

# **An analysis of the similarities and differences between *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Butterfly Lovers***

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**Abstract:** *Romeo and Juliet*, one of Shakespeare's most famous plays, and *The Butterfly Lovers*, one of China's most famous traditional Chinese folklores, have many similarities and differences. This paper discusses their similarities and differences, as well as their significance for contemporary society.

**Keywords:** *Romeo and Juliet*; Shakespeare; *The Butterfly Lovers*

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## **Introduction**

The similarities between the stories of *The Butterfly Lovers* and *Romeo and Juliet* have been explored by many. In Chinese academia, as early as 1996, Aimin Chen explored Chinese and Western love tragedies from a cultural perspective, and in 2013, Haimin Mi and Hui Liu analysed the combination of romantic and realist expressions. However, there is no further description of this aspect of Eastern and Western views of love. In the same period, Lingling Yao uses *Romeo and Juliet* as an example to analyse in more detail the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western tragedies in terms of main lines, characterisation, contingency, tragic aesthetics and cultural differences. While Xueyang Hu focuses mainly on the analysis of the causes of tragedy. This essay will discuss, on the basis of previous studies, three perspectives: 1) the concept of love 2) the similarities and 3) differences

### **1. The concept of love**

Both put love at the forefront, only expressed in different manners. Both of these writings celebrate the freedom of love. (Liu & Yu, 2020) Lingling Yao attributed to cultural differences (2013). The love between *The Butterfly Lovers* is more subtle, often in a suggestive way. In the context of feudal rituals, they can only become sacrificial victims. On the other hand, for *Romeo and Juliet*, the expression and pursuit of love is more direct, love at first sight, even if there is a family rivalry, overcoming obstacles to be together. But Yao Lingling did not discuss relevant Greek culture and humanism in depth, which can be refined in future studies. Due to such cultural differences, Juliet's resistance is more active and, on the other hand, shows shades of feminism.

### **2. Similarities**

#### **2.1 The supremacy of love**

Both believe that love is supreme. *Romeo and Juliet* abandoned their families and future for love, and ultimately lost their lives. Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai made two attempts at love, one by proposing marriage and the other by eloping, but both failed. In the end, the pair have ended up dead. Further, this pursuit of love is rare and valuable, and could be inspirational in modern society. In addition to the study of purely literary constructs, attention can be paid to the revelatory significance of the work.

#### **2.2 The cruelty of fate**

Both East and West demonstrate the cruelty and ruthlessness of fate. Fate can be seen as a third invisible character, manipulating the characters, or hindering. Li Jie's discussion of the role of fate is very in-depth (2020). *Romeo and Juliet's*

love is hindered by the presence of a priest who seems to be a ray of light for the future, but due to some unfortunate events, the two eventually give their lives for love. These coincidences show the unpredictable and destructive nature of fate. On the other hand, Eastern culture advocates that one has to fight against fate through effort, as seen in the two attempts of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, while the West advocates this powerlessness, where one's efforts are just a feeble struggle and the two have to bear the consequences of destruction.

## **2.3 The female figures**

The portrayal of female characters is well worth our attention, and Altenburger was aware of the feminist perspective as early as 2005. Both Juliet and Zhu Yingtai share some male-leaning traits such as bravery, determination and resistance. When Juliet is forced into marriage during Romeo's banishment, she shows a strong conviction to follow her own ideas with unwavering determination, showing that she can stand up to love and life without being oppressed by family pride and refusing very decisively, and is equally decisive later on when she drinks the poison. She is no less brave than Romeo in her pursuit of love and shows her wisdom in seeking the help of a priest, although for various reasons the story does not end flawlessly. However, in the case of Zhu Yingtai, it is worth noting that the representation of female characters has a long tradition of characterisation, particularly in traditional Chinese literature. The requirements for female characters have bordered on the demanding, such as the Cowherd and the Weaving Maiden, but Zhu Yingtai's disguise as a male and her years of living together with Liang Shanbo and her budding love affair not only show the social context and ethnicity of the time - a time when women had to stay at home and could not escape the cage of male dominance and female subordination - but the female disguise helps Zhu Yingtai to break through the limitations of gender and get in touch with men. It also brings out Zhu Yingtai's unconventional qualities, which can be described as a very rebellious female character, and finally rationalises the ending, where Zhu Yingtai's pursuit of free love is hindered by her parents' orders, and the two of them eventually have to die to defend their dreams of love. Both writers show the unique charms of women and their resistance to a male-centred social system. There is a degree of similarity between Oriental and Western ideology in this regard, and this similarity could provide the ideological impetus for later feminists to fight for women's rights.

## **3.1 Characterisation**

The weakness of Romeo's character, which some Chinese scholars may focus on as impatience and as a cause of their fate, is not entirely agreeable to me. Kottman believes that Romeo and Juliet's actions, though seemingly destructive, are in the name of love (2012). However, it could be a pursuit of self-destruction in Western tragic aesthetics. Romeo's fights and love of his enemies, for example, are driven by self-loathing and self-destruction in Romeo's character. In *The Butterfly Lovers*, on the other hand, although both resist because of their love, the characterisation of Liang Shanbo in the book, his goodness in fighting against fate and the feudal system, is sometimes seen as soft, and this tendency to softness is a trigger for their failure. Unlike Romeo, this does not stem from self-destruction, but from forced destruction.

## **3.2 Primitive worship**

In the story of *The Butterfly Lovers*, there is a strong trait of domestication regarding the feudal ritual system, and although there is resistance, there is also obedience to this system. For example, the secret elopement is not brave enough to be confronted with the matter. At the same time, the act of elopement reflects his idea of 'running away', reflecting the powerlessness and struggle of people bound by the social norms of the feudal system. Unlike in the West, the pursuit of desire is expressed more implicitly, through the pair's transformation into butterflies to fulfil a goal that cannot be accomplished in the world. In fact, it is the dissatisfaction with the way of life under the feudal system (parents' orders, matchmaking) that leads them to run away. On the other hand, both Romeo and Juliet are relatively brave in their response to oppression, not being influenced by the social trends of the day (not domesticated) and taking many actions albeit with no good results.

## **Conclusion**

Although both love tragedies have deeply moved posterity, there is still room for further research into the sexism of

both, beyond the construction of the stories, and the revelations they bring - the persistent pursuit of love, and the awakening of feminism, and the rebellion against domestication - still deserve our attention.

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