

COMPARISON OF THE WHITE IMAGE AND CULTURAL IMPLICATION ON THE INJUSTICE OF DOU E AND THE PRINCESS OF MAHSURI

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Abstract: *The Injustice to Dou E* is a China Yuan poetic drama masterpiece whereas *The Princess of Mahsuri* is Malaysia's folk legend. Although both stories represent different theme, they have the same motif of "injustice death". Both heroines took three supernatural oaths to show their innocence after being wronged. Although the two stories are similar in content, it is worth to note that three oaths of the two have invariably used white. This article attempts to explore the different white images and cultural implication of two places from the cultural differences caused by historical, ethnic, and geographical factors by emphasizing on the interpretation of colours in different culture. The purpose of this is to find the unique values of respective culture and to achieve cross-cultural exchange and communication. In addition, the social significance behind the two stories is also worth of further studies.

Keyword: The injustice to Dou E, the Princess of Mahsuri, white image, China, Malaysia

1. Introduction

The Injustice to Dou E is a China Yuan poetic drama masterpiece written by Guan Han Qing. Dou E's story is well-known to every family. The kind-hearted Dou E was sentenced to death by admitting that she poisoned and killed Zhang's father in order to save her mother-in-law. The three vows before her death sentence were a confession of her innocence. These three vows were indeed fulfilled. Dou E, who had been false accused, waited for three years until his father Dou Tian Zhang came back to retrial the case. Finally, Dou E's innocence was justified. Coincidentally, there was also a folklore in Malay literature called *Princess of Mahsuri*, which was passed down on the island of Langkawi, Malaysia. The beautiful princess Mahsuri was accused of having an affair with a young Malay poet whose name was Deramang by the patriarch's wife due to her jealousy. Princess Mahsuri was finally sentenced to death. Before her death, she also made three vows to confess her innocence. All three vows were fulfilled. Therefore, the deeds of Mahsuri being false accused were also hand down to the next generation. Although *The Injustice to Dou E* and *Princess of Mahsuri* have different themes, they both adopted the same motive - "Wrath of Unjust Death". It is worth noting that the three oaths of the two have used WHITE in the same way. From such perspective, this paper attempts to explore the different white images and cultural connotations of two different places.

2. The White Image and Cultural Implication of *The Injustice to DOU E*

In Chinese culture, white has been a symbol of purity and perfection since ancient times. Chinese patriotic poet Qu Yuan's *Nine Chapters – Huai Sha* said: "Turn white to black and fall from top to bottom."⁷ In his poem, Qu Yuan used black and white as a metaphor for the political environment he was in at that time. Here "white" symbolizes justice, kindness, and light. *Zhuang Zi-Heaven and Earth* said: "If the diabolical scheme is in the heart, it is white and unprepared."⁸ The "white" here symbolizes "sincerity and frankness." Meanwhile, Li He's *A Trip to Wine* said: "The rooster crowing makes the world becomes white"⁹. This "white" gives people a clean and bright feeling. Chinese culture often uses words such as "white" together with "snow and jade", such as "flawless white jade", which is perfect and impeccable metaphor. In addition, in terms of character, words such as "innocent" and "white and flawless" are often used to indicate a person's integrity.

⁷ Wang Tao selected versions with notes, Liu Yi Sheng chief editor. (1987). *Qu Yuan selection of ancient poems*. San Lian bookshop (Hong Kong). Page 98.

⁸ Fan Zhong Xin, Yuan Jian. (1992). *Zhuangzi modern Chinese*. China TV broadcast publication. Page 175.

⁹ Pan Tian Ning, Xie Jun Xiang. (1991). *Poetry of tang Dynasty selected beautiful verses*. Zhong Zhou Gu Ji publication. Page 318.

Although white imparts purity, brightness, justice, and kindness to people, there are also aspects that people do not like. White is also a manifestation of exhaustion, bloodlessness, and lifelessness. It is associated with death and funeral. It also symbolizes grief and bad omen. This is because Chinese culture believes in the theory of yin and yang and the five elements. They believe the West represent gold and white tiger. It belongs to the god of warrior who kills other gods and represents autumn in the four seasons. Therefore, the ancients often conquered injustices and executed criminals during autumn to conform the favorable climate. As a result, white has become a taboo colour in China. Therefore, white is often used in funeral ceremonies. For example, funeral arrangement is euphemistically called "white funerals". During the funeral, people need to wear white mourning dress. Relatives and friends of the deceased usually wear black veil on their arms and pin the white flowers on their shirtfront to express condolences and respect to the affected relatives. In addition, the master of the house also sets up a white mourning hall for eating white rice. During funeral, they will raise white banners. This indicates that the relationship between white and death is inseparable in Chinese tradition.

The Injustice to Dou E is a tragedy. The white colour in the work contains two images as mentioned above. Out of Dou E's three oaths, the first oath said: "None of the blood will stick to the ground, but all fly up to the white silk cloth" and the second oath said: "After death, three feet of snow will fall from the sky". These two oaths mentioned "white" as background. The behead of Dou E is the high point in the play. There are twelve feet long white silk clothes hanged beside the execution ground. Under the blue sky and bright sun, the white cloth was fluttering. This scene does not only create a desolate beauty that penetrates the soul and reaches the heart, but also predicts a dreadful tragedy. Dou E was beheaded in grief and indignation. Her blood splashed on the twelve feet white clothes. The white background with red blood thrilled everyone's heart. This scene portrayed a contrast between Dou E's beautiful qualities and her death execution. It also created a strong visual contrast and aesthetic effect. Guan Han Qing did not pause here but continue to write what happened after Dou E death. It aroused a natural vision and a good snow flowing. The execution ground became totally white. The strong atmosphere of tragedy took the audience's inexplicable grief and indignation to the limit.

White is not only a symbol of Dou E's pure personality but also her grievance. In terms of stage effects, white successfully makes the tragedy atmosphere more intense. The characters became more prominent. The romantic colour is richer, and the artistic appeal is more powerful. Because of this, the third part of *The Injustice to Dou E* has always been recognized as Guan Han Qing's most important effort.

3. The White Image and Cultural Implication of *The Princess of Mahsuri*

With the introduction of Islam to Peninsula Malaysia around 14th century, Islam gradually integrated into the Malay culture. Although Malay culture is not equivalent to Islamic culture, to a considerable extent, Malay culture is indeed influenced by Islam.

Islam advocates three colours: black, white, and green. "White colour is the natural colour. Green colour is pure colour endowed by the nature. Do not use red and yellow colours. Red is a gorgeous colour and yellow is a secluded colour."¹⁰ In *Orthodox True Interpretation Righteous Life*, a Chinese Hanafi-Maturidi scholar says: "From five colours, only white is the cleanest. Because it is originally clean and has no artificial factor, it is not comparable by other colours." Prophet Muhammad likes to wear white clothes and always told his believers: "You should always wear white clothes because white clothes are the cleanest and the most beautiful." Therefore, Muslims follow the Hadith teachings and consider white as their preferred clothing. The believers pray five times a day and always need to keep their clothes clean, thus, white clothing can best show up filthiness and they can wash it any time. This is conformed to the requirement where body and clothing must be clean during worship.

Islam emphasizes purity. Thus, they prefer simple, plain, and natural colours. White represents peace, purity, solemn and cheerful. Muslims love for white originated from the ancient Arab custom who advocates white. This is because the climate there is hot and white clothing keeps body cool. In addition, the white building gives a feeling of comfort, tranquility, simplicity, and softness. It also

¹⁰ Ma Yi Yu. (1948). *China Islamic historical criticism*. Shang Wu publication. Page 5.

purifies the soul. The combination of the primitive psychology of whiteness and Islamic teachings is gradually transformed into a national aesthetic sentiment.

In contrary, white has complicated emotions in Chinese culture. Malay culture is relatively simple. Under the influence of Islam, white becomes a natural colour of religious etiquette. White animals are considered sacred and inviolable. White is even regarded as more noble than yellow colour which represents the royal family. This is derived from Malacca sultanate and stipulated after the king of the dynasty converted to Islam. "King Muhammad was the king who first stipulated yellow as the colour used by the king. The people are not allowed to decorate their houses with yellow. As for the umbrellas used when they go out, the white ones are more important than yellow. This is because white umbrella can be seen from a distance. The white umbrella is used specifically by the king, while the yellow umbrella belongs to the prince."¹¹ In addition, same as other Islamic countries, white represents purity on the national flag which has four colours (red, blue, yellow, and white). This indicated how Malay nation has seriously valued the white colour.

Princess Mahsuri in *The Princess Of Mahsuri* shed white blood that symbolizes holiness after she was executed. This illustrates the fact that Princess Mahsuri was false accused by others. Another Malay folklore *Princess Sadong* also has the same plot. For the sake of national security, Princess Sadong of Kedah was sent to the powerful Siam as a hostage. She was later sent back to the country for resolutely refusing to have relations with the King of Siam. After returning to the country, Princess Sadong was not welcomed. Her husband (Raja Abdullah) misunderstood that she had an immoral relationship with the King of Siam and stabbed her with a Malay sword. The princess fainted on the spot with white blood.¹² Although white blood means death approaching, the Malay people do not associate white with death but regard it as holiness. It is enough to make people feel terrified that the deceased has a vision on their own body. That has made people become more sympathy to women who are regarded as weak in the society. As such, the Malay people believe that these weird phenomena indicated the deceased had great grievances which need to be reconciled. They had to express their indignation through this way.

This concept is not only being influenced by Islamic advocates on white, but it is also directly related to the Malay's attitude towards death. Islam believes that there is afterlife. Death is not the end of life but the way to return the truth. Therefore, they avoid the word "death" which is a very important basic belief in Islam. They believe that at the end of the world, all people will be resurrected and be judged before Allah. The judgement is based on good and evil done by a person on the earth. As Quran says, "Everyone who has life will die and on the resurrection day, you will receive your rewards." (Chapter 3 verse 185)¹³ "We are of Allah. We will all belong to Him." (Chapter 2 verse 156)¹⁴ "You said: "The god of death, who is ordered to take charge of your lives, will cause you to die, and then you will be called to your Lord." (Chapter 32 verse 11)¹⁵. Therefore, the attitude of Muslims towards death is quite calm. It is regarded as inevitable where someday death will approach. Pertaining to death, the family members of the deceased must not be overly sad and turn into violence lamentation. At the funeral, the deceased were cleaned and wrapped in a white cloth for burial. It means "coming and leaving with innocent". White does not only mean pure in Malay society but it has extended meaning as holiness.

4. Conclusion

The beauty of white is impeccable and absolutely harmonious. It gives people infinite images and allows different cultures to extend the meanings into multiple cultural concepts. From the Chinese perspective, white is not only the incarnation of light and justice but also represents sorrowful funeral. This complex feeling is fully portrayed in *The Injustice to Dou E*. The Malay culture is comparatively simple. They also advocate white as pure and clean, but they do not have sad feeling in white and even extend white meaning to "holiness". This is the fundamental difference between two cultures. Although there is a slight difference in the imagery of white between China and Malaysia, it does not affect the

¹¹ Huang Yuan Huan translate. Author Tun Sri Lanang (2004). *Malay Annals*. Xue Lin bookshop. Page 87-88.

¹² Adnan Abd. Majid Chief editor. (2005). *Malay Classical Literature*. Dewan Bahasa and Pustaka publication. Page 24-27.

¹³ (2019). *Al Quran Al Karim Malay translation*. Al-Hidayah House of Quran Sdn. Bhd.. Page 74.

¹⁴ (2019). *Al Quran Al Karim Malay translation*. Al-Hidayah House of Quran Sdn. Bhd.. Page 24.

¹⁵ (2019). *Al Quran Al Karim Malay translation*. Al-Hidayah House of Quran Sdn. Bhd.. Page 415.

revelation left by the two works to the descendants of these two places. Justice will always remain in the world and the world will justify the innocence for people.

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