

# Juliet and Zhu Yingtai: A Feminist Interpretation of Eastern and Western Love Tragedies\*

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The aim of this article is to make an in-depth comparative analysis of the two classic literary images of Zhu Yingtai and Juliet from a feminist perspective. The article firstly introduces the background and significance of the study, and then, it conducts a literature review of feminist theories and the current status of domestic and international studies on the images of Zhu Yingtai and Juliet. This article focuses on the connotation of the images of the two female characters and their literary status in their respective cultural backgrounds, and analyzes the oppression and constraints they bear from a feminist perspective, and compares the courage and determination they show in rebelling against traditional concepts and pursuing free love. The images of Zhu Yingtai and Juliet not only convey the concepts of equal rights and free love, but also have far-reaching influence on the real society and literary creation.

*Keywords:* feminism, Zhu Yingtai, Juliet, image comparison

## Introduction

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and the ancient Chinese folk tale *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* are both world-renowned tragic stories that have been adapted and reinterpreted in various artistic forms. Numerous experts and scholars both domestically and internationally have analyzed these two works or their characters from diverse perspectives using a variety of research methods. Their research covers a wide range of topics, including but not limited to love, drama, archetypes, and artistic characteristics.

In these two plays, the female protagonists Zhu Yingtai and Juliet leave a profound impression on readers. Although one originates from an ancient Eastern civilization and the other from a Western society where the bourgeoisie was just emerging but feudal rule still prevailed, both of them depict the oppressive lives of women in patriarchal societies. Living in male-dominated or patriarchal feudal societies, Zhu Yingtai and Juliet lacked a sense of female identity and had virtually no voice. Yet they yearned for freedom and passionately pursued love, even at the cost of their lives.

Based on the plotlines and the words of the heroines, this paper analyzes the images and roles of the heroines in these two renowned Eastern and Western plays. It further explores the constraints imposed on women by patriarchal ideology and feudal society, examines the origins of feminist thought, the essence of female consciousness, the stark contrast—and even the opposition and conflict—between women's humanism and self-awareness and social reality. Furthermore, this paper attempts to compare the similarities and differences between

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women in Eastern and Western feudal societies regarding their pursuit of romantic freedom, individual liberation, and resistance to feudalism, from perspectives such as cultural connotations and feminist awakening.

### Theoretical Approach of the Study

The term “feminism”, which originated in 19th-century France and is also known as women’s rights or gender equality, refers to a political and social movement with a shared objective: to secure for women equal rights as the males in political, economic, personal, and social spheres, whilst at the same time criticizes unequal relationships within society and proposing solutions to advance the cause of gender equality.

Feminist literary criticism emerged in the West in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It developed alongside the rise of the women’s rights movement and constitutes a key theoretical form of feminism within the literary sphere. Centred on women, it focuses on female literary representations, women’s creative writing, and female readers. The primary task of feminist literary criticism is to engage in theoretical analysis of reading and writing. It is dedicated to unearthing and showcasing female literary classics and traditions long obscured by patriarchal culture, whilst exploring and promoting women’s unique modes of expression and writing styles.

Feminism is global, national and localised; different economic and cultural contexts give rise to distinct female discourses. The existence of these diverse female discourses enriches and diversifies feminism. However, the shared marginalised circumstances faced by women also create the possibility for a dialogue between East and West within feminism. (Li, 2000, p. 241)

A comparative analysis from a feminist perspective of the characters of Zhu Yingtai and Juliet, alongside their respective social and historical contexts, examining the oppression and constraints they experienced, and comparing the manifestations of feminism in their personalities, also constitutes a form of dialogue and exchange between Eastern and Western cultures.

### Historical Backgrounds and Female Agency

The story of Liang Zhu and Shakespeare’s tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* are set in different countries, take place in different eras, and have distinct cultural backgrounds. The former originated in the Jin Dynasty, roughly two or three hundred years ago, while the latter was written in 1595, reflecting early Renaissance Europe, a period spanning the 14th to the 16th centuries. Consequently, as the heroines of these two works inhabit entirely different nations and eras, they are inevitably shaped by their respective social environments; their thoughts, behaviours, and even personalities bear the cultural imprint of their respective times.

The ancient Chinese folk tale *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* originally existed as an oral tradition within the realm of folk literature. Having endured through many generations, it has consistently retained its vitality and freshness. Its themes and elements have been continually adapted and expressed through various artistic forms, giving rise to a vast Liang-Zhu cultural tradition that has become a significant symbol of traditional Chinese culture.

According to a stone inscription discovered on Mount Shanjuan—documented in the *Shidao Sifan Zhi*<sup>1</sup> compiled by Liang Zaiyan during the early Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE), the site was marked as “where Zhu Yingtai studied”. A more explicit record appears in the late Tang text *Xuanshi Zhi*<sup>2</sup> by Zhang Du, which indicates that the Liang-Zhu legend had already taken shape by the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420 CE). The historical

<sup>1</sup> Liang Zaiyan, *Shidao Sifan Zhi* (Gazetteer of the Ten Circuits and Four Foreign Regions), Early Tang Dynasty.

<sup>2</sup> Zhang Du, *Xuanshi Zhi* (Records of the Xuanshi Chamber), late Tang Dynasty (ca. 9th century CE).

evolution of folk tales has been influenced by a variety of factors, such as social productivity and cultural values. The story of Liang and Zhu has endured for over a thousand years. The collective consciousness, value systems, and aesthetic preferences of successive generations have all been reflected in its various artistic forms. The collective historical memory, value aspirations, and collective unconscious of the people all bear the profound imprint of Confucian thoughts in feudal society.

*The Legend of the Liang and Zhu* primarily tells the story of Zhu Yingtai, who disguised herself as a man to pursue her studies and fell in love with her classmate Liang Shanbo. After three years at the academy, she returned home. During their farewell at the Eighteen Bends, which is the most celebrated act in the opera and the prolonged leave-taking journey, Zhu Yingtai drops 18 hints of her true identity.

Zhu Yingtai acted as her own matchmaker, hinting that she would propose marriage to him. However, as her parents had already betrothed her to another man named Ma Wencai, Liang Shanbo fell ill and died. On her way to her wedding, Zhu Yingtai threw herself into Liang's grave, and the two lovers were reborn as butterflies in a shared tomb. Every moment and every event in the story reflect the male-dominated patriarchal society of ancient times, highlighting the lack of freedom women faced—from pursuing education to marriage. Bound by ethical norms, a woman so eager for learning could only disguise herself as a man to attend school. Although the desire for knowledge and the exploration of the unknown are inherent to human nature, educated women were few and far between in ancient times, and they were not held in high regard. In feudal China, young men and women did not have the freedom to choose their own partners or the right to decide their own marriages. When it came to marriage, one could not disobey one's parents' wishes. Thus when Zhu Yingtai's father decided to marry her off to a notorious man named Ma Wencai, she had no choice but to comply.

The notion that “a woman's virtue lies in her lack of talent” is a manifestation of the collective unconscious that permeated the minds of people in feudal society. In the first chapter of Zhang Henshui's novel *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, Zhu Yingtai's father, in response to her request to study whilst dressed as a man, remarked: “During the Spring and Autumn period, when private academies were established to teach students, there were three thousand disciples, yet I have never heard of a single female student”. Zhu Yingtai's thirst for knowledge—and her very act of bravely stepping out of her boudoir to pursue learning in male attire—marked the budding of her feminine consciousness. Within her heart, a yearning for gender equality and knowledge was taking root. It was a subconscious rebellion against the fate that had been arranged for her.

*Romeo and Juliet* is an early work by the renowned English playwright Shakespeare, based on a true story from Italian folklore. Its setting and atmosphere are imbued with typical European characteristics and the humanistic romanticism of the Renaissance, whilst also fully illustrating the constraints imposed on human nature by the feudal class. However, the play is set against a backdrop where the bourgeoisie was only just emerging, and feudal forces still held sway. The tragic love story of Romeo and Juliet is, in essence, a conflict between the bourgeoisie and feudal forces, representing a clash between old and new ideas.

Similar in basic plot to *The Legend of Liang Zhu*, *Romeo and Juliet* tells the story of Juliet and Romeo, who fall in love at first sight at a ball. However, they belong to two families locked in a bitter feud. Although Juliet realises that this romance will sow the seeds of disaster, she nevertheless bravely pursues her love, dreaming of marrying Romeo. In her eyes, love is supreme; when love conflicts with morality, she chooses love without hesitation. Upon learning of Romeo's death, Juliet, unwilling to live a life devoid of love, resolutely chooses to take her own life in Romeo's arms, willingly paying the ultimate price.

The story of Liang Zhu depicts the conflict between passion and reason, and the suppression of women's freedom to pursue love and liberty by feudal moral codes, while *Romeo and Juliet* reveals the intertwining of love and hate, the clash between romance and a generations-old feud, and the ruthless shackles of feudal ideology that constrained the nascent spirit of humanism and humanitarianism during the early days of the bourgeoisie. Both stories portray female characters who bravely pursue love and yearn for freedom. In *Romeo and Juliet*, when Juliet sees that Romeo has drunk the poison and died, she cries out: "Alas, my love! Did you drink it all, leaving not a drop for me? ... There is still some poison left on this; I may take it as a stimulant and die" (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 93). She then seized Romeo's dagger, pressed her breast against it as if it were a sheath, and plunged it into her heart. This represents the brutal collision between the romanticism of humanism and the harsh realities of society during the nascent development of the bourgeoisie. Juliet is a pioneer of the new ideology that champions individuality, and her actions also reflect her subconscious resistance to feudal forces.

Although Zhu Yingtai displayed the beginnings of feminist consciousness, her powerlessness and vulnerability under the oppressive weight of feudal moral codes are deeply moving. She was constantly torn between her personal desires and societal morality. In contrast, Juliet, whilst equally bold in her pursuit of love and her struggle against the feudal class system, displayed a more intense and direct rebellion against feudal society, with a far more pronounced personality.

This divergence in the manifestation of feminist characteristics does not stem from individual personality, but rather deeply embedded in their distinct cultural contexts—molded by the vastly divergent sociocultural traditions of China and the West. Traditional China was centred on Confucianism, one of whose core tenets is benevolence, which places greater emphasis on human sociality rather than individuality. The teachings of Confucius and Mencius, as well as Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism, confined women and suppressed the development of their individuality and personal will. In the West, particularly in Europe, the cultures of the two Hellenic civilizations have exerted a profound influence. The religious theology of Hebrew culture does not suppress the human spirit; when Romeo and Juliet's love encounters hardships and obstacles, Father Laurence, with the spirit of Christ's universal love, sympathises with them and comes to their aid. The priest prays: "May Heaven bless this sacred union; let not future remorse condemn us!" (Shakespeare, 1978, p. 55) Another origin of European civilisation is Greek culture, and one of the defining characteristics of Greek thought is individualism (Yi, 2008), which respects the individual. Shakespeare's Juliet possesses a distinct, passionate, and outspoken personality, championing strength and freedom. Whereas Zhu Yingtai threw herself into a tomb to become a butterfly, using fantasy to realise her dream of love and placing her hopes in another world, Juliet, for the sake of a beautiful love in reality, is willing to cast aside her family, her surname, and the feud between their houses. She states clearly: "If you swear to be my lover, I will no longer bear the name Capulet" (Shakespeare, 1978, p. 35).

Even in Juliet's time, when the Enlightenment had already begun to foster a spirit of humanism that encouraged and respected individuality to some extent, women still lived under a male-dominated patriarchal system, deprived of a voice, identity, and freedom of their own. Juliet's father expressed his fury at her refusal to submit to his arrangements, saying:

What! Does she not wish to marry? Is she not grateful to us? Is she dissatisfied? A lowly wench like her—we have found her such a noble gentleman as her bridegroom; does she not realise what a blessing this is? (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 69)

### Classical Connotations and Divergent Female Images

Different cultures have shaped distinct psychological and personality traits in the East and West. The differences in how Zhu Yingtai and Juliet express their love also reflect the contrasting portrayals of women in Eastern and Western cultures. In the ancient Eastern love story of Liang and Zhu, the two spent three years as classmates without ever directly confessing their feelings. Even as the moment of parting drew near, their expressions remained subtle and veiled; ultimately, they failed to convey their true feelings to one another, and their love sadly passed them by. In the classic scene “The Eighteenth Farewell” from the Yue opera adaptation of Liang Zhu, Zhu Yingtai makes several veiled hints, yet can only hint at the truth: “My younger brother has come to act as matchmaker for you”, “It is my younger sister, the ninth daughter”, “Her appearance and character are just like mine”. Even when she is slightly bolder, such as when passing by the Guanyin Temple, Yingtai feigns a slip of the tongue and pulls Liang Shanbo before the Bodhisattva Guanyin to perform the wedding ceremony.

By comparison, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* burn with a passion as intense as a raging fire. Their words are as hot as molten lava, expressing their love for one another directly and intensely; their love is utterly unreserved. “Love’s fire has kindled amidst the ashes of hatred; had we never met, why should we have met at all! Yesterday’s enemies, today’s lovers—this romance is bound to sow the seeds of disaster” (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 31). Under the weight of their families’ enmity, Juliet tells Romeo, “Cast off your name; I would give my whole heart to make amends for this empty title” (p. 36). When her parents arranged for her to marry Count Paris, she declared outright: “I would rather marry the Romeo I detest than marry Paris” (p. 80). Juliet is not merely a passive object of love. She is a bolder, more passionate soul. Her dialogues and whispered exchanges with Romeo, as well as her hopes and dreams for the future, demonstrate her capacity for independent thought and emotional expression—qualities that embody the very values of Renaissance humanism.

The reserved nature of Easterners and the passionate exuberance of Westerners have led to significant differences in the two women’s attitudes towards love and the ways in which they defend it. The Chinese people possess psychological traits characterised by conformity and a penchant for the poetic, manifesting as introversion and introspection, and a pursuit of the state of harmony between heaven and humanity. Western peoples, on the other hand, possess extroverted and pragmatic psychological traits, which manifest as a dynamic, virile beauty and a tragic grandeur (Zhang, 2013). Although Zhu Yingtai and Juliet both displayed a fearless spirit in the face of death for the sake of love, their forms of resistance were starkly different.

Zhu Yingtai met Liang Shanbo at the pavilion and revealed the truth of the matter to him, explaining that her parents had already betrothed her to Ma Wencai. Though Liang Shanbo was shocked and heartbroken, the two confessed their mutual love and longing to one another, vowing that if they could not be together in life, they would share the same grave in death. This act of defiance was, to a certain extent, a concession to reality and a submission to patriarchal society. In the end, Zhu Yingtai yielded to her parents’ wishes and submitted to their arrangements. A turning point occurred on her way to her wedding, as she passed Liang Shanbo’s grave. She decided to pay her respects at the tomb, and subsequently threw herself into it, transforming into a butterfly. Through the author’s artistic embellishment, this process takes on a mythical form that transcends reality, seemingly achieving a happy ending akin to a perfect union. In pursuit of true love, and of a free and autonomous will and spirit, Yingtai broke through the boundaries of life and death through the transformation of her life, reaching a new, ideal realm. The resulting artistic resonance evokes a complex mix of sorrow and joy in the

audience, making the tale immensely popular. It stirs universal values of yearning for eternity and the relentless pursuit of love, whilst also awakening a collective unconscious perception of spiritual life deep within the human psyche. Yet, the cruel reality is that Zhu Yingtai, this intelligent woman who bravely pursued love, was ultimately consumed by deeply entrenched feudal ethics.

In contrast to the gently unfolding narrative of the ancient Chinese lovers, Shakespeare's portrayal of Juliet is marked by dramatic ups and downs as the tragedy's plot and emotional conflicts unfold. From her innocent and carefree beginnings, through moments of joy and sorrow, to her final, resolute acceptance of death, every stage of her characterisation is accompanied by heart-wrenching encounters, a secret wedding, misunderstandings, and the ultimate tragic conclusion. Juliet expresses her love through the most direct, passionate language and the boldest of actions. Upon learning she was to be forced into marriage, she cleverly deceived her mother and wed Romeo. To safeguard her happiness, she chose without hesitation to feign death. She acted courageously for the sake of love, willing to sacrifice everything and give all she had. "So long as I do not marry Paris, you may bid me leap from the battlements of that tower; you may bid me crawl along paths where robbers lurk and venomous serpents lie in wait..." (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 74)

Shakespeare skillfully employed the "tragedy of love", rendering the tragic fate of Romeo and Juliet with a radiance of humanity and a romantic melody. Their ultimate deaths not only radiate unwavering loyalty and devotion to love, but also, through their tragic power, shatter the long-standing shackles between the two feuding families. This heroic sacrifice not only alters the established patterns of real life, but also exerts a profoundly moving influence upon the hearts of the world. Thus, in the future, young people from these two feuding families will no longer be bound by the hatred of the past. Their destinies will be rewritten by Romeo and Juliet's fearless sacrifice, heralding a tomorrow filled with love and hope.

### **Shared Struggles and Cultural Specificity**

As iconic female figures in Chinese and Western literature, Zhu Yingtai and Juliet each embody, in their own distinct ways, female independence, courage, and the pursuit of love. These two female figures not only reflect the attention and pursuit of women's rights in their respective societies, but also offer important insights and lessons for how we view gender equality and self-reliance today. Although they lived in different eras and societies and faced different circumstances, from a feminist perspective, the characters of Zhu Yingtai and Juliet share many similarities.

#### **The Relentless Pursuit of True Love**

Both Zhu Yingtai and Juliet demonstrate a deep longing for and unwavering pursuit of true love. Although Zhu Yingtai lived in a feudal society and faced numerous constraints from her family and society, she bravely pursued true love and chose to elope with Liang Shanbo. Juliet was no different; for the sake of her love for Romeo, she bravely defied her family's wishes and ultimately chose to die for love.

#### **A Contestation of Traditional Norms**

From a feminist perspective, both Zhu Yingtai and Juliet are regarded as figures who challenge traditional norms. Zhu Yingtai, by disguising herself as a man to pursue her studies, not only challenged the feudal dogma that "a woman's virtue lies in her lack of talent", but also defied the societal expectations of women's roles at the time. Juliet, meanwhile, disregarded her family's wishes, refused to marry a man she did not love, and chose to elope with Romeo—a direct challenge to the patriarchal social norms of the era.

### **Distinctive Character and a Spirit of Rebellion**

Both Zhu Yingtai and Juliet are female characters with distinctive personalities and a spirit of rebellion. Throughout her studies, Zhu Yingtai demonstrated her intelligence and unwavering resolve; her rebellious spirit is evident in her pursuit of self-worth and her yearning for gender equality. Juliet, meanwhile, has earned the respect of readers through her independent and resolute character; her rebellious spirit is reflected in her steadfast pursuit of love and her defiance of family conventions.

### **The Bravery to Fight for Love**

Both Zhu Yingtai and Juliet demonstrated the bravery to fight for love. For the sake of love, Zhu Yingtai did not hesitate to dress as a man, undertake a long journey, and, in the face of pressure from her family and society, steadfastly stand by her choice. For the sake of love, Juliet, undeterred by her family's opposition, chose to elope with Romeo and ultimately died for love. Their courage demonstrates women's unwavering belief in and pursuit of love.

### **Conclusion**

In a word, from a feminist perspective, both Zhu Yingtai and Juliet demonstrate a steadfast pursuit of free love, a defiance of traditional norms, a distinct personality and spirit of rebellion, and the courage to fight for love. These shared traits have established them as classic figures in literary history with profound feminist significance. Confucius, the founder of Confucianism held the opinion that women and petty people were difficult to manage. He thinks if a person is too close to them, they become insolent; if he keeps distance with them, they harbour resentment. Under this ideology, men became the dominant figures in ancient society and the family. Women suffered various forms of oppression, marginalization, and restraint, deprived of the rights they were entitled to. The collective consciousness of society held that "a husband's prestige brings honour to his wife, and a mother's status depends on her son" (Wu, 2007, pp. 177-178).

It seemed that women must submit to and please men in order to realise their own worth. Feminism originated from the Enlightenment thought of the 18th century; although women were gradually awakening, during the era in which Juliet lived, men and women still occupied unequal positions in social life. Women were regarded as appendages to men, lacking the rights and capacity to make their own choices. The aim of feminism is to alter the disadvantaged position of women in the economic, political, and social spheres. Although women existed within society, their identity was, to a certain extent, absent, and their voice was consistently suppressed and ignored. Comparing the portrayals of the two female characters in these two works from a feminist perspective, and analysing the attitudes of society and men towards women at that time, as well as the impact on female values, hold profound significance.

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