

Double Oppression under the Post-colonial Perspective

-- An Analysis of the Synergistic Relationship between Eastern and Western Modernity Oppression in Death in Chicago

Huangyin Luo*

Faculty of Education, University of Macau, Macau, 999078, China

*hc31462@um.edu.mo

Abstract

Since Pai Hsien-yung's **Death in Chicago** was published, academic interpretations of the tragic origins of its protagonist Wu Han-hun have predominantly employed a binary opposition framework that fragments the conspiratorial relationship between Eastern and Western modernities, resulting in oversimplified explanations of the causes of death. This paper constructs a theoretical framework of "dual oppression by Eastern and Western modernities," revealing that Wu Han-hun's death is essentially an inevitable outcome of the violent collusion between Eastern and Western modernities within the global capitalist system.

Keywords

Death in Chicago; Postcolonial Perspective; Dual Modernity Oppression; Modernization Transformation of Confucian Ethics.

1. Existing Academic Interpretation and Innovation of this Paper

In his work **Death in Chicago**, Pai Hsien-yung centers on the protagonist Wu Han-hun's psychological breakdown and death in a foreign land, revealing the survival struggles of diasporic individuals in a globalized world [1]. While existing studies have approached the tragedy through cultural, root-seeking, and post-colonial lenses, they fail to fully uncover its underlying causes. Academic interpretations of Wu Han-hun's tragedy primarily follow three paradigms: 1. Cultural Conflict Theory: This perspective attributes Wu's demise to an Eastern individual's inability to adapt to Western cultural impacts (such as lifestyle and values), emphasizing the opposition between Chinese and Western cultures while overlooking structural factors beyond cultural adaptation. 2. Root-Seeking Narrative School: Blaming the tragedy on "homesickness" among diasporic subjects, this school argues that Wu lost spiritual grounding and identity confusion due to cultural alienation. While assuming "mother culture = spiritual salvation," it neglects the modernity alienation inherent in the mother culture itself. 3. Post-Colonial Criticism: Focusing on racial discrimination in Western societies, this school identifies Wu's identity fragmentation as stemming from colonial racial power structures. While criticizing the violence of Western modernity, it severs the connection between Eastern and Western modernities.

Although the aforementioned research touches upon partial characteristics of the modernity crisis, it falls into two major cognitive pitfalls that lead to a one-sided interpretation of the causes of tragedy: Pitfall One, the redemptive presupposition of "Eastern tradition": Viewing "Eastern traditions" (such as Confucian ethics and rural culture) as a "safe haven" against the alienation of Western modernity, while overlooking how tradition has been reconstructed into a tool of oppression in the process of China's modernization (such as the alienated concept of fame and status); Pitfall Two, the binary opposition between Eastern and Western modernities:

Using the "East vs West" framework to sever their relationship, failing to recognize that within the global capitalist system, Eastern and Western modernities have formed a "collusion of violence," jointly imposing structural oppression on individuals.

This paper argues that Wu Han-hun 's tragedy originates from "dual modernity oppression," suggesting that under the backdrop of global capitalist expansion, Eastern and Western modernities are not in opposition but rather form a synergistic mechanism. Western modernity suppresses non-Western subjects through racial discrimination and intellectual hegemony, while Eastern modernity alienates local subjects by reconstructing traditions (such as Confucian views on official appointments) and creating a "rootless state." Together, these mechanisms constitute structural violence against individuals, ultimately leading to Wu Han-hun 's tragic fate.

The innovation of this paper is reflected in the following three dimensions, breaking through the limitations of existing research: First, deconstructing the "root-seeking" myth: no longer viewing "root-seeking" as a spiritual escape for discrete subjects, but revealing how China's modernity creates a "rootless state" through historical turbulence (such as the "Cultural Revolution" and "White Terror") and cultural ambiguity, transforming the "Eastern tradition" from a "redemption object" into a "tool of oppression". Second, revealing the bidirectionality of knowledge colonization: both criticizing Western modernity's suppression of Third World knowledge systems (such as the exclusion of non-Western knowledge by Western academic standards) and analyzing the alienation mechanism -- where China's modernity compels subjects to engage in "knowledge translation transactions" -individuals must acquire "knowledge capital" from the West and then return home to "sell knowledge", becoming doubly alienated "knowledge brokers" [2]. Third, re-examining the traditional-modern contradiction: textual evidence demonstrates that the modern transformation dilemmas of Confucian ethics (such as conflicts between the concept of official rank and family ethics) are more deeply destructive than cultural conflicts, constituting the key factor behind Wu Han-hun's spiritual collapse.

2. The Triple Oppression of Oriental Modernity on Wu Han-hun

Eastern modernity is not the "spiritual backing" of Wu Han-hun, but exerts a hidden but fatal oppression on him through three paths: the disappearance of roots, the alienation of the concept of fame and the intensification of ethical contradictions.

The first is the disappearance of "roots", the disillusionment of the rural utopia and the state of rootlessness.

The term "diaspora " originally denoted the Jewish diaspora, later evolving into a transnational phenomenon under globalization. In Chinese literary discourse, its essence lies in the emotional experience of "leaving one's homeland while yearning for it" [3]. As a member of the "Displaced Generation," Pai Hsien-yung's father Pai Chong-hsi relocated to Taiwan during the Chinese Civil War. The Cold War era further propelled Taiwanese youth to study in the United States, subjecting Pai and his contemporaries to "second diaspora " ---a phenomenon that transcended mere spatial relocation, triggering a rupture in cultural identity. Wu Han-hun's life trajectory epitomizes this collective existential condition: His journey from Taiwan to pursue studies in Chicago, USA, severed ties with China's mainland traditional culture while creating disconnection from Taiwanese indigenous traditions, plunging him into the dilemma of "dual diaspora."

The academic community generally believes that "mother culture" can provide spiritual support for diasporic subjects, but Wu Han-hun 's experience is quite the opposite: his "mother culture" has always remained in a state of ambiguity -- Is it the indigenous culture of Taiwan? The traditional culture of the China's mainland? Or the "Republic of China" culture of the exiled

regime? The unresolved nature of this question renders the "local utopia" an empty illusion. Coupled with historical turmoil (the Cultural Revolution on the China's mainland and Taiwan's White Terror), mother culture not only failed to embrace Wu Han-hun, but further deprived him of the possibility of being "rooted" during the modernization process, plunging him into a complete rootlessness [2].

The second: Confucian concern with official rank and social status and global capital conspiracy: the alienation of knowledge brokers

The Confucian concept of official status in traditional Chinese society (such as "rising from a peasant scholar by day to the imperial court by night") has not been dissolved under modernity's impact, but rather merged with global capital to form new oppressive mechanisms. This convergence manifests as the transnational capital game of "cross-ocean gold-plating-knowledge repatriation": individuals are compelled to travel westward (e.g., Wu Han-hun pursuing a Ph.D. in the United States), acquire "knowledge capital" that meets global capital demands [2], then return home to "sell knowledge" through lectures and academic positions, becoming "knowledge brokers with dual alienation." Wu Han-hun's overseas education experience exemplifies this mechanism -- His core purpose in studying in the U.S. was not to "seek knowledge," but to obtain official status capital through a "Western degree," yet in this process, he lost his subjectivity in knowledge and became a tool of capital logic.

Third: the conflict between the pursuit of fame and family ethics intensified

In the traditional Confucian ideological system, "official rank" and "filial piety" were originally interdependent ethical norms that jointly served individual values and social order --. Pursuing official rank not only demonstrated personal value but also embodied the family honor of "glorifying the ancestors." Meanwhile, filial piety maintained stable family relationships and intergenerational continuity through ethical principles like "not traveling far while parents are alive." However, under the impact of globalization and modernization, the social foundations sustaining traditional ethical systems have undergone drastic changes, significantly amplifying the conflict between official rank and filial piety.

Modernity has intensified the inner conflict between "official status and filial duty". Geographically, contemporary society is characterized by globalization and high mobility. Young people may pursue better career opportunities abroad through overseas education-a trend aligning with Confucian ideals of official status-but simultaneously distance themselves from their parents, making it difficult to fulfill filial obligations, thus exacerbating tensions. In terms of values, modern society has fostered diverse perspectives where concepts like self-actualization and individualism have emerged, inevitably clashing more intensely with familial bonds and traditional filial piety.

Wu Han-hun's tragedy epitomizes this profound contradiction. As a Chinese student in America, he was separated from his mother by thousands of miles. His mother had urged him: "Come back to visit me while you're still alive. It won't matter if it's three or four years-make sure you return." Yet overwhelmed by academic pressures and financial burdens, Wu never fulfilled this wish until his mother's passing. Each letter from her became a sharp blade piercing his heart, as the conflict between studies and filial duty tormented him until his mental breakdown. His mother's death became a nightmare. When his uncle sent him letters or telegrams about her, Wu refused to read them-instead, he burned them in the fireplace. In a haunting dream, he saw his mother's lifeless body lying starkly on the coffin lid, snow-white without a trace of color. As he approached, her eyes suddenly opened wide, staring blankly at him. Her lips quivered as if trying to speak, but no sound escaped. Rushing to her, he pushed the cold, lifeless body into the coffin with all his might. This eerie act foreshadowed that his mother's world had vanished. Under the dual pressures of filial duty and career ambitions, his emotions had been distorted-

what remained was not nostalgia for family ties, but a desperate escape from and fear of such torment.

Imagine this: Had Wu Han-hun's mother not passed away before his doctoral dissertation was completed, and had he returned to China as a wandering scholar ("knowledge broker") after his successful return, he would still have faced repeated cross-regional lectures or been trapped in the academic pressure of "upward mobility or exit." In such a scenario, fulfilling the ethical duty of "supporting his family" would become increasingly difficult, while modern society's implicit exploitation of individuals would intensify. This reveals how the modernization process has created a powerful psychological burden: the struggle between career success and filial duty—a dilemma that defies simple resolution.

The pursuit of career achievements has further eroded familial bonds and romantic relationships. In modern society, industrialization and urbanization have reshaped social value systems, with career success replacing traditional ethics as the core evaluation standard. The utilitarian narrative of success continues to encroach upon emotional space, causing family ties to gradually deteriorate under the impact of modernity. Wu Han-hun loses his emotional anchor, a conflict profoundly reflected in *Death in Chicago*. On her deathbed, the protagonist's mother leaves a seemingly loving instruction: "Don't send him telegrams to avoid distractions from his studies." This ostensibly maternal care actually exposes the distortion and helplessness of traditional family bonds under modern values [1]. By actively sacrificing emotional connection with her son and prioritizing academic success over familial bonds, the mother's choice not only demonstrates the compromise of traditional family ethics in the tide of modernity but also foreshadows Wu Han-hun's spiritual collapse. Struggling to achieve academic success while studying far from home, Wu Han-hun's isolation and spiritual void are magnified infinitely, ultimately leading to the dissolution of existential meaning. This serves as a tragic footnote to modernity's contradictions, revealing how the process of modernization deprives Wu Han-hun of his psychological foundation once again.

Furthermore, the female protagonist Qin Yingfen in the text also became a casualty of career and fame. When Qin Yingfen declared: "I know once you leave, we're finished. You know I won't regret it--" [1], Wu Han-hun still chose to pursue advanced studies in America. After pushing aside Qin Yingfen and draping her with a short jacket, he silently departed from the botanical garden. During his time abroad, his frequent letters to Qin Yingfen received scant replies—only when busy with academic reports or exams would he recall writing back, then immediately forgot about it as coursework became overwhelming. While the loss of maternal affection was Wu's reluctant surrender to reality, his emotional detachment from love was a deliberate choice. Ultimately, as modernity's demands gradually eroded his emotional foundation, Wu Han-hun's emotional pillars were completely consumed by career ambitions.

3. The Oppression of Western Modernity and the Conspiracy between Eastern and Western Modernity

Wu Han-hun's tragedy stems not merely from the oppression of Eastern modernity, but from the "violent collusion" between Eastern and Western modernities within the global capitalist system -- Western modernity creates external dilemmas through racial discrimination and identity suppression, while Eastern modernity generates internal dilemmas through traditional reconstruction and capitalist logic.

As a non-Western subject, Wu Han-hun faced overt racial discrimination and covert identity suppression in Western society. Living in Chicago, he remained perpetually on the "marginal," unable to integrate into mainstream Western society while being alienated from Eastern culture through his "Western education," trapped in an identity crisis of being "neither Eastern nor Western." This existential dilemma stems not from individual adaptability but from the

constructs of Orientalism within Western modernity --- where the "East" is framed as backward and alienated. Through racial power structures, Western societies suppress non-Western identities, preventing Wu Han-hun from establishing stable self-awareness and exacerbating his spiritual crisis.

The "collusion" between Eastern and Western modernities is no accident but an inevitable outcome of global capitalist expansion. While Western modernity seeks to integrate non-Western regions into its global capital system through mechanisms like "knowledge hegemony" and "racial discrimination," Eastern modernity reconstructs traditions (such as distorted notions of official status) to supply Western capital with resources like "intellectual brokers" and "labor forces." This creates a mutually beneficial synergy. Wu Han-hun became the victim of this mechanism: Eastern modernity drove him to seek Western "gilding," turning him into a "knowledge tool" for global capital; Western modernity, through identity suppression and racial discrimination, prevented his integration into Western society, ultimately trapping him in a dilemma where "he couldn't return to the East nor assimilate into the West." This "dilemma of being caught between a rock and a hard place" directly reflects the violent collusion between Eastern and Western modernities -- Both systems jointly deprived Wu Han-hun of his identity, emotions, and subjectivity, ultimately leading to his demise.

4. Conclusion

This paper reinterprets Wu Han-hun's tragedy in **Death in Chicago** through the framework of "dual modernity oppression" from a postcolonial perspective. Contrary to academic interpretations attributing his death to "cultural conflict," "nostalgia syndrome," or "single-ethnic oppression," it reveals that Wu's demise was an inevitable outcome of the East-West modernity pact within the global capitalist system. Eastern modernity eroded Wu's spiritual foundation through the "disappearance of cultural roots," "distorted notions of achievement," and "intensified ethical contradictions." Meanwhile, Western modernity imposed existential hardships via "racial discrimination" and "identity suppression." This dual oppression, acting in concert, ultimately led to Wu's mental collapse and death.

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