Between "Sin" and "Punishment": On the Cross-Cultural Differences in the Paths of Individual Redemption in Rickshaw Boy and Crime and Punishment

Yanxu Chen*

College of Liberal Arts, Heilongjiang University, Heilongjiang, China

*Corresponding author: A17645021121@outlook.com

Abstract. This article aims to compare two literary masterpieces—Lao She's *Rickshaw Boy* and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*—through the framework of comparative literature. It explores the different natures of the "crimes" committed by the protagonists Xiang Zi and Raskolnikov, as well as the corresponding "punishment" they suffered, thus revealing the fundamental differences between Chinese and Russian cultures in terms of personal corruption and redemption. The article believes that Raskolnikov's crime is a positive and rationally thought "theoretical crime". His punishment is manifested as inner moral torture and mental breakdown, and his redemption eventually leads to religious repentance. In contrast, Xiang Zi's sin is a passive and survival-oriented "existential sin", which is punished by material destruction and the collapse of faith. His tragedy is precisely that there is no viable way to salvation at all. This comparison not only highlights the different philosophical concerns of the two writers, but also reflects the profound dilemma of "salvation through suffering" in the cultural background of Orthodoxy, and the collapse of "practical rationality" in Chinese secular traditions.

Keywords: *Rickshaw Boy*; *Crime and Punishment*; intercultural comparison; sin and punishment; redemption.

1. Introduction

As a literary theme, "Crime and Punishment" has long attracted much attention and has appeared in many classic works. This study focusses on cross-cultural comparative research on this topic. Dostoevsky's novel Crime and Punishment elevated this theme to eternal religious significance and guided it towards spiritual revival; while Lao She's *Rickshaw Boy* climaxed with the demise of individualism, which eventually led to complete physical destruction. These two works were created in different eras, but they occupy an important position in the history of their respective national literature, and their interpretations are also diverse. Meng Wenwen, in A Brief Analysis of the Manifestation and Function of the "Superman" Theory in *Crime and Punishment*, discusses the crucial role of the "superman" theory in shaping Raskolnikov's thoughts and actions [1]. Wei Jiawen, in A New Exploration of the Causes of Xiang Zi's Tragedy, identifies Xiang Zi's tragedy as an inevitable result of his existential paradox [2]. Liu Kun interprets the core spirit of Eastern Orthodox culture through textual analysis of Dostoevsky's works, while Jin Ye reinterprets the cultural significance of *Rickshaw Boy* from the perspective of cultural balance under pragmatic rationality [3,4]. Many scholars have explored the works from angles such as social criticism and psychological analysis. Although the separate research on these two works has achieved fruitful results, cross-cultural comparative analysis is still lacking, and the sporadic discussion mainly focusses on the concepts of individualism and the urban bottom class. The completely different fate of Raskolnikov and Xiang Zi stems not only from the difference in their motivations, but also from the inevitable results brought about by their respective unique cultural environments, which ultimately led to their completely different endings. Through their depictions of sin, the portrayal of punishment and the description of the city, Dostoevsky and Lao She demonstrate the diverse possibilities of the "sin and punishment" motif. Therefore, this study unfolds through four sets of comparisons: "theoretical sin" versus "existential sin," "spiritual punishment" versus "material punishment," "maze of reason" versus "marsh of existence," and "religious conversion" versus "absence of redemption." It seeks to

uncover the cultural codes behind these divergent outcomes, helping readers better understand the differences between the two cultures and their fundamental perspectives on individual degradation and redemption.

2. The Revelation of "Sin" in Rickshaw Boy and Crime and Punishment

In revealing "sin," Dostoevsky and Lao She present distinct characteristics due to their differing eras, cultural traditions, and focused character types. They elaborate on "sin" at the metaphysical level of theory-religion and the physical level of survival-degradation, respectively, shaping different connotations of the term "sin."

Nineteenth-century Russia was in a period of transition from the old to the new, shifting from a feudal society to a capitalist one. Traditional religious morality and modern theoretical ideas constantly clashed among the Russian upper class, influencing the creation of a number of literary works [5]. A group of intellectuals represented by Dostoevsky maintained a skeptical and critical attitude toward foreign theoretical ideas. Through depicting the sense of sin induced by the "superman" theory, with Raskolnikov's distortion and perversion as a typical example, they attributed "sin" to the betrayal of traditional religious morality by modern theoretical concepts.

The emergence of the "superman" signifies separation from God. Since Eastern Orthodoxy was established as Russia's state religion in the tenth century, God has existed as a metaphysical supreme will. As the supreme will, God both constrained people's thoughts and provided spiritual sustenance for the majority of believers. When Nietzsche proclaimed "God is dead" in the nineteenth century, freeing humanity from religious confinement, people also fell into new despair [6]. After nearly a thousand years of Orthodox rule, the traditional religious spirit has penetrated into all aspects of Russian life, become part of its cultural genes, and resisted the integration of new ideas. In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov's "superman" theory—rooted in Nietzschean thought—divides people into "ordinary individuals" and "extraordinary beings," using this to justify murder. However, when he really raised his axe to kill, he was overwhelmed by deep fear. This fear did not stem from the crime itself, but from the separation of his soul from God, which gradually pushed him to the brink of collapse, and finally to destruction in the inner torment. In Russia's Eastern Orthodox cultural tradition, criminals are referred to as "unfortunate people." It is believed that a criminal's inherent nature contradicts their actions, and their soul will be rejected by God for profaning the divine [6]. Although Raskolnikov was not a devout Eastern Orthodox believer, God occupied an important place in his mind. His implicit faith in God made him increasingly aware of the impracticability of the "superman" theory after committing murder. His sin precisely lies in this betrayal of traditional religious morality by modern theoretical concepts. After Raskolnikov splits Lizaveta's skull, his fear becomes more acute. This unexpected behaviour completely destroyed his conscience, and he could not accept God's rejection, causing him to fall into a crazy state of corruption. China in the 20th century was also in a period of social transformation, and old and new things coexisted in the social melting pot. The urban bottom class, represented by Xiang Zi, seeks to survive and develop in the city, facing both economic difficulties and oppression from others. Various contradictions intertwined within him, firmly confining Xiang Zi physically and mentally. The urban bottom class, represented by Xiang Zi, seeks to survive and develop in the city, facing both economic difficulties and oppression from others.

Xiang Zi struggled for survival, but eventually fell because of it. He was born in a rural family. Land is the material foundation for the survival of peasants; without land, peasants cannot survive. For the rickshaw puller Xiang Zi, his rickshaw was his "land" [2]. Every time Xiang Zi was about to achieve or had just achieved his ideal, an inexplicable blow would follow. His three ups and three downs in life transformed him from a respectable man into someone who dared not face the sun, a "ghost of individualism's demise." The disguised exploitation by Mr. Cao, Fourth Master Liu's ulterior motives, and Hu Niu's double oppression both physically and spiritually—all these gradually eroded Xiang Zi's passion for life. His hopes for survival were shattered repeatedly, and the physically

and mentally broken Xiang Zi had to resort to dishonorable means and humiliating postures to continue living in society. Xiang Zi's degeneration was an inevitable result of his inability to bear the burden, a passive response driven by the instinct for survival.

The "sins" borne by Xiang Zi and Raskolnikov are distinct. The desire for survival led Xiang Zi down the path of spiritual ruin, while theoretical contemplation veiled Raskolnikov in madness. One person lives like neither a human nor a beast, and the other is almost driven crazy. Xiang Zi's rural growth experience plunged him into the struggle of survival, while Raskolnikov's complex cultural background made him mentally tortured for a long time. Different times and environments have shaped these two completely different "sins" - "the desire to survive" and "theoretical pursuit", which proves the potential impact of cultural traditions on individuals.

3. The Portrayal of "Punishment" in Rickshaw Boyand Crime and Punishment

In depicting "punishment," Dostoevsky and Lao She wrote from entirely different perspectives. Distinct cultural traditions shaped their different focuses: Dostoevsky centered on the soul, yet subjected his characters to physical suffering; Lao She focused on the body, leading his characters to the destruction of faith.

Betrayal of God torments the human soul. Corresponding to the conceptualization and moralization of Eastern Orthodoxy in Russia, Eastern Orthodox thought embodies a complete moral system centered on compassion, enlightened by God's love and sacrifice [3]. Within this system, true punishment is not prolonged hard labor but the torment endured by the soul. Due to his betrayal of God, Raskolnikov's mental state became abnormally pathological after committing the crime. He began to confuse dreams with reality, teetering on the edge between "madness" and "sanity." In his dream, the old woman smiled eerily, and no matter how hard Raskolnikov tried, he could not kill her. It felt as if people were standing all around him, leaving him with his heart constricted and his legs felt rooted to the ground [7]. When he could not help but scream and wake up, Raskolnikov did not dare to open his eyes. Dostoevsky used this dream to depict Raskolnikov's inner struggle; the judgment from within tore his soul apart.

For Raskolnikov, legal confession and punishment were closer to an inevitable path to returning to God's embrace. The punishment endured by the protagonist of *Crime and Punishment* was the self-rupture of the soul, caught between reason and emotion. Law was not a terrifying instrument of torture for him, but God's mercy acted like a mirror, illuminating the ugliness in his heart. When he gradually moved closer to God from being a "superman" who claimed "perhaps there is no God at all," and finally ignited new hope for life under the religious love and inspiration of Sonia, Raskolnikov's punishment truly ended [7]. When Sonia, a symbol of religion, was fully accepted by Raskolnikov, God's light once again shone on his soul, and physical punishment became the beginning of spiritual liberation. After Raskolnikov was touched by this sacred love, obvious symptoms such as high fever, confusion, and paranoia faded away. These physical sufferings, including hard labor, transformed into a necessary price for a new life.

Faith in "material things" constitutes the cruelest punishment. Throughout history, leaving a name for posterity has always been the pursuit of only a few. For most Chinese people before the twenty-first century, especially Chinese peasants, material "worldly matters" such as having four generations living under one roof, granaries full of grain, and gold and silver jewelry resonated more deeply with their hearts. Rooted in this cultural tradition, Chinese people's faith in "material things" is profound. They trust the "things" in their hands and yearn for more, yet they are often destroyed by "things" [8]. To survive, Xiang Zi relied on his body as his only capital, toiling in the city and regarding his body as "everything for survival." However, he lived because of "material things" and was destroyed by them—fever, poverty, and the loss of love led to the collapse of both his body and spirit. Lao She allows Xiang Zi to be consumed by the very "material things" he most believed in, revealing the tragedy and despair of the underclass being swallowed by the logic of survival.

Raskolnikov and Xiang Zi represent the different literary and cultural traditions of their two nations. Raskolnikov's "punishment" is inward, psychological, and a self-rupture of the soul. It originates from the worship of God and leads to self-transcendence. Xiang Zi's "punishment" is outward, material, and the absolute destruction of the body. It stems from faith in "material things" and leads to self-annihilation. Under different cultural traditions, people's understanding of suffering varies, resulting in differences in the portrayal of punishment. In the light of God, Raskolnikov struggles to confront his own ugliness. On the soil of "material things," Xiang Zi endures the collapse of faith, demonstrating the potential role of cultural traditions in interpreting concepts.

4. The Metaphor of the City

The city is an inescapable topic in world literature. Different nations have their own literary urban images—St. Petersburg in Russia, London in Britain, Paris in France, and Beijing (Beijing) and Shanghai in China. The formation of these urban images is inseparable from writers' long-term depictions, during which different cultural traditions have exerted divergent influences on their portrayals of cities.

As the birthplace of Russian literature, St. Petersburg was passed down from Pushkin to Gogol and, through Dostoevsky's writing, has become an indispensable part of the Russian literary tradition [9]. Joseph Brodsky, a St. Petersburg poet who fled to the United States in the 1970s, argued that St. Petersburg "has been a central theme of Russian literature almost since its founding" [10]. Influenced by Eastern Orthodoxy, Dostoevsky wrote about people's souls with religious devotion. In his works, St. Petersburg is isomorphic with the characters' inner worlds, forming a maze of reason.

Dirty and stinking corners hide behind the city, distorting the modern rational civilization advocated by the West alongside Raskolnikov's soul. The St. Petersburg in *Crime and Punishment* differs from modern cities under Western civilization. It is sweltering, crowded, and filled with illusions, like a huge stream of consciousness field. Svidrigailov believes that this city is a place that "exerts such a gloomy, intense, and strange influence on people's souls" [7], but Dostoevsky's purpose is not to depict the city's impact on people. In the hands of this renowned writer, St. Petersburg becomes an incarnation of Raskolnikov's mind. He can barely perceive any light or beauty here because his inner world has already undergone intense conflict, and his reason has become distorted in the process. His body reacts extremely to certain specific information, and the desire to confess and fear of confessing present a structural contradiction [11]. Raskolnikov's reason enters a distorted maze, wandering through the city of St. Petersburg alongside his body.

Beiping was a place where Xiang Zi refused to leave once he arrived, a place "where he wished to die" [12]. It could bring Xiang Zi true happiness. Chinese people possess incredible imagination when viewing cities. As an ancient capital, Beiping was both a paradise on earth dreamed of by ordinary people in the past and a stubborn force that eroded the people in the eyes of the public later [4]. Undeniably, like Xiang Zi's strong and healthy body, this city once displayed vigorous vitality. In Lao She's works, Beiping is an external, alien oppressive force that once brought Xiang Zi joy and ultimately led to his "death."

Xiang Zi truly "died" here. Warlords, detectives, Hu Niu, and the weather—like a marsh, they dragged Xiang Zi down and drained his life force. He struggled in the ancient city of Beiping: roaming the streets and alleys, pulling occasional passengers and then becoming a full-time rickshaw puller for a family. He had just bought a rickshaw when it was seized by warlords, his money was cheated by detectives, and later he lost his innocence after being seduced by Hu Niu, marrying her and gradually being drained physically and spiritually. These events form nodes in Lao She's narrative, weaving a large net that firmly traps Xiang Zi, the "camel." Xiang Zi struggled desperately but could never escape the net; instead, he gradually lost his strength. The courtyard dwellings in Maojiawan are simply a microcosm of Beiping [13]. It was here that Xiang Zi met Xiao Fuzi—he had been drained of his vitality by Hu Niu, while Xiao Fuzi was trapped by Er Qiangzi and her younger brothers. These two pitiful people with similar fates met in this small courtyard, but they were by no means the

only ones. Such courtyard dwellings have never been lacking in this city, and today they even serve as a cultural symbol. By having the two meet in this iconic structure, Lao She confirms the universality of their existence. At the same time, due to the reduced geographical scope, the exploitative acts become particularly apparent. Representing alien forces, Er Qiangzi and Hu Niu gnawed at Xiao Fuzi and Xiang Zi's flesh and blood time and time again. Under this dense social network woven by human relationships, the ancient city of Beiping devours countless "Xiang Zis" through innumerable "Hu Nius," forming the source of the city's vitality.

If St. Petersburg in Dostoevsky's works is a stage for psychological dramas, then Beiping is a battlefield for social dramas. Raskolnikov battles himself in St. Petersburg, where the city acts as a magnifying glass for the character's inner world, highlighting the distortion and chaos of reason. Xiang Zi struggles against external forces in Beiping, where the city transforms into a life-draining marsh, displaying an alien oppression. Eastern Orthodoxy's focus on the soul influenced Dostoevsky's urban portrayal, while Chinese people's understanding of the ancient capital shaped the image of Beiping in Lao She's works. The two complement each other, reflecting the influence of different cultural traditions on writers' depictions of cities.

5. The Other Shore of Redemption: Religious Conversion and the Annihilation of the Path

In interpreting redemption, Dostoevsky and Lao She presented completely opposite narratives. Rooted in the Eastern Orthodox cultural context, Dostoevsky found an outlet in confession and love for Raskolnikov, affirming the redemptive value of suffering. In contrast, against China's secular cultural background, Lao She depicted a rickshaw puller who could not attain redemption in a modern society of moral and social disintegration, imbuing his story with a deeper sense of tragedy.

Religion held special significance in nineteenth-century Russia. In Russian thought, humans can only find God through suffering, and there exists an unknown secret regarding the path to God. Human fate and happiness lie in understanding this secret [3]. As the transitional social form impacted everything old, Dostoevsky, a devout religious believer, directed the ultimate meaning of life toward religion and God.

God, in his eyes, was the spiritual sustenance of the Russian people. Sonia is the character chosen by the author—like the nag in Raskolnikov's dream, she is forced by her master to bear an unbearable burden while facing the threat of death. Yet Sonia does not die amid the cold stares and ridicule of onlookers; she slowly pulls her heavy load, atoning for her sins through predetermined suffering. This brings her soul closer to God, allowing her to appear in others' lives like God himself.

As an incarnation of God, Sonia's companionship and guidance finally lead Raskolnikov to repent during his hard labor and gain a new life. Proclaiming himself a "superman," Raskolnikov is overwhelmed by pain after committing murder and repeatedly numbs himself with the "superman" theory, yet he is ultimately not the "Napoleon" he imagines himself to be. Amid spiritual torment, Raskolnikov reveals his murder to Sonia. His body and reason can no longer sustain him—he is a "louse," not a "superman," and he needs God's salvation. Guided by Sonia, Raskolnikov kisses the earth and turns himself in. One day during his eight-year hard labor, he resolves to draw closer to Sonia. "Can her faith not become my faith now? At least, her feelings, her aspirations⋯" [7]. Raskolnikov finally lets go of his past, finds an exit from the maze of reason, and achieves a form of rebirth. Drawing closer to Sonia signifies Raskolnikov bowing his proud head to God and the religious cultural system he represents. Sonia is a personification of the Eastern Orthodox tradition—her God-like love and devout faith in God heal Raskolnikov's fragmented soul, enabling him to accept suffering calmly and achieve personal redemption.

China's secular culture emphasizes practicality. People usually measure the value of individuals or things by their "usefulness" or "uselessness," a tendency that is more pronounced in the lives of ordinary people. This forms a "pragmatic rationality," regarded as wisdom for living. Li Zehou once discussed "pragmatic rationality," arguing that it "elevates usefulness as the criterion of truth,

asserting that truth resides in its utility and effects" [4]. However, this cultural tradition also leads to an extreme tendency: when people fall to the lowest point in life, they assess their value to others (mostly loved ones) or society. Once they label themselves as "useless" or even a "burden," they often abandon themselves to despair or seek death.

Xiang Zi discovers his own "uselessness" at the lowest point of his life, leading to his spiritual exhaustion. After Hu Niu dies in childbirth, Xiang Zi sells the last rickshaw that truly belongs to him in life. After arranging Hu Niu's funeral, only over thirty yuan remains. Despite years of struggle, he is deceived, exploited, and robbed repeatedly. At the depths of his despair, Xiao Fuzi becomes his spiritual anchor and the final lever by which he measures his own "usefulness." If Sonia in *Crime and Punishment* does not fall on the path of suffering, Xiao Fuzi in *Rickshaw Boy* becomes the "nag" that is beaten to death, dying in agony. Xiang Zi ultimately fails to "rescue her from that small room," and he becomes completely "useless"—this is "the outcome of a lifetime of striving," leaving him with nothing but "useless tears" [12]. The once ambitious Xiang Zi can no longer find his value, and his soul thus loses all vitality, "turning into a thin, dirty, lowly rickshaw puller" [12]. This survival philosophy of "pragmatic rationality" completely loses its power here. Faced with the cruel laws of the modern city, Xiang Zi cannot attain redemption, reduced to a beast in the cultural city.

These two vastly different endings demonstrate the instinctive responses of characters facing shocks and challenges under different cultures. Raskolnikov achieves self-redemption through religious love and faith, while the rickshaw puller Xiang Zi, with the bankruptcy of his "pragmatic rationality" philosophy, has no transcendental force to rely on for survival. As stated in the text: "His life could be ruined by his own hands, and he would no longer sacrifice anything for anyone" [12]. Xiang Zi's life can only be destroyed by himself, no longer entrusted to others or other things. The comparison between Raskolnikov and Xiang Zi not only highlights the different philosophical concerns of the two writers but also reflects the profound dilemmas arising from "redemption through suffering" in the Eastern Orthodox cultural context and the breakdown of "pragmatic rationality" in China's secular tradition.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that *Crime and Punishment* and *Rickshaw Boy* exhibit fundamental differences in their revelation of sin, portrayal of punishment, and interpretation of redemption. These differences are rooted in the distinct cultural traditions of nineteenth-century Russia and twentieth-century China. Influenced by Eastern Orthodoxy, Russia emphasizes metaphysical religious and philosophical contemplation, while China, grounded in secular and rural cultures, focuses on physical survival itself. The comparison of the two works proves that the same literary motif bears vastly different fruits in distinct cultural soils. Furthermore, it reveals that the absolute despair in *Rickshaw Boy* and the spiritual redemption in *Crime and Punishment* are two distinct yet equally profound responses of humanity to predicaments under different cultures. This research provides valuable references for future studies in this field, primarily influencing the cross-cultural interpretation of the "sin and punishment" motif. Future research should focus more on in-depth exploration from a cross-cultural comparative perspective.

References

[1] Meng W. A Brief Analysis of the Manifestation and Function of the “Superman” Theory in Crime and Punishment. Literary Education (Upper), 2020, (09): 52–53.

[2] Wei J. A New Exploration of the Causes of Xiang Zi’s Tragedy in Camel Xiang Zi. Social Sciences in Beijing, 2005, (04): 100–104.

[3] Liu K. The Eastern Orthodox Cultural Connotations in Dostoevsky’s Thoughts on “Sin” and “Punishment”. Foreign Literature Studies, 2009, 29(03): 120–126.

[4] Jin Y. Cultural Balance Under Pragmatic Rationality—A New Interpretation of Lao She's Camel Xiang Zi. Chinese Cultural Research, 2014, (04): 172–182.

[5] Hu T. On the Disease Narrative in Crime and Punishment. Yangtze Novel Appreciation, 2025, (02): 67–70.

[6] He X. Suffering and Redemption—A Comment on Dostoevsky's Creative Psychology in Crime and Punishment. Foreign Language Research, 2004, (04): 103–107.

[7] Dostoevsky F. M. Selected Works of Dostoevsky: Crime and Punishment. Translated by Feng Yibing & Ru Long. Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2021.

[8] Fang J. Camel Xiang Zi: Tragic Discourse from Multiple Perspectives. Ancient and Modern Literature Creation, 2024, (10): 4–6+27.

[9] Tian H. Sin and Punishment: Dostoevsky's Discovery of St. Petersburg. Urban Culture Studies, 2015, (02): 289–298.

[10] Brodsky J. Less Than One. Translated by Huang Canran. Hangzhou: Zhejiang Literature and Art Press, 2014.

[11] Wu W. Time in Illness—The Disease Narrative in Crime and Punishment. Yangtze Novel Appreciation, 2025, (18): 63–66.

[12] Lao S. Selected Works of Lao She: Camel Xiang Zi. Beijing: People's Literature Press, 2018.

[13] Chen Y. Camel Xiang Zi: Lao She's Realist Brushwork and Insight into Human Nature. Zhongyuan Literature, 2025, (12): 11–13.