The Portrayal of Individual Predicaments in an Era of Transition: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of the "Superfluous Man" Images of Ashley and Gao Juexin

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the predicaments of individuals in the transformative era and conducts a cross-cultural comparison of two "superfluous people" characters, Ashley from *Gone with the Wind* and Gao Juexin from *Family*. It clarifies the core characteristics of "superfluous people" in Russian literature, including spiritual contradictions, lack of practical ability and estrangement from their times, and verifies that the concept applies to both Western and Chinese literary works. Ashley clung to tradition as the Southern American plantation civilization declined, while Gao Juexin suppressed himself amid the collapse of China's feudal family system; both drifted apart from their eras and embodied "superfluity" in their own ways. Their cultural roots differ as Ashley's predicament stemmed from the rift between his ideal of the old Southern aristocracy and the harsh post-war reality, leaving him unable to find a foothold in the new era, while Gao Juexin's dilemma arose as filial piety and fraternal responsibility in Chinese family ethics eroded his sense of self. Drawing on Foucault's theory of power discourse, the paper explores how the cultural power system "disciplines" these two characters, and through the "superfluous people" images, *Gone with the Wind* mourns the Southern civilization while *Family* criticizes the feudal system.

Keywords: Ashley; Gao Juexin; Disciplinary Power.

1. Introduction

When an era undergoes transformation, it is usually accompanied by the collision between the new order and the old one. During this process, the confusion, struggles and predicaments that individuals encounter often become the core themes that literary works focus on depicting. In Russian literature, there is a classic image of "superfluous people". These images are characterized by "mental contradictions, lack of ability in action, and disconnection from the era they are in", and they accurately capture the living conditions of individuals during the transitional period. When this "redundant person" prototype was projected onto the environments of 20th-century China and the West, it demonstrated a unique adaptability. Just like in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, there is a character named Ashley who was in the midst of the transition from the southern plantation civilization to the industrial civilization, and he held onto the ideals of nobility in his heart. But when facing reality, they lack the ability to deal with it. And Gao Juexin in Chinese writer Ba Jin's *Family*, he lives at the intersection where the feudal extended family is disintegrating and new ideas are beginning to emerge. He is burdened with the constraints of the eldest grandson, who is the main branch of the family, thus suppressing himself. Although Ashley and Gao Juexin belong to different cultural environments, they all demonstrated the core characteristics of "superfluous people".

At present, most of the existing research focuses on interpreting the image of a single "redundant person" or only makes image comparisons within the same cultural context. There are still not enough studies on cross-cultural comparisons of the two characters Ashley and Gao Juexin. There is a lack of research on the cultural logic differences between China and the West that exist behind their "redundancy". In light of such circumstances, this paper takes the concept of "redundant people" as a theoretical framework for research. It clarifies what the core characteristics of this concept are and its adaptability in cross-cultural aspects and also establishes dimensions for comparison. This paper, through a careful analysis of the text, we specifically examined the "superfluous" manifestations of

these two characters and the commonalities they share. Then this article delves into the cultural roots to explore in what ways American individualism and Chinese family ethics respectively shape the predicaments faced by these two characters and combines Foucault's "power discourse" theory to analyze the "punitive" role played by cultural power. This article makes a cross-cultural comparison. It is intended to enrich the research scope of the "superfluous person" image, revealing the cultural differences existing in the individual predicaments during the transitional period between China and the West, as well as the commonalities of human existence.

2. Definition of the "Superfluous Man" Concept and Its Cross-Cultural Adaptability

The literary concept of "superfluous people" originated in Russian literature in the 19th century. It refers to a group of noble intellectuals living during the special period of social transformation. Although these noble intellectuals were influenced by new ideas, due to their own class limitations and ideological contradictions, they have no way to truly participate in social change. When they became marginalized figures unwilling to collude with the upper class and, due to their relatively distant relationship with the people, they couldn't find their own place, Turgenev first clearly defined the concept of "superfluous people" in his work *Diary of a Superfluous Man* [1]. After that, Characters like Onegin created by Pushkin, Bertov in Herzen's works, and Oblomov created by Goncharov, together form the image spectrum of "superfluous people" in Russian literature [2].

The core characteristics of "redundant people" can roughly be summarized into three aspects. The first aspect is mental contradiction, which refers to the intense conflict between new and old ideas in an individual's inner world. The second aspect is powerlessness, that is to say, even "redundant people" can clearly recognize that they are in a difficult situation. But they lack the courage and the ability to change reality. The third aspect is being out of touch with The Times. Their ways of thinking and behaving cannot keep up with the pace of The Times, which makes them seem like people left over from the past era. Here it should be noted that "superfluous people" are not a product unique to Russian literature; in fact, they are a literary phenomenon that exists in different cultures. When the concept of "superfluous people" is combined with different cultural backgrounds, distinct variant images of "superfluous people" will emerge.

In the field of modern Chinese literature, the image of "superfluous people" and local culture have merged together, eventually giving rise to variants with Chinese characteristics. Just like Gao Jiexin in Ba Jin's *Family* and Juan Sheng in Lu Xun's *The Wanderer*, they are both contradictory figures in the transitional era. They were influenced by the enlightenment of new ideas, yet they were unable to completely break free from the constraints of traditional ethics [3]. In contrast, in Western literature and American literature, the term "redundant person" is rarely used directly. However, the character Ashley in the book *Gone with the Wind* has a very prominent feature of being a "redundant person". He grew up in an educational environment of southern nobility and was simply unable to adapt to the new social reality after the war. Eventually, he became a romanticist who was always immersed in the past.

3. Analysis of the Common Traits Between the Images of Ashley and Gao Juexin

3.1. The Internalization of the Conflict Between Old and New Ideas

The most prominent commonality between Ashley Wilkes and Gao Juexin is that they have very profound spiritual contradictions deep in their hearts, and this spiritual contradiction is also the core feature of the literary prototype "superfluous people". Superfluous people refer to those who are out of touch with The Times. They are unable to adapt to the changes in society and feel that they have nothing to do with this era. They all lived at a crucial juncture when an era was undergoing drastic

changes. At this time, the traditional value system was gradually disintegrating, while a new order had yet to be established. The tension generated by this specific era directly turned into spiritual contradictions within them.

Ashley was actually a figure born out of the noble culture of the southern plantations. He was deeply influenced by Greek classical culture and always pursued a refined and elegant feeling in his spiritual life. However, with the arrival of the war, the industrial civilization of the north also swept over. The beliefs and capital he originally possessed soon became worthless in the new society. The war destroyed the regime in the South and the plantations there. The prosperous life built on these foundations was also lost. However, this did not shake Ashley's inherent noble chivalry. His noble and proud temperament as well as the spirit of "taking pride in defeat" still existed [4]. Ashley was between his attachment to the past and his fear of the future. He knew very well in his heart that those past days would never come back, but he couldn't find his own place in the new era. By the time he became a very contradictory figure, unable to stick to the old traditions all the time, yet unable to embrace the new world.

Gao Juexin's spiritual contradictions, although manifested in different forms, are equally profound. As the eldest grandson of the main branch of the Gao family, he was influenced by Confucian ethics from a very young age and shouldered the significant responsibility of safeguarding the family's traditions. However, the ideological trends of the May Fourth New Culture Movement exposed him to concepts such as democracy, science, and personal liberation. It kindled a yearning for a new society and freedom in his heart. This contradiction is particularly evident in his marital life: He deeply loved his cousin Mei, but due to the Confucian principle of "arranged marriages and parents' orders", he had no choice but to give up their love. After marrying Ruijue, he was unable to prevent his wife from being forced to give birth in the countryside because of the superstitious notion of "blood disaster". Even when she had a difficult labor at the end, He also failed to take the crucial step to break free from the shackles of feudal ethics and stay by her side. Time and again, he compromised with feudal ethics. This was not because he approved of feudal ethics, but because he lacked the courage to resist [5]. This conscious pain was a typical mentality of a "superfluous person", that is, he knew what the right choice was, but due to various internalized norms, he was unable to act.

3.2. Facing Reality with Passivity and Evasion

Another commonality between Ashley and Gao Juexin lies in their inability to act when confronting reality. Both harbor certain ideals and aspirations, yet they appear weak and powerless in the face of real challenges, lacking the practical ability to change their circumstances.

Ashley's incompetence was largely due to his inherent tendency to actively evade. He was not completely unable to adapt to new situations; on the contrary, he refused to make changes from the bottom of his heart. After the war, he tried to run a wood factory but failed in the end. This was not so much because he lacked the ability It is more accurate to say that it was the result of his mental resistance and passive response. He had no choice but to rely on Scarlett's help and protection. However, such dependence hurts his own self-esteem. Most of the time, he felt that life was particularly difficult. He lacked the ability and courage to deal with these obstacles. After having such an understanding, it drove him to retreat even more, retreating to books. He also reverts to his memory to evade the responsibilities he should bear in real life. Ashley's incompetence was not only reflected in his financial life, but also in his emotional choices - he had always been indecisive between Melanie and Scarlett, which was actually a sign that he couldn't make a decisive decision.

Gao Juexin's incompetence is mainly reflected in his constant compromise when facing family pressure. He is a young man who has received modern conceptual education. Theoretically, he supports his younger siblings in pursuing marital freedom and independent behavior. However, in practice, he repeatedly acts as a lobbyist for the family's authority. In fact, he was not completely without the will to resist. Take his own marriage for example. He was particularly eager to be with his cousin Mei and even made some weak efforts to win her over. However, when Master Gao used the draw to determine his fate, the rebellious consciousness that had just emerged in him soon

collapsed in the face of the powerful family authority. He dissuaded Juehui from taking part in the student movement and even interfered with her publication of the newspaper. He was not out of malice but was worried that they would "offend the whole family" by doing so. His timid and cowardly way of handling things made him an accomplice to the feudal family and also made him suffer even more. The tragedy of Gao Juexin lies in the fact that his compromise was not something he did voluntarily. Rather, it is the result of helplessness and powerlessness after each struggle with family authority. Every time he thought that making a compromise could bring temporary peace, but the result only led to more tragedies. Mei passed away due to constant depression, and Ruijue died in childbirth. Both of these incidents were closely related to his repeated concessions [5].

3.3. Facing Reality with Passivity and Evasion

Both Ashley and Gao Juexin are typical representatives disconnected from their own eras. Their personality traits, values, and behavioral patterns belong more to the fading old era than to the new era they actually lived in.

Ashley was a figure born of the Southern plantation civilization. He particularly emphasized honor, elegance and romantic sentiment. However, what post-war American society needed were people like Scarlett who had a pragmatic mindset and adaptability. Ashley once clearly and openly admitted that he belonged to the past era, an era full of chivalry and gentlemanly demeanor. This self-awareness prevented him from integrating into the new social order. At the barbecue held in Twelve Oaks, Ashley predicted that the Old South was coming to an end soon. This actually foreshadowed in advance that he would become a victim of the changes of this era. He was like a medieval knight living in modern society, with noble character. However, it is unable to integrate with the modern society full of utilitarianism [6].

The character Gao Juexin represents the predicament that the feudal scholar-official culture in China faced in modern society. As the eldest grandson of a prominent family, he was required by his family to receive traditional Confucian education, which particularly emphasized family interests and ethical order. However, after the May Fourth Movement, Chinese society was undergoing a re-evaluation of values. Personal liberation and family revolution became the prevailing trends of that era. Gao Juexin was unable to adhere to traditional values as firmly as his ancestors did, nor could he embrace new trends as resolutely as his younger brother Juehui did. As a result, he became a marginal figure wandering between the old and new worlds. Ba Jin, by shaping Gao Juexin's character, has well revealed the process of social transformation in modern China. The awkward predicament faced by traditional Chinese intellectuals [7].

4. The Root of Differences Arising from "Superfluousness" Under Cultural Heterogeneity

4.1. Different Cultural Logics

Although Ashley and Gao Juexin share the common trait of being "redundant men", this "redundant" situation in them stems from profound cultural differences. The predicament Ashley is facing is mainly due to the failure of the compromise between idealism and pragmatism in the American individualistic culture, while the tragedy Gao Juexin has encountered More importantly, it is because in Chinese family ethics, filial piety and brotherhood have eroded the individual self.

The plantation civilization in the South, relying on the slave economy, took chivalry, the code of honor and rural life as its core contents, gradually giving birth to a romantic idealism with a noble air [6]. Ashley was the result of this ideal - he was particularly infatuated with the illusion of the old South civilization, and he was unable to adapt to the social order disrupted by the war. Nor could they accept the new logic of doing things brought about by the industrial civilization of the north. He placed more emphasis on personal honor, spiritual pursuit and the quality of lifestyle rather than material success. Against such a cultural backdrop, the realization of personal value is not directly

equated with material achievements. To say that Ashley suffered defeat after the war was not only due to his insufficient personal ability, but also because of the conflict in cultural values between the North and the South. Scarlett faced reality bravely, but Ashley couldn't. His fear of reality was essentially a particularly intense anxiety, that is, the worry that the old cultural pattern would soon be replaced by the new one.

In contrast, Gao Juexin was more deeply bound by Chinese family ethics and culture. As the eldest grandson of the "main branch" of the Gao family, he was entrusted with the special mission of maintaining family harmony and ensuring the family's continuation. This responsibility was particularly heavy and often overshadowed his personal desires and happiness. When the New Culture Movement began to advocate individual liberation, A very intense value conflict arose in Jue Xin's heart. He had to consider whether to adhere to the desire of the "individual self" or fulfill the responsibility of the "collective self". He chose the latter, not because he truly accepted it, but because he lacked the ability to resist the situation [8]. Jue Xin was confronted with many conflicts, such as those between emotion and reason, thought and action, ideals and reality, as well as love and hate [9]. He wanted to escape from what bound him and betray the class he belonged to. And the first thing he has to face is his own family. In order to be able to fight, he has to endure the constant inner struggles.

4.2. Cultural Power Discipline Offers Different Possibilities for Resistance

Although Ashley and Gao Juexin both share the common trait of being "superfluous men", the "superfluous" situation in them stems from relatively profound cultural differences. The predicament Ashley is facing mainly results from the failure of the compromise between idealism and pragmatism in the American individualistic culture. As for Gao Juexin's tragedy, this is more because in the Chinese family ethics, filial piety and brotherhood have eroded the self [10].

For Ashley, his main disciplinary force comes from the honor discourse in the southern noble culture. This discourse system shapes the behavioral norms, speaking style and value orientation that a gentleman should follow, which makes Ashley prioritize "honor" over practical things. However, what sets Ashley apart from Gao Juexin is that the American society he lives in still offers him a certain degree of personal choice space. The Civil War led to the disintegration of the ancient southern noble system, but the American society is fluid and has a basic respect for individual rights, which provides him with several paths to move forward. After the end of the Civil War, the capitalist economy of the United States expanded rapidly, and the plantation economy in the South collapsed. However, this did not deplete economic vitality; instead, it gave rise to various development paths such as industry, commerce, and the expansion to the west [6]. For Ashley, he could rely on his noble educational background, just as he had rich management experience and relatively high cultural literacy. Engage in new economic activities. He could have worked in Scarlett's lumber mill, or ventured to the west to develop colonies, or engaged in other undertakings, without having to confine himself in the dilapidated Twelve Oaks District. Although these choices were fraught with difficulties, at least in theory they were feasible. Ashley's tragedy lay in the fact that his thoughts were completely bound by the noble culture of the south. It makes it impossible for him to make use of these limited free Spaces. Foucault believed that power not only suppresses people but also gives rise to a certain form of subjectivity. Ashley's "excess" is precisely a special kind of subjectivity produced by the southern noble culture, a kind of subjectivity so refined that it is impossible to survive in the harsh new world.

In Gao Juexin's view, the main force of discipline actually stems from all the ethical disstatements of the feudal family system in China. This discourse framework not only dominated his external behavioral manifestations but also infringed upon his emotional domain, including the norms of the family, the norms of society, and the demands of morality. These aspects together form an unbreakable cage of power. Foucau believed that power was achieved through the "shaping" of individuals, and Gao Juexin was the product of the complete "shaping" of feudal ethics. He constantly transformed external norms such as filial piety towards elders and respect for brothers into demands he set for himself and even imposed self-punishment. When Ruijue encountered a difficult labor, He

couldn't force himself to push open that door. This was not merely because he was afraid of social condemnation, but more importantly, his mind had been completely trained by superstitious words like "blood disaster". The root cause of tragedies is generally not the accidental mistakes made by individuals, but the overall power structure that shapes them. The reason why Gao Juexin's image is so eye-catching is that the feudal family system, as a powerful power discourse system, systematically and subtly erodes people's subjectivity. Even the victim himself has unknowingly participated in the process of being conquered.

4.3. Different Support Systems

Another significant difference between Ashley and Gao Juexin lies in their distinct social networks, which directly shaped their approaches to and possibilities of addressing dilemmas.

Although Ashley had lost all his material wealth, he still had a relatively stable support system. This included Melanie's unconditional support for him, the harmonious relationship between them on a spiritual level, Scarlett's care for him and the help she gave him in secret, and even the Northern rulers, for various motives, He was also given a certain degree of tolerance. These relationships provided Ashley with some emotional comfort and also helped him a lot in real life. Melanie, she demonstrated a value system that was somewhat different from pragmatism. Her existence was proof of Ashley's idealism. Ah, Ashley was considered "superfluous" more because of the conflict between him personally and the outside world. Rather than saying that he is in a completely isolated state.

However, Gao Juexin's situation was far more lonely than others. He was firmly confined in the deep courtyard of the Gao family. What he faced were his lofty and extremely autocratic grandfather, his rebellious younger brothers below, and a group of elders who were always entangled in open competition and various secret plans. Very few people could truly understand the pain in his heart. His cousin Mei passed away at a young age. Although Ruijue was particularly kind-hearted, he couldn't fully understand the contradictions in his heart. And his younger siblings like Juehui would still condemn him for being too cowardly. This profound loneliness gave Gao Juexin's "excess" a deeper tragic resonance - not only was he somewhat disconnected from the era he was in, but he also couldn't find emotional resonance and support within his own family. His particularly isolated state, to some extent, explains why he is more passive and withdrawn than Ashley.

5. Conclusion

The results of this research confirm the core characteristics of the "superfluous people" in Russian literature, namely, spiritual contradictions, incompetence in action, and cross-cultural adaptability that is out of step with the development of The Times. These features can be seen in Ashley in *Gone with the Wind* and are also reflected in Gao Juexin in *Family*. Ashley and Gao Juexin, both characters, lived during a period when society was in transition. They faced the inner reflection of the conflict between old and new ideologies and adopted a passive and evaded attitude towards reality, which was out of step with the development of The Times. The research also pointed out the cultural roots of the differences in the "superfluity" of these two characters and relied on drawing on Foucault's theory of power for discussion. It verified the disciplinary effects of different cultural power systems on the two characters Ashley and Gao Juexin and pointed out the differences in the support systems they each relied on. Research suggests that the two works, *Gone with the Wind* and *Home*, express mourning for the civilization of the American South and criticism of the feudal system in China through the prototype of "superfluous people". These two works also highlight the cultural particularity of the predicaments faced by individuals during the transitional period between China and the West, as well as the universality of human existence. This study has enhanced the cross-cultural research on the "redundant person" prototype in both depth and breadth, filling the gap in previous studies in the cross-cultural comparison of Ashley and Gao Juexin. It provides new case and theoretical approaches for their literary prototype research and the cultural interpretation of individual predicaments in social transformation. Future research should focus more on expanding the scope of

comparison, incorporating more variations of the "superfluous people" from both China and the West, developing different theoretical perspectives such as existentialism, and exploring its reflective value in the contemporary era by connecting the prototypes with the actual context of modern social transformation.

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