



Research on the Ghost Revenge Narrative of “Er Pai” in a Cross-cultural Perspective

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Abstract

“Er Pai” is the collective title of the collection of classical Chinese short stories *Amazing Tales-First Series* and *Amazing Tales-Second Series* compiled by Ling Mengchu in the Ming Dynasty of China. It is the first collection of classical Chinese short stories independently created by literati in China and holds significant importance in the history of ancient Chinese literature. Among them, the thematic narrative of “ghost revenge” is particularly significant for research. It not only carries profound cultural connotations but also vividly expresses the admonitory thought that “doing good deeds ultimately benefits oneself.” By analyzing the narratives of ghost revenge in “Er Pai”, the literary significance of enhancing the tragic color and deepening the characters’ images, as well as its influence on the “towards goodness” thought of the people in society at that time, can be revealed. It can also be compared with the same-theme narratives in Western literary works such as *Hamlet* and *The Overcoat* from a cross-cultural perspective, showing the influence of different cultural backgrounds on the creation of ghost revenge narratives. The theme of ghost revenge has important literary value and educational function in both Chinese and foreign literature, and researchers should also conduct modern thinking on this theme from the perspective of the current era.

Keywords

“Er Pai”; Ghost Revenge; *Hamlet*; *The Overcoat*

Introduction

In the current era of increasingly prosperous global cultural exchanges, the importance of cross-cultural research is becoming more and more prominent. Ancient Chinese literary works, with their profound historical connotations and rich cultural connotations, have attracted international attention. Among them, “Er Pai”, a collection of novels from ancient China that originated from the people and aimed to entertain the public, its creative materials include unofficial historical notes, hearsay novels, and social rumors at that time, and it is deeply influenced by multiple cultural factors such as politics and economy. The thematic narrative of “ghost revenge” within it vividly expresses the admonitory thought of “doing good deeds ultimately benefits oneself.”

Taking “Er Pai” as an example, this study aims to deeply explore the connotations of the narrative of ghost revenge in ancient Chinese literature, hoping to gain a glimpse into the unique concepts of death, soul, and the afterlife in traditional Chinese culture, so as to more comprehensively understand the symbolic meaning and moral concepts shown in the narrative of ghost revenge in Chinese literary works.

1. Characteristics of the Ghost Revenge Narrative in “Er Pai”

There are many themes and rich types of revenge stories in “Er Pai”. Among these works, there are a total of six

chapters involving revenge plots, and three of them depict ghost revenge, namely Chapter 14 and Chapter 19 of *Amazing Tales-First Series*, *To Steal Money*, *Yu Dajiao Does Violence to a Drunken Man*, and *To Confront the Culprit in Court*, *Yang Hua Attaches Himself to a Woman's Body* and *Li Gongzuo Ingeniously Reads a Dream*, and *Xie Xiao'e Cleverly Snares Pirates*; as well as Chapter 11 of *Amazing Tales-Second Series*, *Man Shaoqing Deserts His Benefactor Spouse*, and *Jiao Wenji Wreaks Vengeance After Death*. These three chapters correspond exactly to three types of revenge: revenge for one's own unjust death, revenge for the killing of a blood relative, and revenge for marriage and emotion. Through reading these stories, one can clearly perceive Ling Mengchu's advocacy of the concept of good and evil under the influence of traditional Chinese culture, such as "Justice is in the hearts of the people" and "Good is rewarded with good, and evil is rewarded with evil", his support for combating the dark social atmosphere of the times, and his moral criticism of the heartless behaviors after succeeding in the imperial examinations when he created the themes of ghosts' revenge.

"As the saying goes, 'Faith can move mountains.' After the aggrieved victim makes painstaking efforts and experiences a moving revenge process, when he succeeds in revenge, it can also make many onlookers and admirers obtain spiritual pleasure and satisfaction from the avenger's revenge experience" (Yu Jingtao, 2014). The ghost revenge narrative in "Er Pai", with its profound social implications and unique artistic techniques, reveals the darkness of human nature and the injustice of a society in the era. Thus, stories of ghosts successfully taking revenge are created. Behind the perfect ending of great revenge being avenged and universal celebration, many characteristics of the ghost revenge narrative can be summarized, which add a unique charm to the ghost stories in "Er Pai".

1.1 Complementary of Mercy and Law in the Revenge Process

"He who rules the people, depending upon the moral sentiment, is like the Pole-star, which keeps its place while all the other stars revolve round it" (Ku Hungming, 1989). Only by replacing severe punishment with moral education can the regime be stabilized and the hearts of the people be won. Therefore, "Xie Xiao'e's moral conduct is extraordinary, and she is pardoned according to the decree" (Ling Mengchu, 1991) is the collision of "mercy" and "law". For reasonable and just revenge for blood relatives, the imperial court does not rigidly adhere to the law but achieves "consideration of both mercy and law", which is the manifestation of Confucianism inside and law outside in the ghost revenge of "Er Pai". Similarly, in the description of the chapters *To Steal Money*, *Yu Dajiao Does Violence to a Drunken Man*, and *To Confront the Culprit in Court*, *Yang Hua Attaches Himself to a Woman's Body*, the collision of "mercy" and "law" is also shown. Since Yang Hua was killed by Yu Dajiao and the corpse has been destroyed, according to common sense, such a grievance that wants to return to the truth, is almost impossible. As a consequence, he supernaturally possesses others and uses the other person's mouth to clear his name. If the local officials only rely on the "law", they will definitely not be able to handle such a strange thing. After all, Yang Hua's physical body is dead and there is no evidence; but through "mercy", by carefully interrogating Li, the wife of Yu Deshui, they understand that it is possessed by Yang Hua's wronged soul, and thus the injustice is revealed. Combining moral governance with legal governance is not only an example of the imperial court establishing a good reputation but also the aspiration of the people for the attitude of seeking the truth. Therefore, starting from these two stories in "Er Pai", we can get a glimpse of the delicate attitude of ancient society in striving for a balance in handling the relationship between "mercy" and "law". The legal judgments of these revenge cases in the stories not only reveal the concept of harmony between reason and law advocated by Confucian legal thought but also demonstrate the profound application of moral governance in legal practice.

1.2 Strong Determination of Ghosts in Revenge

The earliest Chinese classics recording the revenge of wronged souls can be traced back to the pre-Qin period. In the Yuan Dynasty, the famous playwright Guan Hanqing created the highly representative ghost revenge story in the history of ancient Chinese literature—*The Injustice to Dou E That Moved Heaven and Earth*. This work makes Dou E's image synonymous with "injustice". Similar to Xie Xiao'e's father and husband in "Er Pai", Dou E also starts her revenge through the way of appearing in the dreams of her blood relatives and finally redresses her injustice. However, Dou E's image is not only limited to the role of a ghost in a dream. She also has something in common with Yang Hua. Both of them confront the culprit or the authorities in the courtroom and finally succeed in clearing their names. In fact, before Dou E died unjustly, she once swore that if she was wronged, "the floating clouds would shade me, and the sad wind would swirl for me. I would clearly write down my three vows" (Guan Hanqing, 2020). After her death, her blood splashed on the white silk, it snowed in June, and there was a severe drought for three

years, which actually came true one by one. These miracles have already shown Dou E's injustice. Why did she still appear to her father in the end and ask him to redress her injustice? The fact that she wants to take revenge, even to the extent of becoming a vengeful ghost, shows Dou E's strong determination to seek revenge.

Similarly, by classifying the narratives of ghost revenge in "Er Pai", it can be seen that the ghosts of Xie Xiao'e's father and husband indirectly sent messages in dreams to seek revenge through their blood relatives; whereas the ghosts of Yang Hua and Jiao Wenji directly participated in taking revenge, even claiming lives themselves. The former caters to reality, as the dead are powerless and unable to take revenge on their own, so they entrust it to their blood relatives; the latter is more idealized, suggesting that after death, the souls remain and haunt the wrongdoers. Both express the pain of the wronged souls who are unwilling to leave the world and their strong determination and desire for revenge to clear their names.

1.3 The Influence of Religious Thoughts on the Concept of Ghost Revenge

The religious elements contained in "Er Pai" play a crucial role in its enduring characteristics. Ghost revenge, as a supernatural creative theme, is also inseparably related to religion. The concept that the souls of the wronged still exist in the world after death can be traced back to ancient books such as *Zuo Zhuan* and *Mozi*. *Tai Ping Jing* ("Scriptures of the Great Peace") also emphasizes the principle that "those who do evil will be counterattacked by supernatural forces", indicating the recognition of the concept of ghost revenge in ancient Chinese Taoism.

Meanwhile, the theme of ghost revenge also contains the core of Buddhist thought. Buddhism prevailed in the Ming Dynasty. While expanding its religious influence, it also integrated the views of karma and the lingering of souls in the underworld through the collision of Buddhist and Taoist thoughts, which became the logical basis for the concept of ghost revenge.

In the narratives of ghost revenge in "Er Pai", the relationship between causes and effects is clearly corresponding. Yu Dajiao killed for money, which led to Yang Hua's return as a ghost to take revenge; Shen Chun and Shen Lan robbed and silenced others, which caused Xie Xiao'e's father and husband to send messages in dreams to seek revenge; Man Shaoqing abandoned his wife and remarried, and was haunted by Jiao Wenji's ghost to claim his life. The concept of cause and effect reflected in these stories is deeply rooted among the people, integrating Taoist and Buddhist cultures, and jointly forming the unique artistic and cultural charm of the works, making them endure through the ages.

2. Comparison of Ghost Revenge Narratives in "Er Pai" and Foreign Literary Works

As a common creative theme, "ghost revenge" is not only embodied in previous works in China but also has similar expressions in foreign literary works. Shakespeare's work *Hamlet* was created at a similar time as "Er Pai", representing different moral concepts under the cultural backgrounds of the East and the West in the same era. Nikolai Gogol's work *The Overcoat* is also similar to "Er Pai" in that they both contain satire on the injustice of the social background at that time. Therefore, starting from the "ghost revenge" narrative, comparing "Er Pai" with foreign literary works can provide a glimpse of the significance and cultural connotations of literary creation under different social backgrounds.

2.1 Comparison of the Causes of Ghosts' Deaths in "Er Pai", *Hamlet* and *The Overcoat*

Hamlet, one of Shakespeare's famous "Four Great Tragedies", also contains scenes of ghostly apparitions. One night, the ghost of the old King Hamlet appeared and told Hamlet the truth that he wanted revenge: "Most people think that when I was sleeping in the garden, a snake came and bit me to death. This fictional cause of death has deceived the whole country of Denmark. In my sleep, I was robbed of my life, my crown, and my queen by a brother at the same time" (Shakespeare, 2020). Thus, the motive of Hamlet's uncle Claudius' crime is revealed. That is, the old king was poisoned to death by his own brother Claudius, and all this was because Claudius wanted to usurp the throne and possess his sister-in-law.

The plot of *Hamlet* is similar to the revenge of Xie Xiao'e in "Er Pai" in that the ghosts' resentment cannot be calmed and they tell their blood relatives to avenge them. However, the forms of ghosts' appearances in "Er Pai" and *Hamlet* are different. One is through a ghost's dream visit, and the other is the manifestation of a wronged soul; one is for the sake of money, and the other is for the sake of power. Money and power are, in most cases, two complementary things and are both desired by people. Although these stories do not occur in the same social background

and are not written by the same person, the human weaknesses and greedy natures revealed in them are the same. This also indirectly shows that whether in the East or the West, the impulse to commit sins due to greed fundamentally reflects basic human nature.

In addition, the realistic short story *The Overcoat* by the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol also depicts the image of Akaky Akakievich, a “little man”, who turns into a fierce ghost that snatches various overcoats from people after his death. It reflects the dark reality of the then-Russian society where bureaucracy was rampant, ordinary people had a low social status, and grievances were difficult to resolve fairly.

It is not hard to notice that Akaky Akakievich lost focus and hope in life and finally fell into deep melancholy until the end of his life. This ending is similar to that of Jiao Wenji in “Er Pai”. As a woman with a low status in the feudal society, she died of depression due to Man Shaoqing’s heartlessness and betrayal. From the causes of death of these two characters, it can be seen that people with a low social status under feudal rule often died of illness in pain after losing their spiritual support. This not only reveals the fragility of individual destinies under the dark social background but also reflects people’s indifference and neglect towards the underclass.

2.2 Comparison of the Revenge Ways of Ghosts in “Er Pai”, *Hamlet* and *The Overcoat*

In *Hamlet*, the old king’s wrongs are redressed through Hamlet’s revenge, and the realization of this process is inseparable from Hamlet’s will for revenge. In terms of the revenge way, *Hamlet* is similar to *Li Gongzuo Ingeniously Reads a Dream*, and *Xie Xiao’e Cleverly Snares Pirates* in that both are stories in which blood relatives help ghosts to take revenge. However, the difference lies in the tragic outcome of Hamlet’s revenge. In order to uphold justice and pursue the truth, although Hamlet killed Claudius, he was unfortunately killed and paid with his own life; while Xie Xiao’e, although she redressed the injustices for her father and husband and killed Shen Lan, because of the titles of “murderers of her father” of Shen Lan and Shen Chun, disregarded the ancient Chinese legal principle of “a murderer should pay with their life” and was granted a special pardon. This reflects the “humanistic” spirit of “Er Pai” and expresses the author Ling Mengchu’s call for humanism. At the same time, from a moral perspective, the setting of successful revenge is reasonable and reflects the spiritual core of yearning for justice and punishing evil, and promoting good.

In *The Overcoat*, Akaky Akakievich takes revenge for himself by turning into a resentful ghost and snatching others’ overcoats, angrily expressing his dissatisfaction and grudges. In terms of the way of revenge, both Akaky Akakievich and Jiao Wenji adopt the visible way and take revenge through actions and body movements. Akaky Akakievich is a rebel. He doesn’t take people’s lives but only expresses his helplessness and pain of having nowhere to redress his grievances. While Jiao Wenji comes specifically to punish Man Shaoqing for his perfidious behavior. She waits for the right moment and takes Man Shaoqing’s life. The endings of ghost revenge are often successful. It highlights the awakening consciousness of individuals, breaks the feudal ethical code, and stirs up the world’s pity for the dark society and the underclass as well as their reflection.

3. The Value and Function of the Theme of “Ghost Revenge” in Chinese and Foreign Literary Works

The enduring theme of “ghost revenge,” as a means to enrich the plot and meaning of literary works, is still constantly used in the field of literary creation today and has created many works with artistic characteristics and literary value. Ghost revenge, as a supernatural element recognized by society or culture at that time, necessarily possesses its unique charm. Therefore, an in-depth exploration of the value of the theme of “ghost revenge” in literary creation is of great significance for a deep understanding of the core of the work.

3.1 The Literary Value of the Theme of “Ghost Revenge”

The theme of “ghost revenge” adds a mysterious color to literary works, builds a bridge between the author and the reader to reach the supernatural world, stimulates the readers’ infinite imagination of the unknown world and unknown situations, and increases the reading interest. Through the discussion of the theme of “ghost revenge,” people can better understand the social significance and thematic inspiration of literary works.

Through the analysis of the narrative of the theme of ghost revenge in “Er Pai”, *Hamlet*, and *The Overcoat*, it can be seen that the ways and reasons for ghost revenge in these stories are all different. There are those who possess others to complain, those who tell their sorrows in dreams, and those who transform into shapes; there are those who

are killed for money and power. The setting of the plot of Ghost Revenge can bring a strong emotional impact on readers and make the progression of the story take on a tragic tone. For example, in “Er Pai”, Yang Hua’s wronged soul possessed the body of Yu Deshui’s wife, making the readers feel the regret that he could not avenge himself because of the separation of life and death, and the injustice and indignation of his unjust death, thus experiencing Yang Hua’s helplessness and sorrow of being at the bottom of society and being killed for money. The old king in *Hamlet* and Akaky Akakievich in *The Overcoat* are also the same. The shaping of these ghost images and the setting of the plot of ghost revenge can clearly and vividly reveal the pitifulness of these wronged souls and make the tragic color of the whole story more intense.

3.2 The Educational Function of the Theme of “Ghost Revenge”

The theme of “ghost revenge” can serve to guide people in contemplating the distinction between good and evil. In this kind of thematic narrative, there are often obvious good and evil sides. The narrative of ghost revenge emphasizes the importance of justice and doing good. By depicting the sufferings and wrongs of the wronged, and their form of revenge, it warns the world that people should be just and aboveboard and must not harm others because of their own desires. This view is conducive to guiding the thoughts and impulses of the people in a positive direction and reconstructing the dark and greedy social atmosphere.

The description of the theme of “ghost revenge” in *Hamlet* shows the complexity and multi-faceted nature of human nature and guides the audience to reflect on social reality. In *Hamlet*, the appearance of the ghost leads the audience to think about the relationship between maintaining justice, morality, and revenge and reflects on how to maintain and balance justice and morality in the turbulent and complex social reality. In the process of the development of the plot, ghost revenge can make the audience understand that when pursuing personal goals, they should not ignore the truth of justice and morality. This guides the audience to think about the relationship between the desire for power and sin. The protagonist commits the sin of murder because of the desire for power, making the audience realize that the excessive pursuit of power will not only make oneself bear the sin but also lead to destruction, thus educating the audience to adhere to the moral bottom line and not violate the rights of others while pursuing their own interests.

3.3 Modern Thinking on the Theme of “Ghost Revenge”

Although the current era differs greatly from the ancient times, the theme of “ghost revenge” still holds considerable practical significance. In modern times, ghosts are no longer used to reveal truths, and people’s scientific understanding has caused them to doubt such supernatural elements. However, the image of ghosts has consistently been presented in various artistic works. Psychologically, people still have a sense of fear or mystery about the unknown element of ghosts and the world after death. It often warns people not to be unscrupulous and even commit irreversible big mistakes because of their certain desires. At present, unbalanced and unfair events still occur in society. Therefore, the narrative of ghost revenge also encourages people to adhere to the pursuit of justice and fairness. The revenge stories of the resentful ghosts of vulnerable groups, it can make people pay more attention to and care about the people at the bottom of society.

In conclusion, the stories with the theme of “ghost revenge” still have the value of research and thinking in the current era. It reminds people to pay attention to justice, draw beneficial ideas from it, and maintain active and dynamic thinking. Through the research and analysis of the ideological core expressed by the theme of ghost revenge, people can have a clearer understanding of society and obtain positive and correct inspiration from it.

4. Conclusion

The literary image of “revenge ghost” occupies a very important position in the literary field, and its influence cannot be overlooked. Taking “Er Pai” as the textual basis, we can observe its unique artistic charm and cultural connotations of the image of a revenge ghost rooted in Chinese culture, which stems from the political system and religious thought. When compared with the same-type narratives in *Hamlet* and *The Overcoat*, it can also show the causal relationship and cultural connotations between the similar backgrounds, similar themes, or different styles of the ghost image shaping in different cultural backgrounds and different literary forms.

In addition, the literary functions, educational values, and prospects of the narrative of ghost revenge in Chinese and foreign literary works have been summarized. Whether in literary creation, mass education, or the attention and

discussion of current society, every appearance of the narrative of ghost revenge in literary works holds an indelible precious value.

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