



The Comparative Study between the Metamorphosis and Cu Zhi in the Strange Tales of Liao Zhai

Shujun Liu

Ningxia University, China

Abstract: Deformation is an ancient and typical literary topic, which has been a common plot unit and structural model of the story. At present, many scholars at home and abroad have realized uniqueness of deformation stories, tries to interpret and compare them from different perspectives, to discover the deep implication of the stories. Based on the previous researches, this thesis will focus on the connotation of the traditional deformation stories, in line of the plots, writers, themes and effects, to discuss the representative of the Chinese and Western deformation stories, which are Cu Zhi in the Strange Tales of Liao Zhai by Pu Sonling and the Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka, to explore the differences and similarities between these two stories.

Key words: Deformation; Cu Zhi; The Metamorphosis; The comparative study

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***Corresponding author:** Shujun Liu, 464178577@qq.com

1 Introduction

Deformation is a typical theme in literature. Stith Thompson viewed that “Deformation” refers that a person, an animal or an object changes its original shape and appears in a new shape(Thompson 309).

For its historical inheritance, the deformation stories contain the thinking characteristics of human childhood and the experience of the ancestors in exploring the world, which subtly influences the lifestyle and mode of things of later generations. At present, many scholars at home and abroad have realized uniqueness of deformation stories,

tries to interpret and compare them from different perspectives, such as ecocriticism, to discover the natural view of the stories. However, in most cases, the correlated researchers ignored the metaphorical function of deformation, through which we can find the natural connotation and social significance of deformation stories. Therefore, based on the previous researches, this thesis will focus on the connotation of the traditional deformation stories, in line of the plots, writers, themes and effects, to discuss the representative of the Chinese and Western deformation stories, which are Cu Zhi in the Strange Tales of Liao Zhai by Pu Sonling and The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka, to compare these two stories.

2 The comparison on plots and writers

2.1 The plot of The Metamorphosis

The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka describes the body change of Gregor Samsa and what happened later in his family. One morning Gregor changed into a big beetle when he wake up. He did not go to work on time so that his parents and sister began to worry about him. Meanwhile his boss sent someone to find out why Gregor was late for work. Unexpectedly, however, they saw the new shape of Gregor—a big beetle—then ran off right now expectedly. After that, his families fell in worry with Gregor, that is to say, they began to worry about their livelihood. In the first place, his sister would like to clean up his room and take care of him on eating. His mother was fatally stricken down in spirit and teared cats and dogs without eating the least. Little by little, Gregor’s parents and sister got tired of this kind of life, as his

father and sister had to work by themselves as well as looking after Gregor everyday. Everything, after being honed and distilled by time, has finally been translated into a hatred. His sister no longer cared for him and his father hit him by an apple, thus leading to his serious injury, both physical and mental. At the end, Gregor perished quietly with hoping the better life of his families; while his families started new life with joyfulness.

2.2 The plot of Cu Zhi

Cu Zhi in the Strange Tales of Liao Zhai by Pu Songling is similar with The Metamorphosis, also describes a story about body change.

The emperor likes to watch the cricket fight. All officials take advantage of the opportunity to get wealth and forced confessions and extortion on ordinary people strictly. In order to a small cricket, officials forced the ordinary people to lose their fortune and break up their families. Cheng Ming as an honest and kind poor scholar was pushed to death step by step in this situation. However when he was in desperation, his wife found the chance of survival: a big and beautiful cricket. Unfortunately, Cheng Ming's son lost this cricket soon. The son was afraid and guilty, so he committed suicide by jumping in the well. After the son died, he became an invincible cricket, so Cheng Ming sent it for the emperor and got a great number of rewards. The tragedy of the disaster turned into a special joy totally.

2.3 The writer of The Metamorphosis

Franz Kafka was a writer who crosses the boundaries of modernism and postmodernism (Liu Jiamei 144). His works mainly express the strong feelings of his heart. Kafka's father was a successful businessman in society, with strong economic strength and a strong figure, who was very demanding of his son. In addition, Kafka is an adult after all: he realized that as a man he should have a sense of responsibility and wanted to be an optimistic, shrewd man who hated any form of "underage care". Like characters in his work, Kafka felt stressful everyday. He wanted to express his mind by Gregor.

2.4 The writer of Cu Zhi

Pu Songling (June 5, 1640-February 25, 1715), a native of Yuchuan, Jinan Province (Pujiashuang, Hongshan Town, Yuchuan District, Zibo City, Shandong Province), is an outstanding writer and

novelist of the Qing Dynasty. He grew up in the countryside and was inspired by the culture of farmers at an early age. His father valued children reading, but the war and the large population of family have led to the fall of the family.

2.5 The comparison on plots and writers

Although the Metamorphosis and the Strange Tales of Liao Zhai were written in different times, regions and cultural backgrounds, they all describe the story of the people being transformed into animals. The great writer of our country in the 17th century, Pu Songling, had lived a life of chaos, suffering, living hard, who had a deep sympathy on the suffering of the labouring people. Thus, although he lived in Chinese feudal society more than two hundred years earlier than Kafka's era, he had never be overwhelmed by darkness for his good quality. He had no intention of the society and did not want to float with the common.

Franz Kafka finished The Metamorphosis in 1912. Pu Songling finished Cu Zhi in 17th century. What surprised people the most was Kafka's familiar skill: change man into a small animal, which is often comparable to Chinese(Zeng Yanbing 367). Research shows that Kafka had read Chinese Ghosts and Love Stories—the German version of the Strange Tales of Liao Zhai which was translated by Martin Buber. On January 16, 1931, Kafka referred to Buber in a letter to Phyllis, saying that he knew a lot and knew the Chinese story. He also praised Buber's Chinese Ghosts and Love Stories for its beauty and subtlety (Ye Tingfang 215-216). Therefore, Franz kafka was likely to have been influenced by Pu Songling to complete The Metamorphosis. In a sense, Pu Songling, a writer who used deformation almost in every part, can be regarded as the first messenger to spread oriental deformation literature.

3 The comparison on themes and effects

3.1 The comparison on the theme of two stories

In western, one explanation of "Metamorphosis" is in Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, which derives meaning "abnormality" from Greek, referring that the change on the shape by magic power; the other is Latin—"defemotio"—distortion on shapes(Dong Xiaoyu 112).

The theme of The Metamorphosis, according to the

deconstructionism of postmodernism, is the dispelling of family responsibility that the close relation of the character's metamorphosis and the disappearance of Franz Kafka's family responsibility reflected in his attitude towards a man as a breadwinner: fear, imagination, avoiding and refusal.

In *Cu Zhi*, all lines expressed complex deep feelings of indignation and bleak attitude to life in society thus showing deep feelings between Cheng Ming and his son.

3.2 The comparison on the effect of two stories

In the Chinese traditional cultural, people and the heaven and the earth are listed as three talents in the world; the status of man is raised above all creature in the world. Thus, seemingly people in the *Strange Tales of Liao Zhai* have changed into different shapes, nevertheless, they will restore the identity of the people in the end. During the deformation, they also retains the human emotion and thinking. In fact, the deformation always revolves around the center of "people".

In the 20th century, western society has a deeper thought on human, human value and human dignity. Whether Kafka or Gregor, they have a more comprehensive understanding to the real situation in real life. In modern society, the free will and existence value of people have been provoked greatly, even negatively. In the face of the great impact caused by that, Kafka used the artistic technique of "deformation" to reveal the loss of people in modern society symbolically. Of course, the *Strange Tales of Liao Zhai* and *The Metamorphosis* do not exist which is better and which is inferior. Comparability exists only in: different historical stages bring different capacities of artistic expression to similar literary topics.

All in all, Kafka is also a good spreader of Chinese culture. Similarly, for instance, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* truly records the mountains, geography, birds and beasts, fish and insects, aliens, customs and other knowledge of that era; many literary works home and abroad have drawn from it in order to express Chinese traditional culture vividly.

4 Conclusion

Ernst Cassirer has said that the typical and

prominent features of the mythical world and the laws that govern it are brought about by the law of deformation(Cassirer 144).

The incessant images in the plot of animals of great beauty or strange looks in the *Strange Tales of Liao Zhai* have many of us wondering what the relation is between the *Strange Tales of Liao Zhai* and *The Metamorphosis*.

In the *Strange Tales of Liao Zhai*, there some colorful deformations, basically have two big system: deformation of objects and deformation of animals or plants. About deformation of objects, in general, objects always change into human beings and participating in daily life of people, showing the yearning of happiness and qualities. About deformation of animals and plants, people always change into ghost, animals or some immortal god, thus doing what they want to do, showing the criticism, retribution and enlightenment for human and society. Two kinds of deformations indicate unique literary and artistic creation of Pu Songling who was apt at reflecting the inward world on the basis of original myth thinking.

Although the *Metamorphosis* is influenced by the *Strange Tales of Liao Zhai*, Kafka is a great writer, whose creation is from the perspective of theology, sociology, existentialism, psychoanalysis, positivism and so forth. If using one theory to explain Kafka's works, it will undoubtedly weaken and reduce Kafka's literary value. Kafka is inexhaustible.

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