

The Character Image of Zhi Zihua (Gardenia) in The Scholar and the Executioner

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Abstract. "The Scholar and the Executioner" is a prize-winning modern Chinese play written by the renowned playwright Huang Weiruo. First staged in 2005, it is a distinctive dark comedy set in the late Qing Dynasty. The playwright Huang Weiruo has crafted this absurdist comedy with biting satire and distinct humor, winning widespread acclaim. This paper aims to analyze the character of "Zhi Zihua" in the work, summarizing her threefold identity: the aware, the compassionate, and the survivor. Her presence not only balanced the gender narrative of the drama, but also elevated the theme from social satire to a philosophical reflection on the universal human predicament, highlighting the restorative power of the female experience in historical contexts. By comparing Zhi Zihua with the images of the other two male protagonists, the role of this character in enhancing the theme becomes evident. Through the creation of this character, playwright Huang Weiruo not only enriched the layers of the drama but also used it to criticize the rigid social system and call for a return to the true value of human nature.

Keywords: The Intellectual and the Executioner, Zhi Zihua(Gardenia), Female Image

1. Introduction

Mr. Huang Weiruo's play *The Scholar and the Executioner*, with its distinctive black humor and absurdist style, stands as a critical masterpiece in modern Chinese theater.

Through the extreme characters of scholar Xu Shengyu (the Scholar) and executioner Ma Kuaidao (the Executioner) we can know that they both deeply distorted by the old social system.

The play exposes how feudal cultural structures corrupt human nature. In this alienated society, "Zhi Zihua" remains the only clear-sighted presence. Though her appearance, manners, and speech may seem "vulgar," she embodies the practical wisdom and way of life common among ordinary people. Amid the pervasive absurdity, she keeps a lucid mind—a true sage in a mundane guise, yet by no means an ordinary figure.

1.1. The scholar, the executioner and Zhi Zihua

The scholar, the executioner, and Zhi Zihua are the three main characters in the story. Zhi Zihua is the executioner's wife, and the scholar is his friend. As the old system crumbles, their fates become intertwined.

The three characters are distinctly different. The timid scholar and the brutal executioner are both victims brainwashed by the old regime, representing submission to its oppressive rules. In contrast, the kind, clever, and courageous Zhi Zihua symbolizes the breaking of these outdated traditions. Together, these three characters drive the narrative, highlighting the play's distinctive black humor.

1.2. Research background of Zhi Zihua

For a long time, scholars have focused on studying the two characters of Xu Shengyu and Ma Kuaidao in the work, analyzing their unique role as a binary opposition and inadvertently illustrating how the work uses these two male protagonists to express the theme of black aesthetics. However, the female character Zhi Zihua has not received sufficient attention. Scholars often regard her merely as a tool to highlight the male characters or as a supporting role added to meet narrative needs, without delving into her positive role in enhancing the work's thematic depth. In reality, however, Zhi Zihua's role and significance are no less important. Structurally, she balances the binary opposition between the scholar and the executioner, moderates the tone, deepens the thematic expression, and drives the plot forward, grounding all idealistic issues in reality. She ensures that this intellectually profound black comedy remains rooted in the earthy, vibrant essence of human life, infused with a raw yet warm vitality. Without her, the story would lose its foundation and much of its brilliance.

Therefore, this paper aims to elucidate Zhi Zihua's role in elevating the theme of the work and her significance within it.

1.3. Other information

To better understand this work and its characters, it is necessary to further introduce the creative philosophy of the author Huang Weiruo and the artistic conception of this piece.

1.3.1. Huang Weiruo

Huang Weiruo is a renowned Chinese playwright and drama theorist. A central professor at the Central Academy of Drama, he is celebrated for his intellectually engaging and critically sharp plays. His works, like *The Intellectual and the Executioner*, often use satire and absurdity to explore profound social and cultural issues. He skillfully blends traditional Chinese theatrical elements with modern sensibilities, creating a unique and thought-provoking style.

1.3.2. "The Intellectual and the Executioner"

"The Intellectual and the Executioner" is a critically acclaimed dark comedy by Huang Weiruo. It centers on two men deeply twisted by their roles in feudal society: a scholar obsessed with imperial exams and an executioner who loves his craft. The play uses sharp satire to critique a system that distorts humanity. In contrast, a female character named Zhi Zihua provides earthy wisdom, standing as the only clear-sighted person in their absurd world.

"The Intellectual and the Executioner" is an award-winning modern Chinese play. Its script won first prize in the 2004-2005 National Stage Art Elite Project Script Award. The play also received a First Class Award at the 5th National Excellent Play Festival in 2007, which commemorated the 100th anniversary of Chinese spoken drama.

Its influence extends internationally. It was performed in Vietnam and selected for the prestigious Theatre Olympics in 2014 . The play has been recognized for its innovative blend of Chinese and Western theatrical styles, creating a unique form of Chinese black comedy .

Huang Weiruo's theatrical creation, *The Scholar and the Executioner*, demonstrates a distinctive preference for employing black humor and absurdist aesthetics in reimagining classical Chinese themes. Unlike his previous works such as *The Boy with the Sword Between His Eyebrows* or *Longing for Worldly Pleasures*, this particular piece manifests a remarkable artistic maturity that prompted the playwright himself to characterize it as a "black comedy" [1].

Within this dark comedic framework, audiences are confronted with the collective madness and spiritual degradation of characters alienated by the feudal system - embodied by the scholar Xu Shengyu, the executioner Ma Rulong, and a cohort of puppet-like figures, all representing various facets of institutional dehumanization.

Amidst this grotesque theatrical panorama emerges Zhi Zihua, a character who singularly incorporates the symbolic dimensions of the "lucid observer", "compassionate presence", and "ultimate survivor".

Without her stabilizing influence and earthy wisdom, the narrative would be deprived of its foundational substance and would consequently lose much of its illuminating brilliance, remaining suspended in theoretical abstraction rather than engaging with the visceral truths of human survival and resilience.

2. The triple personas of Zhi Zihua

Zhi Zihua, as a significant character in the play, embodies the author's unique reflections on female representation. This section analyzes the dramatic content and thematic elements to summarize her triple personas: the lucid one, the compassionate one, and the survivor. These three roles are structured in progressive layers, interacting dynamically to enrich Zhi Zihua's character with profound depth.

2.1. The lucid observer: worldly wisdom in an ordinary soul

We must first acknowledge that Zhi Zihua is, in essence, an "ordinary person" in the most conventional sense. Yet her "worldliness" constitutes the very essence of her wisdom—it is her distinctive medium for self-expression and engagement with reality. This worldly disposition manifests itself through three interconnected dimensions: the vernacular of her language, the simplicity of her desires, and the pragmatism of her behavior.

2.1.1. The vernacular of language

Her speech is characterized by a raw, unrefined, and at times deliberately crude directness—standing in stark contrast to the scholar's literary eloquence and the executioner's professional jargon. In Act III, when the scholar, deprived of his livelihood following the abolition of the imperial examinations, still clings desperately to his recitations of the Four Books and Five Classics while maintaining a facade of cultivated elegance, Zhi Zihua confronts him with brutal honesty: "What damned use is official rank?" She mercilessly chastises his life-or-death devotion to the imperial examination system. Such plain, even vulgar language represents the ultimate expression of worldly discourse. It functions as a language of disenchantment, capable of instantaneously dismantling illusions and pretensions. This linguistic approach perfectly aligns with the mentality of common

folk and mirrors their practical approach to life. Her constant preoccupation with daily necessities—cooking oil, salt, firewood, rice—along with practical concerns like the scholar's academy salary and basic survival needs, firmly anchors her discourse in the realm of ordinary existence.

2.1.2. The simplicity of desires

Her focus remains intensely pragmatic: sustenance, clothing, income, and stability—ultimately, she simply strives to "survive." This orientation is intrinsically linked to her identity: "Those who work as matchmakers are sharp-tongued, perceptive individuals who see through human nature—thoroughly worldly souls. That is why, among the three unmasked faces, only her consciousness remains lucid and her thinking liberated" [2]. All her actions revolve around fundamental survival instincts, rendering her incapable of comprehending the spiritual anguish experienced by the scholar and the executioner—in her perspective, such concerns appear as the indulgent troubles of those "with full bellies and nothing better to do."

Thus, Zhi Zihua embodies the most "worldly" desires of the common people. While the desires of ordinary folk originate from grassroots existence, those of the scholar and executioner represent desires packaged and alienated by the imperial system. The former are rooted in the soil of everyday life, the latter suspended in the lofty halls of power. One is "vulgar," the other "refined"—yet precisely through this juxtaposition, the fundamental absurdity of the feudal system is revealed with particular clarity.

2.1.3. The pragmatism of behavior

Her conduct perfectly aligns with conventional expectations of a market-town woman: shrewd calculation, minor selfishness, and constant grumbling. Yet this very "worldliness" serves as both her means of survival in a harsh reality and a sedative that maintains clarity for herself and others. In Act IV, when both the scholar and the executioner face unemployment, she demonstrates the tenacity of wild grass: weaving shoes and working as a matchmaker to sustain her family during her husband's descent into madness, while seeking practical solutions as the old social order crumbles. One could argue that without Zhi Zihua, the transformative journeys of the two male characters—both in terms of identity and personality—would remain unrealized, and the play's central themes would lack their powerful expression.

As Liu Xi's Shiming observes, "Vulgarity is desire—the desire of ordinary people." [3]Zhi Zihua's "worldliness" carries no negative connotation; rather, it signifies her rootedness in daily life and her focus on concrete survival. It represents the most sincere aspects of both material and spiritual existence among common folk. She embodies a pragmatic philosophy of life—a healthy instinct that simultaneously cherishes existence and possesses the capacity to metabolize suffering, demonstrating remarkable resilience in the face of adversity.

2.2. The compassionate one: human warmth beneath a stern exterior

Zhi Zihua embodies a distinctive form of compassion—not the conventionally warm, openly expressed benevolence, but rather what might be described as "a heart preserved on the blade's edge." Hers is a compassion manifested through action rather than words, grounded in profound understanding, and characterized by resilient, often unexpected gestures. To truly comprehend this unique expression of compassion, one must discern the intricate interplay between her "coldness" and "warmth."

2.2.1. "Coldness" — unflinching realism

Her derisive remark about the scholar's obsession with imperial recognition—"What damned use is it?"—though appearing harsh, functions as a form of verbal "shock therapy." This calculated rhetorical strategy aims to puncture the bubble of his impractical fantasies and compel him to confront reality. Throughout the early acts, she never conceals her preoccupation with daily survival, consistently voicing concerns over basic necessities and mundane struggles. Her "coldness" resides in her steadfast refusal to indulge in idealism—she mercilessly dismantles the scholar's and executioner's romanticized illusions about the feudal system, persistently anchoring the narrative's development around the symbolism of livelihood and steering the story toward the raw truths of human existence.

2.2.2. "Warmth" — empathy and resilience

As scholar Zhang Li perceptively observes, "contemporary comedy often emphasizes mockery and farce while lacking in tolerance and compassion, a phenomenon that reflects our spiritual condition. "Zhi Zihua embodies this understanding through her nuanced approach to both male protagonists [4].

Toward the scholar, she demonstrates insight into his helplessness rather than ridiculing his aspirations. It is not that she fails to comprehend his anguish, but that she recognizes all too clearly his practical incompetence.

Her compassion manifests in refusing to let him starve in an ivory tower of abstract ideals—instead, she resolutely pulls him back to solid ground, insisting that he must first survive. This represents the fundamental wisdom of the marginalized: "Secure survival before pursuing dreams."

Toward the executioner, she shows understanding of his profound isolation rather than merely fearing his profession's nature. By accepting the material benefits his work provides, she implicitly affirms his existential value, recognizing this occupation as his sole means of maintaining identity and purpose. When he loses his position, she facilitates his transition into butchering—a trade reminiscent of his former role—thereby preserving his fragile dignity.

Thus, beneath her "cold" pragmatism beats a consistently "warm" heart. While she presents reality with unvarnished bluntness, her actions—firmly rooted in practical solutions—provide the most genuine solace, creating a vital bridge between harsh reality and human resilience in a world characterized by alienation and absurdity.

2.3. The survivor — the "heretic" unscathed by alienation

Within the dramatic universe of the play, Zhi Zihua emerges not only as the most perceptive but also as the most fortunate character—unlike the scholar and the executioner, she remains miraculously unindoctrinated by the feudal system's ideological machinery, successfully transcending its absurd cyclical logic. Consequently, she stands as a veritable "heretic" surrounded by self-appointed guardians of the established orthodoxy.

The pedagogical nature of the feudal system manifests with striking clarity throughout the narrative—whether through the scholar's obsessive dream of academic distinction or the executioner's aspiration to become a "master of human slaughter," both trajectories vividly illustrate the institutional environment's capacity to distort and alienate human nature. Upon this stage of the absurd, both male protagonists experience a profound loss of their essential humanity, evolving into

willing adherents of the feudal structure—living exemplars of what may be termed "alienated beings."

Within the play's distorted social milieu, the relationship between society and the individual assumes the characteristics of a credit relationship—what appears superficially as human interaction ultimately reveals itself as "capitalist production relations concealed beneath a material shell—seemingly humanized in form yet fundamentally reified and dehumanized in essence" [5] Zhi Zihua, however, fundamentally diverges from this paradigm. She "honors no such credit"—or more precisely, she recognizes the impossibility of establishing any genuine covenant between such a society and herself.

She never subscribes to the scholar's dogmatic assertion that "all other pursuits are inferior; only scholarly learning elevates," which functions within the play as a quasi-religious doctrine. Her sharp, unrefined retorts ("What damned use is it?") constitute a radical act of deconstruction and desecration against these hollow values—a form of vehement ideological rebellion. Similarly, she resists the temptation to sanctify or aestheticize her husband's profession as he does. To her perceptive gaze, it remains merely a "trade," an instrument for putting food on the table. By steadfastly refusing to ascribe any transcendent meaning to this occupation, she effectively immunizes herself against its alienating influence.

Her world remains firmly anchored in tangible realities—rice, meat, coins—and the daily rituals of eating and clothing oneself. This fundamental, corporeal connection to existence forms an impregnable fortress against the encroachment of abstract ideologies. Liberated from the feudal system's vicious cycle, she consequently exhibits authentic human emotions in their rawest form: capable of unconditional love and vehement hatred, unabashed fear and righteous anger. Her anxieties, desires, grievances, and practical calculations all represent unfiltered expressions of innate humanity. When contrasted with the two emotionally alienated men—one paralyzed by pedantry, the other desensitized by ritualized violence—she radiates a remarkable vitality and psychological wholeness, standing as a testament to resilient humanity in a world of systemic deformation.

Through this sophisticated characterization, the playwright suggests that true liberation resides not in reforming the system, but in maintaining what we might term an "ethical mundanity"—a conscious rootedness in life's fundamental necessities that paradoxically becomes the most subversive stance against institutional absurdity. Zhi Zihua's survival ultimately represents a triumph of the human spirit precisely because it refuses to engage in the system's own terms, choosing instead to redefine value and meaning through the relentless pursuit of life itself.

2.4. The relationship between Zhi Zihua's three identities

Based on the above analysis, I have identified three distinct yet progressive identities for Zhi Zihua: the clear-sighted one, the compassionate one, and the survivor.

2.4.1. The foundation of Zhi Zihua: the clear-sighted one

Being kind, brave, and intelligent, Zhi Zihua maintains her sanity throughout the farce due to her persistent love and commitment to life. She uses her life experience and ideals to resist the old system's erosion of human spirit, and through her "unrefined" ways of acting, she secures better chances of survival for her family and friends. It is precisely because of this clarity of mind that she is able to act in ways grounded in common sense and logic, which also shapes her unique character—setting her apart from the scholar and the executioner.

2.4.2. Clarity of mind is the foundation of compassion

It is precisely because she first possesses the identity of the clear-sighted one that she becomes capable of supporting her other roles, such as that of the compassionate one. As analyzed earlier, her compassion is innate yet complex. She does not openly express concern or kindness toward others; instead, it remains hidden beneath a seemingly sharp-tongued exterior, quietly manifesting through practical actions to help others overcome difficulties. This is because she remains clear-minded—able to resist the influence of other "mad" individuals in this absurd world and maintain her own logical way of thinking. Thus, she alone finds the best ways to solve real-world problems and takes action, helping both the scholar and the executioner break free from their ideological prisons.

2.4.3. The survivor: maintaining clarity and compassion

Precisely because she embodies the identities of both the clear-sighted one and the compassionate one, Zhi Zihua ultimately survives the farce. While the old system constantly brainwashes people, turning them into loyal servants, she remains unaffected due to her clarity of mind. Moreover, as the old system crumbles, Zhi Zihua not only manages to preserve her own integrity but also finds the strength to help others overcome their difficulties, ultimately securing a chance for her family to survive. It is precisely her innate decency and persistent efforts as a rational human being that enable her to achieve a favorable outcome in this black comedy populated by "madmen," steering the course of events back to normality.

2.4.4. Comparison with other characters

Zhi Zihua represents the convergence of three identities: the clear-sighted, the compassionate, and the survivor. In contrast, the scholar and the executioner embody those who are submerged by the old system. Although their personalities differ drastically—the former being timid, pedantic, and hypocritically aloof, while the latter is brutal, straightforward, and rough-mannered—both are servants brainwashed by the old order.

As an intellectual, the scholar pursues fame and fortune, aspiring to achieve the highest recognition a scholar could receive under the old system: becoming the Number One Scholar in the imperial examinations. To excel in the exams, he devoted himself to studying and poring over books every day, neglecting even basic livelihood needs. In the end, he could barely survive only through others' charity.

As an executioner, the executioner seeks the fear that people hold toward the violent image of a "butcher" under the old system. As he says in the play, "The thought of people being terrified at the sight of me brings me more joy than becoming an immortal." Even in his dreams, he continues to kill, reveling in the pleasure of being a "butcher."

Zhi Zihua, on the other hand, has always been focused on how to live and how to live better. Her desires are simple and grounded in reality. It is precisely this realist mindset that enables her to possess the rationality of the clear-sighted and the empathy of the compassionate, allowing her to resist the brainwashing of the old system and ultimately emerge as a survivor. In contrast to the two male characters, the radiance of her humanity shines even more distinctly.

3. Conclusion

In an absurd world, playwright Huang Weiruo uses the character "Zhi Zihua"—an ordinary individual—to illustrate that true vitality and dignity stem not from institutional worship, but from

the resilience, passion for life, and warm radiance of fundamental humanity exhibited by ordinary people confronting existential struggles. This form of "radical mundanity" becomes the most powerful resistance against systemic absurdity, ultimately elevating the work's profundity.

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