

The Tragic and the Chinese Subject

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Introduction: The Question of Genre

*Such welcome and unwelcome things at once,
'Tis hard to reconcile.*

—*Macbeth*¹

The comic and the tragic moods in Classical Chinese drama in the Yuan (1271-1368) and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties are indeed hard to reconcile. The issues considered in this article concern the essence of genre, the vicissitudes of *the tragic*, and the possibility of a cross-cultural definition of *the tragic*.² In order to conceive of a cross-cultural definition of *the tragic*, this paper traces the development of the notion of *the tragic* from its ancient Greek context through its reception in German Idealism and Romanticism to its unknown form in ancient China, hoping to reconsider the possibility of the universality of literary experiences, as proposed by Goethe, and to address issues such as genres in cross-cultural, and specifically East Asian, contexts. Instead of pity, fear, or torment, isolation of the tragic character is the core of the tragic in classic Chinese drama. It is the isolation of a redefined self and the isolation from the inescapable web of interpersonal relationship that define the Chinese sensibility for the tragic.

At stake is the definition of genre. The central problem is that the term “genre,” as pointed out by T.V.F. Brogan and Frederick Garber, is often used “interchangeably with type, kind, and form.”³ Rather than family resemblance of kinds or types of literature, the modes and moods, a la Northrop Frye, should be taken as the foundation for genre and literary classification. Following Frye with some revision, Hernadi distinguishes between modes of discourse (dramatic, narrative, or lyric) and moods (tragic, comic, tragicomic).⁴ Indeed, apart from some strictly definable genres such as Greek epic, Greek tragedy, Gothic novel, and German *Trauerspiel*, etc., it is hard to lay clear-cut lines between genres, and Hernadi’s distinction merits a candid baseline between subgenres such as farce / comedy and melodrama / tragedy. Tragedy and comedy can be taken as fully developed versions of melodrama and farce, and they are vehicles of the tragic and the comic moods. However, there is still a need for precise terminology in a cross-cultural definition of *the tragic*. If tragedy is a privileged form of artistic expression belonging to the Classical era in the West, Classical Chinese tragic drama, lacking an apposite term, is a genre that lies somewhere between high tragedy and German Baroque tragedy (*Trauerspiel*).⁵

¹ Macduff to Malcolm in *Macbeth* (4.3.136-139). All quotations of Shakespeare, if not otherwise noted, are from William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

² Vicissitudes, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, means “alternation, mutual or reciprocal succession, of things,” which is especially illuminating in the case of the development of the tragic in the Baroque German, Elizabethan, and the Classical Chinese contexts, where each period saw the development of a special orientation and a characteristic style of the tragic theatre.

³ Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan ed., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 456.

⁴ Paul Hernadi, *Beyond Genre: New Directions in Literary Classification* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972).

⁵ *Das Trauerspiel* is a peculiar stage-form of royal martyr dramas in Germany. The word in colloquial and figurative language also means sorry affair, which gives it a twist toward modern popular soap opera. This is more of an ideal than a reality in the 18th- and 19th-century German theatre. For example, Schiller’s experimental plays “Die Braut von Messina” and “Demetrius” (fragments), Schlegel’s “Die Amazonen,” as well as Heinrich von Kleist’s “Penthesilea”, through their employment of updated, modern chorus and attempts to mirror the ancient Greek models, invite a judgment within the perspectives of tragedy and *Trauerspiel* at once. Noble attempts and worthy failures of these experimental plays characterize the kind of breach between theory and practice in the German reinvention of the bourgeois tragic through a seeming return to the Greek Antiquity.

Why does the genre matter? It matters because it is crucial to the question of the universality of literary experiences. As Dubrow effectively argues, “the medium is indeed the message.”⁶ Genres do not merely provide a means of classification.⁷ Genres are functional in literary communication. They shape the literary work and form the experience of the work. If the reader sees *Tamburlaine* as a tragedy, his response will differ radically from seeing it as a farce. Similarly, we cannot but read the lines “Arma virumque cano,”⁸ “Le donne, I cavallier, l’arme, gli amori, / le cortesie, l’audaci imprese io canto,”⁹ “Canto l’arme pietose e l’ capitano,”¹⁰ and “fierce wars and faithful loves shall moralize my song”¹¹ with an acute awareness of their cross references within the European epic tradition. The hallmark of Pierre Corneille’s French Classical tragedies, *Le Cid*, would be another example. How are we to grasp at the reconciliation that concludes the play? In what sense will we call it a tragedy? Would not reading *Le Cid* against its predecessor, a comedy, *Las Mocedades del Cid* by Guillen de Castro, change the interpretation of it? The particular slant a reader takes, tragic, comic, or tragicomic, toward this play decisively formulates his experience with it. Least but not last, would not the genre, a modern satire or a realistic novel, of David Lodge’s *Small World: An Academic Romance* occupy a decisive position in its reader’s understanding of it?

We live in an age when multiculturalism seems to be the easier option. However, acknowledging the sheer differences is not enough. Stephen Booth shares the anxiety of many

of us in the literary profession when coming to terms with definitions of literary genres, especially of tragedy. Any attempt to define tragedy can be frustrated by the very same reasons that motivate such an attempt: the multiplicity and the vicissitude of *the tragic* within specific theatric forms ranging from the ritual foundation in Greek theatre to the brutality in the Senecan tragic cosmos, and from the isolation of Man in Shakespearean tragedies to the institutionalized isolation in classic Chinese tragedies. The search for a definition of tragedy has been “the most persistent and widespread of all nonreligious quests for definition,”¹² as observed by Booth. However, it is only within the domain of Western literature that such quests prevail. While tragedy has epitomized an interesting array of definitions and perceptions throughout the history of dramatic literature in the European tradition, the question as to whether or not the Chinese stage since the 14th

“WHILE TRAGEDY HAS EPITOMIZED AN INTERESTING ARRAY OF DEFINITIONS AND PERCEPTIONS THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY OF A DRAMATIC LITERATURE IN THE EUROPEAN TRADITION, THE QUESTION AS TO WHETHER OR NOT THE CHINESE STAGE SINCE THE 14TH CENTURY EVER NOURISHED SUCH A GENRE REMAINS CONTROVERSIAL AND IS SELDOM TAKEN UP WITH EQUAL PASSION AS THAT OF THE QUESTS FOR DEFINITION IN THE WEST AS BOOTH OBSERVED.”

century ever nourished such a genre remains controversial and is seldom taken up with equal passion as that of the quests for definition in the West as Booth observed.

The form unknown, the Chinese tragedy, deserves due critical attention. An examination of the vicissitudes of *the tragic* in Greek and Classical Chinese drama, which are distant and exotic enough, will yield new evidences and redefine a genre that was arguably lost in China. I do not propose that Classical Chinese tragedies should be measured against the Aristotelian criteria and expectations for tragic plots, diction,

⁶ Heather Dubrow, *Genre* (London: Methuen, 1982), 11.

⁷ “A venerable error” was the term Fowler used when referring to the notion that genres merely provide “a means of classification” for literature. Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 37.

⁸ “I sing of warfare and a man at war.” (I.i) Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Random House, 1981), 3.

⁹ “Of ladies, cavaliers, of love and war, / Of courtesies and of brave deeds I sing.” (Orlando Furioso, I. i) Ludovico Ariosto, *The Frenzy of Orlando: Part One*, trans. Barbara Reynolds (London: Penguin, 1973), 117.

¹⁰ “I sing the reverent armies and the captain.” (Gerusalemme liberata, I.i) Torquato Tasso, *Jerusalem Delivered: An English Prose Version*, trans. Ralph Nash (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 5.

¹¹ Edmund Spenser, *Faerie Queene* (I. Proem, l. 9).

¹² Stephen Booth, *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition, and Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 81.

and characters. Rather, the tragic mode, which Alastair Fowler and Northrop Frye ventured to distinguish in their subtle analysis,¹³ is more useful than the tragic form, which Aristotle and many of his followers have championed. Exoticism in this scheme of comparison of tragedy East and West merits more than a diary entry of an early cultural-anthropologist whose travelogue and ethnographical writings describe not the distant culture but his “home.”¹⁴

Is there a Chinese tragedy? If yes, of what sort? If not, has Chinese literature nourished a different set of plays such as comedy, tragicomedy, high comedy, farce, etc., or is there indeed a kind of Chinese tragedy but called by some other names or never named? By asking whether or not Chinese literature has ever known some forms of tragedy, we are questioning the ways in which a genre can or should be defined. We are also questioning what Goethe referred to as *Weltliteratur*, the notion of the universality of literary experiences, among “diverse national or regional literatures”¹⁵ and, I would add, in cross-cultural exchanges.

Conjunctions and Disjunctions: Comedy, Tragedy, and Something In Between

Tragedy was born in Greece when myth was endowed with the dimension of a civil society. Shakespearean tragedy was bred out of the spirit of negation and the isolation of Man, in the Renaissance Humanist terms. German Baroque tragedy (*Trauerspiel*) was created out of a shift from myth to history, and from the transcendental ritual to the counter-transcendental “play,” or game, as the word *Trauerspiel* (mourning play) denotes it. But when was the Chinese tragedy born? After Stephen Greenblatt and New Historicism, it is almost a blasphemy to speak of a collective mentality of a certain nation during a certain period, in approaches like the now-tarnished “world picture”¹⁶ approach that “read complex literary works against a supposedly stable, coherent, and transparent ‘historical background’ that enshrined the political and social orthodoxies of the age.”¹⁷ However, I would still venture to launch an inquiry into the Chinese mindset and the Chinese aesthetics for the tragic narrative embedded in a theatrical expression that appears to be harmonic, or even

¹³ See Northrop Frye’s distinction of “mode” and genre in “The Mythos of Autumn: Tragedy” and “Tragic Fictional Modes,” *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 206-223 and 35-43; Paul Hernadi’s notion of mood in *Beyond Genre: New Directions in Literary Classification* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972); as well as Alastair Fowler’s concept of kind in “Concepts of Genre,” *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 37-53.

¹⁴ Three examples that immediately spring to mind are, though set apart by some 380 years in between, Claude L’Jvi-Strauss’ “Le Hon d’écriture,” *Tristes Tropiques* (Paris: Union Generale d’editions, 1962), Léry’s travelogue, and Raleigh’s famous account of the lost Guyana. Being accused of forgery, Sir Walter Raleigh indicates that his story is “an abstract taken out of certain Spanyardes letters concerning Guiana and the countries lying upon the great river Orenoque... taken at sea by Captain George Popham.” Sir Walter Raleigh (1552?-1618), *The Discoverie of the Large, Rich and Bevvtiful Empire of Guiana*, (London: Robert Robinson, 1596), 102. Jean de Léry (1534-1611) published in 1580 his anthropological account of his journey into the Bay of Rio between 1556 and 1558. Through eroticised speech, he emphasizes in the preface that the tale is extrapolated from “memoirs... written in Brazilian ink and in America itself.” L’ry travelled to Brazil only to find his Geneva. See Jean de Léry, *Histoire d’un voyage fait en la terre du Bresil, autrement dite Amerique* Edition de Frank Lestringant (Montpellier: M. Chaleil, 1992).

¹⁵ Antoine Berman, *L’Ipreuve de l’Jtranger*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1984). English translation quoted is from Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*, trans. S. Heyvaert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 55.

¹⁶ E.M.W. Tillyard’s seminal work, *Elizabethan World Picture: A Study of the Idea of Order in the Age of Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1943), characterizes a renewed interest in questions of “history” and marks the turn of literary studies from “always aestheticizing” and “always theorizing” to “always historicizing.” Tillyard’s take on the issue of history and “Elizabethan mindset” in Shakespeare’s England as a collective entity, though brilliant and innovative in its own right, smacks of the entry of a cultural-anthropologist’s diary entry. A grotesque vision of history and a seemingly fragmentary treatment of history have been taken up by New Historicist writings including Hayden White’s *Metahistory* and Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. For a summary of New Historicist’s take on the study of tragedy, please refer to James Cunningham, “New Historicism,” *Shakespeare’s Tragedies and Modern Critical Theory* (London: Associated University Press, 1997), 64-80.

¹⁷ Louis Adrian Montrose, “The Elizabethan Subject and the Spenserian Text,” in *Literary Theory / Renaissance Texts*, ed. Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 304.

comic. I am not offering a generalized reading of Classical Chinese drama against that supposedly stable and transparent “Chinese mentality.” Rather, I propose to reconstruct *the tragic* in the world of these dramas and ask questions such as: Was there ever a Chinese mentality or sensibility, between the 14th and the 17th century, for *the tragic*? Why was Classical Chinese drama deprived of the title of tragedy by scholars like Karl Jaspers and Yao Yiwei?¹⁸ The question as to whether or not China, between the 13th and 18th centuries, ever produced some kind of tragic drama remains controversial ever since its first inception in the late 19th century.

In line with many critics from the early Renaissance to the present, George Steiner’s view on the construction of tragedy is representative: “I believe that any realistic notion of tragic drama must start from the fact of catastrophe. Tragedies end badly.”¹⁹ Concerns about the mingling of happy ending, humor, and the tragic mood in Chinese tragedies have developed and expressed in similar manners. For the Greeks, as well as for the Chinese, catastrophe is more a technical device that does not necessarily have to conclude a tragedy. Aristotle also preferred a more fortunate ending. Some tragedies, for example *Eumenides*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *The Orphan of Zhao*, and the more controversial *Le Cid*, do have a slant toward a “happy ending.” These examples show how interpretations can vary even within the same cultural heritage and framework. In this regard, critics’ concerns about the essential formal features of Chinese tragedy are understandable, but the impetus behind these concerns worth a closer examination.

Yao holds that the characters in the Homeric underworld are true shadows while figures in the Chinese hell are utterly human and real. They suffer when they are tortured and they bear the

mark of their good and evil deeds during their lifetime. Since China knows a non-Homeric and stricter set of rules governing the underworld in which the virtuous is always rewarded and the wicked always punished, it follows that ancient Chinese stage never produces the kind of tragedy as Athens or Elizabethan England knew it. However, Yao concedes that “the tragic sense of life” and the tragic do exist in Classical Chinese plays—if tragedy is understood as more than a particular form of artistic expression peculiar to a certain period of culture. Jaspers, on the other hand, totally denies the existence of the genre of tragedy in China. When commenting on pre-Buddhist China, he concludes that the tragic cannot come into being “wherever man succeeds both in achieving a harmonious interpretation of the universe and in actually living in accord with it.”²⁰ He goes on to distinguish the differences between the ancient Chinese and the European cultures:

Terror and horror are part of experience and are as familiar to this civilization as to those civilizations awakened to an awareness of the tragic. Yet serenity remains the dominant mood of life; there is no struggle, no defiance. ... The relaxed and serene face of the Chinese still contrasts with the tense and self-conscious expression of Western man.²¹

There are, of course, pitfalls awaiting any one attempting such a study of East-West literary relations including the Saidian reflective “orientalism”²² and the kind of generalization of the “relaxed and serene face of the Chinese” and the “self-conscious expression of Western man”

¹⁸ Yao, Yiwei, “Yuan zaju zhong de beiju guan chutan (A preliminary attempt at the tragic consciousness in the zaju of the Yuan Dynasty),” *Xiju yu wenxue (Drama and Literature)*, Lienjing Pinglun 8 (Lienjing Critical Series Vol. 8) (Taipei: Lienjing Publishing, 1989), 13.

¹⁹ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), 8.

²⁰ Karl Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit, Philosophische Logik, 1*, (Band. Mhchen: R. Piper, 1947). Sections translated and titled *Tragedy is not Enough*, trans. Harald A. T. Reiche, Harry T. Moore, and Karl W. Deutsch (Archon Books, 1969), 32-33.

²¹ Karl Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit, Philosophische Logik, 1*, (Band. Mhchen: R. Piper, 1947).

²² By this I am referring to the irony in furnishing an image of the exact opposite of the West as if the cultural boundary is a mirror.

Another aspect of this irony lies in the act to contradict that image with a kind of reflective orientalism, not the “original” Orient. For example, if the West conceives of China as A, the self-orientalizing attitude assumes that it must be wrong and B, on the opposite, is championed. See Zhang Longxi’s *Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) and Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

in the passage above, but is it true that there is no indictment, no horror, and no rejection but only lament in Chinese drama? Instead of lament, pity, fear, or torment, isolation of the tragic character is the core of the tragic in drama. Tragic isolation in classic Chinese drama does not result from the pursuit of individual achievement. The kind of isolation for Chinese tragedy lies in the redefined self and in the interpersonal relationships. Due to the tradition of stylized performance, the Chinese theatrical actions are beautiful, even in the occasion of death and on the scale of unimaginable brutality. However, it does not follow that in the Chinese Buddhist context, characters are never torn in desperation. Misery and evil are not merely temporary disturbances in the karma or a circle in the retribution system. Tragic characters are exiled by Time and Space and often seek comfort in Time, as there is a continuum between past and present in the past-present dynamic in the tragedies of Yuan and Ming Dynasties. This suggests nonetheless a tragic sense of life. What is common between the Elizabethan and Yuan tragedies is that the tragic characters' names are restored only belatedly. What is unique in the Chinese plays is that they are avenged only by the generations to come. For example, in the *Orphan of Zhao*, a play of vengeance, it takes twenty years and toll of three lives to nail the villain, Tu Anqu. In the *Snow in Midsummer*, the unjustly executed lady, Dou E, sees her triple prophecies by her death realized one by one. Her ghost then haunts the stage until poetic justice is restored.

The Tragic and the *Trauerspiel*

Aristotle defines tragedy by its *telos* and therefore focuses on plot that constitutes tragic actions. Tragedy is "an imitation of an action... performed by actors... effecting through pity and fear the purification (*catharsis*) of such

emotions."²³ The actions on stage also ritualize the actions to be taken in the moral and civic community at large. It dramatizes the ritual of finding out the filthy "thing-in-itself" and getting rid of it. This search-and-discard is the essence of *catharsis*, or purification process in the collective consciousness.²⁴ Tragedy, then, is a representation of actions, and the tragic has to do with the nature of these actions represented, the essence of which is life. The shortcoming of the Aristotelian system is the conception of a tragic hero who has to be morally and socially nobler than the audience who forms the surrounding civic and moral community, both in the form of tragic chorus on-stage and in the form of spectator off-stage. To the essence of tragic characters and to the nature of *the tragic*, Classical Chinese tragedians, Shakespeare, and the German Romantics offer a different answer.

Peter Szondi opened his seminal work, *Versuch über das Tragische*, with a remark on the German reception of tragedy and the German invention of *the tragic*. A poetics of tragedy has existed since Aristotle, but a philosophy of *the tragic* only after Schelling.²⁵ *The tragic* is the mode of conflicts of forces embodied a dramatic narrative,²⁶ and it differs from the tragedy in that the latter is a dramatic form while the former advises a sense of sublime and an empirical mysticism in man's conditions. Aristotle outlined a poetics of tragedy and its necessary foundation in forms, but Schelling complicated the notion of tragedy, though also in light of its *telos* and *Zweck* (purpose), by engendering a philosophy of the tragic, which is a negative proof of man's free will. The assertion of free will is only possible through willingly taking the blame and enduring the punishment for transgression. The transgression is precisely that knowing the doomed result but nevertheless taking the lead to rise up and struggle with Fate, or Nature.

²³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), 10.

²⁴ The issue of *katharsis* is controversial in the translations of Aristotle's *De Arte Poetica Liber*, and its interpretations range from the moralism of neo-classicists, the "affective fallacy" of the New Critics, to the mental experiences in communal terms suggested by psychoanalysis.

²⁵ "Seit Aristoteles gibt es eine Poetik der Trag`die, seit Schelling erst eine Philosophie des Tragischen." See Peter Szondi, *Versuch über das Tragische* (Frankfurt/Main: Insel-Verlag, 1961), 7.

²⁶ Even the idea of the tragic is controversial, and it is not surprising to find that the entry "das Tragische" in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* starts with a reduction approach: "Unstreitig [...] ist nur die Zugehörigkeit der Trag`die zum Dionysos-Kult." (Author's translation: What remains indisputable is only the affiliation of tragedy to the Dionysus cult.) Joachim Ritter und Karlfried Grhnder hrsg. *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie Band 10: St-T* (Basel: Schwabe & Co AG Verlag, 1998), 1334.

The end of tragedy, for Schiller, is not to purge the audience in the Aristotelian sense, but to offer a venue for *das absolute Ich* (the absolute I) to exercise the free will, which in turn creates a world around the subject with the projection of the subjectivity. This world is the tragic world in a tragic theatre.²⁷

“It is we who are Hamlet.”
– William Hazlitt²⁸

It is the spectator who is, or becomes, the ultimate tragic protagonist. The Aristotelian age of aristocratic and noble tragic heroes occupying high social status is bygone. Now it is the bourgeois spectator and the bourgeois character that occupy the theatre, where a series of bad circumstances plunge a bourgeois family or character into despair. Aristotle defies the possibility of having a bourgeois character as the tragic hero because such a character lacks the height from which to fall. However, for Lessing and Chinese tragic drama in the Yuan Dynasty, it is precisely because of the bourgeois status of the tragic character that education through the tragic can be effected in its audience. The audience is involved in a dual and reciprocal process of identification. He first relates conditions of life to the events on stage and finds the tragic character pitiable. This is how pity is possible in the first place. He further relates the conditions of the tragic character back to his own conditions as man and finds himself in the vicinity to such terrible and fearful symmetry of sin and misfortune. The audience takes pleasure, Schiller claims, in practicing reason in the tragic theatre, which is an assertion of free will and subjectivity. Aristotle championed the importance of plot and techniques, or tricks even, of tragedy and tragedians, but Schiller focuses on the sentimental education of the spectator of the

tragic spectacle.

The bourgeois-ness of the *bürgerliches Trauerspiel* (bourgeois tragedy) in Germany, which Lessing and his contemporaries promoted as part of their program for sentimental education, serves as the Western model to facilitate our understanding of Classical Chinese drama, since going to plays and acting were local practices in ancient China, with a civic dimension and communal dynamics. The word *Trauerspiel* literally means mourning play; it also compounds game and stage performance. There are cultural resonance between the Classical Chinese tragedy and the tragic consciousness in the German *Trauerspiel*, while the kind of heroic isolation in Shakespearean tragedies illustrates, through contrast, another important aspect of the Chinese tragic consciousness, the civilian isolation in the crowd.

To our purpose, Walter Benjamin’s distinction of *Tragödie* and *Trauerspiel* in terms of myth and history is useful.²⁹ To this two more crucial distinguishing elements should be added, i.e. the dimension of individual pursuit in tragedy, framed in the plot or character-centered stage representation, and the communal and collective tragic consciousness of *Trauerspiel*, framed in a spectator-centered theatrical experience. Tragedy and *Trauerspiel*, then, become the mighty opposites of myth and history, the hero and the citizen, the transcendental and the counter-transcendental, the divine and the worldly, as well as the individual and the community. Shakespearean tragedy is the ritualized representation of isolation as a result of the pursuit of individual achievement. Chinese tragedy, which is closer to *Trauerspiel*, is the festive tragedy by the audience and for the audience. It does not reach up to the heaven, like tragedy, for the “hidden god” as the viewer aimed at. Rather,

²⁷ F.W.J. Schelling, “Zehnter Brief (1795),” *Philosophische Briefe, Werke 3. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, ed. H. Buchner et al. (Stuttgart: Frommann-Helzboog, 1982), 106-112.

²⁸ William Hazlitt, “Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays” (1817), in *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, ed. Jonathan Bate (London: Penguin Books, 1986).

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Rev. Ausg. besorgt von Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1963).

it bends toward the earth and seeks communal memorabilia of grief and relief. Tragedy as a classical genre differs radically from the *Trauerspiel*. Tragedy takes its root in myth and acts out a rite of heroic sacrifice on verisimilitude of the community. *Trauerspiel*, on the other hand, rises from representation of history.

In his last letter on tragedy, Schelling has made clear his position on *the tragic* as the third way between criticism and dogmatism.³⁰ The end of tragedy is not to reaffirm the unfathomable Nature or World-in-Itself, nor to afford us with a crystal clear world of representation which is up for grabs by the subject. Schelling further argues that:

The essence of tragedy is a real conflict between freedom in the subject and objective necessity. This conflict does not end with one defeated by the other, but with the totally indifferent appearance of the two, the winner and the loser at the same time.³¹ [...] The conflict between freedom and necessity is only real where the necessity undermines the will and freedom is contested on its own ground.³²

This is a picture of the incommensurability of the world and the singular and potentially tragic human nature. A picture of a human nature “as having to determine itself to its truth, for good or evil and despite everything,” is a tragic picture, as Marchant understands the Shakespearean tragedies.³³ This not true of Classical Chinese tragedies in which many tragic characters have to conform to the moral community and whatever role endowed on them at every single moment of life. What we have in common to characterize *the tragic* in Shakespearean and Classical Chinese

drama is the isolation of characters, though in different terms, and the necessity and tyranny of Time. Readiness is all. The protagonist wills some actions and cannot avoid willing some others. The fact that he cannot avoid it is the picture being presented in tragedy. Some kind of understandable but inexplicable sense of despair in relation to Time characterizes *the tragic*, which is part of the audience’s recognition of the worldly picture of thing-in-itself. Hamlet’s comments on the ripe of time before the duellare especially illuminating. He says to his friend and loyal companion Horatio:

Not a whit, we defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be [now], ‘tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it [will] come—the readiness is all.
—*Hamlet* (V.ii., 219-222)

The amoral Time, not the benevolent Heaven, in this sense, also characterizes the Chinese tragic. The Classical Chinese tragic character is ostracized by Time with an acute awareness of this exile, a reality he cannot avoid. A few remarks on the genre theory in ancient China is necessary before we explore further the defining characteristics of *the tragic* in the Classical Chinese drama.

The Tragic in Classical Chinese Drama

The genre theory takes a slightly different twist in the traditional Chinese critical idioms, in which drama was not categorized by its effect (audience’s response) or content (plot) into comedy, tragicomedy, melodrama, or tragedy. Birch points out in a beautiful metaphor that

³⁰ F.W.J. Schelling, “Zehnter Brief (1795),” *Philosophische Briefe. Werke 3*. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe. ed. H. Buchner et al. (Stuttgart: Frommann-Helzboog, 1982), 106-112.

³¹ “Das Wesentliche der Trag’ die ist [...] ein wirklicher Streit der Freiheit im Subjekt und der Notwendigkeit als objektiver, welcher Streit sich nicht damit endet, daß der eine oder der andere unterliegt, sondern daß beide sigend und besiegt zugleich in der vollkommenen Indifferenz erscheinen.” F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst. Werke*. I. Abteilung, Band 5. Stuttgart: 1856-61, 693.

³² Translated by author. “Der Streit von Freiheit und Notwendigkeit [ist] wahrhaft nur da, wo diese den Willen selbst untergrübt, und die Freiheit auf ihrem eigenen Boden bekämpft wird.” F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst*. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1960), 696.

³³ Robert Marchant, “The Idea of the Tragic,” *A Picture of Shakespeare’s Tragedies* (Retford: Brynmill, 1984), 17.

“a literary genre is a comfortable saddle” for the “writer-rider” and the “reader-rider.”³⁴ Classic Chinese drama has uniquely been categorized into subgenres by 1) its thematic issues³⁵ such as “young scholar and the beauty” or “outcasts and *flâneur*”³⁶, 2) its form and style of performance such as *zaju*³⁷ or *chuangci*,³⁸ and 3) its regional variations, music, and dialects such as Peking opera, Cantonese opera, or Kunqu opera. This is another reason why “tragedy” is regarded to be non-existent in China. Chinese plays have traditionally been generically labeled as *zaju* of the Yuan Dynasty or *chuangci* of the Ming Dynasty after the style of performance the plays were set.³⁹ Terms such as comedy, tragedy, tragicomedy, and melodrama were not used to categorize classical Chinese plays. Hence the question of the existence of tragedy in ancient China is a confusion between kinds and modes before it becomes a question of definitions.⁴⁰

“WHILE TRAGEDY HAS EPITOMIZED AN INTERESTING ARRAY OF DEFINITIONS AND PERCEPTIONS THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY OF A DRAMATIC LITERATURE IN THE EUROPEAN TRADITION, THE QUESTION AS TO WHETHER OR NOT THE CHINESE STAGE SINCE THE 14TH CENTURY EVER NOURISHED SUCH A GENRE REMAINS CONTROVERSIAL AND IS SELDOM TAKEN UP WITH EQUAL PASSION AS THAT OF THE QUESTS FOR DEFINITION IN THE WEST AS BOOTH OBSERVED.”

Now back to the question where we started. Does classic Chinese drama know tragedy, ritual or complex? Scholars and literati ancient and modern have attempted to answer it with various persuasions ranging from a total disavowal of the existence of tragedy in China based on formalistic observations of the performing formula, represented by Ch’ien Chungshu⁴¹ and Chu Kwangtsien⁴² to a petition of the genre of tragedy, a form unknown to early Chinese critics, based on the content of dramatic narrations, represented by Wang Guowei.⁴³ Contemporary dramaturgy and literary critic Yao Yiwei stands somewhere in between, as he takes the tragic sense of life as the tragic mode epitomized by Classical Chinese plays such as *Injustice Done to Dou E*. Tragedy does not only refer to a specific dramatic form in a specific historic period, such as the Hellenic world, and has undergone many revisions such as the

³⁴ Cyril Birch ed. *Studies in Chinese Literary Genres* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 1.

³⁵ The Ming prince and scholar Chu Quan (d. 1448) recorded 12 thematic categories of classic Chinese drama in the Yuan dynasty ranging from “nuns and fairies” to “exiled lords and orphans” and from “erotic love amongst flowers and under the moon” to “loyal lords and assassins”. See the chapter on “12 Categories of *Zaju*” in Chu Quan, *Taihe Zhengyin Pu* (Great Peace Tables for Correcting Sounds), 1398.

³⁶ *Robinhood* is an Anglophone equivalent to this archgenre.

³⁷ *Zaju* is a generic term for a style of drama in the Yuan Dynasty. It is a variety play with dance, song, monologue, balladry, and farcical skits set in four acts, each with a set of arias sung by the leading role. Spoken lines are inserted between the songs, and arias do not develop the plot but function to convey the emotions on stage and ambience of the particular scene. For a detailed study of the craft and formal characteristics of *zaju*, see James I. Crump, “The Conventions and Craft of Yuan Drama,” *Studies in Chinese Literary Genres*, ed. Cyril Birch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 192-219.

³⁸ *Chuangci* is another generic term for a different style of drama in the Ming dynasty. The play is more of an epic spectacle that unrolls like a giant Chinese scroll painting that contains more than 30 scenes. Tang Xianzu’s love tragicomedy *Mudan Ting* (Peony Pavillion), staged in the complete 55-scene version in 3-day Marathon performance at the Lincoln Center in New York in 1999, is the most famous example of *chuangci* plays. For a detailed study of this genre, see Cyril Birch, “Some Concerns and Methods of the Ming *Chuangci* Drama,” *Studies in Chinese Literary Genres*, ed. Cyril Birch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 220-258.

³⁹ There were *zaju* and *chuangci* in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, too. The Yuan and Ming were the respective periods when these genres first came into being and flourished.

⁴⁰ In terms of a cross-cultural definition of genre, the idea of mode is useful, though it remains still controversial. The debate between Derrida and Genette exemplifies modern disagreement on the idea of mode and genre. See Jacques Derrida, “La Loi du genre,” *Glyph: Textual Studies* 7 (1980): 176-201. Gérard Genette, *Théorie des genres* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), and Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre” Trans. Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry* 9.1 (1980): 55-81.

⁴¹ Ch’ien Chungshu, “Tragedy in Old Chinese Drama,” *T’ien Hsia Monthly* 11.1 (1935), reprinted in *Renditions* 9 (1978): 85-91.

⁴² Chu holds that “comedy” and “drama” are interchangeable in ancient China. Chu Kwangtsien, *Beiju Xinli Xuei* (*Psychology of Tragedy*) Trans. Longxi Zhang. (Beijing: Renmin Wenxuei Publishing, 1983), 218-219. Originally published in English as a dissertation submitted to l’Université de Strasbourg. See Chu Kwang-Tsien, *The Psychology of Tragedy: A Critical Study of Various Theories of Tragic Pleasure* (Strasbourg: Librairie Universitaire d’Alsace, 1933). Herbert Muller and Ralph Hallman share similar ideas. Herbert J. Muller, *The Spirit of Tragedy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 328-30. Ralph J. Hallman, *Psychology of Literature: A Study of Alienation and Tragedy* (New York: Philosophic Library, 1961), 47.

⁴³ Wang Guowei, “Yuanju zhi wenzhang (The Texture of the Yuan Drama),” *Songyuan Xiqu Kao* (*A Study of Song and Yuan Drama*), in *Wang Guowei Xiqu Luenwen Ji* (*Collected Essays on Drama by Wang Guowei*), (Taipei: Liren, 1993), 123-125.

Senecan rewrite and Shakespearean inventions, just to cite two examples.

The Chinese theatre knows violence, grief, and the stroke of natural or contrived disaster, within a cosmos interwoven with desires and complex interpersonal relationships. *The tragic* in Classical Chinese drama, such as *The Story of the Robe*⁴⁴ and the *Orphan of Zhao*,⁴⁵ is closer to what Aristotle described as *philos*: two friends instead of two enemies turning against each other out of a series of bad circumstances. Chinese tragedy is more Antagonistic— meaning irresolvable conflicts between Good and Good in the web of interpersonal relations, than Oedipal— concentrating on Providence and redemption.

The spiritual mood and depressed temper in the Renaissance English tragedies may be absent from Classical Chinese drama, but many defining features of tragedy are present in the Chinese plays. The extremely stylized performance in Chinese theatre tends to understate the violence of emotional impact. One of the major preoccupations of the Chinese dramatists is the suffering to which ordinary people (*shengdo xiaomin*) are subjected. Many of the Chinese tragedies have a suffering and often unjustly accused citizen from lower social classes as the central figure. Humble women and men often become the martyrs. Poetic justice is valued by some playwrights, perhaps more devotedly than by the European dramatists. The emphasis on death is paramount, though the fear of it never dominates the Chinese stage.

Snow in Midsummer (also known as the *Injustice to Dou E*) by Guan Hanqing stands out as a classical example of the Chinese “tragedy.” It comes “with a touch of

Dionysian extravagance and fervor”⁴⁶ and affords an interesting counterpart to *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. At the age of three, the heroine, Dou E, suffered the death of her mother. At seventeen she was given to a well-to-do widow since her father could not afford to raise her. She loses her husband after two years of unhappy life in marriage. Her mother-in-law consents to a second marriage under threats of an odious bandit and his father. After failing to blackmail Dou E into a similar marriage, the young bandit contrives a plot to murder her mother-in-law. However, the poisoned cup accidentally reached the villain’s own father instead. This reminds us of the poisoned cup reaching the wrong lips by the end of *Hamlet*.

The heroine is given the choice of being accused of murder or of accepting a hateful marriage. She refuses the marriage and is executed by a judge bribed by the villain. She makes a triple prophesy before her execution: 1) if she is innocent, she declares that upon her decapitation her blood will rise to stain a white banner high in air; 2) if she is innocent, though it is midsummer, there will be snow falling to bury her body and the devouring earth; and 3) if she is innocent, the province where such injustice has been done will be without rain for three years. Heaven does intervene, but only as an overarching moral universe. Dou E becomes the symbol for filial piety and a hallmark for rationalism as she says to her mother-in-law in the court, “if I don’t (take the blame) and be executed, how can I save you!” There are indeed numerous tragic ways to kill a woman,⁴⁷ and there are ways to die. However, Dou E chooses to become the martyr for her filial piety. She was once a

⁴⁴ *Luoshan Ji (Story of the Robe)*, a *Chuangci* play in 28 scenes from the Ming Dynasty, author anonymous. Such themes as the recognition of the villain in the adopted father and the intriguing relationships between biological father / imposter father and the son / adopted son have been recurrent in dramatic and fictional narratives such as *Hehan Shan (Reunion of the Robes)*, a play in the genre of *Zaju* in four acts, by Zhang Guobin in the Yuan Dynasty.

⁴⁵ A detailed study of the background of the story can be found in Wu-chi Liu, “The Original Orphan of China,” *Comparative Literature* 3 (1953), 193-212, in Shou-yi Cheng, “The Chinese Orphan: a Yuan Play,” *Tien Hsia Monthly* (September 1936), and in Jung-en Liu, “Introduction,” *Six Yuan Plays*. Trans. Liu Jung-en (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 7-35.

⁴⁶ Henry Wells, *The Classical Drama of the Orient*. (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1965), 53.

⁴⁷ Building on Nicole Loraux’s beautiful metaphor in *FaHons tragiques de tuer une femme* (Paris: Hachette, 1985). English translation available. Nicole Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*. Trans. Anthony Forster (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

philosopher and her concerns were the Truth: she did not murder the bandit's father. But now, at this very moment, Dou E is the filial daughter, and there is no space for a seeker for Truth. It is not about individual achievement and reputation, but the family at stake. As soon as the corrupted social institution and the torture instruments in the court close upon her and her mother-in-law, she surrenders to her role as a widow and a daughter. She has to save her mother-in-law. Dou E will die, and there is no way out. She could insist upon the Truth and die under the physical torture in the court, but that is not a choice for her, just as escaping Achilles' blow is an unimaginable choice to Hector, though in different circumstances. Dou E dies under forgery. To save her mother-in-law from being tortured to death in the court, she chooses to endorse the forged story about her "murdering" the bandit's father. She is found guilty and executed accordingly. Dou E's choice, or to be more precise, her having nothing from which to choose, characterizes the Chinese tragic in the communal sense. The free will per se is the free will of the community as a whole in the Chinese context, not that of an individual. At stake is the concern of becoming and being a citizen and a member in the moral community, which enacts the tragic isolation of the tragic character in the framework of her / his community.

A series of bad circumstances and tangles and knots in interpersonal relations, such as that of Dou E's heartily felt responsibility to her mother-in-law, characterize the tragic in Chinese drama. The tragic character cannot avoid making such choices due to his *position* in the interwoven web of interpersonal relationships. This "cannot" is the core of the tragic and is the cause for the tragic isolation.⁴⁸ The inevitable happens as it is, as a result of the character's positions in the web of

interpersonal relationships. Thus, "readiness is all," as Hamlet concludes.

Another aspect of the dilemma is the obligation to choose between sacrificing Truth or sacrificing the beloved, such as in Dou E's case. The replaceable submits to the irreplaceable when such sacrifice is at stake. The Truth for Dou E, in this case, is replaceable, even belatedly and after death, but her filial responsibility to her mother-in-law and the relationship between Dou E and her mother-in-law are irreplaceable; therefore, the irreplaceable duty has to be taken up, according to the decree of the society at that time. Mencius's answer, centuries earlier, to the hypothetical question posed by one of his students best illustrates such concerns within a moral community.⁴⁹ It is ask what would have happened if Blind Purblind (Shun's father) kills someone, when Shun is the emperor and Gao Yao is the justice minister. Mencius replies unequivocally that of course Gao Yao has to arrest Blind Purblind. The student follows on and wants to know whether or not Shun should have forbidden it. There is no way out for this potentially tragic situation since the two bodies of the king belong at once to the empire and the family. Mencius's solution epitomizes again the logic of the irreplaceable and the replaceable. Emperor Shun is confronted with difficult choices between allowing Gao Yao, the justice minister ordained by the emperor himself, to apprehend the murderer who happens to be the emperor's own father, and doing something in line with his duty as a son. Emperor Shun, Mencius says, should cast aside the empire as no more than "discarding a worn shoe." Having abandoned the crown, the emperor then secretly steals into the maximum-security prison and carries his father on his back and flees to the edge of the sea where no one can find them. He lives there happily with his

⁴⁸ Wang Guowei also takes this as the core of the tragic in his comments on *Honglo Meng*, which he thinks of as the "tragedy of tragedies." Following Schopenhauer, he outlines three kinds of tragedy: 1) the tragedy of the villain, 2) the tragedy of the blind Fate, and 3) the tragedy of the inevitable and contingency. Wang holds the last in the highest regards, since in such kind of tragedy things happen as they are, not as the result of the manipulation of a villain or the oblivion of the blind Fate. Wang Guowei, "Honglo Meng Pinglun (Critical Appraisal of *The Dream of Red Chamber*)," *Jingan Wenji (Collected Essays of Jingan)* (Ribei Zhongguo Sixiang Shi Yijiu Hui 1957), 42-43.

⁴⁹ Mencius, "To Fathom the Mind: Book One," 35 *Mencius*. Trans. David Hinton (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998), 248.

father, never giving a thought to the empire. This is a classical Chinese solution to a potentially tragic situation. For Dou E, it is quite different, since both polemics, the Truth and the filial duty, demand her devotion, and not one of them can be discarded by Dou E “like a worn shoe.” The tragic epitomized therein is the isolation between the two polemics and between the two worlds.

Time befriends me not and awaits me not.
—Chinese proverb

The return of the ghost of the unjustly executed Dou E signifies the Chinese sense of loneliness as being ostracized by Time and Space.

As a female repressed by her society and burdened with filial duties, she has nothing to resort to but Time. A continuum between past and present is shown in the belated “compensation” of the snow in the summer and the belated restoration of justice. Chinese

tragic characters are *homo political* and *homo historien*, as they resort to Time, the future, when seeking comfort for injustice done in the past and when seeking to restore their names. History and Time are conceived as cyclic instead of linear in the pre-Buddhist Chinese context, and Time comes into being only in concrete terms such as the elders, the bygone generation, or the life after death.⁵⁰ *The tragic* occurs in the “after life,” in the form of offspring or spirits, and a strong continuum between past and present can be found.

Such a continuum is most clearly exemplified in the recognition scene in *The Story of the Robe*. Shu Jizu, the orphan of the Shu family, finds out one day that his adopted father Shu Neng was once a bandit, and Shu Neng happens to have killed Shu Jizu’s family out of some complications of life. At this point,

Shu Neng comes to visit. Shu Jizu sets up a welcome banquet to celebrate his father’s visit, to thank his father for 18 years of labor raising him, and to celebrate his achievement in the imperial exam. However, the dinner is also a difficult confrontation between the imposter father, who is once the bandit but now a good person, and the adopted son, who is now a judge ordained by the emperor and an “enlightened” man who knows his real parentage. The continuum between past and present, in Classical Chinese drama, is embodied in the form of spirit, in Dou E’s case, and in the form of off springs, in Shu’s case. Upon realizing his real parentage, Shu Jizu has to switch to

his newly perceived self and has to act according to the duty of this new vision of self: avenge his biological father. We see a continuum between the biological father and the son. It is as if Shu Jizu’s biological father, whom he has never met, suddenly lives in

him. The story of the family is a fiction in the strictest sense, since Shu Jizu’s life is so detached from that bloody past. The person to whom he is thankful is his adopted father. However, the fiction becomes reality in this continuum in the tragic past-present dynamics. Shu Jizu is obliged to avenge his father and kill his adopted father. He is hesitating and tormented psychologically. The last scene is entitled “apprehending the father” without a forensic discourse. Rather, the son only approaches his adopted father with all kinds of detour and implied narrative of the past “sin.” Seeing this, Shu Neng hangs himself that very night to avoid putting his adopted son and himself in a difficult situation. Shu Jizu mourns his fate and the death of his imposter father.

The continuum between past and present is also evident in the recognition scene of *The*

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⁵⁰ The topic of the conception of Time is at once broad and intimidating. Classical Chinese fiction and drama provide us with many versions of understanding and multiplies it with infinite factors. No exhaustive treatment can be offered here given the constraint of space, but a comparative study of Aristotelian and pre-Buddhist Chinese conception of Time can be found in Christoph Harbsmeier’s “Some Notions of Time and of History in China and in the West: with a Digression on the Anthropology of Writing,” in *Time and Space in Chinese Culture*, ed. Huang Chhn-Chieh and Erik Zhrcher (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 49-71.

Orphan of Zhao where the orphan has learned of his real parentage and suddenly becomes ready to kill his adopted father, who has been in every aspect a loving and responsible father for the past twenty years. The debt cancels out everything and the bond to the biological father, which dictates the interpersonal relationships and ostracizes the orphan of Zhao in Time. The orphan is brought up by the greatest enemy of his family and is ignorant of his real ancestry. When Orphan Zhao reaches twenty, Cheng Ying, Zhao's tutor and guardian, manages to reveal to the orphan the whole story using a scroll on which the tragic history of the Zhao family is represented. Being struck by such a blow, Orphan Zhao faints. When being revived, he is "enlightened" and knows what to do. Orphan Zhao now realizes that his real name is neither Cheng Bo nor Tu Cheng, but Zhao. A crisis of traumatic proportions awaits Orphan Zhao. His adopted father Tu, whom he has referred to as the "able minister," turns out to be a man who butchered his whole family. Orphan Zhao has to kill his adopted father despite the fact that Tu has lavished on his adopted son the kind of protection and affection worthy of a real father for twenty years. Orphan Zhao's state of mind could have materialized into a Hamletian question had there been a tradition of monologue on the Chinese stage. He embraces his newly perceived vision of self and the new identity of a man "who has mistaken a villain for a father." It is as if his father and grandfather, who were killed by Tu, suddenly live in Orphan Zhao after that brief and symbolic moment of unconsciousness. He is placed at the Janus-faced gate between (his father's) past and (his own) present and between freedom and necessity.⁵¹ He looks upon both and is isolated from both.

Conclusion: *the Tragic in Cross-cultural Contexts*

*Claudius: But now, my cousin
Hamlet, and my son—*

*Hamlet: [Aside] A little more than
kin, and less than kind.*

—Hamlet (I.ii. 65)

Hamlet's response to this invitation from the imposter father is revealing of the tension between father and son and the anxiety between the authentic and the imposter. Similar tensions have been found in *Orphan of Zhao* and *The Story of the Robe*, when the protagonists find out that their "fathers" are imposters and merely adopted fathers. Even worse, these "fathers" are murderers, just like Claudius. The distant footsteps of the father, in the voice of "Adieu, adieu, adieu! Remember me,"⁵² does not sound across the corridor in the Classical Chinese drama dealing with father and son relationships. The Chinese fathers do not demand to be "remembered"; rather, they *live* in their offspring. This has to do with a different past-present dynamics and a self defined by duty and its place in the web of interpersonal relationships. The father's two bodies are hence the flesh in which he takes form and the body of his offspring to come. He lives and moves between these two bodies in the *Orphan of Zhao*, patiently seeking the moment for revenge. The son, now orphan Zhao, becomes his father by living out his father's will when he finally realizes his real parentage, because he takes up this new identity of the son to his biological father as smoothly as putting on a new gown. In the new identity, he has to get rid of the imposter—Tu, once the enemy to the Zhaos and now the loving adopted father. The immortality of the father is presented through the shift of identities in the son, the avenger.⁵³

⁵¹ Janus, the Greek and Roman god of beginnings, openings, and endings, after whom the month January is named. See also the gate of Janus in Virgil's *Aeneid* vii.

⁵² *Hamlet* I.v.91.

⁵³ An interesting parallel would be the Elizabethan fascination with the king's "two bodies," especially in the English legal theory. At royal funerals an effigy representing the king's Dignity is presented to show the immortality of the king. As some of Shakespeare's plays like *Richard II* and *King Lear* show, the king has both "anointed flesh" and the body of a "poor, bare, fork'd animal."

Orphan Zhao and Shu Jizu are male tragic characters, while Dou E is a female martyr. Their self is defined as Duty.⁵⁴ They all act in their capacity as son and adopted son, daughter and adopted daughter, to right the wrongs suffered by their fathers, grandfathers, or immediate family. This relates to the collective consciousness of the tragic in the world of Classical Chinese drama. Hence the isolation of the tragic character comes from without, the community, and not from within, from the individual Man, as in the cases of Shakespearean soul-searching tragic protagonists.

It is true that characters in Classical Chinese tragedies are seldom found in the process of soul-searching, but they are by no means stereotypes. The moral choices for the characters are few, and the ways in which positive characters can make such choices are further dictated by their roles and duties. The self is defined in terms of virtues and duties that often turn out be mutually exclusive. The tragic mode is to be understood as an isolation of the protagonist in an interwoven web of interpersonal relations and irresolvable dilemma. The most common duties include being filial to one's parents, loyal to the ruler, and faithful to friends. There is an interesting parallel between the conception of personal shame and communal responsibility in the Greek Antiquity and in ancient China. The world of Homeric epic is a shame culture in which the heroes are motivated by shame to perform the acts that they do. Shaming, to different extents in Greek and Classical Chinese tragedies, is public disapproval of one's character and, in the Chinese context, moral integrity. Shame,

reputation, and honor are the incentives that motivate Greek epic characters.⁵⁵ Therefore, Achilles would rather die on the battlefield than follow Athena's advice and lead a peaceful life at home. Escaping the fate of dying at the hands of Achilles is an equally unimaginable choice to Hector. To extend this statement about epic characters to the case of Classical Chinese drama, duty would replace the Greek conception of shame, as the self is defined as duty in Chinese tragedies, hence the tragic mode is embodied in a web of propriety and duties, which is closer to what Aristotle termed as *philos*: two friends, instead of enemies, turning against each other due to forces beyond control.

“ CLASSICAL CHINESE DRAMA FASHIONS A WORLD OBSESSED WITH MORAL EXCELLENCE EMBODIED IN THE CHINESE VISION OF SELF. ”

Shaming requires a set of norms. These norms define the duty, which in turn defines the self for

Classical Chinese

characters. The behavioral norms or moral standards are set by one's position in the web of interpersonal relationships rather than by one's social position only, as is true for the Greek tragic heroes. Kings adhere to one set of standards, commoners to another, and women to yet another. Postulating one's position in the continuum of time and among the visions of self, then embarking on a tragic voyage into the isolated inner world, of oneself and of the community, is the *modus operandi* of dramatic tragic narratives in Classical Chinese literature.

The underlying structure to the tragic question and responsibility of choice is Time. The basis of the tragic vision is being in the flow of one-directional time, where everything happens once and for all. Death, in this regard, defines the tragic hero and shapes the tragic experience in the Greek and Shakespearean theatre. Hamlet's conclusion that "readiness is all" shall not be

⁵⁴ Joseph Lau shares similar views. Joseph S.M. Lau, "Duty, Reputation, and Selfhood in Traditional Chinese Narrative," *Expression of Self in Chinese Literature*. ed. Robert Hegel and Richard C. Hessney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 372.

⁵⁵ I am indebted to Bernard Williams for the notion of shame as the impetus for tragic actions in the Homeric world. Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

China overseen, and death is indeed something inevitable that comes when it comes. However, the tragic irony lies in the fact that even the most thoroughly prepared tragic hero can be “surprised by death” when it befalls them.⁵⁶ The tragic moment, or the dénouement, in Shakespearean tragedy often arrives hand in hand with death, while the opposite operates in the Chinese tragic mood. It is the offspring, or the spirit, of the martyr who lives out the tragic isolation.

Classical Chinese drama fashions a world obsessed with moral excellence embodied in the Chinese vision of self. This

is most evident in *The Orphan of Chao*. After knowing that he has “mistaken the villain for a father” for more than twenty years, the sole heir of the Chao family resolves to avenge his father who is killed by the villain, now his adopted father. His newly perceived self as son of a murdered father dictates that he becomes an avenger to reaffirm the cosmic order. This supersedes the fact that the villain has been a loving father in every aspect. The Orphan Chao kills the villain without a slightest show of contemplation. *The tragic* is exemplified in the tragic vision of self, and the form unknown is hence revealed.

⁵⁶ For the argument on the role of death in tragedy, I acknowledge Frye’s influence. Northrop Frye, “My father as he slept: tragedy of order,” *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 3.