

# TRAGIC PROTOTYPES AND THEIR EVOLUTION IN CLASSICAL CHINESE WORKS

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**Abstract:** Classical tragedy in China, as a unique literary form, embodies the nation's cultural spirit and possesses profound historical heritages and distinctive aesthetic value. As an interdisciplinary research method, prototype analysis provides new perspectives and theoretical tools to delve into the connotations of tragedy. Studying the prototypes of classical tragedy in China helps reveal the development trajectory and inherent laws of classical tragedy in history. This article aims to analyze typical prototypes in Chinese classical tragedy within the framework of prototype theory, revealing the cultural characteristics of Chinese classical tragedy and its differences from Western tragedy. The goal is to provide a theoretical basis for related research.


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**Resumen:** La tragedia clásica en China, como forma literaria única, encarna el espíritu cultural de la nación y posee un profundo patrimonio histórico y un valor estético distintivo. Desde tiempos antiguos, la tragedia ha ocupado un lugar importante en la historia de la literatura China, reflejando preocupaciones públicas sobre la realidad social y su contemplación del destino humano. Como método de investigación interdisciplinaria, el análisis de prototipos proporciona nuevas perspectivas y herramientas teóricas para profundizar en las connotaciones de la tragedia. El estudio de los prototipos de la tragedia clásica en China ayuda a revelar la trayectoria de desarrollo y las leyes inherentes de la tragedia clásica en la historia. Este artículo toma el marco de la teoría de prototipos para analizar los prototipos de la tragedia clásica en China, con el objetivo de proporcionar la base teórica para la investigación relacionada.

**Palabras clave:** Análisis de prototipos. Tragedia. Literatura clásica.

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# TRAGIC PROTOTYPES AND THEIR EVOLUTION IN CLASSICAL CHINESE WORKS

Yunpeng Zhang<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Classical tragedy in China, as a unique literary form, embodies the nation's cultural spirit and possesses profound historical heritages and distinctive aesthetic value. As an interdisciplinary research method, prototype analysis provides new perspectives and theoretical tools to delve into the connotations of tragedy. Studying the prototypes of classical tragedy in China helps reveal the development trajectory and inherent laws of classical tragedy in history. This article aims to analyze typical prototypes in Chinese classical tragedy within the framework of prototype theory, revealing the cultural characteristics of Chinese classical tragedy and its differences from Western tragedy. The goal is to provide a theoretical basis for related research.

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## INTRODUCTION

Prototype criticism, originating from the ritual school in the 20th century, is a research theory and method that analyzes works with mythological foundations. It has a deep foundation in Western culture and is considered one of the four major methods in contemporary literary studies, as described by Wilfred L. Guerin. Prototype criticism is supported by three interdisciplinary theories: cultural anthropology, represented by Frazer; analytical psychology, represented by Jung; and symbolic philosophy, represented by Cassirer (Xu, 2005, p. 125-126).

Anthropology is a comprehensive discipline that emerged in the 19th century. It seeks to understand the origins of human culture, development and transformation processes from a cross-ethnic and cross-cultural perspective, discovering common cultural laws and individual cultural patterns in different ethnic cultures. Frazer's book, *The Golden Bough*, is an anthropological study of rituals, myths and folklore centered around witchcraft. However, the sympathetic magic principle, established in the book, provides the key to understanding many cultural and literary prototypes. Frazer believed witchcraft was important for primitive people to explain and control the unfamiliar natural world. From witchcraft emerged symbolic ritual activities, and mythology became the vivid and rational interpretation created by ancient

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people for these rituals. Frazer believed that such a clue existed in various ethnic groups' myths and in the ones of regions (Liu, 2014, p. 149-154). Inspired by Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, literary scholars have devoted themselves to studying literature from the perspective of mythology and rituals, forming the so-called "Cambridge school." Frazer even proposed that *The Golden Bough* was originally an anthropological work. Still, its influence on literary criticism is even greater than within its field, making it justifiable to consider it a literary research work. It can be said that *The Golden Bough* serves as the foundation for mythological prototype criticism (Chen, 2020, p. 99-100).

Anthropologists have pointed out the universality of modes of thought and beliefs in the early stages of human development. At the same time, psychologists have highlighted the existence of the collective unconscious at the psychological level. Jung believed that "[...] the origin of creation [...] is the typical psychological experience gradually formed in the ancient social life of humanity, accumulated through generations of history" (Han, 2021, p. 453-457). From the perspective of analytical psychology, and in conjunction with actual literary creation, Jung proposed the essence of literary creation, which lies in the material called "archetypes" that already exists in the writer's mind (Han, 2021, p. 453-457). Once these archetypes are activated, they prompt the writer to engage in writing. In the subconscious process of creation, personal experiences gradually recede, and the accumulated human cultural heritage begins to emerge at the conscious level. When inspiration strikes, writers are often governed by an uncontrollable force, producing things that even surprise them. The repetition of human experiences gradually transforms certain creative behaviors into instinctive reflections. In similar situations, people, even without knowledge of previous experiences, produce reflections similar to their predecessors' ones. In literary creation, this reflection is manifested as the repetition of archetypes in writing. Compared to Frazer's contributions to the theory of prototype criticism, Jung's analytical psychology, represented by Jung himself, primarily contributed to forming this critical theory through two important concepts, which also differentiate it from other critical theories (Hou; Li, 2023, p. 107-116).

In comparison, the German philosopher Cassirer made a relatively late and indirect contribution to the study of prototypes. In his book *Mythical Thought*, Cassirer introduced the concept of "mythical thought." He approached mythology from an epistemological perspective and argued that mythology is a mode of thought that predates theoretical thinking. It is an "internally consistent worldview." Furthermore, Cassirer posited that the essential difference between humans and other species lies in the fact that humans possess mythical thinking, logical thinking, symbolic language, and other characteristics. It is through these faculties that humans establish their cultural systems. Humans can comprehend the process of ancestral cognition and the interpretation of the world through myths and legends. "Myth, language, and art permeate and intertwine with each other in their specific historical phenomena" (Zhao, 2021, p. 43-46). Therefore, as the earliest form of literature, the symbol

systems, contained in mythology, and the linguistic conventions, formed within it, served as a model for the formation of literary language and imagery in later periods. Mythology carries symbolic significance, and establishing human culture is also a symbolic act that originates in mythology (Zhao, 2021, p. 43-46).

The seminal figure in prototype criticism is Canadian scholar Northrop Frye, and his work, *Anatomy of Criticism*, is considered the “bible” of the prototype criticism school. He introduced the concept of “prototype” in the field of literature, emphasizing the cultural dimension of prototypes, namely their socio-cultural characteristics of transmission. Frye expanded the scope of the prototype concept, suggesting that the carriers and forms of expression of prototypes are not limited to Jung’s collective unconscious, but can also include mythology, symbolism, rituals, and themes, among others. Cultural prototypes are visible, transmissible, collective and subject to substitution and transformation. For example, themes, images, characters and motifs, in literary works, possess a repetitive, symbolic and conventional nature.

## 1 PROTOTYPE ANALYSIS OF CLASSICAL TRAGEDIES IN ANCIENT CHINA

In Western literary theory, a comprehensive definition of tragedy first appeared in the renowned Greek scholar Aristotle’s *Poetics*: “Tragedy is an imitation of serious and complete action, with the embellished language used in different forms throughout its various parts. It imitates the characters’ actions rather than narrates them, evoking pity and fear to release these emotions” (Xie *et al.*, 2010, p. 43-46). Although ancient China did not have a clear concept of “tragedy”, as defined by Aristotle, it produced many tragic works. The establishment of classical tragedy theory in ancient China can be attributed to the eminent modern scholar Wang Guowei. Wang Guowei believed, “The spirit of our people is joyful and optimistic, and this optimistic outlook permeates our theatrical and fictional works. They begin with sorrow and end in joy, begin with separation and end in reunion, and begin with adversity and end in prosperity” (Xie *et al.*, 2010, p. 43-46). Ancient Chinese tragedy possesses distinct characteristics compared to Western classical one, with the hero’s and wronged filial woman’s prototypes being typical representatives.

### 1.1 TRAGIC HERO’S PROTOTYPE

According to Carl Jung, the source of literary creation lies in the collective unconscious or prototypes. The creation process involves the author delving into the depths of the psyche, reawakening and activating the buried and dormant prototypes in the people’s collective unconscious. These prototypes are excavated from the abyss of the unconscious, imbued with conscious value, transformed, and made understandably and accepted by contemporary

minds through literary works. Literary art originated from mythology, religion, rituals, illusions and dreams. In today's literary works, we can discover the recurring prototypes that emerged from early human thought, especially in mythology. In later literary works, these prototypes are manifested in the form of recurring images or structures. This indicates that the source of literary creation is the collective unconscious or prototypes. Essentially, literary creation involves the recreation of prototype imagery. It results from the creative subject, as an individual within humanity, drawing from the collective unconscious, integrating personal and, especially, racial experiences, and giving them form, such as in mythology (Ye, 2021, p. 38-44).

For example, we can consider the character “Yi” in ancient Chinese literary works. The *Huainanzi* is recorded:

During Emperor Yao's reign, ten suns rose together, scorching crops and killing vegetation, leaving the people without sustenance. There were rampant monsters named Zaochi, Jiuying, Dafeng, Fengxi, and Xiushe, all causing harm to the people. Emperor Yao thus sent Yi to exterminate Zaochi in the Chouhua wilderness, kill Jiuying above the Xiongshui River, capture Dafeng in the Biaoqiu marsh, shoot down the ten suns from the sky, sever Xiushe in the Dongting Lake, and capture Fengxi in the mulberry forest (Liu; Hu, 2018, p. 99-100).

In primitive societies, human survival abilities were limited, and the harsh natural environment further worsened their lives. Droughts, floods, ferocious beasts, diseases and, more often, threatened human existence. Consequently, people longed for supernatural protection that could conquer and control nature, and they desired heroes with extraordinary abilities to eliminate harm and secure the people's well-being. This collective unconscious gave rise to heroic figures like Yi, who possessed strength and courage. *Mencius · Lie Lou Xia* is written as “Fengmeng studied archery under Yi and mastered his techniques. He thought Yi was the only one who could surpass him, so he killed Yi” (Yang; Yang, 2021, p. 48-56). Yi was a great hero who made significant contributions to humanity. With his excellent archery skills, he was dispatched by Emperor Yao to exterminate ferocious creatures, shoot down nine suns and, ultimately, bring peace and prosperity to the people who rejoiced in his accomplishments. His fearlessness and dedication to eradicating harm for the people's sake almost became a shared virtue among heroic figures in later Chinese literature. However, Yi's fate was tragic. Despite wielding his bow and arrows to protect the people and passing down his skills diligently to his disciple Fengmeng, he ultimately met a tragic death at his jealous student's hands. Yi exemplifies a tragic hero's archetype, as his life trajectory follows the pattern from establishing heroic achievements in slaying suns and beasts to meeting a tragic demise, aligning closely with the tragic heroes' model seen in later periods.

*Annals of Xiang Yu* is a remarkable work by Sima Qian, who dedicated much effort. It is also a timeless masterpiece within “Historical Records” that recounts significant events in Xiang Yu’s life and his tragic and ultimately inevitable self-inflicted death. Xiang Yu, a Chu generals’ descendant, was described as over 1.8 meters tall, capable of lifting a cauldron, and exceptionally talented. He possessed great ambitions and could not tolerate the Second Emperor’s brutal rule, belonging to the Qin Dynasty. He actively immersed himself in the anti-Qin tide, employing his extraordinary intelligence and strength, capturing Dingtao and Xiangyang. In the crucial battle of Julu<sup>2</sup>, Xiang Yu disregarded his own life and death, delivering the fatal blow to the decaying Qin Dynasty with a “burning the boats and bridges” courage and determination. It can be said that without Xiang Yu, there would have been no victory in the peasant uprising against Qin and no glorious establishment of the Han dynasty in history. To a certain extent, regarding him as a heroic figure, who made significant contributions during a specific period at the end of the Qin dynasty, is not an exaggeration. Xiang Yu always pursued personal dignity. Even in the failure of the Battle of Gaixia, when he had the opportunity to escape alive, he chose to commit suicide to fulfill his aspirations (Huang, 2002, p. 29-32). He smiled, “If Heaven abandons me, what need have I to cross over? All men from Jiangdong crossed the river to the west and did not return. If, out of pity, the elders in Jiangdong mourn for my loss, how can I face them? Even if they say nothing, can I alone be free from self-reproach?” (Sima; Yang, 2021, p. 76-78). He would rather die with a bang than live in a pitiful and miserable state. Although Xiang Yu’s physical form perished, he achieved a magnificent character’s shaping in his unique way, maintaining his noble spirit and dignity. Thus, he became a classic figure in Chinese classical literary works. Li Qingzhao, a poet from the Song dynasty, said, “When alive, one should be a hero. Even dead, one should still be so. We still honor Xiang Yu today. O he’d die rather than flee away” (Compilation Committee of Zhongtu Wenku, 2018, p. 58-66). Similarly, Li Guan wrote, “Unfavorable is the time, yet his steed does not flee. Trapped in Yinling, facing the pursuing troops. Wailing and lamenting, shattering heaven and earth. Gazing upon the path homeward, enduring the stolen life! An extraordinary achievement, but where can one see the lingering soul?” (Compilation Committee of Zhongtu Wenku, 2018, p. 58-66). Although his “extraordinary achievement” was renowned, “[...] where can one see the lingering soul?” (Compilation Committee of Zhongtu Wenku, 2018, p. 58-66). This common tragic hero motif is observed in later generations.

## 1.2 THE WRONGED FILIAL WOMAN’S PROTOTYPE

The wronged filial woman’s prototype is an important story archetype in Chinese classical literature. From ancient legends, in pre-Qin times, to historical records of the Western

<sup>2</sup> Battle of Julu: It took place in 208 BC and was led by Xiang Yu and others. This battle basically destroyed the main force of the Qin army and brought the Qin Dynasty to its rapid demise.

Han and Eastern Han dynasties, mystery novels in the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern dynasties, poetry in the Tang Dynasty, historical records in the Song Dynasty, dramas in the Yuan Dynasty, and local chronicles in Ming-Qing dynasties, there are relevant accounts of this type of story. Moreover, such stories have always continued in oral transmission among the common people. With the various forms of recording, adaptation and re-creation by literati since the Song and Yuan dynasties, the oral and written works related to the wronged filial woman's prototype have become exceptionally abundant.

The earliest wronged filial woman's prototype can be traced back to the legend of the "Shu Nv Jiao Tian (Destitute widow crying out to heaven)" in the pre-Qin period. Liu An of the Western Han dynasty recorded in the *Huainanzi*: A destitute widow from the state of Qi, who harbored grievances, cried out to the heaven, resulting in thunder and lightning striking the lofty tower of Duke Jing in Qi. The fallen debris caused injuries to Duke Jing's limbs, and the seawater surged and overflowed onto the land. Gao You of the Han dynasty wrote a commentary on it:

In the state of Qi, there existed a destitute widow who refused to remarry due to her lack of offspring. She served her mother-in-law with the utmost respect. The mother-in-law, lacking a son but having a daughter who coveted her mother's wealth, compelled her mother to marry off the widow. However, the widow adamantly refused. In a malicious act, the daughter killed her mother to accuse the widow falsely. The widow could not prove her innocence, and her grievances reached the heavens. The heavens responded by unleashing thunder and lightning, causing the collapse of Duke Jing's tower, damaging his physical body, and leading to a massive overflow of seawater (Bai Zi Quan Shu 3, 1993, p. 83).

A similar story appears in Gan Bao's *In Search of the Supernatural* during the Jin Dynasty:

During the Han Dynasty, a filial woman in the East Sea region treated her mother-in-law with utmost care. The mother-in-law said, "The woman has diligently taken care of me. I am already old, and what does it matter if I pass away early, having burdened her for many years?" She subsequently took her own life by hanging. Her daughter reported to the authorities, saying, "The woman killed my mother." The officials arrested and interrogated the woman, subjecting her to cruel torture. Unable to bear the agony, the filial woman falsely confessed. At that time, Yu Gong served as an official in charge of prisons. He said, "This woman has dutifully cared for her mother-in-law for over ten years, and her filial piety is widely known. She must not have committed the murder." However, the magistrate did not listen to him. Yu Gong, unable to rectify the situation, embraced the case files and wept in the government office before leaving. Subsequently, the county experienced a prolonged drought for three years. When the new magistrate arrived, Yu Gong said, "The filial woman should not have died. The former magistrate wrongfully executed her, and the blame lies with him." The magistrate immediately conducted a personal sacrifice at the tomb of the filial woman and erected a memorial tablet. Rain fell from the sky, and the following year had a bountiful harvest. According to the accounts passed

down by the elders, the name of the filial woman was Zhou Qing. As she was about to die, a chariot carrying a ten-zhang bamboo pole was prepared, and five banners were hung. She swore publicly, saying, “If I am guilty, let me be killed, and my blood will flow downward. If I have been wrongfully condemned to death, let my blood flow against the current.” After the execution, her blood appeared greenish-yellow, flowing along the bamboo pole upward, marking the spot, and then flowing back down along the banners (Gan; Zong, 2020, p. 101).

Compared to the story of the “Shu Nv Jiao Tian” from the pre-Qin period, the plot of the story of Jin Dynasty about the wronged filial woman is more intricate, and the setting is narrowed down to the Donghai commandery. However, the protagonist’s identity in the story has not undergone significant changes. She is still labeled a widow, childless and devoted to her mother-in-law. In ancient Chinese society, where filial piety was deeply ingrained, the distinctive feature of the filial daughter story itself undoubtedly served as a rapid passport for its widespread circulation. It also retained the humanitarian spirit of the “Shu Nv” legend, using the resonance between heaven and humans to rectify unjust social events by popular sentiment and reason. The extraordinary changes in celestial phenomena symbolize the changing cultural and psychological landscape of the era. In the ancient agrarian society’s context, a three-year drought was enough to concern the ruling class deeply. However, these changes did not affect the public’s appreciation of the story from their perspective. This is also an important reason why this filial daughter story continues to be passed down.

In Volume 96 of the *Book of Jin*, in the Biographies section, the 66th biography is titled “Woman of Shaan.” It states:

A woman in Shaan, whose surname and given name are unknown, was nineteen years old. During the time of Liu Yao, she lived as a widow in Shaan County and was devoted to her brother-in-law and mother-in-law. The mother-in-law had a married daughter. The daughter had requested to borrow money from the widow but was denied. As a result, she falsely accused the widow of murdering her mother. The authorities failed to investigate and wrongly executed the widow. During that time, a flock of birds mournfully cried atop the corpse, their sounds filled with sorrow. The corpse remained intact and unaffected by decay or the intrusion of insects and animals for ten days, even during the scorching summer. Furthermore, the region experienced a prolonged drought for years. Yao dispatched Hu Yanmo as the new magistrate. Upon learning of the widow’s wrongful execution, he promptly beheaded the daughter and held a modest ritual to honor the widow’s tomb. She was posthumously honored with the title “Filial and Virtuous Woman of Loyalty,” on that day, there was heavy rainfall (Fang; Huang, 1934, p. 66).

We can see that, in the revised version of the “Book of Jin” of the Tang Dynasty, the setting of the wronged filial woman’s story changes, but the reason for the filial woman’s killing remains tied to her mother-in-law’s death. The false accusation still stems from the



conflicts between her and her younger sister-in-law. However, the filial woman's plot, making a vow before her death, has been omitted, and instead, legendary elements, such as "a flock of birds mournfully crying above the corpse, their voices filled with sorrow, the corpse remaining uncorrupted for ten days in the scorching summer, untouched by insects or animals", have been added, imbuing the story with distinct regional characteristics.

Guan Hanqing, a playwright of the Yuan Dynasty, is the founder of Yuan drama and one of the "Four Great Masters of Yuan Drama"<sup>3</sup>. He achieved great success in drama, and his most famous work is *Dou E Yuan* (The Injustice to Dou E), which is also the most well-known representative work of the wronged filial woman story. Dou E lost her mother at three, and her father was addicted to gambling, leaving her heavily indebted and pawned off to Cai Po as a child bride for twenty taels of silver. The play begins by highlighting Dou E's young age and numerous misfortunes. At age twenty, she observes a three-year mourning period for her husband, becoming a young widow (Wang, 2023, p. 17-19). Unexpectedly, Dou E is later coerced and framed by the rogue Zhang Lv'er and, out of compassion for Cai Po, she accepts false charges. Ultimately, she dies with deep resentment, unable to reveal the truth. Before her death, Dou E makes three vows to prove and express her innocence: "When a pure mat is spread out, let me, Dou E, stand upright. Let a pair of white silk cords hang from the flagpole. If I, Dou E, am truly innocent when the blade falls, let my head be severed. Not a drop of my warm blood stains the ground, but let it splatter onto the white silk cords" (Wang, 2023, p. 23-25), "Now, in the scorching days of summer, if Dou E is truly innocent, after my death, let three feet of auspicious snow fall from the sky, covering Dou E's corpse" (Wang, 2023, p. 23-25), "I, Dou E, died truly wronged. From this day forward, let Chu Prefecture suffer from a drought lasting three years" (Wang, 2023, p. 23-25). Later, each of these vows is fulfilled: blood splatters onto the white silk cords, snow falls in June, and there is a three-year drought, thus propelling this emotionally gripping drama to its climax and bringing it to a close.

The wronged filial woman's prototype story, although having variations, can be essentially summarized as follows: 1. The filial woman remains faithful and devoted after becoming a widow. 2. The filial woman is falsely accused and wronged. 3. The filial woman dies as a result of the wrongful accusations. 4. The injustice of her case generates significant attention, leading to extraordinary phenomena, such as "drought", as a manifestation of her unjust suffering. People sympathize with her plight and thus perform rituals at her tomb to alleviate her grievances and resolve the calamities. In his exploration of the history of Song and Yuan drama, Wang Guowei referred to three types of tragedy mentioned by Arthur Schopenhauer. The first type of tragedy involves "the deliberate manipulation by individuals possessing extreme malevolence and the full range of capabilities to ensnare others." This

<sup>3</sup> "Four Great Masters of Yuan Drama" refers to four playwrights of the Yuan Dynasty who made significant contributions to the development of Yuan drama. They are Guan Hanqing, Ma Zhiyuan, Bai Pu, and Zheng Guangzu.

extreme malevolence often appears in wronged filial women's stories, such as Zhang Lv'er in "Dou E Yuan," who falsely accuses Dou E of murder, ultimately leading to her tragic demise. The second type of tragedy arises from "the blind workings of fate." The protagonists in wronged filial women's stories often come from impoverished backgrounds, have lost their husbands and lack support. Social status, illness and death carry an elusive sense of destiny. The irresistible nature of fate stems fundamentally from the structural circumstances that the lower classes find themselves in, from the very beginning of their lives, trapped within their time's context. The third type of tragic circumstance arises from "the positions and relationships of the characters, forcing them into an inevitable situation, not necessarily characterized by malicious intent or unexpected events, but rather by ordinary characters and circumstances that compel them inescapably. They are fully aware of the harm inflicted and received, each party exerting their influence yet unable to escape their guilt." In "Dou E Yuan," from the moment Dou E's father sells her to Cai Po, the escalating events present a sequence of choices that seem "inevitable." They are dramatic coincidences, but more accurately, they represent a certain inevitability within the social context. This inevitability is intertwined with the intense conflicts and contradictions between the turbulent era and the system of social values, embodying the ordinary people's helplessness and powerlessness in the face of tragedy (Guan, 2020, p. 36-48).

The formation of the wronged filial woman's prototype is primarily influenced by Confucian culture. During the Han Dynasty, Confucianism became the society's mainstream ideology. With the introduction of the ethical concept of "Three Bonds and Five Constants," Confucian filial piety was implemented in social customs. The "Three Bonds and Five Constants" reinforced the ruler's, father's and husband's rights, placing women in a disadvantaged position. The wronged filial woman's story is a product of this "Three Bonds and Five Constants" ideology. After her husband's death, the filial woman must willingly assume a daughter-in-law's duties, diligently serving her mother-in-law. The complete loss of self-awareness under environmental pressure is the tragic origin of the filial woman's life.

## 2 CHARACTERISTICS OF CLASSICAL TRAGEDIES IN CHINESE LITERATURE

The protagonist of a tragedy undergoes a transformation from prosperity to adversity, ultimately meeting an unfortunate ending, which generates the most powerful tragic effect. Chernyshevsky believes that tragedy is the humans' great suffering or the great individuals' death. For example, in the ancient Greek tragedy *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus is punished by Zeus for helping humanity attain enlightenment and stealing fire. He is bound with heavy chains to a cliff in the Caucasus. Not only does he lose his freedom, but he also endures hunger, wind and scorching sun, while a group of evil eagles, sent by Zeus, pecks at his liver daily, which regenerates each night. Thus, he perpetually suffers the dual torment of spirit

and body without end. Similarly, in *Medea*, to help her beloved Jason obtain the Golden Fleece, Medea disregards everything, betraying her father and country, and even kills her brother. She does all this to be with the man she loves. However, in the end, Jason betrays and abandons her to marry a princess from another country. Medea kills the king and his daughter to seek revenge for Jason's infidelity and cruelly murders her two beloved children.

Western classical tragedies typically embody a "tragedy to the end," intensifying the conflicts of the tragedy. Tragedies feature the protagonist's suffering and misfortune, with death and destruction as the definitive outcomes determined by fate. They provide a profound impact and contemplation, emphasizing the tragic characters' struggle against fate and the value and spirit of transcendence through their destruction. Chinese classical tragedy differs in certain aspects. Harmony is the fundamental principle of emotional expression in Chinese culture. Confucianism requires that emotional expression be moderate rather than excessive or indulgent. Therefore, Chinese classical tragedies often employ various methods such as "reunion" and "tragedy with a touch of happiness" to compensate for shortcomings and prevent tragedies from becoming purely tragic, as seen in Western classics (Chen, 2022, p. 78-85).

Taking Chinese classical tragic heroes as an example, although they have tragic endings on a personal level, people often hope they receive compensation in other aspects. In Chinese folklore, after Hou Yi's death, he was deified by the heavenly emperor, and people established ancestral temples to worship tragic heroes, like Xiang Yu and Yue Fei, for generations. In popular tragic literary works, the protagonist's destruction is often not the end of the story; the author arranges for the protagonist to reappear in the form of a ghost or spirit. Through its efforts or seeking external assistance, the ghost ultimately achieves revenge and resolves grievances. For example, in *Dou E Yuan*, when Zhang Lv'er falsely accuses Dou E of being her father's murderer, she resists fiercely without compromise. She initially hopes for justice from the authorities but encounters a corrupt official. Under threat to her mother-in-law's life, she ultimately succumbs and confesses under duress after making three vows, only to meet an unjust death. However, the author does not end the story there. Instead, Dou E's ghost seeks justice from her official father by fulfilling omens. The play ends with the ghost narrating her grievances and finding a resolution for her unjust death. Another example is *Wu Tong Yu* (Rain on the Plane Tree), which tells Emperor Tang Minghuang and Yang Guifei's love story. During the rebellion led by An Lushan, Emperor Tang Minghuang flees with Yang Guifei. At Ma Wei Slope, the soldiers mutiny and force Emperor Tang Minghuang to execute Yang Guifei. Afterward, as a retired emperor, Tang Minghuang paints portraits of longing for Yang Guifei and dreams of reuniting with her. Although Yang Guifei is dead, the work concludes with a reunion in a dream abruptly interrupted upon awakening.

## CONCLUSIONS

The archetype is a psychological structure that holds normative and inspirational significance for a nation's culture and art. The basic content of the archetype constructs the artistic space of classical Chinese tragedy and also influences the audience's aesthetic consciousness. Classical Chinese tragedy has been continuously reworked and recreated in its development and evolution. As classics, they embody the crystallization of national wisdom and integrate the psychological deposits of the nation's collective unconscious. Traditional Chinese tragedies tend to provide emotional compensation or even conclude with a bittersweet reunion because of the concept of harmony and balance in Chinese traditional culture. This concept of harmony regulates people's ideals and restrains their behaviors. The aesthetic taste, rooted in this cultural ideology, inevitably advocates the gentle and harmonious beauty of "moderation and harmony." In literary creations, this is manifested as "starting with love, ending with virtue," aiming to achieve the effect of "sorrow without injury, joy without lewdness." In summary, it seeks moderation and appropriateness. In ancient Chinese tragedies, regardless of the difficulties encountered by the main characters, they always have a satisfying ending due to divine assistance or humanitarian aid. This demonstrates that Virtue is its reward and dilutes the painful and mournful elements of tragic plots. The method of archetype criticism allows us to discover the underlying cultural undercurrents beneath the ever-changing surface structures of classical Chinese tragedy. The regular content in the deep structure enables us to perceive the Chinese nation's spiritual characteristics constantly. When we appreciate classical Chinese tragedies, our consciousness instantly connects to the historical origins of Chinese culture, and what we feel is no longer just a particular character's fate, but rather a caring and experiential understanding of the entire national culture.

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