

WANG GUOWEI AND A *DREAM OF RED MANSIONS*

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Abstract: Wang Guowei's 王國維 (1887-1927) understanding of the idea of tragedy was inspired by two German philosophers—Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. It is generally held that the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer plays a fundamental role in Wang's borrowing from Western philosophers. Wang Guowei's Hongloumeng Pinglun 紅樓夢評論 (Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions, 1904) shows that in fact he was closer to Nietzsche than to Schopenhauer. This paper focuses on the article and the idea of “tragedy” in the context of Wang Guowei, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Although Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions was based on Schopenhauer's idea, it is in fact alienated from Schopenhauer's philosophy in the sense that it represents the double movement back into his own cultural sensibility—renjian qinghuai 人間情懷 (feeling for this world). The double movement occurred in the case of using Nietzsche too, not as alienation, but as bringing in. Nietzsche's “spirit of tragedy” was brought into Chinese culture based on Wang's own strong initiative. Wang's conscious closeness to Nietzsche is also an uncompleted mission since his Confucian principles are against Nietzsche's abrupt departure from his tradition. This misunderstanding and misinterpretation shows well the true face of cross-culture communication at the beginning of 20th century, especially when we consider the development of Chinese aesthetic modernity.¹

Introduction

Wang Guowei 王國維 (1887 – 1927) was a late Qing scholar who assumed a pioneering role in introducing Western philosophy to China. Unlike the other of his contemporaries, Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1929), Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858-1927) and Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854-1921), who were interested in introducing Western politics, social science, and other practical revolutions for the reestablishment of China as a great power, Wang Guowei was the first to celebrate and earnestly introduce great *wisdom* — Western philosophy, aesthetics and literature. As renewed concern with traditional culture emerged powerfully in the 1990s, and discussions of modernity became prominent, Wang has been cited as the founder of Chinese ideas

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¹ A similar version of the first part of this paper titled “The Third Kind of Tragedy—How Wang Guowei Departures from Schopenhauer” was published in Yolaine Escande, Vincent Shen, Li Chenyang (Eds.), *Inter-Culturalism and Philosophic Discourse* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, 71-80). Another co-authored article “Spirit-of-This-World Encounters Spirit-of-Tragedy through the Hermeneutical Lenses of Kierkegaard and Heidegger” (*Journal of Comparative & Continental Philosophy*, Vol.6, 1[2014], 68-83) also partly overlaps with the first part of this paper. However, this paper for the first time brings together Wang Guowei, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche through the idea of tragedy.

about philosophical and literary-aesthetic modernity.² Wang Guowei is directly relevant to the pioneering of a Chinese cultural modernity. Therefore, interpreting his work is essential to achieve a better grasp of the problems that accompany the emergence of Chinese modernity. Wang Guowei's understanding of the idea of "tragedy" exemplifies the case.

Wang Guowei was the first scholar who introduced the aesthetic idea of "tragedy" into Chinese academic world. His understanding of "tragedy" was mainly inspired by two German philosophers, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. It is generally held that the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer plays a fundamental role in Wang's borrowing from Western philosophy. Wang Guowei's essay *Hongloumeng Pinglun* 紅樓夢評論 (*Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions*, 1904) shows that in fact he was closer to Nietzsche than to Schopenhauer and it represents Wang's double movement back into his own cultural sensibility. This paper focuses on the art of "tragedy" in the context of Wang Guowei, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and tries to reveal the true face of cross-culture communication at the beginning of 20th century, especially when we consider the development of Chinese aesthetic modernity.

The proposition of this paper is that there is a specifically Chinese sensibility that is crucial for understanding Wang's use of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, a sensibility that has been ignored by those who later sought to reconstruct and evaluate his earlier studies. I intend to argue that Wang Guowei's entire philosophical and aesthetic thinking was developed upon a deep "feeling for this world". The phrase "feeling for this world" *renjian qinghuai* (人間情懷) is borrowed from traditional Chinese culture to describe the Chinese sensibility that played an important role in Wang's appropriation and departure from Schopenhauer. It would be another project in itself to talk adequately about the Chinese sensibility of *renjian qinghuai*, but for the limited scope of our topic, a casual and general definition of the phrase will suffice. One of the most persistent ideas in Chinese philosophy is that since there is no transcendent divinity in Chinese culture comparable to the Western transcendent spirit, the Chinese concerns for "life" are expressed and embodied in "the proper way of human beings" (*rendao* 人道) and concrete, familiar things in this world (*renshi* 人事). Concepts such as *dao* and *tian* in Chinese philosophy cannot be interpreted in the same way as the concepts of Idea, God, Will, and other absolute principles often found in Western philosophy. Chinese philosophy concerns itself with "the proper way of human beings" even more than "the way of *tian*"; or, to put it another way, "the way of *tian*" (*tiandao* 天道) is actually the same as "the proper way of human beings," and is not something above and beyond *rendao*.

Wang Guowei points out this difference between Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy in an article written in 1906:

"Although *Zhongyong* 中庸 is a philosophy which raises 'Cheng' (誠) [integrity, sincerity] as the essence of cosmos and life, it is still different from modern Western philosophy. 'Cheng' as a concept is not only different from Fichte's 'Ego,'

² See Wen Rumin (1993); Liu Xuan (1996); Liu Xiaofeng (1998); Zhang Hui (1999), Peng Feng (2009).

Schelling's 'Absolute,' Hegel's 'Idea,' Schopenhauer's 'Will,' and Harman's 'Unconscious,' but it is also different in interpretation and explanation. I don't think that borrowing the concepts of modern Western philosophy to interpret ancient Chinese philosophy is the right way to approach our ancient philosophy in its own terms. Our ancient scholars were not so systematic in their writing; in one passage, they can freely talk about both *tiandao* and *renshi*, the same as for a whole chapter, and they feel free to use one word to express all the different meanings, and to use one concept to discuss both *Tian* and human beings ("Comments on Gu Tangsheng's English Translation of *Zhongyong*", *Shu Gu Tangsheng Yingyi Zhongyonghou*, 《書辜氏湯生英譯中庸后》), 1906)."

The emphasis on human affairs to which Wang refers can also be found in a well-known passage from the *Analects*:

Chi-lu [Jilu] asked about serving the gods and the spirits of the dead, but the Master replied, "If you are not yet able to serve other people, how can you serve the spirits of the dead?" He then asked about death, but the Master replied, "If you do not yet understand life, how can you understand death?"³

Philosophically, some clues can be found in Roger Ames and David Hall's works on Chinese philosophy, where they describe the essential characteristics of Chinese sensibility in both Confucian and in Daoist terms. In their translation of the *Zhongyong*, Ames and Hall choose "focusing the familiar affairs of the day" to describe one of the central Confucian ideas, *zhongyong* 中庸. *Zhongyong*, as they interpret it, "emphasizes the profoundly transformative effect that consummate human beings have on the world around them."⁴ It expresses the concept of "ritualizing the human experience and enchanting the common, the routine, the concrete, and immediate. . . . Ritualizing the human experience requires both an appreciation of persistent life forms, and the full exercise of our imagination in authorizing them for our own time and place."⁵ The ideal exemplary human beings who "feel for this world" are sages like Confucius who act "through their creative participation in the transforming and nourishing activities of the world. . . . The cultivated moral, aesthetic, and religious sensibilities that define the flourishing community inspired by and fully integrated into the rhythms of the natural environment, have an elevating spiritual effect that adds significance and value to the world."⁶ In their philosophical translation of the *Dao De Jing* (2004), Ames and Hall opt for the subtitle *Making This Life Significant* "to capture the defining purpose of the text: bringing into focus and sustaining a productive disposition that allows for the fullest appreciation of those specific things and events that constitute one's field of experience."⁷

³ *Analects*, 11/12; Ames and Hall (1987), 197.

⁴ Ames and Hall (2001), 87.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁷ Ames and Hall (2004), 13.

“Focusing on the familiar things in this world” or “feeling for this world” are socially (communally) centered concepts; they express a concern for one’s concrete, immediate life instead of postulating some distant, transcendent, individual goal. Such a way of thinking is most acceptable to Chinese intellectuals, and, as such, influenced Wang’s aesthetic ideas immensely. Yu Yingshi, in his book *Scholar-Official and Chinese culture* (*Shi yu Zhongguo Wenhua*, 《士與中國文化》) describes intellectuals in Chinese culture who traditionally play the role of “the conscience of society”: “...The Confucian *Shi* who aims at *Dao* (the Way) demonstrates that that *Shi* is the protector of basic social value... [This ideal] had a profound influence on later scholar-officials, and its spiritual power was even more evident when the community had suffered from a time in which the *Dao* was lost.”⁸ This reminds us of the words by Wang’s best friend, the historian Chen Yinke (1890–1969), who concludes in the preface to his elegiac words to Wang Guowei’s death by suicide (*Wang Guantang Xiansheng Wanci bing xu*, 《王國維先生挽詞並序》): “Whenever a culture is in decline, the person who has received benefits from this culture will necessarily suffer. The more a person embodies this culture, the deeper will be his suffering... How can a man who personifies the very spirit of this culture not meet the same fate and come to an end along with it?”⁹

In Wang’s works, *renjian* 人間 (“this world” or “human world”) appears repeatedly, and it is arguably the central concept of his philosophical thought. Two of his poetry collections are titled *Renjian ci* (《人間詞》), *Poems of “This World” Vol. I*, 1904-1906, and *Poems of “This World” Vol. II*, 1906-1907, and another of his landmark theoretical works is entitled “*Renjian cihua*” (《人間詞話》), *The Poetry of “This World,”* 1908. A statistical study reveals that in his 115 poems in *Poems of This World*, he uses the exact term *renjian* (“this human world”) 39 times; and that does not include other frequently used words bearing similarity through meaning and use to *renjian* 人間 such as *rensheng* (人生, human life) and *shaohua* (韶華, glorious

⁸ Yu Yingshi (2003), 2.

⁹ On June 2, 1927, two days before the Duanwu (Double Fifth) or Dragon Boat Festival, a day to commemorate the great poet Qu Yuan [340–278 BCE] who drowned himself in the Miluo river in Hunan Providence as a gesture of protest against the corruption of his state, Wang Guowei drowned himself in Kunming Lake of the Summer Palace just before the revolutionaries entered Beijing. Some scholars believe that as a Qing court server and a “conservative” scholar, Wang was afraid of the Revolutionary army; some think his suicide followed the collapse of his relationship with his lifelong mentor, friend and cooperator Luo Zhengyu. Still others argue that his suicide reflected the influence of Schopenhauer’s pessimism. Chen Yinke, one of his best friends and colleagues at Qinghua Guoxueyuan, believed that his death was a ritual death, a symbol of the decline of his beloved culture. I would argue that Wang committed suicide not because of the influence of Schopenhauer’s pessimism but rather as a result of cultural collapse. For a detailed discussion of Wang Guowei’s death, see Luo Jizu (1999), *The Death of Wang Guowei* (Wang Guowei Zhi Si 《王國維之死》).

time in human life). His close friends even called him “Mr. This World” (人間先生, *renjian xiansheng*).

Most contemporary scholars argue that “this world” in Wang’s works is always the “tragic world” of the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer, and hence *Poems of This World* is a “vivid practice of Schopenhauer’s pessimism.”¹⁰ However, compared to Wang’s *Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions*, the appearance of the collection *Poems of This World* was much later than Wang’s time of addiction to Schopenhauer’s thinking. In fact, it is easy to find numerous examples in his *Poems of This World* that challenge the commonly held opinion that the main thrust of Wang’s aesthetic lies in sadness and hopelessness. *Poems of This World* is rather a proof of love, an enthusiasm for this world, and reveals the heart of his cultural sensibility.¹¹

I will use Wang’s *Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions* and the idea of “tragedy” as an example to show the connections and differences between Wang Guowei, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The paper will be divided into two parts: in Part I, I will discuss how the Chinese sensibility *renjian qinghuai* played an important role in Wang’s “borrowing” from Schopenhauer, which is quite contrary to the common understanding that Wang was a devoted follower of Schopenhauer’s “pessimistic” side. In Part II, I will make a further step, demonstrating Wang’s use of Nietzsche.

I: *Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions* and Schopenhauer

A Dream of Red Mansions (*Houloumeng*, 《紅樓夢》) was written in the 18th century and since then has received endless attention in the history of Chinese literature. It is said that it took the author Cao Xueqin (1715-1763) more than ten years to polish and repolish it, but the novel was still unfinished when he died in 1763. The novel describes in detail the fall of two large powerful families, mainly because of disfavor with the Emperor. The main character Baoyu (Precious Jade) is in love with Daiyu -- Baoyu’s most sentimental, talented, emotional, jealously sick cousin. But Baoyu is predestined in this life to marry another cousin, Xue Baochai. At the end, after his true love dies, Baoyu follows a Daoist sage and departs untraceably. The love triangle of Baoyu, Daiyu, and Xue Baochai, against the background of the family’s decline, is at the heart of this best-known novel.

Wang Guowei’s *Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions* has been viewed not only as a landmark in modern Chinese literary theory, but also as representative of Schopenhauer’s influence on Wang Guowei in his philosophical and aesthetic theory. The well-known authority on Wang Guowei, Ye Jiaying, in her important book *Wang Guowei and His Literary Theory* (Wang Guowei Jiqi Wenxue Piping, 《王國維及其

¹⁰ See Fo Chu (1999), 157; Liu Xuan (1997), 78-79; Ye Jiaying (1982), 460.

¹¹ I described this in detail in my doctoral thesis: *Beauty and This World*, Chapter 2, Part I: “Questions concerning the Idea of Wang Guowei’s Pessimistic Human World---A Close Reading of Wang Guowei’s *Renjianci* (*Poetry of This World*)”.

文學批評》), names three contributions of Wang's *Critique of the Dream of Red Chamber* to the history of Chinese literary theory:

1. It was the first work to criticize literature from a philosophical and aesthetic perspective.
2. Going beyond traditional literary theory, Wang's study of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* was the first systematic critical work in the history of Chinese literary theory.
3. It brought changes and a new rectification to the prevailing "textual exegesis" of contemporary literary criticism, especially with regard to studies of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Most late-Qing *Red Chamber* scholars were intrigued by questions of authorship, edition, background, and so forth. They rarely looked at the aesthetic value of the work itself. Wang introduced an aesthetic eye to grasp the spirit and value of the work.¹²

While Ye Jiaying highly praises Wang's breakthrough of interpreting the work through a philosophical perspective, she criticizes Wang for making the work serve his own philosophical aim, namely Schopenhauer's pessimism, instead of letting philosophical ideas come naturally from the work itself.

Given the problems inherent in any attempt to celebrate the breakthrough of Wang's *Critique* in Chinese literary history, most interpretations of Wang Guowei's work seem to indicate that the "first meaning" (*di yi yi*, 第一義) of this work unquestionably was Schopenhauer's pessimism; hence, concentrated discussions and debates have focused primarily on whether or not it was a successful application of Schopenhauer's thought.

Before exploring further the problematic in this common interpretation, I want to provide some explanation as to why a "philosophical interpretation" was viewed as a great achievement in Chinese thinking. As I mentioned above, Wang's encounter with and introduction to Western philosophy is different (even unique) from that of his contemporaries. "The (haunting) problem of the universe and human life" drives him to search for answers in Western philosophy ("The First Author's Note on Reaching Thirty Years of Age," *Sanshi Zixu I*, 《三十自序(一)》, 1907). In Wang's eyes, Western philosophy is the symbol of pure metaphysics — it lays out the very spirit and value of human beings. In his works, he repeatedly praises "great metaphysics, sublime ethics and pure aesthetics" and disdains materialist thinking. He cannot endorse the doctrine of Herbert Spencer or Darwinism, the merits of technology, nor the Chinese "worldliness" — he even excoriates them: they all reduce philosophy to a mere tool for living (either to contend for hegemony or for animal-like survival), rather than seeing in it the aim of life. Wang Guowei's commentators believe that with him, the pure pursuit for human spirit and the aesthetics of disinterest, as opposed to the practical use of literature, appeared for the first time in his aesthetic theory: only with Wang Guowei did Chinese intellectuals

¹² Ye Jiaying, 1982, 179-204.

begin to realize that literature had another function — that is, a philosophical meaning — to open our eyes to the truth of human life.

According to Wang Guowei, great western thinking could be united with great Chinese thinking, and the same goes for great literature; that is the value of merging the *A Dream of Red Mansions* with Schopenhauer's philosophy. Schopenhauer did indeed open avenues for Wang to look at Chinese literature, his culture, and the world in many different ways; and these different ways actually allowed him to see his own culture in distinctively Chinese ways: to see another is to learn to see oneself, to look through the lens of another philosophical orientation is to refract light upon one's own, and to seek outward is to move inward. As a scholar who aimed to project his own idealization of traditional Chinese culture, Wang's "feeling for this world" (*renjian qinghuai*) played a crucial role in his reading and appropriation of Schopenhauer.

If we look carefully at Wang's *Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions*, we find that what was viewed as a Chinese practical application of Schopenhauer's philosophical theory was actually a double movement of application (action) and reaction --- both for and against Schopenhauer --- as well as a sort of traditional Chinese thinking juxtaposed with Western thinking.

The obvious and most conscious way of approaching Wang's reading of Schopenhauer and other Western thinkers is to view him as being "against" the "happy end tendency" in Chinese literature, which makes him define *A Dream of Red Mansions* as a unique work in the history of Chinese literature — "a Tragedy from the very beginning to the end." A latent, and even unconscious, way is to view him as being "against" Schopenhauer's pessimism even though Wang himself did not clearly realize this turn in his encounter with Schopenhauer. It is through this latter approach that we can begin to value Wang's experience of Schopenhauer and how he chooses to borrow from him, in what ways he is led to borrow, and how he refracts this understanding back to understanding and promoting his own cultural-aesthetic sensibility. So, Wang's contribution to Chinese aesthetic modernity is not simply a break with the past, but is also a continuity, although it is a continuity with a fresh face.

1. The Third Kind of "Tragedy": Wang's Departure from Schopenhauer

Although Wang's *Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions* was inspired by Schopenhauer's thought, a fact that Wang acknowledges, *Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions* is in fact alienated from Schopenhauer's philosophy in that it symbolizes the double movement back into his own cultural aesthetic way of being in the world. In the Author's Preface to the *Jing'an Collection* (*Jing'an Wenji* 《静安文集》) --- Jing'an is one of Wang's style names --- Wang recants, "The article *Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions* I wrote last summer was based on Schopenhauer's theory; however, I shot a big question at him in the fourth chapter:

I realized that Schopenhauer's doctrine originated partly from his subjective experience and therefore bears no relationship to objective knowledge. I actually argued this in detail in another article, 'Schopenhauer and Nietzsche'" (*Shubeihua*

and *Nicai*, 《叔本華和尼采》, which was written later in the same year that he wrote his *Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions*, 1904).

And this is surely the case. In Wang's first three chapters — “A Survey of Human Life and Art,” “The Spirit of *A Dream of Red Mansions*,” and “The Aesthetic Value of *A Dream of Red Mansions*” — he sufficiently shows Schopenhauer's influence. Wang uses *Yu* (欲, desire or as it was translated, “Will”) to describe the nature of life. He even connects this *Yu* with Baoyu's name (precious jade), since 玉, jade in Chinese, is a homophone of 欲 desire. Wang writes:

The desire (or will) to live exists before human beings. Human life is only the discovery of the will to live. Baoyu ... desires to be in this suffering world... His fatal decision [to re-enter the human world is the basis of] his 19-year destiny and this 120-chapter story... (*Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions*)

This endless desire for daily life is the exact reason that life is a life of suffering. Also, like Schopenhauer, he believes art and the aesthetic perception can have the effect of giving us a short-lived emancipation from painful daily life. Wang considers tragedy the highest of all written forms of art, and the aesthetic value of *A Dream of Red Mansions* lies in its spirit of tragedy, which makes this work distinguishable from, and opposed to, the usual “happy endings” of Chinese literature. In this spirit, Wang claims that *Dream of the Red Chamber* is a “tragedy of tragedies” and that this makes it one of the world's classic masterpieces. According to Wang, the aesthetic value of *A Dream of Red Mansions* lies in its tragic character which, according to Aristotle's definition in his *Poetics*, has the “cathartic” function on the human spirit which is the aim of Ethics. He explains, “That is also the reason why Schopenhauer puts poetry on the top of all the literary arts and defines tragedy as the highest art form” (*Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions*).

Schopenhauer elaborates upon Aristotle's understanding of the effect of tragedy. He distinguishes three types of tragic representation:

- 1) “the extraordinary wickedness of a character . . . who becomes the author of the misfortune”
- 2) “blind fate—i.e., chance and error”
- 3) “characters. . . [who] are so situated with regard to each other that their position forces them, knowingly and with their eyes open, to do each other the greatest injury, without any one of them being entirely in the wrong.”¹³

Schopenhauer regarded the last kind of tragedy as the most profound, since it shows the reader that disaster can, and often does, arise out of the ordinary circumstances of everyday life.¹⁴ Wang shares Schopenhauer's emphasis on the third kind of tragedy,

¹³ Arthur Schopenhauer (1969), Vol: 254.

¹⁴ Ibid.

but his understanding was very different from Schopenhauer's. In Schopenhauer's case, it seems because the third form of tragedy is compared to

...the other two,... it shows us that the greatest misfortune...arises easily and spontaneously out of the actions and characters of men...and in this way it is brought terribly near to us... [It] shows us those powers that destroy happiness and life, and in such a way that the path to them is at every moment opens even to us. ...Then, shuddering, we feel ourselves already in the midst of hell.¹⁵

For Schopenhauer, just because the third form of tragedy happens so unexpectedly, inevitably, at any moment, at any time, the sufferer is threatened and shocked enough to observe "the complete knowledge of the real nature of the world, acting as a *quieter* of the will, producing resignation, the giving up not merely of life, but of the whole will-to-live itself."¹⁶

Wang Guowei departs from Schopenhauer exactly here. For Schopenhauer, the inevitable, ordinary tragedy which befalls ordinary people produces the "denial of the will to live." Wang acknowledges the "ordinary, universal" character of the third kind of tragedy (for him, it is the very essence of "tragedy"), yet, he adamantly disagrees with Schopenhauer when it comes to how to understand the meaning of this kind of tragedy. He argues,

Without experiencing the suffering facts of this world how is one to talk about denial of the will-to-live? Suffering has no value in itself at all; it should be the way to reach the denial of the will-to-live. A person who is living in suffering and always lamenting suffering, but has no courage for release, will arrive nowhere, neither in heaven nor in hell. (*Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions*)

He questions, "Is denial of the will to live really possible?" His concern is ethical. Is denial of the will-to-live really the highest ideal of ethics? No, since it is opposed to our basic social virtue. But why is this so? If we can look at our world in a full way, we will realize that the existence of our world is due to the sins of our ancestors. We were also created for it. Therefore, we, as the offspring of our ancestors, bear the responsibility to atone for their crime and attain salvation. (*Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions*) So he talks about "responsibility."

2. The Impossibility of *Jietuo* (*Denial of the Will-to-Live*)

When we reach Chapter 4 ("The Ethical Value of *A Dream of Red Mansions*") of *Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions*, we can see that Wang Guowei seems to overthrow his former reliance on Schopenhauer. We see this in his use of the central concept *jietuo* (解脱, emancipation, transcendence, and the "denial of the Will-to-Live"). In this concept of *jietuo* lies Wang Guowei's big question for Schopenhauer.

¹⁵ Ibid, 255.

¹⁶ Ibid, 253.

Wang argues that “Schopenhauer only talks about the individual Denial of the Will-to-Live, instead of the whole world which is opposed to his doctrine of ‘the world as will’.” That is exactly what he means when he says that Schopenhauer “only cites some words from the Bible and classical works, but has no theoretical foundation” (*Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions*). What the “theoretical foundation” means for him is that since Schopenhauer thinks that an individual will is unified with the will of the universe as a whole, one is a part of the universe like everything else. One person, as a microcosmos, is a holographic being of the Universe, just like the sea and all the bubbles of the waves that are interdependent with each other. The Will should be a question of “being one with all things.” As such, individual transcendence cannot happen until all flesh is released. He argues, “I won’t be a Buddha until all flesh is released.” But that has never actually happened. And why so? — The transcendence of Buddha cannot occur without the transcendence of all flesh and body. All we need to do is to look at this world and we soon discover it is still a painful world for all fleshly humans, even after Buddha’s Nirvana, Christ’s Passion, and so forth. How can it be celebrated for that?

Since common people are still suffering in this world, how can it be said that Buddha and Christ are transcendent? Therefore, an individual *jietuo* (denial of the will to live) is fundamentally impossible since the will of the universe and the myriad things amount to the will of me. In other words, a human being as a member of a community should be responsible for the suffering reality of those in the community and bear the responsibility to change the situation. *Jietuo* (Emancipation) in Wang Guowei’s understanding is not getting rid of reality, but is found in facing it, and changing it: “The emancipation of the microcosmos (human being) should be within the macrocosmos (the world)” (*Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions*).

Wang’s community-centered mind finds the expression of individuality in Schopenhauer’s doctrine highly problematic since he identifies Schopenhauer’s doctrine “World as Will” with the concept of the “oneness of *tian* and human beings” (*tianren heyi* 天人合一) or the “oneness of all things” (*wanwu yiti* 萬物一體). More interestingly, he cites a whole passage in *World as Will and Representation* that, to his mind, shows how Schopenhauer realizes the problem and tries to rectify the conflict in his doctrine:

Voluntary and complete chastity is the first step in asceticism or the denial of the will-to-live. It thereby denies the affirmation of the will, which goes beyond the individual life, and thus announces that the will, whose phenomenon is the body, ceases with the life of this body. Nature, always true and naïve, asserts that, if this maxim became universal, the human race would die out; and after what was said in the second book about the connexion of all phenomena of will, I think I can assume that, with the highest phenomenon of will, the weaker reflection of it, namely, the animal world, would also be abolished, just as the half-shades vanish with the full light of day. With the complete abolition of knowledge the rest of the world would of itself also vanish into nothing, for there can be no object without a subject. Here I would like to refer to a passage in the Veda where it says: “As in this world hungry children press round their mother, so do all beings await the holy oblation”. Sacrifice signifies resignation generally, and the rest of nature has to expect its

salvation from man who is at the same time priest and sacrifice. In fact, it is worth mentioning as extremely remarkable that this thought has also been expressed by the admirable and immeasurably profound Angelus Silesius in the little poem entitled "Man brings all to God"; it runs:

"Man! All love you; great is the throng around you: All flock to you that they may attain to God."

But an even greater mystic, Meister Eckhart, says wholly in the sense here discussed: "I confirm this with Christ, for he says: 'I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all things [men] unto me' (John xii, 32)." So shall the good man draw all things up to God, to the source whence they first came. The masters certify to us that all creatures are made for the sake of man. This is proved in all creatures by the fact that one creature makes use of another; the ox makes use of the grass, the fish of the water, the bird of the air, the animals of the forest. Thus all creatures come to the profit of the good man. A good man bears to God one creature in the others." He means that because, in and with himself, man also saves the animals, he makes use of them in this life. It seems to me indeed that that difficult passage in the Bible, Rom. Viii, 21-24, is to be interpreted in this sense.

Even in Buddhism there is no lack of expressions of this matter; for example, when the Buddha, while still a Bodhisattva, has his horse saddled for the last time, for the flight from his father's house into the wilderness, he says to the horse in verse: "Long have you existed in life and in death, but now you shall cease to carry and to draw. Bear me away from here just this once, O Kantakana, and when I have attained the Law (have become Buddha), I shall not forget you."¹⁷

This passage may reveal Wang's own wishful "cultural misreading." Wang interpreted Meister Eckhart's statement, "the good man draws all things up to God, to the source whence they first came," in this fashion: God as a member of the whole realizes that the whole world should be released instead of just Himself. In fact, Wang misunderstood Schopenhauer's aristocratism (or elitism) of Will with knowledge: Schopenhauer separates the world as Will and Representation and views Will as the essence of human being and the whole world, but he simply could not rise above the concept of transcendence — represented by the dualism of the human and the divine. He emphasizes Will in life, but he concerns himself more with the objectivity of will — Will with knowledge --- and only geniuses could objectify their will and have the knowledge and power to deny the will-to-live:

The opposite of this, the *denial of the will-to-live*, shows itself when willing ends with that knowledge, since the particular phenomena known then no longer act as motives of willing, but the whole knowledge of the inner nature of the world that mirrors the will, knowledge that has grown up through apprehension of the Ideas, becomes the *quieter* of the will, and thus the will freely abolishes itself.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid, 380-1.

¹⁸ Ibid, 285.

An ascetic as “the highest phenomena of will, the weaker reflection of it, namely the animal world, would also be abolished, just as the half-shades vanish with the full light of day.”¹⁹ Therefore, the statement “I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all things [men] unto me” (John xii, 32) and “Thus all creatures come to the profit of the good man; a good man bears to God one creature in the others,” are expressions that the elitist exemplifying Will with knowledge does a favor to the crowd (the common people). Wang doesn’t really care about the holy existence of God. Even Buddha and Christ are in his description not meant to be more than sages such as Confucius --- sages who are always with the common people and who are the common people, while never existing outside of this world.

Schopenhauer’s idea of denial of the will-to-live expresses the individual hero’s disdain and a break from his world:

If we compare life to a circular path of red-hot coals having a few cool places, a path that we have to run over incessantly, then the man entangled in delusion is comforted by the cool place on which he is just now standing, or which he sees through the *principium individuationis*, and recognizes the true nature of things-in-themselves, and thus the whole, is no longer susceptible of such consolation; he sees himself in all places simultaneously, and withdraws. His will turns about; it no longer affirms its own inner nature, mirrored in the phenomenon, but denies it... he ceases to will anything, guards against attaching his will to anything, tries to establish firmly in himself the greatest indifference to all things.²⁰

In Wang Guowei’s mind, Schopenhauer’s World as Will turns into “life should be equally treated,” which we probably can find reminiscent of Zhuangzi’s lines in the *Qi Wu Lun (On the Equality of Things)*. Wang realizes that:

His [Schopenhauer’s] idea of the universal beneficence (*bo'ai* 博愛) is not about loving this world, but only about love in his own world. His idea to “die out” (*Jietuo*) is not about wanting to be dead, but is an expression of his dissatisfaction with this world. While Buddha says “heaven and earth, worship me,” Schopenhauer would say, “the only possibility for me to be happy is that heaven and earth only exist for me. (“Schopenhauer and Nietzsche”)

Before this passage, Wang also cites Friedrich Paulsen’s (1846-1908) discussion of Schopenhauer’s personal relation to the morality of his system:

It has often been pointed out that there is no harmony between Schopenhauer’s system and his life. The system recommends renunciation of the world and negation of the will-to-live; his life shows nothing of the kind; he does not lead the life of an ascetic saint but of an Epicurean... In his system he praises compassion; but he seems to have been rather devoid of this feeling himself. No one ever pursued his literary opponents more unmercifully than did Schopenhauer... During his entire life he was as careful as he was successful in guarding against sharing

¹⁹ Ibid, 380.

²⁰ Ibid, 380.

other's losses and sufferings.... And he was helpless against them; he often says so himself: it is a curious but undoubted fact that the clearest knowledge of the perverseness of the will can produce no change in it. This enables us to understand his ethical system: it is the confession of his failings and sins.²¹

Wang concludes that "Paulsen's opinion of Schopenhauer is not wrong, but he does not realize that it is not only because of his practical knowledge, but also his subjective will." Wang realizes that Schopenhauer's truth is not about the universe and this world, but only about himself. Wang's Confucian heart could never accept a modern-individual-hero-Schopenhauer: "He looked at himself as Atlas who supports the earth and Brahma who nurtures the universe" ("Schopenhauer and Nietzsche", 1904). Here I would cite what he says in *Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions* again,

In conclusion, whether *jietuo* (denial of the will-to-live) should be the highest ideal of ethics actually is linked to whether there is a possibility of denial of the will-to-live... Now, given the impossibility of *jietuo* (denial of the will-to-live), how can there exist the possibility of this ideal of ethics? One doctrine that is opposed to this doctrine of lifeless-ism (*wusheng zhuyi* 無生主義) is live-life-ism (*shengsheng zhuyi* 生生主義). This world is finite, but human life is infinite. Put the infinite human life in the finite world, and as a consequence, some cannot get their right to live. However, the ideal of live-life-ism will not permit even a single individual who cannot get his right to be in this world. Therefore, from the ideal of the live-life-ism, if we want to maximize the quantity of the life in this world, we should minimize the purview of individual. The so-called maximum of the happiness and benefits for the most is only a dream of ethics... however, without this dream, our world will be arranged by the law of the jungle. What is ethics for? Our human life is such a suffering life, anybody of courage and uprightness would eagerly request release. Though we cannot find it in practical life, we should strive for it in art.

The late philosopher Feng Youlan (1895-1990) insightfully points out that "Although Wang Guowei has big questions about Schopenhauer's philosophy, he does not question the *Dream of Red Chamber*. He even gives higher praise to *A Dream of Red Mansions*, since he thinks of it as an artistic creation. *A Dream of Red Mansions* is most important and meaningful for our contemporary human world."²²

II: Wang Guowei and Nietzsche

Wang's borrowing from Nietzsche is quite different from his use of Schopenhauer. The Chinese collective unconsciousness of "focusing on this world" was a driving force in Wang Guowei's deviation from the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer. However, he consciously paid tribute to Nietzsche's "spirit-of tragedy" and hoped to

²¹ Friedrich Paulsen, 1913, 210-213.

²² Feng Youlan (1962), vol. II, 542.

use it to rectify one of China's aesthetic tendencies --- "eternal optimism" --- especially in an era of national decadence. Wang's *Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions* shows that he was closer to Nietzsche than to Schopenhauer. Although *Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions* was based on Schopenhauer's ideas, it is in fact alienated from Schopenhauer's philosophy in that it represents the double movement back into his own cultural aesthetic way of being in the world. The double movement occurred in the case of using Nietzsche too, not as alienation, but as bringing in. Nietzsche's "spirit of tragedy" was brought into Chinese culture based on his own strong initiative.

I. The Spirit of Tragedy: Wang's appropriation of Nietzsche

Wang Guowei openly admitted that his critique of the *A Dream of Red Mansions* was influenced by Schopenhauer's ideas, yet he also mentioned his discomfort with Schopenhauer, especially with his Denial of the Will to Live. He developed this idea in his article on Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

In Part I, I explained that Wang's questions to Schopenhauer in theory actually unconsciously showed that his "feeling for this world" was dominant in his understanding. Here I will use some examples he gave in his article to show what Wang Guowei values most as the summit of poetic art --- tragedy.

In his article *Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions*, Wang differentiates Baoyu's *jietuo* (解脱, "emancipation, transcendence, and the denial of the Will-to-Live") from the escapism of Xichun and Zijuan. Baoyu ultimately followed a Daoist recluse and left his family. Xichun, his young cousin, who from a young age wanted to be a nun, eventually became a nun. And Zijuan, Daiyu's maid, devoted herself to Buddhism after her master died. Some contemporary scholars maintain that Wang valued Xichun and Zijuan's reclusion over Baoyu's, as he called the first two "extraordinary" and Baoyu "ordinary." Wang comments:

Only an extraordinary individual has extraordinary wisdom and understands the essence of the cosmos and human life, knowing that life and suffering cannot be separate from each other. Therefore they deny the Will-to-live, and are transcendent (*Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions*).

Scholars have repudiated Wang's comment since Xichun and Zijuan in Cao's book are un-important characters who show no evidence of being "extraordinary" at all. Why would Wang put them "over" Baoyu? From my perspective, Wang's comments need to be understood in an alternative way. Xichun and Zijuan's devotion to Buddhism arose from others' suffering, without personal experience. However, what Wang emphasizes most is not an "extraordinary", mysterious sudden enlightenment, but the experience of ordinary human life--- cast by tears and suffering. Ordinary people experience "life as the kiln, suffering as charcoal," eventually "casting the cauldron of transcendence" (*Critique of the Dream of Red Chamber*). It is worth mentioning here, that in another article, *Qu du pian* (《去毒篇》), "Methods to cure the addiction to Opium", 1906), Wang views the "solace" of religion as inferior to the

inspiration of art, because religion refers to the “future ideal,” but art is positive, humane and realistic. In relation to the *A Dream of Red Mansions*, he comments:

In conclusion, the former [Xichun and Zijuan]’s Denial of the Will to Live is supernatural, spiritual, the latter [Boayu]’s natural, humane; the former’s religious, the latter’s artistic; the former’s peaceful, the latter’s tragic, magnificent, hence literary, poetic and novelistic. Therefore the leading personae in this novel are not Xichun and Zijuan, but Baoyu (*Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions*).

Wang Guowei emphasizes “self-offense, self-punishment, self-confession, self-transcendence.” Only an ordinary individual and his Denial of the Will to live through painful self-struggle could achieve the beauty of “tragic magnificence”—that is exactly why he values the third tragedy most. In this regard Wang Guowei is closer to Nietzsche than to Schopenhauer. For the meaning of tragedy, Nietzsche is standing against Schopenhauer.

A highest state of affirmation of existence is conceived from which the highest degree of pain cannot be excluded: the tragic-Dionysian state.²³ And,

Art and nothing but art! It is the great means of making life possible, the great seduction to life, the great stimulant of life. Art as the only superior counterforce to all will to denial of life, as that which is anti-Christian, anti-Buddhist, antinihilist par excellence. Art as the redemption of the man of knowledge — of those who see the terrifying and questionable character of existence, who want to see it, the men of tragic knowledge. Art as the redemption of the man of action —of those who not only see the terrifying and questionable character of existence but live it, want to live it, the tragic — warlike man, the hero. Art as the redemption of the sufferer — as the way to states in which suffering is willed, transfigured, deified, where suffering is a form of great delight.²⁴

Both Nietzsche and Wang Guowei affirm that art/tragedy and suffering have a positive effect on human life. But their difference is also obvious. While Schopenhauer emphasizes the denial of life, Wang Guowei emphasizes “the process” of the pain. For Wang Guowei, it is stalwart “living” in the midst of pain that bestows meaning and value upon a human being. Yet, his affirmation of this suffering life is so immersed in Confucian “feeling for this human world” that his affirmation is by no means a Dionysian affirmation. Quoting Nietzsche, “How much truth can a spirit endure, how much truth does a spirit dare?”²⁵ Nietzsche’s goals are “reversing the values” and instilling “the value of becoming.”

Therefore, I would say that Wang consciously prefers Nietzsche’s concept of tragedy but stops at what he thinks is right. Here is another example to show his double movement toward Nietzsche. Both Nietzsche and Wang Guowei positively viewed Faust as the protagonist in Goethe’s tragic drama *Faust*, while Schopenhauer

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche (1968), 853.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1041.

chose Gretchen as the noblest man, after a long conflict and suffering, “finally...so keenly, or cheerfully and willingly give up life itself.”²⁶ Nietzsche chose the tragic Faust, for he “represents the culmination of the theoretical optimism which begins with Socrates and which must end in frustration because of its failure to recognize its own limits.”²⁷ But for Wang Guowei, in comparing the tragic protagonist, Faust, to Baoyu, the tragic protagonist of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the former’s “frustration is still the suffering of the genius (the intellectual aristocrat), while Bao Yu’s suffering is the suffering of ordinary people, everybody’s suffering which exists at the root of human beings so deep that it requires (even) immediately rescue” (*Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions*). This shows Wang’s concern for ordinary people and for the emancipation of the masses.

Actually, Wang Guowei understands both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer very well. In “Schopenhauer and Nietzsche,” he points out that one (Schopenhauer) makes *Denial of the Will* to live as his ethical ideal, the other (Nietzsche) the opposite. However, Nietzsche [as Schopenhauer’s successor] thinks the will is the essence of a human being too, yet he questions Schopenhauer’s denial of the will to live, saying that denial of the will to live is itself a will...while Schopenhauer talks about “dying out”, Nietzsche talks about “transfer.” One wants to die out forever, the other views “dying out” as the tool of the übermensch. (“Schopenhauer and Nietzsche”) Wang concludes with some interesting metaphors:

The suffering of Schopenhauer’s genius is like the daylight of a servant, his aesthetic aristocratism and metaphysical idea of “identity of the will” is like the night of a king. Nietzsche’s case is different: he has Schopenhauer’s genius but doesn’t have his metaphysical belief, therefore he has the all-day servant’s day, all-night servant’s night, awake a servant, in dream a servant. He has to overthrow all the values to slacken his burden. Schopenhauer consoles himself in his night life and wants to realize it in his day life, that is the reason that Schopenhauer’s doctrine is not against the (universal) normal morality, but Nietzsche unbridles his treachery without fear. Because he doesn’t have any other way to console himself, he has to do thus (“Schopenhauer and Nietzsche”).

1. The Idea of the Sublime

Connected to the concept of tragedy is the idea of the sublime. In *Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions*, Wang introduces Schopenhauer’s idea of the sublime and he uses the Chinese expression “*Zhuangmei* 壯美 (lit. Sublime beauty)” to translate this concept. Again, this *Zhuangmei* also reflects his cultural misunderstanding. In Schopenhauer’s conception,

The feeling of the sublime arose from the fact that something positively unfavorable to the will becomes object of pure contemplation. This contemplation

²⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer (1969), Vol. I: 253.

²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche (2000), 157, n.97.

is then maintained only by a constant turning away from the will and exaltation above its interests; and this constitutes the sublimity of the disposition.²⁸

... ..

The sublime character springs from the fact that the will is not excited here by objects certainly well calculated to excite it...His personal happiness or unhappiness will not violently affect him...and accordingly will conduct himself in this respect rather as a knower than as a sufferer.²⁹

Schopenhauer again emphasizes the unfavorable relationship, the special situation which results in a free and conscious transcending of the will (denial of the will to live), and calls this “sublime.” However, his Chinese admirer selected a scenario in *A Dream of Red Mansions* as the most “sublime” of the tragedy which shows that he is unable to transcend his “spirit of this world.” In this scene (chapter 96), the very sick Daiyu heard that Baoyu was going to marry Baochai, the news which “struck her ears like a clap of thunder”:

Dai-yu’s heart felt like oil, soy-sauce, sugar and vinegar had all been poured into it at once. She could not tell which flavour predominated, the sweet, the sour, the bitter or the salty... she herself turned back in the direction of the Naiad’s House. Her body felt as though it weighed a hundred tons, her feet were as wobbly as if she were walking on cotton-floss. She could only manage one step at a time. After an age, she still had not reached the bank by Drenched Blossoms Bridge. She was going so slowly, with her feet about to collapse beneath her, and in her giddiness and confusion had wandered off course and increased the distance by about a hundred yards. She reached Drenched Blossoms Bridge only to start drifting back again along the bank in the direction she had just come from, quite unaware of what she was doing.

Nightingale (Zijuan, Dai-yu’s maid) had by now returned with the handkerchief, but could not find Dai-yu anywhere. She finally saw her, pale as snow, tottering along, her eyes staring straight in front of her, meandering in circles...

“Why are you turning back again, Miss?” she asked softly. “Where are you heading?”

Dai-yu only heard the blurred outline of this question. She replied: “I want to ask Bao-yu something.”

...Despite her apprehensions, she (Nightingale) dared not prevent the meeting, and helped Dai-yu into the room. The funny thing was that Dai-yu now seemed to have recovered her strength. She did not wait for Nightingale but raised the portiere herself, and walked into the room... He (Bao-yu), who had already lost his wits because of the unexpected marriage arrangement, was sitting up in the bed, and when she came in made no move to get up or welcome her, but remained where he was, staring at her and giving a series of silly laughs. Dai-yu sat down uninvited, and she too began to smile and stare back at Bao-yu. There were no greetings

²⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer (1969), Vol. I: 207.

²⁹ Ibid, 206-207.

exchanged, no courtesies, in fact no words of any kind. They just sat there staring into each other's faces and smiling like a pair of half-wits...

Suddenly Dai-yu said: "Bao-yu, why are you sick?"
Bao-yu laughed. "I'm sick because of Miss Lin."

Aroma (Bao-yu's main maid) and Nightingale grew pale with fright. They tried to change the subject, but their efforts only met with silence and more senseless smiles... (The maids began to help Nightingale to take Dai-yu back)... Dai-yu stood up at once, unassisted, still staring fixedly at Bao-yu, smiling and nodding her head.

"Come on, Miss!" urged Nightingale. "It's time to go home and rest."

"Of course!" exclaimed Dai-yu. "It's time!"

She turned to go. Still smiling and refusing any assistance from the maids, she strode out at twice her normal speed.

This scene actually is very touching, showing the depth of Daiyu and Baoyu's love for one another. Daiyu's inexpressible feelings, and her strange behavior demonstrates the impact of the tragedy on her heart. Baoyu was no better than Daiyu when he realized that he couldn't control his own destiny, and would lose his true love forever...the smiles on both faces, their gazes at each other, their silly laughs, all the strange behavior in contrast with a normal "sad" scene, successfully shows the unexpressed pain of love. Theirs is a wordless communication — they are soul mates. This ordinary yet extraordinary human feeling for each other, leads Wang to comment:

Scenes like these appear everywhere in the book. How can they not touch our feelings? No one who has an aesthetic sensibility won't experience this tragic sense (*Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions*).

This point is not only far away from Schopenhauer's "pure contemplation", but also has no resonance with Nietzsche either; for Nietzsche, the sublime comes from the danger; from the feeling of disgust of reality, from "the artistic taming of the horrific", from the courage to rescue and reshape the will:

Here, at this point of extreme danger for the will, *art* draws near as the enchantress who comes to rescue and heal; only she can reshape that disgust at the thought of the horrific or absurd aspect of life into notions with which it is possible to live: these are the *sublime*, the artistic taming of the horrific...³⁰

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche (2000), 46.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have focused on Wang Guowei's *Commentaries on A Dream of Red Mansions* and the art of "tragedy" to show the complicated features of Wang Guowei's use of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Wang Guowei's borrowing from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche has its "primitive" face, that is, a Chinese sensibility, here specifically, "feeling for this world." Wang Guowei's "feeling for this world" made a double movement in his borrowing from both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. In Schopenhauer's case, he unconsciously departs from Schopenhauer's idea of the Denial of the Will to live; but his move towards Nietzsche is also an uncompleted mission, since his Confucian value is opposed to Nietzsche's abrupt departure from his tradition. Therefore, his borrowing from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche has its Chinese "brand." In the modern Chinese cultural context, true emancipation is possible only by acting collectively and ethically within, not beyond, this suffering.

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