received a strict feudal family education from a young age, and could not be a little out of line. Influenced by the "Poetry - Guan Ju", she reveals her deep-seated pursuit of free love. And by the maid encouraged the first time to secretly tour the garden, hidden in the heart of the feelings finally exposed. The beautiful spring light inspires her inner yearning for the opposite sex and love, and awakens her lust, waiting for the arrival of a heterosexual to explode. Finally, in the "dream", Du Liniang met a scholar, in the spring dream, and its inversion, enjoy the fish and water. After waking up from the dream, she wanted to turn the dream into reality, so she began to "search for the dream". However, the dream is just the moon in the mirror flowers in the water, the reality of where to find it? So she died of depression because she could not fulfill her wish. Du Liniang's "death" becomes another beginning of her rebellion against feudal marriage - a wandering soul renews its relationship with a scholar in reality. She dies for her dream lover and is reborn for her real lover. But after her resurrection, she once again faces her father's obstruction of her love marriage - Du Bao refuses to recognize the marriage between Liu and Du. In the end, it was only after Du Liniang made an impassioned speech to the emperor at the court that she was able to gain recognition with Liu Mengmei.

Juliet and Du Liniang, the same noble birth, kind and beautiful, faithful to love. Fourteen-year-old Juliet was born in a large family, in the shelter of her parents happy and happy growth. She has great respect for her parents, so the criteria for choosing a spouse is to be in line with her parents' wishes at the same time as she likes. However, when love comes, the God of Fate plays a joke on her and lets her fall in love with the son of her enemy's family, with whom she is unlikely to have a fruitful relationship. However, Juliet does not take into account the hatred of the family and accepts Romeo's courtship and marries him in secret behind the back of the family's back. After Romeo was expelled, in the face of the parents of the forced marriage, Juliet is to show wisdom and courage. She pretends to give in and agrees to the marriage, while she seeks help from the priest and attempts to escape. The great power of love makes her swallow the "poison" without hesitation despite the danger, because she knows that if she wakes up and does not see Romeo, it would be better to stay awake. It is precisely because he is determined to die from the beginning that he wakes up to the news of his husband's death and kills himself again without hesitation.

### 5.2. Liu Mengmei and Romeo

In The Peony Pavilion, the character of Liu Mengmei is slightly inferior to Du Liniang. Although Tang Xianzu designed him as a descendant of the Tang poet Liu Zongyuan, giving him the status of a man of letters, a handsome and extraordinary appearance, as well as a learned and ambitious inner being, he also arranged for his parents to die and his fortune to be bad, relying only on Guo Camel, who ran an orchard and flower garden after Guo Camel, to provide for him. In spite of his hard life, Liu Mengmei insisted on

studying hard, and after going through trials and tribulations, he finally got a high school diploma. He and Du Liniang were fond of each other because of their dreams, and for her rebirth, he dared to dig a grave to save her life, and accomplished a great love with his courage.

Romeo is likewise an incarnation of humanism portrayed by Shakespeare. He is passionate, affectionate, bold, sincere, determined, fearless, and deeply bourgeois adventurer. After all, Romeo's is too young, not calm enough, and lack of calculation. In the fate of the trick, impulsive as he is bound to destruction. In the end, he gave up his life for the sake of love, and in his opinion, his death was a well-deserved one. It can be seen that he is a straightforward, brave and resolute young man who dedicates himself to his ideals, and has the same important position as Juliet in the play.

The image design of Juliet and Julianne, Liu Mengmei and Romeo reflects the different concepts of Chinese and Western cultures about human beings. Chinese culture mainly understands human beings as a class of beings, emphasizes the social value of human beings, and only regards human beings as a member of a group, a derivative of his social relations, and his value exists because of the group and is embodied by it. On the other hand, Western culture emphasizes the status of man as an independent individual with reason, dignity and free will, and requires man to be responsible for his own destiny. Therefore, Tang Xianzu designed the image of Du Liniang as a young lady from an official family, who cannot pursue her own love, but can only follow her "parents' order" to enter into a marriage with a person she does not know at all. In other words, despite her noble birth, Du Liniang is still unable to choose her own destiny as an independent individual, and she can only stay in the family group and be swayed by the group's interests. Although Du Liniang has fought and endured many ups and downs in her quest for love - illness, death, return of soul, resurrection, and ultimately the rewards of a happy love and marriage - she has never broken away from her family. After all, she had to get her father's permission and the emperor's approval before she and Liu Mengmei could become a legitimate couple. The Chinese "happy ending" also arranges for Liu Mengmei to become a high school scholar and thus a good match for Du Liniang, the daughter of the prime minister. From this point of view, Tang Xianzu's conception of human beings is still not divorced from the conception of the group, not to mention the principle of loyalty and filial piety that "serving the king is like serving one's father". Shakespeare's Juliet and Romeo, on the other hand, do not, their image reflects the "individualism" of Western culture, emphasizing the individuality of the promotion of the pursuit of freedom and rights, reflecting the individual in pursuit of love and freedom at the risk of betrayal of the family, at the risk of giving up their lives. As Dante said, "It is not the family that makes the individual noble, but the individual that makes the family noble." Their image is a kind of eulogy for the liberation of individuality and the right to freedom. They follow the "first principle of freedom", i.e. "freedom of the will". This kind of individualistic thought, the humanistic trend centered on the liberation of personality and the reconstruction of human subjectivity became the mainstream thought of western culture since the Renaissance.

## 6. Differences in Chinese and Western Understanding of Tragedy from the Ending of Love

### 6.1. The Love Ending of The Peony Pavilion

In *The Peony Pavilion*, Tang Xianzu presents romanticism through the means of bringing Du Liniang back from the dead, transforming the tragedy of love into a comedic ending through such bold imagination. This is a kind of surrealistic creative technique that conforms to Chinese traditional ideals, i.e., a "happy ending" in the traditional sense. Our culture has a tendency to pursue a happy ending, which is a manifestation of the aesthetics of comedy in literary creation. The idea that love needs to go through trials and tribulations in order to be complete is expressed by the author to the fullest extent. The thread of Du Liniang's story begins with her living in the bosom of a woman, and then she realizes the pursuit of love, and then she has a dream of making love with a scholar, and then she dies of lovesickness, and then she returns to the world of the living and renews her love with Liu Mengmei, and then finally, she finally meets with him and they are united in love. If the drama only arranges for them to renew their relationship without a happy ending, it is not able to satisfy the psychological needs of the Chinese audience. Therefore, this kind of happy ending is not only a manifestation of the traditional ending idea of Chinese drama, but also an expression of the traditional aesthetics of comedy.

### 6.2. The love ending of Romeo and Juliet

For Western culture, it is the tragic ending that is the essence of literary creation. As Aristotle said in *Poetics*: "Comedy always imitates those who are worse than we are today, and tragedy always imitates those who are better than we are today." The word tragedy contains three meanings in the terminology of western culture: firstly, as a kind of drama; secondly, the tragedy in human life; and thirdly, the tragedy consciousness that grasps the cultural concept of tragedy. In the development of ancient Chinese drama, the most striking and heart-wrenching drama is the "bitter drama" with "miserable and sad" content and plot. The difference between Chinese and Western tragedy is due to cultural differences. Westerners advocate the use of tragedy to reflect the beauty of art, the beauty of this defect is considered to be the highest aesthetic expression of art. This aesthetic point of view is also embodied in the play "*Romeo and Juliet*", the most obvious expression is that the two sides to martyrdom to defend the end of love. Death is a most solemn and serious event and the highest pinnacle of tragic expression.

This shows all the differences between the Chinese and Western understanding of a tragic ending. Westerners believe that the tragic ending of a hero is that he or she must die. It can be seen that the tragic ending in the West is a struggle with life, a manifestation of a conflict that has grown to a fever pitch. Such as the martyrdom of Romeo and Juliet. Contrary to the Western tragedy, Chinese bitter drama often ends in the form of happy drama, the so-called first bitter and then sweet, bitter and sweet, is the reconciliation of the conflict. But this happy ending is often not earned by the protagonist himself, but realized through an external force. For example, the happy ending of *The Peony Pavilion*. The reason for this is that Chinese culture emphasizes the beauty of neutrality and harmony, and "holding harmony" is one of the basic spirits of Chinese culture, which is in great contrast to the "tragic spirit"

of Western culture. It can be said that the spirit of tragedy is a concentrated manifestation of Western cultural thought, the root of which lies in the tradition of Western civilization, which "advocates individuality and freedom, is rich in adventure and pioneering, and seeks for strength and technology; and possesses the spirit of criticism, skepticism, and the courage to deny". Therefore, the direct cause of Western tragedy is their ability to doubt and judge.

## 7. Conclusion

Literary comparison is one of the important ways for people to get in touch with and understand the spiritual and cultural connections and differences of different civilizations. Through the comparative analysis of *The Peony Pavilion* and *Romeo and Juliet* in the four aspects of creation background, plot design, main characters' image, and love ending, this paper finds that China and the West have different characteristics in cultural spirit, way of thinking, conception of human being as well as understanding of tragedy, which is, in the final analysis, due to different cultures of China and the West. It should be emphasized that the simple textual analysis

is inevitably biased, and the author's ability is limited, failed to dig deeper and more detailed excavation, and only roughly analyzed the reasons for this, the inadequacy of which is welcome to criticize and correct.

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