

# Similarities and Differences in Revenge - A Comparison between Lu Xun's *Forging the Swords* and Wang Zengqi's *Revenge*

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**Abstract.** In the history of Chinese new literature, the theme of revenge has rich artistic expression. In Lu Xun's "*Cast Sword*", the revenge between the ruler between the eyebrows and the "black man" Yan Zhiao shows the glory of the avenger's humanity, and also expresses the doubt about the meaning of the act of "revenge" itself. Wang Zengqi's *Revenge*, on the other hand, reveals the struggle and relief in the psychology of revenge by constructing a symbolic revenge scene. This study takes Lu Xun's *Forging the Swords* and Wang Zengqi's *Revenge* as examples to compare the difference of the action of "revenge" in the two works. Lu Xun's *Forging the Swords* and Wang Zengqi's *Revenge* are two revenge-themed novels, which are based on the same revenge story, but show different forms in characterisation and story ending. Both of them also show the characters' revenge and resistance to revenge, and the incompleteness of revenge, so as to deconstruct the revenge. This difference and similarity is caused by the writers' personal experience, social and period background, and is a reflection of the influence of a specific period on the aesthetic value orientation.

## 1 Introduction

Revenge is an important theme in ancient and modern literary creation. Dating back to the *Lieshizhuan* and the *Soushenji*, the story of Gan Wang Mo Qi is an extremely classic story of blood relatives' revenge in traditional Chinese novels. This kind of story is usually strongly related to the son's revenge on his father within the framework of bloodline ethics. In the last century, Lu Xun's *Forging the Swords* and Wang Zengqi's *Revenge* are both novels based on the theme of vengeance, with the former adapting the story of Gan and Moxie to describe the heroic revenge of the aspirant against the darkness. The latter uses stream-of-consciousness techniques to implicitly express the author's thoughts on "revenge" and "harmony".

*Castings Swords* was written at the end of 1926, when China was in the midst of internal and external troubles, with the old system about to be destroyed and the new one yet to be established. Lu Xun witnessed the bloodshed of many revolutionaries and accumulated hatred in his heart. However, as a literati, he lacked the basis to transform this hatred into realistic revenge. Lu Xun devoted himself with great enthusiasm to the new cultural movement to enlighten the people, but was pessimistically sceptical about its success, and

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this questioning and disappointment in real life was also projected into Lu Xun's creative works.

Wang Zengqi rewrote *Revenge* in 1944, which was more mature than the previous version. During this period, Wang Zengqi was heavily influenced by stream-of-consciousness novels. At this time, the Second World War was drawing to a close, and the war had entered a period of counter-attack, with victory in sight. During this period, revenge literature returned to the pursuit of the “human being” itself, and the flow of consciousness of the swordsman replaced the traditional interpretation of the revenge story.

Lu Xun and Wang Zengqi both came from the Wu-Yue cultural circle, where regional culture and literary creation are closely linked, and their bonds are deep and complex, intertwined, and together they shape the literary characteristics of a region. The vengeful culture of Wu-Yue has an important influence on their creations. The influence of folk customs and culture on creation is far-reaching and extensive.

The author will try to compare and contrast Lu Xun's *Forging the Swords* and Wang Zengqi's “*Revenge*” to explore the similarities and differences in the protagonist's image and story structure of the two novels, which also take the act of “revenge” as the main line.

## **2 Similarities and differences in the image of the avenger and the object of revenge**

### **2.1 Lu Xun's *Forging the Swords***

There are two avengers in *Forging the Swords*: Mei Jianchi and Yan Zhi'ao. Lu Xun summarises Mei Jianchi's growth process in the opening scene of *Forging the Swords*, when Mei Jianchi kills a rat. The teenager Mei Jianchi hesitates between feeling sorry for the rats and feeling deservedly sorry for them, and his indecisive temperament makes his mother sigh: “You will be sixteen years old by the time I hand over my son, and your temperament is still the same, neither cold nor hot, and it hasn't changed at all. It seems that there is no one to avenge your father's death. [1]” After learning of his father's revenge, Mei Jianchi, immediately decided to avenge his father. He thought that he has changed his gentle nature”, to “calmly go to seek his undying hatred of collation”, but his mood that night was not calm. His unsettled mood that night and his reckless assassination in his first act of vengeance show that he is still an immature avenger. Mei Jianchi hesitates until only his head is left, soaking in the cauldron. At first, his head swims around in circles playfully, but then it enters a state of vengeance, swimming against the water and stirring it up, making it very hard for him to take revenge. Swimming against the water “caused the water to splash in all directions”. Without the intervention of the black man Yan Zhi'ao, Mei Jianchi, with his wavering attitude and reckless form, would not have been able to complete his act of revenge against the king. Therefore, when the Black Man tells Mei Jianchi that he will help him to avenge him and his father, Mei Jianchi calmly and without hesitation cuts his own throat and sacrifices his head, which is a particularly tragic act [2].

In contrast to the hesitant avenger Mei Jianchi, Yan Zhi'ao in *Forging the Swords* is also avenger, but Yan Zhi'ao's vengeance is not an ethical one. Yan Zhi'ao has given his heart to others in a righteous way, but he has been taken advantage of [2]. Yan Zhi'ao was once righteous and gave his heart to others, but in the end, he was exploited: “Righteousness, sympathy, those things, which were once clean, have now become the capital for the ghost's debt. I don't have any of those things in my heart. I only want to avenge you! [1]” “He avenges himself on the darkness, on himself, on vengeance itself: “Don't you know how good I am at vengeance? What is yours is mine; and he is mine. [1]” Yan Zhi'ao avenges

Mei Jianchi, that is, himself; and the hatred is his own. As he himself says, “Man the wounds I have inflicted, I have abhorred myself!” Yan Zhi'ao's vengeance is a bitter struggle that erupts in despair, a vengeance that is shared and knows to be fruitless. Yan Zhi'ao's success is based on the failures of all the previous avengers; he is a collection of all the oppressed, rich in experience and sufficiently intelligent, but at a great cost. He has the fearless self-sacrifice of going down with the enemy for the sake of victory.

## 2.2 Wang Zengqi's *Revenge*

In Wang Zengqi's *Revenge*, the hesitation of the unnamed swordsman, the avenger, is carried throughout the text. From birth, the swordsman is burdened with the destiny of vengeance that his mother puts on him: “This sword must drink the blood of my enemy” [3]. These words are like a shackle that binds him tightly to his destiny of revenge. He has never seen his father and has no memory of him, but he is naturally burdened with this hatred from nowhere because of his blood, and the ethical framework presses him to take the path of revenge. From the very beginning, the swordsman is in a void of self-doubt: “Sword, it is not that you belong to me, I actually belong to you. [3]” The swordsman's revenge also stems from his father's murder by his enemy, but the confusion and hesitation in the swordsman's mind is even greater than that of Mei Jianchi, which Wang Zengqi describes at great length in a stream-of-consciousness style. “Sometimes he preferred to be killed himself by his enemy. Sometimes he feels good about his enemy. Sometimes he felt that he was the enemy. [3]” He longs for an end to the act of revenge, even as he is caught in the existential dilemma of identity. In his exploration and discovery of his inner self, the swordsman remembers his grey-haired mother and misses his home, “the well rail of green stone. A rack of crocuses by the well”, he lingers on a peaceful and beautiful life and is thus shaken by a vague hatred from the father he never met and an act of revenge based on it. The faltering avenger is saddened by the fact that his life will be buried in the path of vengeance, and is fuelled by the desire for a new life because of the ordinary, happy lives of the other people he meets on his way to find his enemy. The swordsman is an avenger who rebels against the futile consequences of revenge [4].

## 2.3 Comparative Analysis

Mei Jianchi and the nameless swordsman in *Forged Sword* and *Revenge* are both hesitant avengers. Before carrying out the action of revenge, they hesitate to varying degrees, and their acts of revenge are also motivated by the same ethical relationship of taking revenge on the enemy for the sake of their blood relatives. Yan Zhi'ao's vengeance in *Forged Sword* is not due to the killing of his blood relatives, but rather, his vengeance is motivated by his boredom with “revenge” and his hatred of darkness. Yan Zhi'ao's revenge is not due to the killing of his blood relatives; his revenge is due to his boredom with “revenge” and his hatred of darkness.

Both Mei Jianchi and the nameless swordsman “he” have their motives for revenge rooted in ethical relationships, especially in the traditional ethical framework of revenge against blood relatives; Mei Jianchi's vengeance is a direct response to his family's honour and responsibility, and reflects the ethical concepts of Confucianism, such as loyalty, filial piety and righteousness. Mei Jianchi's revenge is a direct response to family honour and responsibility, reflecting the Confucian ethical concept of “loyalty, filial piety, righteousness”. The revenge of the unnamed swordsman “He” does not explicitly mention the blood relationship, but his deep moral conflict and emotional entanglement also reflect the influence of ethical norms on personal behaviour. This motivation for revenge based on

ethical relationships is the common cultural background and narrative foundation of the two works.

In contrast, Yan Zhi'ao in *Forging Swords* demonstrates a spirit of revenge that transcends personal grudges. His revenge is no longer confined to the realm of blood relations or ethical relationships, but rises to the level of revolt against universal injustice and darkness; Yan Zhi'ao's vengeance is a kind of criticism and indictment of social phenomena, and a challenge to and subversion of the power structure. His image represents those pioneers who are brave enough to stand up and speak out for justice.

Mei Jianchi and the nameless swordsman's hesitation and indecision before taking revenge exemplify the complex psychological state behind the act of revenge. The similarity of their hesitation lies in their uneasiness about the process and consequences of revenge; Mei Jianchi's hesitation is due to the inevitable indecisiveness of his character, while the Nameless Swordsman's hesitation is due to "uncertainty" - not knowing who or where his enemy is. He does not know who his enemy is, where he is, or where he should go after taking revenge.

### **3 Story structure: similarities and differences in revenge endings**

#### **3.1 Lu Xun's *Forging the Swords***

*Forging the Swords* is based on the story of "Dry General Moxie", and Lu Xun kept the basic structure of the story in his rewriting: Mei Jianchi's father was killed, and when he grew up, his mother told him to take revenge by telling him about her hatred, and he succeeded in taking revenge with Yan Zhi'ao's help. Mei Jianchi and Yan Zhi'ao's vengeance begins as a rebellion against darkness and oppression: Mei Jianchi's vengeance is against the ruling class represented by the king, for which he willingly sacrifices his life and his head as bait to avenge the king's death, and Yan Zhi'ao's vengeance is met by the young revenant who falls to the ground in his battle with the king. When Yan Zhi'ao sees that the young avenger is losing the battle with the king, he raises his sword and kills himself, and dies gracefully, using his own head to help Mei Jianchi, and together they complete their vengeance. The story of "*Forging the Swords*" is a cold one, but Lu Xun's passionate emotions can still be seen in the joint revenge of Mei Jianchi and Yan Zhi'ao.

At the end of the story, Lu Xun continues with the part where the palace people distinguish the skulls of Mei Jianchi and Yan Zhi'ao after they succeed in their revenge, and the people bury the king: the palace people are busy but unable to distinguish between the king's and the "traitor's" skulls; the people burying the king's head and the heads of Mei Jianchi, Yan Zhi'ao and the king; and the people burying the king's head. The funeral procession for Mei Jianchi, Yan Zhi'ao and the king was as "lively" as any funeral of a great man, and the "righteous people" did not think much of Mei Jianchi and Yan Zhi'ao's feat of assassinating the king. The "righteous people" are not impressed by the feat of Mei Jianchi and Yan Zhi'ao in stabbing the king. The ending, in which the three men die together, seems to be a victory for the avenger, but the terrible price the avenger pays, the ignorant and unawakened people kneeling down to the ruler at the "unseemly" funeral ceremony, and the unfair judgement of the avenger make the readers feel sad in the midst of the absurdity [5]. As for the meaning conveyed by the ending of *Forging the Swords*, Qian Liqun argues that although Lu Xun favours revenge, he also recognises that revenge is meaningless to the "array of nothing" [6]. The "great mourning" at the end of *Forging the Swords*, which is like an orgy, dissolves the sublimity of the previous text, and is Lu Xun's questioning of vengeance itself. The ruler is dead, but the people are still to be enlightened, the noble act of revenge, the avenger to pay for the blood and the hopelessness of the

revenge in stark contrast, “casting swords” ending is a victory in the defeat, this is Lu Xun in the act of revenge in the despair of the perceived [7]. But as Lu Xun says, “Yet since a few people have risen up, you cannot say that there is never any hope of destroying this iron house. [8]” From the level of narrative strategy, “Forging Swords” is like a circle of self-disintegration, revealing a kind of dichotomous spiritual characteristic unique to Lu Xun's works, “there is resistance in despair, and resistance returns to despair” [9].

### 3.2 Wang Zengqi's *Revenge*

Wang Zengqi's *Revenge* is not a direct rewriting of the story of “Dry General Moxie” as in *Forging the Swords*. *Revenge* is still framed by the story of blood relative's vengeance, but the original story pattern is re-examined from a new perspective, and the reasonableness of vengeance under the inherent ethical framework is questioned, so that the existence of human beings, especially the individual, comes to the forefront. Chinese blood relative revenge stories began to show the depth of rationality in thinking about the existence of the individual.

In Wang Zengqi's *Revenge*, the swordsman becomes lost on his way to revenge. After several searches, the swordsman discovers that his enemy turns out to be a mountain chiselling monk he met on the road. And the reason why his enemy killed the swordsman's father is because the monk was also another swordsman decades ago. In the end, he chooses to let go of his hatred and work with the monk to cut the stone wall. The hatred ends in this generation. The ending of *Revenge* is remarkable in modern Chinese literature on the theme of vengeance: the avenger finally finds his father's murderer, but instead of choosing to pay the debt in blood and kill him, he gives up his revenge and joins him in the hard work of chiselling the mountain. On the surface, this transformation of the swordsman seems to be extremely abrupt, but in connection with the existentialist thought of Sartre that the author was influenced by at this time, it can be seen that the transformation of the swordsman in *Revenge* is related to the return of self-consciousness and free will [10]. The swordsman initially settles under the normative requirements constructed for him by his mother and ethics, passively accepting the fact that he has to become an avenger, and this unfreedom of the purpose of vengeance causes him to abdicate his responsibility for the choice of his own existence. During the process of revenge, the swordsman is constantly reminded of his mother, which is both a sign of his nostalgia for his past life and a symbol of the fact that his mother's demands are a form of bondage from the outside world for him [11]. Deep down, the swordsman does not want to continue this revenge because he does not know who his enemy is, where his enemy is, and where he should go after the revenge, otherwise the swordsman would not be so hesitant. When the task of revenge is about to be completed, the swordsman meets the Monk of Chisel Mountain, his enemy. Not knowing that the monk is his enemy, the swordsman rests in the ancient temple where the monk is staying, and recalls his journey, and his fatigue with the act of revenge: “For many days he has gone up, and up, and up again; ascending, descending a little, and ascending still higher. He climbed too many mountains. The mountains grew higher and higher, the hills and mountains crowded tighter and tighter. The road grew smaller and smaller and blurred. [3] “This weariness caused him to begin to doubt his mission. The monk, on the other hand, symbolises forgiveness and letting go. The alternation between the image of his mother and the monk in the swordsman's mind symbolises that he is torn between insisting on revenge and letting go of his hatred. When the swordsman sees the name of the monk's father tattooed on the monk's arm, he suddenly realises that both he and the monk are tools and victims of revenge, and he does not want to become a tool that has lost its self-worth, thus awakening his self-awareness. The swordsman chose to reconcile with his enemy and cut the wall together, and suddenly thought in his heart: “He believes that his mother must be

dead”, the avenger began to examine the reasonableness of revenge, and jumped out of the identity of the father's vengeance tool, and began to think about the meaning of personal existence.

### 3.3 Comparative analyses

The cause of the protagonist's vengeance in both *Cast Sword* and *Revenge* is the death of a blood relative: Mei Jianchi's father casts a sword, and the king kills him because he does not want the swordsman to make another good sword; the swordsman goes on the path of revenge because his mother wants him to avenge his murdered father. The endings of the two novels are quite different.

*Forging Swords* ends with the success of Mei Jianchi and Yan Zhi'ao's revenge against the king, but it is not a complete success. The death of the king does not inspire the people, who are still saddened by the “death of the king” and call the avengers Mei Jianchi and Yan Zhi'ao “traitors”, and the success of their revenge is short-lived. The success of the revenge is only short-lived, and then the “mediocre people” go back to their old lives and survive in silence. This ending reflects Lu Xun's deep insight into the social reality, his sadness and anger towards the people, and also expresses Lu Xun's thoughts on the meaning of the act of “revenge”.

The ending of *Revenge* is the reconciliation between the nameless swordsman and his enemy, which conveys a positive and peaceful philosophy of life. The nameless swordsman's choice of reconciliation is not only a transcendence of the behaviour of vengeance under the ethic of blood relationship, but also a profound reflection and bold innovation on the theme of vengeance in the literary tradition, which injects new vitality and depth into this ancient and complex literary theme. The nameless swordsman chooses to let go of his hatred and step out of his identity as a tool of revenge for his father's generation, thus truly discovering himself, realising inner peace and freedom, and achieving true liberation and transcendence. This provides readers with a new way of thinking about the theme of “revenge”.

## 4 Conclusion

Both *Forging Swords* and *Revenge* use the son's revenge on his father as the narrative framework, however, influenced by different social environments, the two stories show obvious differences in their writing styles and endings. The former begins with the revenge of blood relatives, but goes beyond the simple motive of revenge, focusing on the strong will to realise the revenge, and the image of the avengers, Mei Jianchi and Yan Zhi'ao, becomes a symbol of resistance against injustice; the latter explores the complex human entanglements and emotional conflicts behind the act of revenge, and the reconciliation of the two individuals held hostage under the framework of the revenge of blood relatives. The latter explores the complex human entanglements and emotional conflicts behind the act of revenge, and the reconciliation of two individuals held hostage under the framework of blood feud.

*Forging the Swords* is Lu Xun's creative interpretation of “Ganong Moxie”, which retains the core plot of the original story of the son avenging his father's death, but rewrites it to highlight the inner will of revenge, and also reveals the author's questioning of the act of vengeance. In contrast, *Revenge* inherits the tradition of Lu Xun's writing, and at the same time transcends Wang Zengqi's own creativity by showing a different narrative perspective and depth from the former. The reflections on the theme of “revenge” in these two works reflect the different backgrounds and cultural environments of their respective times. The differences in writing styles and endings of the two works are a reflection of the

different social environments. The strong and tragic character of *Cast Sword* is a reflection of Lu Xun's era of social turmoil and ideological upheaval, and it calls for a kind of determined resistance and innovation against the old system and the old power. The avenger described in *Revenge* resolves his hatred and reaches reconciliation with understanding and forgiveness, which reveals a deep desire for the return of humanity and social harmony. Though both of them are the same story of revenge, they blossom differently due to the differences in the spirit of the times, and together they enrich the literature's profound insight and expression of human nature and society.

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