

Desire and Fate: The Oedipus Complex in *Judou*

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ABSTRACT

The Oedipus complex, vital to Western tradition, seems to be negligible in Chinese literary and film works. However, the truth is that it still finds presentations in different forms in many works. The Chinese film *Judou* directed by Zhang Yimou focuses on the incest taboo in human society as its theme, provoking profound literary, psychological and anthropological reflections. The incest between Wang Judou the aunt and Yang Tianqing the nephew endows the characters in the story with multiple identities, hence complicated conflicts in the film and more interpretation possibilities. This article adopts psychoanalysis to revisit the contradictions and conflicts between Tianqing and Jinshan, Tianqing and Tianbai, Tianbai and Jinshan, as well as Tianbai and the villager. It finds that the Oedipus complex lies deep behind the tragedy. Tianqing's desire to murder his adoptive father Jinshan, and Tianbai's killing of his titular father, natural father and the imagined possessor of his mother, whether it be successful or failed, are all specific manifestations of the Oedipus complex. In addition, the Oedipus complex also offers a new perspective to analyze Tianqing's ambivalent attitude toward his adoptive father Jinshan. Despite strong desires to replace Jinshan as the possessor of Judou, Tianqing exhibits much hesitation and has always been postponing murdering the latter, for this, as psychoanalysis sees it, implies the denying of himself. In short, the Oedipus complex provides new angles and possibilities for the interpretation of this film.

Keywords: *Judou, The Oedipus complex, Postponed death, Psychoanalysis, Multiple interpretations, Zhang Yimou.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Incest as a universal taboo in human society indirectly reflects the instinctive desire in the depths of human hearts, because the forbidden is often what is yearned for (Qu 2019). Many literary and artistic works including *Oedipus Rex*, *The Tale of Genji*, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, etc. have touched upon this topic. The Oedipus complex just offers a handy approach to this issue, and sheds lights on the field of film & television studies, psychology, anthropology, sociology, etc. As for literature, many scholars choose to resort to psychoanalysis to examine works of Shakespeare, D. H. Lawrence, Dostoevsky, etc. (e.g., Lupton, Einhard & Reinhard, 1993; Armstrong, 2005; Turner, 2020). Film and television studies have also borrowed this tool to interpret such works as *The Lion King*, *King and the Clown* (e.g., Kegerreis, 2013; Kim, 2006). However, as Oedipus complex derived from the European tradition, its universality

is often questioned in non-Western cultural traditions. As Gu, for instance, argues, “the centrality of the Oedipus complex in the Chinese culture is non-existent [...] the documented presence of oedipal themes in Chinese literature, both traditional and modern, is barely present” (2006: 164).

Freud claims that if ancient Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* moved modern playgoers or readers as much as it does among contemporary Greeks, “the only possible explanation is that the effect of the Greek tragedy does not depend upon the conflict between fate and human will, but upon the peculiar nature of the material by which this conflict is revealed”, and “there must be a voice within us which is prepared to acknowledge the compelling power of fate in the Oedipus” (1931: 161). Freud actually manifests a fact that transcends history and culture. In other words, Oedipus complex seems to be universal. This article subscribes to this

argument (at least in the case of China), underpinned by the fact that the Oedipus complex finds its manifestations and presentations in both Chinese literary works (e.g., *The Thunderstorm* by Cao Yu and works by Eileen Chang, etc.) and cinemas (e.g., *The Banquet*, *Dam Street*, *Shadow*, etc.).

Many of Liu Heng's works also focus on the basic desires of human beings, including food (e.g., *The Damned Food*), sex (e.g., *The Obsessed*), and power (e.g., *White Vortex*), implying that it is hard for human beings to escape these fateful desire traps. Chinese director Zhang Yimou discovers the primitive desire in Liu Heng's novella *The Obsessed* (*Fuxi Fuxi* 伏羲伏羲), and puts it on the screen as *Judou*.¹ The film adapts the collective unconscious emotional experience of human beings in the Western sense to Chinese scenarios, and highlights the Oedipus complex from multiple levels, thus endowing the story with multiple-sphere interpretation possibilities. The present article will use this tool to analyze the film *Judou*, in a hope to offer a different interpretation of the story.

2. JUDOU – THE TRAGEDY OF INCEST

Although *The Obsessed* replaces the time and place of the story to a closed Chinese mountain village in the early 1920s, it completely inherits the basic plot of *Oedipus Rex*, and goes even further. The film *Judou*, however, is further adapted on the basis of the novella, for example, adapting Tianqing's suicide at the end of the novel into a murdering by his son Tianbai. In so doing, the film becomes more complicated than the prototype, and highlights the Oedipus complex in the original work, offering audience a multi-dimensional experience of the Oedipus complex and enabling more interpretation perspectives and possibilities.

Sophocles, the author of *Oedipus the King*, places the story before the palace of Thebes, and *Judou* is exactly the same. It arranges the main conflict of the story in the home of Yang Jinshan, the owner of the dyeing house whose door divides the world into inside and outside these two completely different parts. If observed from the outside, Yang Jinshan, Yang Tianqing, Yang Tianbai and Wang Judou constitute a harmonious

family: Jinshan's dyeing business provides a livelihood for the family; Tianqing is hard-working; Judou is smart and beautiful; and Tianbai is the crystallisation of the love. However, inside the dyeing house is another world with thousands of threads and complexities. And the source of all this comes from the incest between the aunt and the nephew.

In *Judou*, Yang Jinshan, the owner of a dyeing house in a mountainous area of China, buys a young woman Judou as his wife. There exists basically no affection between them, for the former only regards the latter as a long-term hired hand and a tool for reproduction, and often sexually abuses her. Jinshan's adopted son Tianqing, still unmarried in his 20s, lives under the same roof after his uncle's marriage to Judou. The inhuman abuse imposed by Jinshan, Judou's tragic experience and Tianqing's instinctive drive eventually lead to the incest, and bring the consequence of sin — Tianbai — into the house. Jinshan who is infertile due to physical defect becomes accidentally paralyzed during an outing. His inability to move encourages the tryst between Judou and Tianqing, but soon the secret between the two is discovered. Jinshan, revengeful, uses Tianbai as a tool to torture the spirits of Tianqing and Judou, but is accidentally dragged into the dyeing pool by Tianbai and drowned. When Tianbai grows up, he also has a vague insight into the adultery between Tianqing and Judou. When the two are suffocating in the cellar, he rescues his mother Judou, and throws his natural father Tianqing into the dyeing pool and drowns him.

The complex relationship among these four, especially the incestuous relationship between Tianqing and Judou, becomes the main clue to advance the story. Compared with other literary and screen works, the Oedipus complex in incest-themed *Judou* is particularly prominent and presented in multiple layers.

3. THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX IN JUDOU

The story revolves around the complex relationship among three men (Yang Jinshan, Yang Tianqing, Yang Tianbai) and a woman (Wang Judou) (as shown in the "Figure 1" below, with the solid line representing the actual relationship, and the dotted line the relationship in the eyes of outsiders). The incest in the family endows each character with multiple identities, and it is precisely because of the multiple identities of each character

1. The film is nominated for the Best Foreign Film at the 63rd Academy Awards and wins a handful of other international film awards.

that the Oedipus complex in the film is open to more interpretation possibilities.

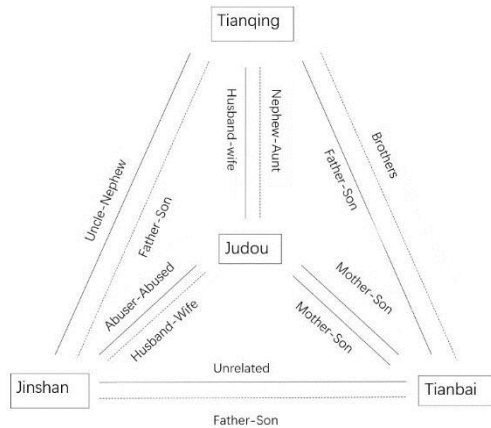


Figure 1 Relations in *Judou*.

3.1 *Tianqing and the Possessor of His Aunt — Jinshan*

In *Judou*, the aunt takes the place of mother, and the uncle takes the place of father. Despite minute adjustments in characters compared with the tragedy of Oedipus, both are the incest stories framed within the same prototype. After Jinshan marries Judou, he often makes her work in the daytime and sexually abuses her at night. Tianqing, the single adopted son under the same roof, harbours rejection, resentment and hatred for his uncle, and in the meantime, he cherishes sympathy and love for Judou. Tianqing’s hostility to Jinshan rises along with his growing yearning for his aunt Judou. Multiple factors create an ever increasingly intense desire in Tianqing to kill his uncle and monopolize his aunt. Finally, in one night when Tianqing hears a hoarse ‘squeak’ in the wing, he goes out in darkness with a sharp chopping knife, his sweaty big hands grabbing it tightly. The violence in the second-floor room makes Tianqing full of anger and unable to hold it back any longer, so he frantically wields the knife with his sturdy arm, and chops it into the elm column of the main house.² Evidently, the target of the sharp knife is by no means the column. It can be said that to a certain extent Tianqing has already killed his adoptive father Jinshan in his heart. After the two have an affair, Judou asks Tianqing whether he is afraid of being chopped down by Jinshan with an axe if the

2. The relevant plot quotations of the film *Judou* are all excerpted from its film script. See: Liu, H, (1993), Liu Heng’s Selected Works Vol. 5: Film Script Volume—*Judou*, Beijing: Writers Publishing House.

adultery is exposed. This time Tianqing replies, ‘Kill me? [...] let’s see who chop whom [...]’. Then when Tianqing finds out that Jinshan has gone out and paralyzed on the edge of a cliff, his eyes become ‘mysterious and unpredictable’ and ‘undetermined’. The unpredictable gaze and the hesitance suggest Tianqing’s sway between ‘saving’ and ‘killing’ these two extremes. Although Tianqing does not really kill his uncle, the birth of Tianbai, the consequence of the adultery between Tianqing and Judou, at the dyeing house in fact implies that Tianqing has completed the replacement of his uncle.

3.2 *Tianbai and His Mother’s Nominal Possessor — Jinshan*

As people outside the dyeing house see it, Jinshan and Tianbai are father and son, but from the inside of the dyeing house, they are unrelated. Out of jealousy and anger, Jinshan’s revenge against Tianqing and Judou begins by trying to strangle Tianbai in his infancy, but dramatically, he eventually dies at the hands of Tianbai a few years later. One day, Tianbai, holding a handful of dog’s tail grass in his hand, ties a rope around his waist and pulls Jinshan home in a basket. When Jinshan offers to help Tianbai dye the dog’s tail grass bright red, Tianbai suddenly runs away at this moment, and the stretched rope pulls the basket into the dyeing pool. Jinshan struggles desperately in the pool, ‘red pulp churning, beautiful and fresh like blood’. When Tianbai ‘sees this moving scene, he could not help giggling, innocent and cute’. In the end, the dyeing pool falls into stillness, and everything returns to peace. The last scene Jinshan sees in the world is ‘his lovely son giggling in a red world’. At this moment, Judou has already arrived at the house and witnessed everything. She is stunned and ‘a look of fear passes over her earth-grey face’, because she sees his son giggling over Jinshan’s drowning, and this is the first time Tianbai has giggled in his life. Just as Oedipus kills his own father unintentionally because of the curse of fate, Tianbai also objectively kills his titular father Jinshan, whether intentional or not, and has giggled for the first time since his birth.

3.3 *Tianbai and the Actual Possessor of His Mother—Tianqing*

The Oedipus complex does not end in the previous generation, but is reinterpreted again with life in the next. Similarly, Tianbai’s resistance to his natural father Tianqing never ceases. When

Tianqing confides to Judou, 'I really want to hear Tianbai call me Daddy! I don't know when he will be able to say a word?', Tianbai at this moment is in the dyeing house, "looking at Jinshan curiously, uttering from his small mouth a vague word: "Dad -Dad-". However, when Tianqing asks Tianbai to call him father, 'Tianbai just lowers his head and says nothing.' In addition to the violence of words, Tianbai's resistance to Tianqing is more manifested in actions. When Tianqing and Judou have a clandestine tryst, he smashes with pebbles the window of the house where the two are sleeping. 'There is a person standing in the courtyard. He looks strong and sinister in the shadow of the moon. It is little Tianbai, and his small body stands like a wall in the night.' 'There is something that this courtyard could not hold [...] it will burst.' Jinshan, as Tianbai's titular father, is paralyzed, and he is at odds with his mother, which also inspires Tianbai's desire to protect and possess his mother. Jinshan's death makes Tianbai confirm even further that his mother belongs to him alone, and hence a stronger possessiveness. Aside from this, the ambiguous relationship between Tianqing and Judou compels Tianbai to show more hostility towards Tianqing. More than ten years later, the pen that Tianqing gives to Tianbai is still handed over by Judou, because 'that little brat ignores me (Tianqing)', and Tianbai's eyes are always 'cold' and 'mysterious' when looking at Tianqing. When Tianqing wants to treat Tianbai's injured hand, Tianbai is so angry that he throws him violently, driving him to kneel on the ground and kicks him fiercely.

However, Tianbai's resistance never ceases, and a wall is built in the courtyard to isolate Tianqing. But later he discovers that Tianqing and his mother Judou have an affair in the cellar, and the two become unconscious due to the lack of air. 'Mother and cousin put their heads side by side, and hide their bodies hideously, as if they were suffering great grievances and anger and wanted to give the world a dark and indulgent resistance.' For his mother Judou, 'Tianbai comes forward, breaks Tianqing's hand with force, puts his mother on his thin body, and then crawls towards the hole.' For Tianqing, he 'pulls him to the edge of the dyeing pool' and dumps him into it. Just as Tianbai lets out a breath, Tianqing emerges from the pool like a blood man, and grabs Tianbai's leg with one hand, and the other hand desperately grabbing the edge of the pool. At this time, Tianbai just picks up a club near him, swings it round with all his strength, and slams it towards Tianqing's head. And Tianqing, like Jinshan, sees vaguely with his last breath that

his own son Tianbai is sneering in a red world. Judou, once again, witnesses Tianbai's behaviours. If Tianbai's giggle is more out of ignorance when he unintentionally kills Jinshan, his titular father, then the sneer when he kills his natural father, Tianqing, is more from the revengeful pleasure of eliminating his competitor. Sadly, just as Oedipus could not escape the fate of murdering his father, Tianbai does not know his real identity until he kills his natural father Tianqing.

3.4 Tianbai and the Imaginary Possessor of His Mother

When Tian Erlaizi, a villager, gossips nastily about Judou's adultery with others, Tianbai couldn't bear it anymore and comes over with a gleaming axe in his hand. Tianbai chases after him, and the revengeful axe, just like 'the galloping horse's head', 'dashes forward terrifyingly [...]'. When Tian Erlaizi retells the details of the adultery, he in a sense fantasizes about himself as the possessor of Judou. What Tianbai wants to kill is indeed anyone who desires to possess his mother, whether it be the actual possessor (Tianqing), the nominal possessor (Jinshan), or the imaginary possessor (Tian Erlaizi). This is the protection of his mother, and it is also a manifestation of his subconscious exclusive possessiveness.

In short, Tianqing, out of love for his aunt, resents his uncle and even breeds the idea of murder, which is undoubtedly a manifestation of the Oedipus complex. With regard to Tianbai's hostility to and murder of, intentional or unintentional, successful or attempted, of his mother's actual, nominal or imaginary possessor, are also specific manifestations of the Oedipus complex.

4. PSYCHOANALYTICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE POSTPONED DEATH

After Jinshan welcomes Judou into the dyeing house, Tianqing's attitude towards his adoptive father changes gradually, from obedience and dependence at the beginning, to resent and hatred, and finally the intention to kill him. If Tianqing still has scruples and worries about killing Jinshan before he loses his ability to move, then it is quite easy to do so after Jinshan is paralyzed. Besides, as the story unfolds, Jinshan retaliates many times, which also provides Tianqing with sufficient opportunities and motives to kill him. Despite this,

Tianqing keeps postponing Jinshan's death. Is this just for morality? Or for other reasons? This part will use psychoanalysis to solve this puzzle in order to offer a new interpretation of Jinshan's delayed death.

Jinshan adopts Tianqing, and the two form a titular father-son relationship. Be that as it may, their relationship, in the eyes of the former, is more of a relationship between master and servant, and the latter is just a money-making tool for him that has never slept through. 'Son? Bullshit! He has my blood on him?' When Tianqing goes out to deliver goods for many days, Jinshan just utters one sentence: 'Stay in the cheap hotel. Don't earn one and spend two.' When Tianqing returns home, Jinshan says nothing but 'squats and hurries to count the money', while Tianqing 'licks his lips and waits'. His uncle yawns, seemingly ignoring him and showing no intention to invite him to have a look at the new-born, for the nephew is just like an outsider in his mind. When Tianqing accidentally knocks over the bucket, Jinshan reprimands: 'Little bastard, lift your hands and feet lightly! [...] Tianbai couldn't sleep well. If you awake him, I'll settle the account with you! Get out of my sight! [...] Drink the mule!' It can be seen that Jinshan does not treat Tianqing as a family member, and that the two show more of a master-servant relationship.

Tianqing has repeatedly postponed Jinshan's death, which may not rule out the moral trade-off. After all, he is adopted by his uncle. However, considering the fact that Jinshan and Tianqing are more of a master-servant relationship, and that Tianqing could not feel the warmth of home at the dyeing house and could not regard himself as a member of the family, this article believes that Tianqing's indecision to kill Jinshan is more out of his inner fear of denying himself. The biggest motive for Tianqing to kill Jinshan is to replace him and possess Judou. If examined from the perspective of the Oedipus complex, what Tianqing wants to kill is not Jinshan, but the person who possesses Judou. However, once Tianqing kills Jinshan and takes his place, he also denies himself in a sense.³

In order to better explain the above-mentioned point of view, this article might as well borrow Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet* for comparison. The hesitant character of Hamlet has also aroused

academic discussions. Freud believes that the tragedy of Hamlet 'is rooted in the same soil as *Oedipus Rex*' (1931: 163). Hamlet has well discerned all the conspiracies and crimes of his uncle. Not only that, he has many opportunities to kill his uncle to avenge his father, but he lets them slip away from his eyes because of his hesitation. This hesitation is not due to his cowardice or lack of action in character. On the contrary, Hamlet is a figure of action throughout the story. For example, in the fourth scene of the third act, he stabs Polonius to death who is hiding behind the tapestry and eavesdropping on the conversation; the second scene of the fifth act also witnesses how he kills Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. It can be found that Hamlet is not a man of hesitant character. But why does he show so much hesitation in his revenge?

Psychoanalysis offers a unique perspective for explaining this hesitation. In the play, Hamlet's uncle kills his father and marries his mother, which is exactly the subconscious desire of Hamlet — doing away with his father and taking his father's place with his mother. In other words, his uncle shows Hamlet in realisation the repressed desires of his own childhood. 'The loathing which should have driven him to revenge is thus replaced by self-reproach, by conscientious scruples, which tell him that he himself is no better than the murderer whom he is required to punish' (Freud 1931: 164).

In *Judou*, it can also be noticed that Tianqing has also been constantly delaying Jinshan's death, showing a hesitant character. First of all, when Tianqing hears the despaired howls from Judou at night, 'neither like a human but nor a wolf', he is full of anger, takes the pig-killing knife, but chops it down on the elm column with all his strength. Later, he 'quietly removes the sharp knife from the column and puts it back to its original place.' In another scene where Jinshan goes out and does not return, Tianqing searches and finds him paralyzed on the edge of the cliff. When Tianqing carries him on shoulders, his eyes become 'mysterious and unpredictable' and 'undetermined'. When Jinshan, paralyzed in bed, tries to strangle Tianbai, and Judou urges Tianqing to 'destroy him', Tianqing loosens his grabbing hands instead. When Judou encourages him again, Tianqing just gives him a threat. The moment when Judou proposes for the third time — 'Destroy him, Tianqing', this time Tianqing 'doesn't answer, just stares at Jinshan and gasps'. It is not difficult to find that Tianqing has many opportunities to kill Jinshan, but every time he shows a strong struggle and indecision in his heart.

3. Similar to the suicide ending of Hamlet, Tianqing is also unable to escape the fate of death and commits suicide in a water tank at the end of *The Obsessed*. In *Judou*, Tianqing is killed by Tianbai.

People may get enlightening conclusions if psychoanalytic approach is employed to interpret Tianqing's behaviours. The reason why Tianqing does this demonstrates the reluctance to deny himself in a sense. If Tianqing kills Jinshan, it also means that he denies his imagined self, because he subconsciously intends to replace Jinshan to possess Judou. People can even conclude that in this story whoever takes the position of Judou's husband is doomed to cause tragedy in the end. Perhaps people can also borrow Freud's famous statement to explain Tianqing's behaviour: What Tianqing wants to achieve is his own long-repressed desire, so his loathing for Jinshan is 'replaced by self-reproach, by conscientious scruples, which tell him that he himself is no better than the murderer whom he is required to punish'.

5. CONCLUSION

Taboo stems from the society's inhibition of human instinctual desires, and the nature of taboo as a projection of human desire determines that people tend to adopt a complex psychology towards it. On the one hand, there is a desire to break taboos in the subconscious, but on the other, there is also a fear in the heart because of the existence of this desire. However, the suppressed desire can be vented, transformed, reproduced and achieved in literary and artistic works, the carriers of human imagination. In 'Creative Writers and Daydream', Freud points out that creative writers, like children playing games, pour their emotions into their works to create a fictional world, and this fictional world is not an original creation, but a re-creation of ready-made and familiar materials (1989: 437). In this sense, it is not difficult to comprehend why the Oedipus complex, as an integral part of human mythology and psychological structure, has been repeatedly presented in different cultures.

As a fictional work that reflects human life and reveals the inner world of human beings, *Judou* shows the conflict between instinctual desires and external constraints of human beings, and presents the game between morality and desire. Tianqing and Tianbai, meaning 'innocence' if combined together, are regarded as 'the best two characters in their generation of the family' out of the door of the dyeing house that divides the world into two distinct parts.⁴ However, inside the door there is nothing clear nor pure, but full of incest, revenge

4. '清' and '白' these two Chinese characters mean being 'clear' and 'pure'. Put together, they form a phrase '清白' meaning 'innocence'.

and murder, which proves to be an irony of reality. The red dyeing pool inside the door seems to have been given a special meaning, becoming a symbol of desire and sin, depriving human beings of innocence and purity.

Instinctive desire and inability to resist the arrangement of fate are intertwined, leading to the human tragedy in *Judou*. Everyone in the story writes their own fates in a unique way, taking revenge on others while destroying themselves. A psychoanalytic exploration into *Judou* undoubtedly provides readers with a new fulcrum and lends to more multi-dimensional interpretation possibilities.

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