

Exploring the Tragic Transformation from "The Orphan of Zhao" to "The Chinese Orphan"

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Abstract: "The Chinese Orphan" and "The Orphan of Zhao" are two works that differ significantly in their settings, characters, narratives, and themes. Voltaire's "The Chinese Orphan" can be seen as a representative work of Western culture's reinterpretation of Chinese tragedy. As Fan Qiu Xia quotes from Mr. Fan Xi Heng: "To this day, it represents the greatest glory of Chinese literature internationally, if not the only one." Influenced by the Yuan Zaju play "The Orphan of Zhao," Voltaire dramatically altered the theme of revenge into a narrative celebrating freedom, kindness, and justice, emphasizing the power of moral influence. His ultimate aim was moral edification and enlightenment of the French public, with cultural transition being driven internally by Enlightenment thought. This paper investigates the tragic characters, nature, emotions, conflicts, and values from Ji Jun Xiang's "The Orphan of Zhao" to Voltaire's "The Chinese Orphan," analyzing the creators' thought processes and intentions behind these changes.

Keywords: The Orphan of Zhao, The Chinese Orphan, Tragic Transformation, Changes, Creative Intent

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1 Introduction

The story of "The Orphan of Zhao" first originated in Sima Qian's "Records of the Grand Historian - The House of Zhao," with opera becoming its main medium of dissemination. This story has undergone continuous evolution in various forms of opera, including Song and Yuan opera texts, Yuan Zaju, Yuan Chuanqi, Ming Chuanqi, Ming Nanxi, Qing Kunqu, Flower Drum Opera, Beijing Opera, and modern local operas such as Qinqiang, Puju, Xiangju, Sichuan Opera, Yunnan Opera, and Guangxi Opera. While gaining widespread popularity domestically, it was also one of the first Chinese opera works to be translated and spread abroad. As early as 1731, "The Orphan of Zhao" was translated into French and adapted into Voltaire's significant work "The Chinese Orphan." Originating from the Yuan playwright Ji Jun Xiang's "The Orphan of Zhao," it has not only become a precious part of China's literary heritage but also enriched the world's literary trove. Wang Guo Wei, in his "History of Song and Yuan Drama," praised it as one of the most tragic plays of ancient China, saying, "It holds its own among the world's great tragedies." To this day, the theme of "The Orphan of Zhao" remains active in films and television, highlighting the contemporary relevance of researching the opera text of this story.

2. Tragic Characters: Dehistoricized Treatment

As Zhang Mao Xue notes, "Character setup is extremely important in drama creation. The characters' personalities, actions, and psychological activities can influence the development of the plot. To a certain extent, the portrayal of characters determines the success or failure of a drama." In "The Chinese Orphan," although there are flaws such as a lack of main characters and a simplistic plot, it successfully depicts characters like Genghis Khan and Idame as wise monarchs and women with strong individual consciousness. This is in stark contrast to the portrayal of characters like Tu Anjia and Cheng Ying in "The Orphan of Zhao." In the latter, General Tu Anjia plays a crucial role in driving the plot forward. His cruelty and brutality lead to national chaos, and his framing of the loyal Zhao family results in the monarch of Jin ordering the execution of the entire Zhao clan, leading to a bloodbath that claims the lives of more than three hundred people, including Zhao Dun, his son Zhao Shuo, other family members, and servants. Princess Zhuang Ji, Zhao Shuo's wife and the monarch's sister, is the only survivor and is sent back to the inner palace. A few months later, Princess Zhuang Ji, pregnant, gives birth to a boy named Zhao Wu. However, Tu Anjia had already ordered the palace to be sealed off. Princess Zhuang Ji, using the excuse of seeking medical help, invites Cheng Ying, a family friend and local doctor, into the palace and pleads with him to rescue her child. Cheng Ying plans to smuggle Zhao Wu out in a medicine chest. The guard

Han Jue, impressed by Cheng Ying's righteousness, lets him and Zhao Wu leave and then commits suicide. Unable to find the whereabouts of the Zhao orphan, Tu Anjia furiously announces a mass execution of all infants under six months old. To protect the Zhao orphan and innocent infants across Jin, Cheng Ying and retired old doctor Gongsun Chujiu deceive Tu Anjia with a fake orphan. Cheng Ying sacrifices his own newborn son in place of the Zhao orphan, and old man Gongsun takes the blame to protect the orphan, after which Cheng Ying personally reports to Tu Anjia. Believing Cheng Ying's report, Tu Anjia cruelly kills both Gongsun and the fake "Zhao orphan."

In "The Chinese Orphan," Genghis Khan, initially portrayed as a ruthless conqueror, transforms into a rational monarch. He had once vowed to conquer the world to change the perception of others after being rejected by the Han girl Idame. However, his awe at witnessing China's magnificent architecture and cultural heritage shifts his perspective. His memories and love for Idame rekindle his emotions. Upon seeing Idame again, his hatred transforms into revived old affections, and he evolves from a feudal tyrant and warlord into a tender and emotional person, expressing sincere love to Idame.

In terms of character setup and plot arrangement, "The Chinese Orphan" and "The Orphan of Zhao" differ significantly. Although the characters differ, both plays propagate Confucian ethical thought, which we will analyze in the roles of both plays.

In "The Orphan of Zhao," Cheng Ying is a tragic character. He is a humble local doctor with low social status and frail power, yet he possesses immense spiritual strength. His bravery in rescuing the Zhao orphan and his noble act of replacing the Zhao orphan with his own son demonstrate his high moral character. His struggle against Tu Anjia and his ingenious way of revealing the truth to the orphan showcase his wisdom and kindness, as well as his heroic spirit. He conforms to the inevitable demands of history, despite suffering an undeserved temporary defeat in his conflict with Tu Anjia. Cheng Ying could have handed over the Zhao orphan to save his own son, but he chose not to, and his righteous actions evoke pity, indignation, and sympathy from others.

In "The Chinese Orphan," however, the character setup changes, with Genghis Khan and the Zhang couple replacing the original characters. Zhang Ti is a minister of the Southern Song Dynasty, and his wife Idame was once admired by Genghis Khan. In this play, the Zhang couple's task is not to protect a minister's child, but to safeguard the orphan of the Southern Song Dynasty. Unlike "The Orphan of Zhao," Idame, Zhang Ti's wife, is unwilling to sacrifice her own child and reveals the truth to Genghis Khan. The plot reaches its climax as Idame, loyal to her husband, refuses Genghis Khan's marriage proposal and is willing to sacrifice herself to protect the orphan of the Southern Song Dynasty. This displays Voltaire's admiration for Confucian 'benevolence and righteousness' and reflects the ideas of

'following the husband's lead' and 'serving the monarch.' Overall, both plays propagate Confucian ethical thought through their character portrayals.

3 Tragic Nature: The Role of Moral Edification

In "The Orphan of Zhao," Cheng Ying unhesitatingly takes the orphan from the princess and sacrifices his own child to save Zhao Wu, demonstrating his loyalty and unwavering spirit. When he eventually reveals the truth to the orphan, it also shows his wisdom. He endures twenty years, from switching the orphan to revealing the truth, embodying the adage, 'A gentleman's revenge is not too late even after ten years,' supported by his optimistic spirit and firm belief in the triumph of justice. Cheng Ying represents more the force of righteousness than just an individual character. "The Orphan of Zhao" inspires a sense of longing and a collective sense of nobility.

In contrast, in "The Chinese Orphan," Zhang Ti, like Cheng Ying, sacrifices his own child, but his wife Idame cannot bear to give up her own child and tells Genghis Khan the truth. In the end, Idame remains loyal to her husband, refuses Genghis Khan's proposal, and is willing to sacrifice herself to protect the orphan of the Southern Song Dynasty. These characters show realistic psychology in harsh conditions, presenting personal characteristics more than Hamlet's indecisiveness, Othello's impulsiveness, or Macbeth's greed.

Living in an era of the French Enlightenment, Voltaire sought to enlighten people's minds. Hence, the tragic nature between the two plays differs from the universal to the individual, emphasizing Voltaire's message to the public about self-awareness and rational thinking. "Voltaire was a follower of capitalist humanism and consciously learned from traditional Confucian culture. In 'The Chinese Orphan,' he displayed rational thought and admiration for Confucian benevolence and righteousness," reflecting the ideological conflict in Idame when surrendering her child and ultimately choosing to reveal the truth. Voltaire's over-trust in the Chinese emperor, intending to use imperial authority to resolve all conflicts for a happy ending, represents a flaw in his thinking.

4 Tragic Emotions: Variations of Order and Freedom

"The Orphan of Zhao" displays a unity of diversity, integrating elements of tragedy and comedy, reflecting the primary emotional expression of classical Chinese tragedy. The play includes the sorrow of Zhao Dun being framed and the joy of being rescued, the hatred of Tu Anjia towards the Zhao family, and the joy of the orphan finally clearing his family's name. This comprehensive use indicates that balancing happiness and sorrow is a key feature. The comic segments in the play also fully show Tu Anjia's brutality and

satirize social reality, injecting comedic elements into the tense tragic atmosphere. The interplay of happiness and sadness in the play makes the tragedy more subtle and profound.

In "The Chinese Orphan," Zhang Ti sacrifices his own child to save the orphan, while his wife Idame cannot bear to send her own child to death and pleads with Genghis Khan. After learning the truth, Genghis Khan agrees to pardon them, offering to marry Idame as a condition. However, Idame, loyal to her husband, would rather die than consent. Ultimately, Genghis Khan is moved by the loyalty and sacrificial spirit of the Zhang couple, decides to pardon them, treats the orphans of the former dynasty kindly, and asks Zhang Ti to stay in the palace to spread the advanced civilization of the Chinese nation. This story displays the loyalty and noble qualities of the characters, showing Genghis Khan's transformation and appreciation for Chinese culture.

It is evident that compared to the tragic emotions in "The Orphan of Zhao," "The Chinese Orphan" continues the intermingling of tragic and comic emotions. However, "The Chinese Orphan" differs from "The Orphan of Zhao" in terms of depth and rhythm. Idame, in her dilemma, is able to make a rational and free choice. In the traditional Chinese moral concept, any tragic sacrifices for the so-called 'greater good' are acceptable and even strongly supported, as advocated by Chinese ethics. However, from a Western cultural perspective, such acts are seen as irrational and inhumane. Therefore, in "The Chinese Orphan," when a mother faces the imminent danger of her own son, any duty to the state is secondary to maternal love. Ultimately, her inability to bear the pain of losing her son leads her to reveal the truth, a natural and fitting decision.

5 Tragic Conflict: Driven by Enlightenment Thought

In Ji Jun Xiang's "The Orphan of Zhao," the military officer Tu Anjia is depicted as a proud, cunning, and brutal character, while the Zhao family is portrayed as loyal ministers serving the country. Due to conflicts between civil and military officials, Tu Anjia devises schemes to eliminate the loyal and monopolize power in the court. However, people like Gongsun Chujiu, seeing the righteousness of the Zhao family, step forward to protect the orphan, forming an irreconcilable conflict that constitutes the central opposition in the play of framing and counter-framing, loyalty and treachery. When adapting the play, Voltaire, admiring Chinese civilization, transformed the "civil-military discord" in "The Orphan of Zhao" into a struggle between two nations, a conflict between two civilizations. Although he retained the "search for and rescue of the orphan" plot from "The Orphan of Zhao," the connotations of the conflicts shown in the play are entirely different. In "The Chinese Orphan," Tu Anjia searches the entire city for orphans to leave no survivors, and as the sole descendant of the Zhao

family, the Zhao orphan is born with the deep hatred of over three hundred innocently killed family members. For the doctor Cheng Ying, saving and raising the orphan is to preserve the last bloodline of the Zhao family, allowing him to grow up and take revenge against the traitor, clearing the Zhao family's name.

However, in "The Chinese Orphan," the orphan is the son of the former emperor of the Southern Song Dynasty, bearing the glory and revival of the nation, symbolizing the entire Southern Song Dynasty. Genghis Khan, as a barbarian, disdainful of the culture and virtue revered by the Han people, is filled with hatred and determined to completely destroy the Song Dynasty, leaving no obstacles. He also attempts to control the minds of the people through force, conquering not only the country but also largely trying to change the culture, denigrating the traditional culture and civilization of the Han nationality. The conflict in the play shifts from "treachery" versus "loyalty" to "love" versus "hatred," reflecting the contradictions of conquest and anti-conquest, education and anti-education.

In this adaptation, the character of Tu Anjia represents the forces of conquest and malice. He embodies a barbaric civilization, trying to rule and destroy the traditional culture and civilization of the Han people through force. He longs for revenge, intending to completely destroy the Song Dynasty and control the minds and consciousness of the people through military power. In contrast, the Zhang couple, playing the roles of love and justice, represent the traditional values of Chinese civilization, adhering to respect for ethics, morals, and family. They bear the responsibility of protecting the orphan of the Southern Song Dynasty, preserving the nation's honor, and reviving the great cause. The Zhang couple are willing to sacrifice their own child, protect the Zhao orphan, and remain loyal to the Southern Song Dynasty. By transforming these character settings and plotlines into a conflict between two nations, Voltaire emphasizes the opposition and interaction between civilizations. Through this adaptation, a primitive natural one, thus transforming the main dramatic conflict into a moral and barbaric national conflict. Evidently, the burden borne by the orphan in "The Chinese Orphan" is greater than that in "The Orphan of Zhao." Voltaire sought to express his will through his creation and adaptation, influencing more French people to embrace benevolence, wisdom, rationality, and freedom. He aimed to break the shackles of a corrupt old system through the spread of cultural thought, making the dramatic conflict in "The Chinese Orphan" serve the transmission and impact of Enlightenment thought. The clash and collision between the two cultures could inspire the public to rebuild a new political system and social order in France.

6 Tragic Theme: Cultural Migration and Tranheenhances the cultural conflict and significance of the play.

Overall, "The Chinese Orphan" and "The Orphan of Zhao" differ in character setup and plot arrangement, but both convey the propagation of Confucian ethical thought. The plays demonstrate different conflicts and confrontations between civilizations through the portrayal of contrasting relationships, exploring themes of love, justice, loyalty, malice, and conquest. Voltaire believed that a rational civilized society was superior to sformation

The tragic conflict and resolution in "The Chinese Orphan" differ markedly from "The Orphan of Zhao." The play presents a compact and unique tragic plot, showcasing both the terror of cavalry warfare and the warmth of love. In the tragic resolution, Genghis Khan suddenly awakens and repents, demonstrating the triumph of moral spirit over barbaric violence. This bloodless and deathless ending brings about a coordination and unification of two opposing forces, creating a sense of tragic beauty. Voltaire inherited the traditional concepts of European tragedy, creatively mimicking the contradictions, sufferings, confusions, and struggles experienced by ancient tragic heroes in the conclusion. He also followed the aesthetic principles of classical tragedy, presenting the victory of reason through the conflict between civilization and barbarism, offering the audience emotional catharsis and aesthetic pleasure. Such an ending presents a harmonious unity, transforming the pain and struggle in the tragic conflict into the audience's emotional purification and aesthetic experience. Through Voltaire's creative adaptation, he successfully combined Chinese culture with the European tradition of tragedy, creating a unique and memorable tragic work, "The Chinese Orphan."

The transformation of the protagonist Genghis Khan's character in "The Chinese Orphan" deviates the tragedy from the original theme of "The Orphan of Zhao." The original play highlighted the life-and-death struggle between justice and evil, celebrating the invincibility of righteousness. In contrast, "The Chinese Orphan," through the transformation of Genghis Khan's character, emphasizes the conflict between love and reason, praising the immense power of morality in reason. As a barbaric ruler, Genghis Khan's past contempt for Han culture is reversed in the play through a process of remorse and awakening, ultimately embracing the power of love and demonstrating a moral transformation. This shift highlights the importance of reason and morality in the play, emphasizing their victory and strength. Thus, "The Chinese Orphan" focuses on exploring the contradiction between love and reason, emphasizing the power of morality in reason, differing from the original "The Orphan of Zhao," which emphasized the struggle between justice and evil. The transformation of

Genghis Khan's character presents a new thematic and conceptual representation in the play, expressing praise for the power of moral forces and human redemption.

During the European Enlightenment, cultural elites like Voltaire desperately sought a higher level of intellectual and cultural thought to break free from the shackles of the old regime, and distant China became a source many turned to. Both "The Orphan of Zhao" and "The Chinese Orphan" affirm Confucian thought, but while "The Orphan of Zhao" focuses more on its promotion, "The Chinese Orphan" does not emphasize Confucian moral views to the same extent. In "The Chinese Orphan," Voltaire creates a unique character in Idame, who is unwilling to sacrifice the orphan, her own child, or submit herself to preserve her integrity. Voltaire invests in her the qualities of rationality, maternal love, and chastity, reflecting his emphasis on natural personal emotions. However, he is also unable to accept sacrificing the highest interests of the state, and Idame's choice ultimately provides Voltaire with a balance. Genghis Khan eventually emerges as a wise and benevolent monarch, forgiving everyone, exemplifying Voltaire's ideal of freedom and equality under monarchy. "The Orphan of Zhao" unfolds its plot around the discord between civil and military officials in the court — the generational feud between the Zhao family and the treacherous Tu Anjia, with the orphan of Zhao eventually avenging the blood debt. The play is imbued with a strong satirical undertone of setting one's own trap, making the tragedy uniquely Chinese in character. The conclusion showcases violent revenge against evil, affirming Chinese traditional spiritual and aesthetic beliefs of karmic retribution. Voltaire's adaptation of "The Chinese Orphan" creates a tense atmosphere in the storyline, making the readers fear for the Zhang couple. However, the story takes a sudden turn as the barbaric Genghis Khan is moved by the couple's fidelity to love and their dedication to the revival of the nation. The play ends with a grand resolution, combining contradictions, conflicts, and the interplay of emotions among characters. This ending displays the theme of morality triumphing over barbarism, deeply influenced by the Confucian concept of 'benevolence,' emphasizing reconciliation, prioritizing culture and virtue, and asserting that rational justice will replace barbarism, and progress will overcome ignorance. Overall, "The Orphan of Zhao" advocates 'encouraging goodness and punishing evil,' using conflict to showcase the glory of virtue; whereas "The Chinese Orphan" emphasizes 'integrating evil and promoting goodness,' using reconciliation and compromise to illuminate the future with unmatched power, guiding people towards benevolent direction. Voltaire's adaptation reflects his admiration for the Confucian concept of 'loving others' and hopes his work will positively impact the French people, integrating into their actions and thoughts, demonstrating the immense power of virtue.

"The Orphan of Zhao" and Voltaire's "The Chinese Orphan" significantly differ in their plot and ideological content. "The Orphan of Zhao" centers on the conflict

between loyalty and human feelings, promoting Confucian morality through the protagonist's sacrificial act. Voltaire's adaptation of "The Chinese Orphan" shifts the tragic conflict to a secondary role. Genghis Khan resolves the conflict, forgiving everyone, reflecting Voltaire's ideals of freedom and equality. The differences in content between the two works lead to distinct ideological implications. "The Orphan of Zhao" reflects the struggle between loyalty and treachery within the feudal ruling class, while "The Chinese Orphan" delves into the internal conflict of emotions and reason in the protagonist, emphasizing the power of reason and morality. Voltaire viewed Chinese culture as a carrier of Enlightenment ideals, combining it with Western rationality and humanitarianism. In "The Chinese Orphan," the element of love is enhanced, with Genghis Khan's attitude towards Idame more akin to a Western knight, while Idame shows bravery and sacrificial spirit uncommon in traditional female characters. These changes reflect Voltaire's misinterpretation and imagination of Chinese culture. Thus, the transformation from "The Orphan of Zhao" to "The Chinese Orphan" is not accidental but reflects the inevitable trend of cultural transmission, exchange, and even development within cultures themselves. The process of cultural exchange involves proximity, communication, collision, conflict, and integration. Through tracing "The Orphan of Zhao" and "The Chinese Orphan," we see the influence of traditional Chinese culture on French Enlightenment culture and contemplate the changes and trends of Chinese culture in its dissemination. Cultural exchange is a process of individual psychological maturation, and it is believed that Chinese culture will continue to improve and lead globally under this trend. Maintaining an open, inclusive, and respectful attitude is crucial for promoting cultural diversity and shared progress.

7 Conclusion

"The Orphan of Zhao" emphasizes the power of struggle and justice, presenting a violent revenge ending that manifests the traditional spiritual civilization of 'good is rewarded with good, and evil with evil.' In contrast, Voltaire's "The Chinese Orphan" highlights reconciliation and the triumph of morality, prioritizing culture and virtue. It expresses Confucian ideas of benevolence, emphasizing the power of reason and justice over barbarism, guiding people towards a benevolent direction. Voltaire's adaptation of "The Orphan of Zhao" reflects his admiration for Confucian thought, hoping to bring a positive influence to the French people with his work and demonstrate the immense power of virtue. Simultaneously, he also perfectly reshaped the great spiritual civilization of the Chinese nation, embodying his ideal spiritual world.

From "The Orphan of Zhao" to "The Chinese Orphan," we neither deny the significance of Chinese culture nor the value of Western civilization. The decay of monarchy clearly hindered national progress, which is evident. The

emergence of concepts like freedom of speech, equality, and democracy under an autocratic system seems paradoxical. In contrast, we can scrutinize Western enlightenment ideals such as "equality, freedom, fraternity," which, despite being repeatedly reaffirmed, have inherent limitations that cannot be overlooked. Even today, these concepts remain goals to be pursued rather than realities. Through constructing an "ideal state," Voltaire infused the ideas of "freedom, equality, fraternity," and "natural human rights" into his admiration for China, satirizing the declining monarchy and corrupt church. What the moral roots of the Chinese nation are and whether the monarch is wise may not be so important to Voltaire; he was merely seeking a tangible and touchable model for France to emulate. Today, we have no reason to use Voltaire's arguments to prove how excellent our culture once was. We need to soberly recognize our civilization and rationally critique and choose when facing foreign cultures.

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