



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

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One of the paramount distinctions between classical tragedy in China and Western countries lies in their respective nature: the former embodies a blend of sorrow and joy, a bittersweet amalgamation, while the latter exudes a solemn atmosphere permeated with sorrow. Zhang (2024) contends, in the article, that the denouement of classical Chinese tragedies, often culminating in reunion, is a manifestation of the aesthetic inclination towards the beauty of “moderation” deeply rooted in Chinese cultural tradition.

In *The Analects of Confucius, Chapter VI Yong Ye*, Confucius elucidated that “The Doctrine of the Mean is the perfect virtue of the supreme level. But for a long time, very few people have been able to attain this level (Liang, 2019, p. 24).” This marks the inaugural mention of the concept of the “Doctrine of the Mean” within Confucianism, which later became embraced by subsequent Confucian scholars. Over time, scholars have continued to refine and enrich their ideological implications, profoundly shaping the Chinese populace’s moral compass and life’s fundamental principles. Zhu Xi provided a precise elucidation of this notion, asserting that “When making a judgement, one has to hold the scale even,” emphasizing the necessity of impartiality in all matters. The concept of the “Golden Mean” not only influences the Chinese worldview and methodology, but also deeply impacts the Chinese people’s aesthetic sensibilities. The promotion of “moderation” and “harmony” has been ingrained in the Chinese psyche, influencing various aspects of life, including the pursuit of a “moderation” beauty in classical Chinese tragedy.

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The *Shuowen Jiezi* 说文解字 interprets *zhong* 中 as a person's inner essence. Xu Shen, in his annotations, contrasts the meaning of *zhong* with *wai* 外 "external" and *pian* 偏 "biased", while also carrying connotations of "appropriateness". By Wang Yangming's era, *zhong* came to represent the principle of Heaven, termed as such because it embodies impartiality. Consequently, *zhong* 中 denotes a state that is rational, suitable and in alignment with both the principles of Heaven and human emotions. The term *he* 和 "harmony and compatibility" signifies the coordination and adaptation among entities of differing natures. Any state, in which diverse entities can blend and adapt harmoniously, is described as a state of *he*.

In ancient Chinese traditional culture, the concepts of *zhong* and *he* are often closely intertwined, with ancient China consistently pursuing a state of *zhizhonghe* 致中和 "achieving harmony and compatibility". The term *zhizhonghe* first appears in the *Book of Rites: Doctrine of the Mean* (《礼记·中庸》), stating that

[...] when joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness have not yet arisen, it is called the state of *zhong*; when they arise to their appropriate degrees, it is the state of *he*. The *zhong* state is the root of the world; the state of *he* is the way of the world. To attain the *zhizhonghe* state is to establish heaven and earth as one's foundation, nurturing all things thereby (Liang, 2009, p. 85).

The essence of *zhizhonghe* is to maintain inner harmony and tranquility, thereby coordinating all things and maintaining a dynamic balance within society, fostering the growth of all things and facilitating the coexistence of myriad paths. The beauty of *zhizhonghe*, pursued by the Chinese, is a kind of gentle and subtle beauty, imbued with the harmonious atmosphere of dilution and silence. This aesthetic inclination runs through the history of ancient Chinese artistic development, with Chinese art consistently venerating the state of harmony. Ancient Chinese painting, music and calligraphy all pursue a natural and harmonious beauty, while the aesthetic pursuit of Chinese literature is particularly focused on achieving the beauty of *zhizhonghe*, allowing individuals to reach a relaxed state and making literature a spiritual enjoyment for people.

Confucius praised the *Guan Ju* (《关雎》) as being "joyful without being licentious, mournful without being harmful," emphasizing the importance of moderation and balance in expressing emotions. He believed that emotional expression should be tempered with reason, adhering to the standards of *zhonghe*. This concept of *zhonghe* has been inherited and developed by later literary critics, exerting a significant influence on the development of Chinese literature and gradually evolving into a national aesthetic tradition. "Gentleness and sincerity" have become an overarching pursuit in Chinese literature. Emotional expression in literary works should adhere to the principle of moderation, neither suppressed nor excessively

indulgent. The content and characters, portrayed in literary works, should embody the highest virtues and, aesthetically, beauty and goodness should be unified. The pursuit of “perfection in goodness and beauty” has become the countless scholars and virtuous individuals’ ultimate aspiration.

The aesthetic inclination towards seeking the beauty of *zhonghe* inevitably exerts a significant influence on the creation of classical tragedies in China. Under the influence of this aesthetic orientation, the beauty of classical Chinese tragedies no longer simply embodies masculine or feminine beauty, but rather achieves a harmonious unity of both, combining strength and gentleness in a balanced and appropriate manner. Consequently, in the creation of classical Chinese tragedies, the handling of tragic conflicts does not become excessively intensified. Instead, there is often a certain level of reconciliation after conflicts reach a climax, preventing the emotional intensity of classical Chinese tragedies from becoming overly sorrowful. While depicting the life’s pains and the society’s wounds, classical Chinese tragedies also advocate ethical principles, instilling confidence in justice and goodness among the audience (Lin, 2013, p. 110). Furthermore, the portrayal of societal exposure and the expression of inner indignation are conveyed more subtly and indirectly, intertwining with the narrative with a sense of complexity and subtlety.

Moreover, the creators of classical Chinese tragedies were often members of the literati, who were well-versed in cultural knowledge beyond that of the average person yet deeply rooted in the folk society. They possessed a profound understanding of Confucian classics and exhibited a certain degree of accommodation and compromise towards feudal orthodox culture. However, their prolonged exposure to life’s realities made these intellectuals keenly aware of the inherent irrationality within feudal ethics and norms. This psychological conflict is reflected in their works, where regardless of the hardships endured in life or the grievances felt, they ultimately reconcile with the image representing the ruling class. The tragic characters in Chinese dramas often represent the society’s weaker factions and, if their misfortunes were left uncorrected, it could undermine the foundation of feudal ethics and class order. The appearance of a happy ending serves to reconcile the conflicts between feudal ethics and human relationships, offering a gentle release and simultaneously consolidating the stability of the feudal order.

In summary, the grand reunion denouement, as a traditional model in classical Chinese drama, reflects the entire nation’s aesthetic demands. Looking at the “quality” of the ending, it may seem that the reunion resolution dissolves all previous tragic effects, as if the story returns to a rational track within societal order, lacking the antagonistic and glaringly hostile elements present in the conflicts. However, the grand reunion ending not only fails to diminish the tragic consciousness, but rather dissipates the overly intense emotional experiences generated by tragedy in a relatively gentle manner, transforming tumultuous

waters into a gentle stream. In terms of the tragic effect, the “quality” remains unchanged while the “quantity” becomes more potent and forceful. On the other hand, driven by a compensatory mentality, the grand reunion denouement fulfils the concept of moral retribution, conveying values of truth, goodness and beauty. Moreover, given the conflicts and tensions in real life that are often difficult to overcome and balance, the reunion model also provides solace, serving as a literary resistance against dark forces in society. Overall, the grand reunion ending in classical Chinese drama serves multiple purposes, like tempering intense emotions, conveying moral values and providing comfort in the face of real-life conflicts, demonstrating role of literature in the struggle against adversity.

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