



COMMENT ON “TRAGIC PROTOTYPES AND THEIR EVOLUTION IN CLASSICAL CHINESE WORKS”


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In the history of classical Chinese literature, there is no strict division between tragedy and comedy. The first person to use the concept of tragedy, to comment on classical Chinese literature, was Mr. Wang Guowei, who pointed out there is a tragedy in the *Zaju* of the Yuan Dynasty in the *History of Song and Yuan Dramas*, breaking the assertion that scholars at home and abroad argued that there were no tragic stories in China.

Since Wang Guowei put forward this view, Chinese scholars have begun to think and argue about the tragedy in China and have tried to conclude the existence of tragedy in China from various perspectives. There have been constant controversies, with each side holding its viewpoints. However, per the existing research results, it is impossible to conclude whether there is a tragedy in China. The theory of tragedy was created under the background of the unique geography and culture in the West, so it would be far-fetched to use Western theories to criticize Chinese culture and art. Tragedy has its unique value as an essential category in aesthetics, and the introduction of tragedy theory has enriched the research of aesthetics theory in China and filled the blanks in aesthetics research.

Zhang (2024) points out an essential feature of Chinese tragedy that distinguishes it from Western one. For example, Chinese classical tragedies often end with a comedy, which embraces the fun of reunion and shows a reconciliation of the conflicts in the tragedy. Many factors influence Chinese tragedies to end in reunions. Most researchers discuss them in the

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following three ways: firstly, at that time, the intellectuals, whose status was relatively low and whose career paths were unsuccessful, wrote the pent-up anger and injustice in their hearts into the plays and realized their expectations with the help of their writings. Secondly, the influence of the theories of the beauty of “Centrality and Harmony” of Confucianism, “Detachment from the world” of Taoism and “Virtue has its reward” of Buddhism shaped unique cultural psychology and phenomena in China. Thirdly, it involves the populace’s aesthetic psychology, where people yearn for reunion and desire to derive solace and compensation from it.

The phenomenon of reunion in Chinese tragedy has been viewed differently since ancient times, with some people referring to it as a cliché and others affirming its interest in reunion. In the late 19th century, the phenomenon of the grand reunion began to be criticized by intellectuals, and it was even criticized on the level of national spirit. In 1918, Hu Shih (1998) criticized the phenomenon of the grand reunion in traditional theatre:

This ‘superstition of reunion’ is an ironclad proof of the weak thinking of the Chinese people. The person who writes the book knows that most of the real things in the world are unsatisfactory. He knows that the things in the world are either confusing right and wrong, or separation and death, but he insists on making ‘all lovers in the world become married’ and insists on talking about good and evil. He closed his eyes and would not look at the tragedies of the world, and refused to write honestly about its perversions. He only wanted to write a book that would please people. This is the literature on lying. (Hu, 1998, p. 122).

In *Another Discussion on the Collapse of Leifeng Pagoda*, Lu Xun put forward the famous assertion that “Tragedy is to destroy the valuable things that people cherish in life” (Lu, 2005, p.192), which is regarded as Lu Xun’s crucial theoretical point of view on tragedy. He pointed out that, if it is blindly embellished and glossed over in literature, “[...] not only will Rousseau and his kind of madmen never appear, but also a tragic writer or a dramatist or a satirical poet will never appear” in China (Lu, 2005, p. 194). Lu Xun has a profound understanding of tragedy, and he not only captures the essential characteristics of tragedy, but also gives tragedy a specific sociality, making tragedy have a more vital mission and responsibility. In Lu Xun’s opinion, the four great tragedies of the Yuan Dynasty and the late Ming and early Qing dynasties all had the reunion aim of “concealment and deception,” which tried hard to gloss over the dark reality. All of that weakened the inspirational power of tragedy, and it should be discarded. Lu Xun highly praised the *Dream of the Red Chamber* because it is thought-provoking and writes about the life’s many destructions. The *Dream of the Red Chamber* focuses on numerous conflicts, where the worthless forces tend to prevail, and on the contrary, the idealistic and worthy sides tend to be the object of destruction, and eventually cannot escape the fate of destruction. Cao Xueqin’s greatness is that he dared to create a tragedy throughout, and he lifted the veil that had been used to cover up the people’s

misfortune and ugliness, removed the flowery rhetoric, so that the facts are exposed in front of the world's eyes.

Although Wang Guowei was the first to introduce the theory of tragedy into China, he merely borrowed Western theories to explain the phenomenon of Chinese art and did not form any systematic writings on the theory of tragedy, which was completed by the scholar Zhu Guangqian. Zhu Guangqian drew on the Western scholars' viewpoints to understand Chinese tragedy. He investigated Hegel's, Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's tragedy theories, respectively, affirming the respective rationality and pointing out the respective deficiency. The compilation of tragic theories on “Vitalism” is worth noting. Zhu Guangqian argued that the existing “vitalism” theory of tragedy cannot fundamentally explain the central question: Why tragedy can take us from the real world of daily experience to the ideal world that produces excellent actions and is full of profound passions, and eliminate the boredom that the mundane and trivial daily life makes us feel.

On this issue, Zhu Guangqian believed that tragedy, as the highest form of art, is much richer than giving a strong stimulus to the human life force. With its content of expressing great pain, tragedy can strongly stimulate people's emotions. However, this is not enough to prove the greatness of tragedy and the pleasure it brings people. Tragedy has a glamour unsurpassed by any other art form because of the way it presents itself to deal with pain: defiance. That is because, “There can be no tragedy without revolt against disaster. It is not catastrophe that causes us pleasure, but revolt. There is a spark of divinity in each of us that does not allow us to resign ourselves to defeat, but inspires us to love adventure.” (Zhu, 1989, p. 22). From this quotation, we can identify similarities between Zhu Guangqian's understanding of tragedy and Nietzsche's theory of tragedy: they both emphasize that tragedy inspires the human life's exuberance and expresses the spirit of unyielding resistance.

The Chinese theory of tragedy has been discussed and interpreted by Wang Guowei, Lu Xun, Zhu Guangqian, and others, providing ideas and essential references for further research by later generations. From the results of existing research and the current situation, the research on Chinese tragedy theory can be approximately divided into three significant trends: firstly, we followed the Western way of thought, introduced and interpreted Western academic writings and, then, applied these foreign theories, which were understood by the Chinese people, to evaluate and measure Chinese artistic creations, resulting in the formation of a set of theories that were substituted one thing for another. Secondly, it is to throw off the constraints of Western theories and to research the problem of Chinese tragedy from t China's specific cultural background and creative reality, so as to form a theory of tragedy that conforms to China's local characteristics. Thirdly, it needs to respect China's different cultural qualities and foreign countries, seek a spirit of common human development and explore

the human beings' essential question, based on respect for differences, to achieve the human beings' common development and progress.

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