

An Analysis and Comparison of Sufferings in *The Book of Job* and *Tianwen**

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Both the ancient Israel classic *The Book of Job* and *Asking Heaven* written by Qu Yuan from the state of Chu in the Warring States Period of China are composed of questions, conveying the characters' queries and doubts about the universe, human affairs, ethics, etc. This paper analyzes and compares the theme of suffering reflected in the two classics by generalizing similar features of suffering caused by physical loss, broken relationship and spiritual trauma, and revealing several perspectives of differences as well. This research enriches the ideological studies of this area, contributing for a more profound knowledge of suffering from the perspective of cultural communication, as suffering is not a national but universal challenge.

Keywords: *The Book of Job*, *Asking Heaven*, Qu Yuan, suffering

Introduction

Suffering has been an eternal theme for all human beings, indecipherable but inseparable from human lives. The Hebrew classic *The Book of Job* depicts the righteous man Job's sufferings and raises the question of why the righteous suffer. Ancient Chinese have similar stories, and one of the most famous ones is poet Qu Yuan from the Pre-Qin dynasty who suffers and asks similar questions in his poem *Tianwen* (which literally means *Asking Heaven*). The author of this paper is inspired by these similar lived experiences to ask as well what suffering is and believes that a cross-cultural comparison would bring a more complete picture of it. In addition, other cultures serve as mirrors to help Chinese develop a critical view and know themselves better (Li, 2020).

In China, research on *The Book of Job* has not been as much fruitful as in the Western world. Here the related work could be generalized into three categories: explanation from a religious perspective (Zhang, 2008), textual analysis (Hao, 2005), and literary illustration (Hou, 2015). Within the latest 100 years, Chinese researchers have explored the poem of *Tianwen* from various aspects, such as proof of its author and time, explanation of its connotation, textual structure, and archaeological studies (Zhou, 2019). In the past two decades, by adopting emerging approaches and theories, researchers started to explore its spiritual values, some of which are conducted by comparing *Tianwen* and *The Book of Job* (Zhong, 1993; 1994; Han, 1996). However, in these researches, there shows less concern about the ultimate care for individual lives (Wang, 2017). That is,

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the psychological and spiritual experiences individuals undergo in their sufferings need to be illustrated in more depth so as to gain a better understanding of this topic.

This paper tries to figure out such subjective responses of the two characters when they suffer outwardly from this physical world, aiming to contribute to the knowledge of sufferings. Specifically, the author first clarifies the definition and perspectives of sufferings this paper involves, and then presents an analysis and comparison of these two characters' sufferings.

On Human Sufferings

Lain Wilkinson (2005) defined human suffering as experiences of death, loss, helplessness, desperation and dissimulation, including emotions, such as depression, anxiety, guilt, shame, tiredness, and sadness. Wilkinson (2005) made a difference between the concepts of pain and suffering, in which he says pain refers to physical sensation while suffering refers to subjective response to pain. Wilkinson's definition of suffering is adopted in this paper in the analysis of Job and Qu Yuan's miseries.

Both *The Book of Job* and *Tianwen* depict individuals' experience of sufferings through their doubts and questions. We find similar psychological and spiritual conditions when facing loss and damage in life despite of cultural, geological and experiential differences. The author believes that loss and damage are the feelings of insecurity and dissatisfaction an individual feels when their needs are not met. Psychologist Abraham Harold Maslow (1908-1970) in his *theory of Hierarchy of Needs* claims that there are five different human needs ranging from the lowest to the highest levels, including physiological needs, the needs of safety, the needs of belonging and love, the needs of esteem and self-actualization, and human beings are motivated and advance on these needs (Maslow, 1987). However, when these needs are not satisfied, individuals feel suffered. Based on this theory and the suffering depicted in *The Book of Job* and *Tianwen*, the author tentatively categorizes three kinds of human needs. The first, also the lowest level of human needs, refers to physical needs, such as physiological and safety needs, the second and higher level refers to social needs like the needs for care and respect in human relationships, and the third and highest level refers to the need of self-realization, especially on the spiritual level. When these needs are not met, negative subjective responses or feelings of sufferings arise. The author thus classifies three perspectives of sufferings. The loss and damage of health, possession, fame and position are sorted into the category of *physical loss*, the pain resulting from lack of care and respect into *broken relations*, and when the needs in spiritual or ideological areas are not met; the pain belongs to the category of *mental trauma*. This paper tries to analyze Job and Qu Yuan's sufferings from these three perspectives.

Job's Suffering

The righteous man Job enjoys abundant wealth and children. Under the permission of God, Satan tests Job's faith in God by raping successively away his wealth, children and health. Job could not understand why these things happen on him and questions God why the righteousness has to suffer. He debates with his three friends in turn who think Job suffers because he has sinned, while Job insists on his innocence. At the end of the dialogues, God talks to Job and Job humbles himself in the presence of God and finds his innocence about suffering. Then, God changes Job's circumstances and blesses him more than before.

If human beings have the duality of physical and spiritual attributes, nearly half of the sufferings are from physical loss. Job's physical loss includes loss of possession and health. Job, living in the land of Uz, was very

rich and owned “seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants” (Job 1:3).¹ The first challenge for Job was his wealth being taken away by the Sabeans and all of his children dead. Facing this sudden loss, Job tore off his robe and shaved his hair. The reason why physical loss brings pain for human is probably due to human instinct of craving for material and physical existence, and overreaction in this crave usually brings pain and disaster. At this moment, Job still had the right attitude for suffering, saying that “the LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised” (Job 1:21). Thus, due to his faith in God, the loss of possession didn’t destroy his life. Next, Job lost his health and was afflicted with painful sores all over. Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes (Job 2:8). His body was clothed with worms and scabs, his skin broken and festering (Job 7:5). He could not even breathe (Job 9:18) and had restless days and nights, frightening dreams (Job 7:4-14), offensive breath and nothing left but skin and bones (Job 19:17-20). Because of this health decline, Job felt abandoned by his wife, relatives and friends (Job 7:5; 19:13-20). That is why he sat in the ashes for seven days and nights, not talking to anyone and even cursing his birthday. There are 29 chapters in *The Book of Job* depicting this pain (Job 3-31). One thing for sure is that Job, even in this great pain, staying conscious, defends himself by bravely asking questions to God and tries to seek the reasons behind his suffering. Even when his wife told him to reject God and die, Job rebuked her and did not sin by his mouth (Job 2:9-10). We can see that this righteous man is not destroyed by his physical loss.

Besides physical loss, Job suffers from broken relations between Job and people around him as well as between Job and God. The broken human relations include not only his loss of children, but also that his wife and friends rebuke and reject him for his physical loss, which dumps him into a more miserably solitary circumstance. The broken relation between Job and God is depicted mainly through Job’s confusion that he could not understand why God permits suffering and why righteous people suffer. This confusion tears apart his previous intimacy with God and puts him into a deep valley of pain. Love, care and sharing would lessen Job’s pain, but at this very moment, the rejection he feels from God and people inevitably worsen his misery from physical loss.

The third level of suffering for Job is mental trauma. American psychologist Leon Festinger (1919-1989) claims in his *Cognitive Dissonance Theory* that human beings tend to keep their internal concepts and external circumstances consistent, and inconsistency between the two is likely to let them undergo a painful experience of being deprived and threatened (Ye, 2000). The more they feel deprived and threatened, the more rebellious they will become (Ye, 2000). Professor Elliott Alonson from the University of Texas adds a term “self-concept” into the *Cognitive Dissonance Theory*, and explains that cognitive dissonance refers to the inconsistency between one’s concepts of this world and the real circumstances, which is likely to bring a psychological disorder or conceptual displacement (Ye, 2000). This inconsistency for Job happens, because for ancient Jews, sufferings and disasters are punishments from God and the righteous will not suffer. This concept is embedded in Job. He believes that he is a righteous man, so he will not suffer. But when his miserable circumstance does come and conflicts with his previous concepts, Job suffers greatly from a mental dilemma and trauma. He asked God why this happens and even hated his life (Job 7:20). Job’s three friends were embedded as well with this concept that the righteous will not suffer. That is why when Job claimed that he did

¹ All Biblical scriptures in this paper are cited from *the Book of Job in Holy Bible* (New International Version) published in 2007 by Chinese Christian Association. Following the international convention, *the book of Job* is abbreviated in in-text citation as Job. For example, Job 1: 3 refers to chapter 1 and verse 3.

not sin, his friends debated fiercely with him instead of showing pity. They insisted that the righteous would never be destroyed and only the evil would reap the trouble of what they had sowed (Job 4:7-8). After three turns of debates, the young man Elihu showed and pointed out that the righteous could also suffer probably from God's disciplines, so did Job and he needed to accept everything. All of his friends were very eloquent and expressive, but Job still reserved himself until God revealed to Job the limit of human cognition and mystery of suffering. Finally, when Job humbled himself in the presence of God's sovereignty, his suffering was with meaning, and he said that God knew his way and after he was tested, he would become like pure gold (Job 23:10).

Qu Yuan's Suffering

The poet Qu Yuan was born in a royal family in the state of Chu during the Warring State period of China, being well-educated and enjoying early success. The king then in the state of Chu was Huai Wang. Qu Yuan gained the king's trust and was offered the position of Zuotu (prime minister) in the government. Qu Yuan upheld the political dream of Mei Zheng (Ideal Politics), carrying out political reform at home and uniting the state of Qi against the state of Qin. When his political practice encountered slanders from Prime Minister Jinshang and prince Zilan, he was exiled by the angry king. Though researchers have been arguing about the number of times and the accurate periods of his exiles, most agree that *Tianwen* was written after Qu Yuan was expelled (Zhong, 1993). In exile, this poet felt that his life was like falling down into a deep valley and his firmly held beliefs were shattered. While wandering in the wilderness, he looked up to heaven, cried bitterly and wrote down this poem. In the poem, he asked heaven and earth, inquiring about various worldly affairs, the origin of the universe, the standards of social development, the pursuit of human ethics and the ultimate purpose of human lives. Lu Xun once said in his work *Mo Luo Shi Li Shuo* (On the Power of the Satanical School of Poetry) that Qu Yuan fought bravely against the darkness of this world, pursued for a purified life, reflected on affairs from the origin of this universe to the most tiny issue of this world and expressed himself more boldly than any previous generation (Chen, 2008). Behind the poet's questions, we could feel his doubts and bitterness through his persistence for righteousness in this fallen world.

First, on the level of *physical loss*, though Qu Yuan did not undergo health decline, he suffered from the pain of being deprived of his political identity and the ruin of his country. Specifically, Qu Yuan lost his political right due to the slanderers. It is painful because in ancient China, most well-trained intellectuals were trained to take office and serve in the government and Qu Yuan was no exception. It is written in Sima Qian's *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian) that Qu Yuan's work was to help the king with national affairs, enact decrees, welcome guests and negotiate with the state governors, but slanders and exiles deprived him of this political right and opportunities of dedication to his king and country, which was extremely painful for him (Zhong, 1993). *Tianwen* was written under this circumstance as a reflection of this miserable experience (Wang, 2017). For instance, in this poem, Qu Yuan mentioned several times about Gun's story of flood control who was said to be king Yu's father in the very early period of Chinese history. This mythical story firstly appeared in *Shang Shu* (The Book of Documents), in which Gun was depicted as a brutal and ruthless man failing in his work of water control. However, in Qu Yuan's description, Gun seemed like a hero welcomed by his people. He asked in his poem that if Gun was not capable, then why the crowd recommended him. Instead, they let him try and encouraged him to release his worries. Also, if Gun was not capable, why did the legendary turtles submit to him and help him? Qu Yuan also asked why heaven punished Gun when he followed his own heart

and will to dedicate himself to the work of water control (Luo, 2019). It is seen that Qu Yuan could not understand why the people upheld and helped Gun if he was not qualified for this work and why king Yao punished him if he was qualified. This conflict confuses him. In his another poem of *Li Sao*, Qu Yuan seemed to give an answer, saying that Gun was exiled and died in the wilderness of mountain Yu because he was unwilling to give up his integrity facing social darkness (Luo, 2019). That is to say, Gun was capable of his work, while his integrity displeased king Yao and Yao thus rejected and punished him, which was very unrighteous in Qu Yuan's eyes. We can say that Qu Yuan's description of this tragic hero character reveals his own miserable experience after being deprived of his political identity and right. Besides the loss of political right, Qu Yuan experienced as well the pain of losing his country. As we all know that he was in this emotional struggle between the times after he was exiled and before he dropped himself in Mi Luo river. In this pain, he asked heaven questions by retelling the historical ups and downs of the three dynasties, namely Xia, Shang and Zhou. He asked why the throne of Yin Shang was turned over if this dynasty was destined by heaven, why this dynasty prospered and then perished and what sin this dynasty committed (Luo, 2019). He also asked why bad kings were put on the throne if the kings' mission was claimed by heaven and why they finally lost their thrones and country without wise suggestion and help from heaven (Luo, 2019). Qu Yuan challenged fatalism in Chinese tradition, while behind these challenges and questions, it is his unwillingness, confusion, helplessness and misery he felt when losing his land and country. He lamented that he did not know how long his nation would last with such a militarily incapable king and sighed about his desperation in exiles (Luo, 2019).

Besides the pain of physical loss, Qu Yuan also experienced the pain of broken human relations as in the case of Job. One of these broken relations was between Qu Yuan and the King Huai Wang in the state of Chu. In Qu Yuan's heart, Huai Wang, the capital city of Yin and the land of Chu were inseparable symbols of his beloved motherland. So Huai Wang was like a brotherly companion on the road to realize his political ambition which relied on a close cooperation between a wise king and his capable ministers. In many of his works, Qu Yuan expressed his loyalty and expectation to the king and mentioned many times about the promises and commitments between them, like many kings and his ministers did in the Spring and Autumn Period and in the Warring States Period of China, who were ready to die for each other. In the periods of wars and turmoils, this kind of committed relationship between men is really encouraging and empowering. For example, in his work of *Yi Wang Xi* (Recalling the past), Qu Yuan remembered that the king gave him great support at the time of political reforms and the king promised he would not punish Qu Yuan even if he was found with fault or even failed (Luo, 2019). When slanders ruined this relation and Qu Yuan was exiled, he still missed and cared about the king, constantly thinking of coming back to the king's side (Liu, 2012). In his work of *Chou Si* (*Thinking*), Qu Yuan recalled and sighed about the days when the king promised him with a lifelong commitments (Luo, 2019), which unexpectedly disappeared immediately. In his work of *Li Sao* (*Encountering Sorrow*), Qu Yuan complained that the king did not trust his loyalty but fell into the trap of slanders, and what really hurt him was not because of the separation with the king, but the king broke his promises when slanders came (Huang, 2003). In the work of *Tianwen*, Qu Yuan expressed his pain and confusion by illustrating the relations between kings and ministers from ancient myths and legends, such as Bi Gan and King Zhou in the Shang dynasty as well as Gun and King Yao in the early historical periods.

In addition, the pain of broken relations is not only shown in his relationship with King Huai, but also with the slanderers. Though Prime Minister Jinshang and prince Zilan were the ones who attacked him, Qu Yuan's

pain was not only from these attackers but disappointment with the social group these attackers represent. Qu Yuan endeavored in his whole life to pursue a noble character and the purity of life while the slanderers' behavior was like something against the gentlemen' doctrines pursued by most intellectuals and officials at that time. This inconformity between reality and his ideals of a civil society ruled by gentlemen doctrines was what really hurt Qu Yuan in his exiles. So in *Tianwen*, Qu Yuan expressed his pain by telling the stories of people with vulgar characters like Lei Kai who flattered King Zhou and took office in the government (Luo, 2019), Da Ji, the imperial concubine of King Zhou, who puzzled the king with her beauty and no ministers dared to submit honest advice to the king (Luo, 2019) and Du Ao, son of King Wen in Chu state, who took throne by killing his father (Luo, 2019).

The pain from physical loss and broken relations is much more endurable than that of mental trauma. As *the Cognitive Dissonance Theory* claims, when one's inner cognition and outer reality conflict with each other, one feels deprived and painful. For Qu Yuan, his inner cognition came from the way he was educated. For instance, he had a strong pursuit of a noble character, such as royalty to the king, a life and death commitment and other doctrines of being gentlemen from Confucianism. However, outwardly, he experienced the righteous being slandered, truth being twisted, the Tao not being practiced but utilitarianism being popular. This inconsistency between the internal concepts and external reality brought him a sense of being deprived and thus mental disorder. Under this circumstance, Qu Yuan was angry and asked heaven a series of questions: Why did wise kings, like King Yi, turn into tyrants (Luo, 2019)? Why did King Zhou become so stubborn and was not willing to accept any advice (Luo, 2019)? Is it due to destiny or human ethical weakness? Why was Qi not wounded when he fought with Yi? Why did King Yu's choose candidate Yi's throne deprived while Yu's offspring prospered (Luo, 2019)? Why did King Zhou's royal minister Bi Gan be persecuted by the king while the flattering minister Tu Kai was offered with high positions (Luo, 2019)? Why did the unrighteous Wu Guang from the state of Wu always win the state of Chu in years of wars? Why was the virtuous official Zi Wen in Chu state born with his father unknown? Why did the son of King Wen in Chu state who killed the king but enjoyed a fame of being loyal? (Luo, 2019)

A Comparison of Job and Qu Yuan's sufferings

Though Job and Qu Yuan lived in different times, spaces, cultures and circumstances, their subjective responses to sufferings possess similarities. Both of them experienced the pain of physical loss, broken relations and mental trauma. For Job, physical loss refers to the loss of health, possessions and children. Broken relations for Job include the horizontal human relations and vertical relations between God and Job. Job's mental trauma is caused by the conflict between his sufferings in reality and the concept that the righteous would not suffer, which brings confusion and helplessness. For Qu Yuan, physical loss is revealed in his loss of political rights in a life threatening period of his country, and he felt deprived of his identity, dreams and everything. Broken relations in his life include an unpleasant relation between Qu Yuan and the king as well as the conflict between Qu Yuan and the group of people with vile characters represented by the slanderers. Qu Yuan's mental trauma is primarily the disillusion he felt when the doctrines of gentlemen he earnestly pursued conflicted with the outward evil deeds. These are similar characteristics of human sufferings probably caused by similarly physical, social and mental attributes of human beings. Besides, in these similar experiences, both of them witnessed two forces of good and evil struggling with each other in their lives, and in this struggle, the force of evil sometimes or usually prevail in social reality. When this outward evil or darkness conflicts with

their inner pursuit of light and goodness, their original concept of this world becomes inconsistent with the reality, which brings them a sense of being deprived and torn apart. That is the reason Job raises questions about why the righteous suffer and Qu Yuan asks why his political dreams could not be carried out in reality and why the righteous are persecuted while the evil ones enjoy prosperity. This painful feeling is likely to undermine one's motivation and hope for life and brings a sense of disillusion, especially for the reverent Job and Qu Yuan who pursues an ideal social reality.

There are differences as well between Job and Qu Yuan's sufferings. First, Job has a dialogue with a personalized God while Qu Yuan has not. Though there is the concept of heaven in Qu Yuan's ideals, we are not sure if this heaven is a personalized God or just an object with natural attributes. Anyway, there is not a real dialogue like Job did with God (Zhong, 1994). So, Qu Yuan raised approximately 180 questions but most of them were left without answers. We just could not help reflecting if this difference results in the different fates of the two. *The Book of Job* ends with a comedy by Job's seeing God face to face, and his confusion was solved and views broadened. All what he lost before was regained and blessed even more, and the existence of a personalized God gives meaning to Job's sufferings. While for Qu Yuan, when there were no answers to his questions, he was incapable of relieving himself out of his anger and confusion in the presence of a brutal reality, and at the same time failed to find a new value system to perch himself on it, so the only way out is to end his life. Second, there is a different elaboration of the relationship between individual suffering and community destiny. In *the Book of Job*, the story is elaborated through dialogues between God and Satan, Job and each of his three friends, and the young man Elihu and God, highlighting the influences of individual interactions instead of a community destiny on one's sufferings. While in the case of Qu Yuan, community destinies seem to play a major role in one's sufferings. For instance, the destiny of a life-threatening country and a group of people with vile characters have both contributed primarily to Qu Yuan's pain and suffering. Third, though the mental trauma for both of them results from the conflicts between inner values and outer reality, different reflections are drawn on how to solve this conflict. If one's inner concepts and values are not correct, sufferings could possibly help to erase or change these self-centered concepts. For Job, the concept that the righteous would not suffer is probably one of the principal causes of his painful heart. But through Job's dialogue with God, when his experiences on human suffering are put into a broader perspective of the universe, he realizes the limit of human beings and is conscious of the mystery of sufferings. Then, his self-centered concepts that the righteous would not suffer would possibly be changed, the conflict between his inner cognition and outer reality is dissolved and he regains his peace. Qu Yuan's pursuit of an ideal world is not incorrect. On the contrary, it is one of the most glorious and noble qualities for human beings, but this pursuit seems not right in this not right reality. Qu Yuan's mental trauma raises a question for us all. That is, how to face this conflict when our inner cognition is right while the outer reality is wrong? Do we need to submit to the reality or follow our hearts and stick to our principles? If Qu Yuan chose to give himself to the darkness of reality, he would probably live a safe life. But if he did not choose to stick to his ideals and drown himself into the river, he would not become a landmark figure in Chinese ideological legacy and influence so many generations with his great contribution to the national character of China.

Conclusion

This paper explores the theme of human suffering by analyzing and comparing Job and Qu Yuan. It's found that human sufferings possess similar features possibly due to similar physical, social and mental

attributes of human beings, contributing to our understanding of what suffering is. Differences are found as well and these differences might open a door for us to understand and learn from each other the ontological and epistemological variations in cultural communication, since suffering is not a national but universal challenge for all human beings. It is hoped that more exploration from a perspective of cultural comparison could be done concerning the features, causes and significance of human suffering.

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