

Functional and Lyrical Ghost: A Comparative Study of the Narrative Modes of Supernatural Characters in Chinese and Western Drama

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Abstract:

Based on the knowledge of narratology and comparative literature theories, this paper mainly studies the narrative modes of the ghost characters in Shakespeare's dramas and traditional Chinese Yuan Zaju. It addresses a research gap in cultural supernatural symbolism by comparing their roles in different works, including plot narration, religious standpoints, forms of existence, and narrative outcomes. The ghosts in Shakespeare's dramas mainly serve as the core of action and strengthen individual conflicts, while in Chinese Yuan Zaju, the "hundun" primarily acts as an emotional carrier and serves the reconciliation of collectivist ethics. Ghosts in Shakespeare's plays primarily drive action and amplify internal conflict, and ghosts always reflect Renaissance individualism and Christian cosmology. Comparatively, "hundun", as an emotional implement, upholds collectivist ethics, often ending with moral reshaping. The comparison underscores how different cultural values and religious ideologies can shape the presentation and purpose of ghost characters in theater. Ultimately, this research illustrates that some different ways in which supernatural characters both reveal and emphasize the ethical and narrative characteristics of their respective literary traditions.

Keywords: Narratology; William Shakespeare; ghost; Yuan Zaju; comparative poetics.

1. Introduction

Shakespeare's drama and Yuan Zaju, also known as Yuan Opera, are both approaching contemporary and the peak of their respective theatrical traditions.

Notably, "ghosts" or supernatural characters, a persistent motif in Western and Eastern literature, are typical in Shakespeare's drama, such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, as well as Yuan Operas. For instance, *The Injustice to Dou E* and *The Peony Pavilion* both use

revenants, especially “hundun” in Chinese, as defined by a conventional female ghost character role in Chinese classical drama. Her embodiment is highly codified through performance techniques such as ethereal movement and white costumes to intervene in the living world [1]. Nevertheless, existing scholarship rarely compares their dramatic functions, obscuring cultural constructs of death and justice. For example, in *Hamlet*, the Ghost of Hamlet’s father appears to demand revenge, driving the protagonist’s actions and shaping the play’s exploration of mortality and justice [2]. In *The Injustice to Dou E*, the ghost returns to expose her wrongful execution, which embodies a demand for moral correctness in Chinese traditional ethical frameworks. Through a profound study of these cases, this study can observe how each tradition uses ghost figures to answer the questions of death, accountability, and the afterlife. However, the lack of cross-cultural analysis obscures how death narratives reflect fundamental cultural background.

This essay mainly adopts a combination of textual analysis and comparative literature approaches. And then, it analyzes selected ghost scenes from *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, along with hundun passages from *The Injustice to Dou E* and *The Peony Pavilion*, to make a comparison about their dialogue, dramatic actions, and narrative structure. Moreover, through parallel comparison, this research examines differences between Chinese and Western ghostly figures in terms of narrative function, mode of existence, narrative denouement, and religious and cultural contexts that play a role in the different narrations. This study theoretically proposes a binary model of “functional ghost” and “lyrical ghost” to revise comparative literature’s monolithic interpretation of supernatural characters, while extending narratological analysis to cultural anthropology.

2. Narrative Functions of “Ghosts”: Agents of Action and Vessels of Sentiments

2.1 Shakespeare’s Ghosts as Plot Catalysts

The ghosts in Shakespeare’s plays can drive external action. For instance, the Ghost in *Hamlet* delivers a clear command: “Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder” [3], transforming Hamlet’s identity and setting the entire plot in motion. This transformation from scholar to avenger sets the entire narrative trajectory into motion, triggering a chain of events including the plays, the killing of Polonius, and the final duel. The ghost’s revelation of Claudius’s crime provides the essential exposition that the

courtly world of Elsinore deliberately obscures, making it the climax of the play.

In addition, the ghosts in Shakespeare’s plays can create internal conflicts. Banquo’s ghost in *Macbeth* does not speak but acts as a psychological projection, accelerating Macbeth’s descent into madness and paranoia. For example, the silent apparition of Banquo says, “Never shake the gory locks at me!” [3]. The ghost operates as a dramatic externalization of conscience, illustrating the Renaissance preoccupation with the inner self.

Moreover, the ghost’s primary function is to actively intervene in, disrupt, and ultimately redirect the narrative plot. It is a crucial plot role in initiating and propelling the dramatic action. Its existence is wholly justified by its structural and causal utility. The ghost sets the revenge plot in motion and defines Hamlet’s moral and existential dilemma. This aligns closely with the Aristotelian conception of plot as the “soul of tragedy,” wherein every element must contribute to the complication and resolution of the action, rather than serve as decorative or atmospheric embellishment [4]. Specifically, the ghost’s demand for vengeance generates the play’s central dramatic question: “Will Hamlet enact revenge?” While its continued psychological lingering ensures that this imperative permeates every subsequent scene, it heightens the tension and structures the narrative through enduring moral and emotional pressure.

2.2 Yuan Opera’s “Hundun” as Supplement to Lyrical Themes

In Chinese traditional dramas, “hundun” always play a role in externalizing the internal emotions of characters. For example, Dou E, later as a hundun in *The Injustice to Dou E*, appears not to instigate new action but to lament her injustice and intensify the pathos for the audience. Her father, named Dou Tianzhang, is already an investigating official. Her function is affective, not causative. Her appearance culminates in the emotional and moral climax of the play, intensifying the pathos and appealing directly to the audience’s sense of righteousness. Her function is thus affective and symbolic, reinforcing the Confucian ideal that “tianli” (natural moral law) will eventually rectify human wrongs. This aligns with the Chinese theatrical tradition of “qing” (authentic, deep emotion), where emotional expression is central to dramatic meanings. This concept is most famously articulated by the Ming dynasty playwright Tang Xianzu in the preface to his masterpiece *The Peony Pavilion*, where he asserts that genuine “qing” possesses a transcendent power so profound that “for its sake, the living may die, and the dead may come to life

again” [5].

Additionally, hundan can continue the lyrical themes of a drama. Du Liniang, as a ghost in *The Peony Pavilion*, exists to perpetuate the theme of “zhiqing”, which means ultimate love, a key ideal in Tang Xianzu’s dramaturgy that celebrates passion capable of transcending even death [5]. Her interactions with Liu Mengmei are about providing a lyrical space to express yearning that transcends death rather than driving plot. The ghost here is not a catalyst of plot but a manifestation of desire. It critiques rigid Confucian social norms, illustrating how “qing” could challenge and ultimately harmonize with cosmic order.

Fundamentally, the hundan expresses the play’s lyric themes. Rather than advancing causal chains of events, she presents collective sorrow, laments ethical rupture, and embodies transcendent values, such as “qing” or “yi” (righteousness). The presence of hundan is licensed by a poetic logic that prioritizes emotional truth and moral symbolism instead of narrative reasoning. In this sense, the hundan is less a character in a realist sense than a performative symbol—one that elevates the drama from social storytelling to spiritual and lyrical reflection.

3. Narrative Techniques: Different of Supernatural Existence

3.1 Realist Embodiment in Shakespeare’s Plays

Shakespeare’s ghosts are not abstract notions but are presented with specific, often horrifying visual details. It always concrete representation and sensory realism. The ghost in *Hamlet* is meticulously described by the guards. For example, it is wearing “the very armor he had on” when he was killed, and his appearance is pale and sorrowful, making him recognizable [3]. As Stephen Greenblatt argues in *Hamlet in Purgatory*, this embodiment reflects a profound cultural anxiety rooted in the Protestant Reformation’s suppression of Purgatory—the ghost appears as a startlingly real, yet theologically problematic, remnant of a recently abolished Catholic past [6]. It is meant to be perceived as a real, though supernatural, presence within the world of the play.

The primary affective response triggered by these embodied ghosts is profound fear and uncertainty. Their embodiment is designed to provoke terror and doubt in both the characters and the audience. For example, the sentence “Is this a dagger which I see before me?” in *Macbeth* [3], while not a ghost in the literal sense, operates under the same dramaturgical principle: a supernatural manifestation so concrete it induces paralyzing doubt and

foreshadows moral collapse. The central tension revolves around the question of whether its reality is a psychological projection of guilt. As noted by critic A.C. Bradley in *Shakespearean Tragedy*, it is crucial to the play’s oppressive atmosphere [7]. The reality of ghosts is not a given, which becomes a source of intense debate and anxiety for characters like Hamlet, who must navigate the terrifying possibility that the spirit could be a “devil” exploiting his melancholy.

3.2 Codified Symbolization in Yuan Zaju

In Yuan Zaju, “hundan” performs a stylized representation, which means the hundan is never intended to be a realistic depiction of a ghost. As Li Yu emphasizes in *Xianqing Ouji*, particularly in the sections on “training Voice and Body” and “Designing Costumes”, the artistry of performance lies in the refined and conventionalized expression of essence [8]. Instead, her entire being on stage is constructed through a set of standardized performance techniques that symbolically communicate her identity and state to the audience. Her flowing white robes signify tragedy and the future. Her faint movements, particularly the delicate “ghost steps”, visually represent her insubstantial nature. These are Li Yu’s “tai” (a sense of spontaneously expressed dynamic charm and grace).

Moreover, the primary audience recognizes that the hundan is one of profound empathy and moral recognition, and it is obviously different with the Shakespeare’s ghost that is designed to provoke terror and conflicts. As scholar Judith Zeitlin T. argues, the Chinese ghost is a figure of pathos [9]. Similarly, in Wang Guowei’s foundational definition of Yuan Zaju in *Song Yuan Xiqukao* (Traditional Chinese Drama in the Song-Yuan Dynasties), he deems its natural and direct expression of emotion [10]. The symbolism of hundan is not to question reality but to make clear a moral reality of injustice, mentioned as “yuan” in Yuan Zaju.

With the development of hundan, hundan gradually becomes a powerful vehicle for the play’s Confucian ethical thesis in her individual story. Meanwhile, this function resonates with Li Yu’s pragmatic theory of drama, which insisted that theater must “convey moral teaching” [8].

In addition, this formal difference stems from different aesthetic traditions. Western mimesis seeks a persuasive illusion of reality. Yuan Zaju, as defined by Wang Guowei’s conception of “drama must combine speech, action, and singing to perform a story” [10]. Thus, hundan accords with these theories and performs a triumphant creation, where codified forms convey essential emotional and spiritual truth.

4. Narrative Outcomes: Unresolved Death and Ritualistic Sublimation

4.1 Unresolved Death in Shakespeare's Plays

In Shakespeare's tragedies, death seldom serves as a clean resolution. Instead, it often functions as a device that sustains narrative and ethical tension beyond the biological end of life. This phenomenon can be understood as unresolved death, a state where death does not conclude moral or existential crises but extends them, leaving conflicts unsettled and the restoration of order deferred. This concept finds strong support in *Trauma Fiction*, because Whitehead argues that traumatic events, by their very nature, resist integration into a coherent narrative and are "characterized by delay", only manifesting through their repeated and belated intrusion into the present [11]. Therefore, the ghost's command frequently precipitates not order but catastrophic ruin and ontological uncertainty. In *Hamlet*, for instance, the climax does not offer restorative justice; instead, the Danish court is decimated. This denouement underscores a world where moral and political orders are not merely damaged but obliterated, reflecting what Stephen Greenblatt identifies as a post-Reformation crisis of spectral authority and unresolved mourning [6].

Moreover, the narrative emphasis remains on the tragic fate of the individual, as Hamlet's death epitomizes this focus. As Marjorie Garber argues, Hamlet becomes an archetype of the modern subject whose death suspends rather than resolves metaphysical tensions [2]. Thus, Shakespearean tragedy leverages suspended death not as a narrative failure, but as a profound thematic strategy.

4.2 Ritualistic Sublimation in Yuan Zaju

In contrast to the suspended death in Shakespeare's tragedy, Yuan Zaju employs the *hundan* to achieve a narrative and ethical resolution characterized by ritualistic sublimation [12]. The appearance of the *hundan* often serves as the *catastasis* of a moral and ritualistic process, designed to restore the disrupted cosmic and social harmony. For instance, in *The Injustice to Dou E*, the ghost of Dou E does not seek merely personal vengeance but stages a public appeal that exposes the corruption and failure of the judicial system [13]. This narrative functions as a judicial ritual, where the ghost's intervention culminates in the restoration of "tianli".

Furthermore, the endings in Yuan Opera frequently adhere to a pattern of harmonious resolution, which transcends the Western notion of a simple "happy ending." As Wang

Guowei established in *Song Yuan Xiqukao*, Chinese drama prioritizes the emotional and ethical satisfaction of the audience through closure that reaffirms collective values [10]. In *The Peony Pavilion*, Du Liniang's return to life and subsequent marriage to Liu Mengmei represent the ultimate triumph of "zhiqing" over death. This resurrection is not a supernatural anomaly but is sanctioned by social authority—the emperor bestows his approval, legitimizing their union [5]. Thus, the ending is closed, harmonious, and morally reassuring, not only providing emotional consolation but also reinforcing the Confucian paradigm wherein individual desire, when sincere and virtuous, can be integrated into and upheld by the social order.

In a nutshell, through the ritualistic function of the *hundan*, Yuan Opera transforms potential tragedy into a sublimated celebration of moral and cosmic order, offering a narrative conclusion that delivers both emotional catharsis and ethical affirmation.

5. Conclusion

This comparative study yields clear and significant findings. The supernatural revenants in Shakespeare's drama and Yuan Zaju serve fundamentally different narrative functions. Shakespeare's ghosts perform as catalytic engines of plot. They instigate an external action and an internal conflict. However, *hundan* operates as a lyrical vessel of emotion, embodying and expressing a profound empathy and an unfulfilled desire.

This core functional divergence is not merely stylistic but is underpinned by deeper cultural logics. Shakespeare's ghost performs a Western ethos of individual confrontation with fate, where the spectral presence exacerbates personal agency, moral ambiguity, and existential crisis. In contrast, the Chinese *hundan* reflects a Confucian framework of collective ethical mediation; her return from the dead serves not to instigate further chaos but to appeal for and ultimately achieve the restoration of social and cosmic harmony. Therefore, the former is a mechanism of narrative technique about driving conflicts, but the latter acts as a modulatory and lyrical presence in the whole narrative process. Ultimately, these differences are derived from diametrically opposed semiotic and ideological systems about death. The Western paradigm is shaped by Christian frames, and it always views the ghost as a manifestation of individual crimes and divine judgment. The Chinese construct, derived from Confucian "tianli" ideology, positions the *hundan* as a symbol of *yuan*, whose suffering and vindication publicly reaffirm an established social, universal moral order.

Nevertheless, this study has primarily focused on a par-

adigmatic comparison between two canonical traditions, necessarily limiting the scope of its textual and cultural analysis. Future research could productively expand this framework in several directions, for instance, firstly, by incorporating other forms of Chinese drama, such as chuanqi plays, to trace the evolution of the hundan trope; and secondly, by examining contemporary adaptations. For instance, how these classical ghost figures are reinterpreted in modern films, theaters, or even digital media to explore how these ancient cultural images' logic persist or are transformed for today's audiences.

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