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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Maternal collapse and narrative difference: Infanticide in Xihou and Medea

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ABSTRACT

Although *Xihou* belongs to the tradition of classical Chinese fiction and *Medea* belongs to the tradition of ancient Greek tragedy, both works present an extreme tragedy through the motif of a mother killing her child. This shared motif makes the two works suitable for a parallel study in comparative literature. This article focuses on the child-killing episodes in the two works. It examines the collapse of the traditional image of motherhood, the family and bloodline order represented by the children, and the tragic paradox in which resistance and self-destruction exist at the same time. This article argues that maternal infanticide is not simply an act of revenge. It also cannot be explained simply as the loss of maternal love. Instead, it is an extreme tragic response to marital imbalance, the constraints of motherhood, and a crisis of female subjectivity. At the same time, the same motif produces different narrative meanings in different literary traditions. *Medea* uses monologues, dialogue, and stage conflict to present the female subject's will openly. In this way, child-killing becomes an extreme expression of revenge. *Xihou*, by contrast, uses compressed narration and the author's final comment to place the woman's predicament within the framework of traditional ethical judgment. The comparison shows that the motif of maternal infanticide reveals tensions within the ethics of motherhood. It also exposes a deeper problem in patriarchal marriage and family structures, where female subjectivity is difficult to recognize fully.

KEYWORDS

Xihou; Medea; maternal infanticide; motherhood; female agency; narrative difference

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1. Introduction

"Maternal infanticide" is an extreme literary motif with strong ethical impact in both Chinese and Western literature. Traditional cultures usually connect motherhood with love, care, protection, and sacrifice. However, the act of killing one's own child directly overturns this stable image of motherhood. It brings parent-child ethics, marital order, and the crisis of female identity into the same tragic event. For this reason, maternal infanticide is not an ordinary act of violence. It also cannot be explained only as revenge or moral failure. Instead, it reveals a hidden and fragile part of family ethics. A woman may face conflicts among her roles as a wife, a mother, and an independent subject. Under such conditions, motherhood may change from a source of care into a source of pressure and even destruction (Rich, 1976; Ruddick, 1989).

Xihou comes from the tradition of classical Chinese fiction, while Medea comes from the tradition of ancient Greek tragedy. The two works have no direct relationship of influence. However, both use maternal infanticide as the climax of an extreme tragedy. This similarity gives them value for a parallel study in comparative literature. Previous studies have examined Medea from several perspectives. Scholars have discussed gender relations, female agency, revenge, motherhood, and the emotional structure of the tragedy (Foley, 2001; Rabinowitz, 1993; Segal, 1996). Recent studies have further expanded these discussions. Kasimis (2020) examines Medea through exile, displacement, and women's subordination within the family. Laufer (2021) connects Medea with maternal infanticide and the social construction of motherhood. Allan (2021) focuses on the relationship

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between emotion and moral judgment in Euripides' tragedy. Studies of *Xihou* and *Liaozhai Zhiyi* have mainly examined female representation, gender discourse, and the narrative tradition of classical Chinese fiction (Chen, 2012; Huang, 2014; Liu, 2007). However, fewer studies have placed *Xihou* and *Medea* within the same comparative framework of motherhood, the symbolic role of the child, self-destructive resistance, and narrative form.

This article focuses on maternal infanticide in *Xihou* and *Medea*. It examines how the two works present the collapse of the traditional image of motherhood. It also explores how the children represent family order and bloodline continuity. In addition, the article analyzes the paradox of self-destruction within female resistance. On this basis, the article further compares the narrative methods of the two works. As an ancient Greek tragedy, Medea uses monologues, dialogue, and stage conflict to present the female subject's will in a direct and public way. As a work of classical Chinese fiction, Xihou uses compressed narration and the author's final comment to present moral judgment within a traditional ethical order. This article argues that the killing of the children in the two works should not be understood simply as the loss of maternal feeling. It should also not be reduced to a successful act of revenge. Instead, it is an extreme tragic response to marital imbalance, the constraints of motherhood, and a crisis of female subjectivity. The same motif of maternal infanticide also creates different tragic meanings in different literary traditions. *Medea* gives greater emphasis to the public expression of the female voice and the force of revenge. *Xihou*, by contrast, gives greater emphasis to the woman's predicament, which is compressed and partly hidden within ethical judgment.

2. The collapse of the image of motherhood: why is maternal infanticide so shocking?

Maternal infanticide becomes an extreme form of tragedy not only because it destroys the parent-child relationship. More importantly, it overturns the traditional image of motherhood at its foundation. In common ethical ideas, a mother represents love, care, protection, and sacrifice. The bond between mother and child is also often seen as the most natural and stable form of family affection. Therefore, when the mother no longer protects life but destroys it, the act creates an ethical shock that goes beyond ordinary violence. *Xihou* and *Medea* both use this unusual plot to break the stable and caring image of motherhood. In both works, motherhood becomes a space where pain, hatred, and a crisis of female subjectivity come together.

In *Medea*, the shocking nature of maternal infanticide first comes from the sharp conflict between maternal feeling and the desire for revenge. *Medea* does not kill her children because she has completely lost her maternal love. On the contrary, she shows pity and hesitation several times before the killing. When she looks at her children, she wavers and says, "My heart, do not do this!" This cry shows that her identity as a mother has not disappeared. Her children still touch her deepest emotions. However, these maternal feelings cannot finally stop her desire for revenge. She later admits, "I know that what I am about to do is wrong, but my passion is stronger than my reason." These two statements reveal *Medea*'s inner conflict. She understands the moral wrong of killing her children, but she cannot free herself from the anger and desire for revenge caused by Jason's betrayal (Euripides, 2002; Allan, 2021). The horror of *Medea* does not come from an absence of maternal love. It comes from her conscious choice to let revenge overcome maternal feeling, even though she knows that her children are innocent and that their deaths will also cause her great pain.

This conflict gives the collapse of motherhood in *Medea* greater tragic force. Jason's betrayal does not only destroy the marriage. It also denies the sacrifices that *Medea* has made for love and marriage. She is abandoned as a wife and loses the protection of the marital relationship. She is also a foreign woman who lacks a secure kinship network. Her gendered and displaced position makes her crisis more severe (Kasimis, 2020). Her dignity as a female subject is also damaged. In this situation, the children are no longer only lives that a mother should protect. They also become part of *Medea*'s plan for revenge against Jason. By killing the children, she punishes the man who betrayed her, but she also destroys her own identity as a mother. For this reason, *Medea*'s infanticide is not simply the completion of revenge. Revenge gives her a form of agency, but it also destroys her maternal identity and family bond (Segal, 1996; Battistella, 2021). She punishes Jason in the most extreme way, but she can do so only by destroying the children she herself gave birth to. This shows the complete reversal of motherhood within the logic of revenge.

The representation of child-killing in *Xihou* appears within the ethical context of classical Chinese fiction, but it also reverses the traditional image of motherhood. Traditional Chinese family ethics values the parent-child relationship, family continuity, and family order. A mother is expected not only to raise her children but also to help maintain family ethics. As a mother, *Xihou* should protect her child and preserve family order. However, she finally destroys this relationship with her own hands. After *Xihou* learns the truth, the story states that "when Jia was away, she killed the child in her arms, took her belongings, and fled back to Man" (Pu, 2020). The narration is very brief. It gives almost no account of *Xihou*'s thoughts before the killing. It also does not describe the violence of the scene in detail. However, this compressed narration makes the act seem more sudden and shocking. The phrase "the child in her arms" should represent the closest bond between mother and child. A child in a mother's arms usually suggests dependence, protection, and affection. Yet *Xihou* kills this very child. The mother's arms therefore change from a place of protection into the place where death occurs. The image of motherhood is completely reversed. However, *Xihou*

is more complex than a simple story of female resistance. The text does not fully approve of *Xihou*'s act. In the final comment, Pu Songling compares *Xihou*'s return to Man with "Lord Shouting's return to Han," which stresses the firmness of her emotional choice. At the same time, he also states that "to kill her child and leave in this way also makes her one of the most ruthless people in the world" (Pu, 2020). This comment gives *Xihou*'s action a double meaning. Her return to Man shows her loyalty to an earlier love and her refusal to accept a deceptive marriage. However, the killing of her child also gives this loyalty an ethical stain that cannot be removed. Therefore, the child-killing in *Xihou* is neither a simple rejection of motherhood nor a simple praise of female resistance. Instead, it creates a sharp conflict among love, marriage, motherhood, and family ethics (Chen, 2012).

In summary, both *Xihou* and *Medea* create strong ethical shock by reversing the traditional role of the mother. The shocking force of maternal infanticide comes from a basic contradiction. The person who is expected to protect the child becomes the person who destroys the child. As a result, the most stable family bond becomes an unbearable ethical rupture.

3. The child as a bearer of family order: why does the child become the target of destruction?

If maternal infanticide first overturns the traditional image of motherhood, the child as the victim further reveals the structural meaning behind the act. In traditional family ethics, the child is not an isolated individual. The child exists within a network formed by the mother, the father, marriage, and family order. The child comes from the mother's bodily experience, but also becomes part of the logic of paternal bloodline and family continuity. For this reason, the child becomes a key link between the parent-child relationship, the marital relationship, and the family structure. In this sense, maternal infanticide does not only break the bond between mother and child. It also breaks the structure of marriage and the mechanism of bloodline continuity.

In Classical Athens, motherhood was also shaped by wider social expectations concerning reproduction, childcare, and family order (Waite & Gooch, 2023). In *Medea*, the children are closely connected to Jason's identity as a father and to the continuation of his bloodline. After Jason betrays *Medea* and marries the princess of Corinth, he does not truly give up the children. Instead, he still wants them to have a place within his new family and social position. This shows that the children remain part of Jason's future family and identity. They are not only objects of personal affection. They also support his role as a father and his hopes for the future. *Medea* understands this connection. For this reason, she includes the children in her plan for revenge. By killing them, she destroys not only her own children but also the basis of Jason's identity as a father. She also destroys his bloodline and his future hopes. Therefore, the child-killing in *Medea* is not simply an act of emotional violence. It is an extreme break in the chain of paternal continuity (Segal, 1996).

Compared with *Medea*, the child in *Xihou* does not have the same clear political and bloodline function found in ancient Greek tragedy. However, the child is also deeply embedded in the traditional Chinese patrilineal family structure. In this structure, children do not only maintain the parent-child relationship. They also support family continuity and the stability of family order. In *Xihou*, *Xihou* kills her child and returns to Man. This shows that her escape is not simply a departure from the merchant. She also cuts off the child-related bond within the existing marriage. The child originally represents the most direct bond of intimacy and protection between mother and child. In this episode, however, the child becomes the object through which *Xihou* breaks her marital and family ties. The child is therefore destroyed not only as an individual life but also as a link within marriage and family order.

The children in *Xihou* and *Medea* are not ordinary plot elements. They carry key functions within different cultural structures. In *Medea*, the children represent the break in paternal identity and bloodline continuity. In *Xihou*, the child represents the destruction of the marital bond and the traditional patrilineal family order. The two works come from different cultural contexts, but they reveal a similar structural relationship. The child serves as a link within the family. Once that link is destroyed, the system that supports paternal or patrilineal continuity also begins to collapse. The shock of maternal infanticide becomes especially strong at this point of rupture. The act does not only end a life. It also removes a key support of the family's ethical order.

4. Self-destruction in resistance: the tragic paradox of maternal infanticide

The complexity of maternal infanticide lies in the fact that it cannot be understood simply as a victory of female resistance. It also cannot be treated only as an act of moral failure. For the women in *Xihou* and *Medea*, killing the child is indeed an extreme form of resistance. It gives direct expression to suppressed anger, humiliation, and the demand for dignity. It also causes irreversible damage to the betrayer and to the existing marital order. However, this resistance does not truly create a path for female subjectivity to gain recognition. The women can express their pain only by destroying the child, breaking the role of motherhood, and damaging family ethics. This shows that they lack a normal space for speech and action within the existing order (Rabinowitz, 1993). The tragedy of maternal infanticide lies in this paradox. On the surface, it challenges marriage and family ethics. At a deeper level, however, it carries the cost of self-destruction.

This paradox appears especially clearly in *Medea*. *Medea* does not kill her children because she suddenly loses control. She makes the decision while fully aware of its consequences. She knows that the children are innocent. She also knows that their

deaths will cause her great pain. Even so, she chooses this act because she wants Jason to suffer the greatest possible loss. Before the killing, she admits that "my passion is stronger than my reason." This statement shows that the desire for revenge finally overcomes both maternal feeling and rational judgment. This inner division makes *Medea*'s action more than an act of madness. It becomes an extreme choice made in full awareness of pain. By destroying her children, *Medea* tries to defend her wounded dignity. At the same time, she destroys her own identity as a mother. When the revenge is complete, female subjectivity does not gain full recognition. Instead, the parent-child bond, maternal identity, and family relationship collapse together.

Compared with *Medea*, *Xihou* does not express her will in such a direct and public way. Her action appears more like an extreme response to a broken marriage and an ethical crisis. By killing her child and returning to Man, *Xihou* completely cuts her ties with the merchant's family. However, this act also places her under the judgment of maternal ethics. At the end of the story, Pu Songling calls her "one of the most ruthless people in the world." This comment shows that the text does not present her child-killing simply as a victory of resistance. *Xihou*'s tragedy is not only a case of personal moral failure. The text does not allow her to express her pain directly. Instead, her suffering is compressed into the sudden actions of killing the child and returning to Man. The killing can therefore be understood as an extreme way for her to break completely with the existing marriage.

The tragic paradox of maternal infanticide lies in its double nature. It resists the existing order of marriage and family ethics, but it cannot truly move beyond that order. It allows female subjectivity to appear in an extreme form, but it does so at the cost of destroying the parent-child relationship and maternal identity. *Medea* gives greater emphasis to inner division within conscious revenge. *Xihou* gives greater emphasis to an extreme reaction under ethical pressure. Both works show that child-killing does not complete female freedom. Instead, it becomes a disastrous response when female subjectivity cannot gain normal recognition. The act breaks the apparent stability of family order. At the same time, it reveals the tragic condition in which women remain trapped within that order.

5. Differences in narrative style: female self-assertion and ethical judgment

Both *Xihou* and *Medea* present maternal infanticide as an extreme form of revenge. However, the same motif produces different tragic meanings when it appears in different literary traditions. The difference lies not only in the characters and their motives for revenge. It also comes from the genre traditions and narrative methods of the two works (Liu, 2007). As an ancient Greek tragedy, *Medea* mainly presents the character's inner world through monologues, dramatic dialogue, and stage action. As a work of classical Chinese fiction, *Xihou* relies more on concise narration and the author's final comment to form an ethical judgment. Because of these different modes of expression, *Medea*'s child-killing places greater emphasis on the public expression of individual will. *Xihou*'s child-killing, by contrast, places greater emphasis on moral judgment within a traditional ethical order.

Revenge in *Medea* has a strong verbal dimension. *Medea* does not move toward child-killing in silence. Instead, her pain, anger, and determination for revenge are repeatedly expressed through monologues and dialogue. When she speaks to the Chorus, Jason, and her children, she uses language to confirm both her humiliation and her decision to take revenge. This is especially clear in the monologue before the killing. Her hesitation, self-justification, and final decision are not reported by a narrator. They are presented directly through stage speech. *Medea*'s language allows anger, hesitation, and moral conflict to become visible to the audience (Allan, 2021). *Medea* admits the pain and moral wrong of what she is about to do. At the same time, she allows her desire for revenge to push the action toward an irreversible end. The dramatic form of ancient Greek tragedy allows her inner conflict to appear directly before the audience through her own words. For this reason, *Medea*'s child-killing appears more like a public declaration of female subjectivity.

The narrative method of *Xihou* is clearly different. Pu Songling does not give *Xihou* a long passage of self-defense. He also does not describe her thoughts in detail before she kills the child. Instead, he reports the event in only a few words: "When Jia was away, she killed the child in her arms, took her belongings, and fled back to Man." This compressed narration does not fully reveal *Xihou*'s inner world in the way that *Medea* does. Her pain, anger, and determination remain largely hidden within the sudden turn of the plot. At the same time, the final comment states that "to kill her child and leave in this way also makes her one of the most ruthless people in the world." This judgment places *Xihou* once again under the authority of traditional ethics. Her claim to subjectivity is not expressed through direct speech. Instead, it is contained within the restraint of classical Chinese narration and the moral judgment of the narrator (Chen, 2012; Liu, 2007).

This difference in narrative method also creates different tragic effects. *Medea* gives greater emphasis to the outward expression of the female voice. The act of killing the children therefore carries a strong sense of self-declaration. *Xihou*, by contrast, focuses more on the conflict of identity within an ethical order. The act of child-killing is always accompanied by the narrator's moral judgment. In *Medea*, female anger appears in a direct and intense form. In *Xihou*, the woman's predicament appears through brief narration and ethical evaluation. The same motif of maternal infanticide therefore develops different

points of emphasis in the two literary traditions. The tragedy of *Medea* highlights the outward expression of the female voice and the force of revenge. The tragedy of *Xihou* highlights a female predicament that is compressed and partly hidden within ethical judgment.

6. Conclusion

Although *Xihou* and *Medea* belong to different literary traditions, both use maternal infanticide to create an extreme form of tragedy. *Xihou* comes from classical Chinese fiction, while *Medea* comes from ancient Greek tragedy. A comparison of the two works shows that child-killing cannot be understood simply as the completion of revenge. It also cannot be reduced to a natural loss of maternal feeling. First, maternal infanticide overturns the traditional image of the mother as loving, caring, and protective. The mother changes from a protector of life into a destroyer of life. At the same time, the child serves as a link among marriage, bloodline, and family order. The child's death therefore also breaks the parent-child relationship and the mechanism of family continuity. Maternal infanticide is thus not only the destruction of an individual life. It is also a tragic result produced by the crisis of motherhood, family order, and female subjectivity.

From the nature of the act, maternal infanticide has a clear paradox. On the one hand, it is an extreme form of female resistance to male betrayal, marital imbalance, and ethical pressure. On the other hand, this resistance comes at the cost of destroying the child, breaking maternal identity, and damaging family ethics. It therefore does not truly bring the liberation of female subjectivity. More importantly, the same motif of maternal infanticide creates different points of emphasis in different literary traditions. *Medea* uses tragic monologues, conflicts in dialogue, and stage action to emphasize the public declaration of female will. *Xihou*, by contrast, uses compressed narration and the author's final comment to place the woman's predicament under the judgment of traditional ethics. The former gives greater emphasis to the outward expression of the female voice and the force of revenge. The latter gives greater emphasis to a female predicament that is compressed and partly hidden within ethical judgment.

The value of comparing *Xihou* and *Medea* lies not only in their similar plots of maternal infanticide. More importantly, both works reveal a deeper problem in traditional marriage and family ethics. In these systems, female subjectivity is difficult to recognize fully. When women are understood only as wives and mothers, they have little space to express dignity, anger, and pain as independent subjects. Under such conditions, motherhood may change from a caring role into an oppressive identity. The tragic meaning of maternal infanticide lies in this transformation. It exposes the internal tensions within family ethics in the most extreme way. It also gives literary form to the hidden predicament of female subjectivity.

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