

## Westernization or Localization? The (Mis)reading of “the Tragic” in Modern Chinese Literary Discourse

Tian Gu

*Nankai University, China*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the features and causal factors in constructing an idea of the tragic in modern Chinese literary discourse. It attempts at revisiting and reproducing the realities of misreading and variation upon modern Chinese introduction of the term "tragedy" (*beiju*) at different socio-historical periods, and has observed the interplay between two trends, namely, Westernization and localization, through the negotiation of "the tragic" into modern Chinese literary practice. These two trends have been integrated by a political and pragmatic perspective, which dominates the formation of a modern Chinese literary discourse on "the tragic". This perspective offers both possibility and legitimacy for certain deliberate misreading, thus endows modern Chinese tragic tradition with unique features different from its Western models. This paper holds that modern Chinese intellectuals approached the idea of the tragic more at an instrumentalist level; they retained the connotation of the term in their attempt of Westernization, and altered and reconstructed the denotations of the term as their efforts of localization. For this reason, modern Chinese reading of "the tragic" is not so much as a pure passive acceptance as an active endeavor to deliberately misread this alien concept for the renovation of the then existing Chinese literary tradition.

## Tian GU

### Westernization or Localization? The (Mis)reading of "the Tragic" in Modern Chinese Literary Discourse

Gao Xudong, a Chinese scholar in comparative literature, refers to Western influence on modern and contemporary Chinese literature as "all-pervasive" (3). This intimate connection was established around the last few years of the 19th century, when modern Chinese literature was being shaped by a pressing cultural and social crisis that was taking place in China at the turn of the century. Several military and diplomatic defeats brought about by China's initial contacts with the West produced a sense of political urgency among Chinese intellectuals; as a result, they resolved to follow and imitate the Western models, believing that only in this way could they redeem China from a disastrous downfall. It was in this socio-political trend of Westernization that a pronounced influx of foreign terms and concepts began to constitute a large part of the vocabulary of a new generation of Chinese intellectuals, paralleling their efforts to redefine Chinese literary tradition in a wider context of world literature.

The urgent and critical socio-political condition offered a great chance for "tragedy" (*beiju*) to enter modern Chinese intellectual discourse, because it was a term—be it a literary form or an aesthetic idea—completely foreign to the Chinese. The rapid acceptance of this concept at the time fit the then prevailing belief in the functional role of literature in social enlightenment: intellectuals regarded "tragedy" an ideal instrument to negate the existing "literature of deception" (Hu, "The concept" 382), and attached great importance to tragedy's direct appeal to audience's emotions and thoughts. Based on active introduction and practice of the tragic ideas from across different Western literary traditions, the concept of tragedy gained an instant and long-lasting popularity in Republican China.

"Westernization" and "localization" have thus become two keywords to the formation of a modern Chinese tragic tradition: the former serves as an external force driving the appropriation of *the tragic*; the latter an internal force helping the assimilation of *the tragic* into the indigenous literary practice. These two seemingly opposed trends keep reinforcing each other in favor of the construction of a modern Chinese literary discourse on Tragedy, hence not only engaging modern Chinese literature in a global process of literary modernity, but also bringing into question the methodological limitations of some existing research. Influence studies would be among the first choices for those who attempt to find the Western ancestral features of modern Chinese literature. However, this approach puts more emphasis on the *rapports de fait* of the travelling texts, which may leave the deliberate variations of the indigenous literary practice out of discussion. Modern Chinese localization of *the tragic*, although driven by a striking upsurge of Westernization, was clearly marked by the "misreading, mistranslation, and 'creative treason' caused" (S. Cao 57), or filtered, by different groups of intellectuals with their own cultural, social, and political intentions. Consequently, questions such as "what was retained and what was rejected, and why, and how was the material absorbed and integrated, and with what success" (Remak 4) during this process should be paid proper attention.

This paper proposes an alternative approach to influence studies in demonstrating the dynamic relationship between modern Chinese tragic perceptions and their Western models. It revisits the evolution of modern Chinese interpretations of the concept of tragedy as a form of Westernization, and regards the negotiation of the idea of the tragic into modern Chinese literary discourse as a form of localization. Through reproducing the realities of how *the tragic* has been engaged in the discursive construction of literary, cultural, and political identities of the modern Chinese under drastic social change, this paper holds that the negotiation of *the tragic* in modern Chinese literary discourse is not so much as a pure passive acceptance as an active endeavor to deliberately misread this alien concept, in order to renovate the then existing Chinese literary tradition.

#### Background: The Formation of a Modern Chinese Tragic Tradition

At the beginning of the 20th century, intellectuals such as Wang Guowei (1877-1927) and Jiang Guanyun (1865-1929) started to approach "tragedy" both as a new form of literature and as a philosophical aesthetic concept.<sup>1</sup> Later, the New Culture Movement (1915-1923) promoted significantly the appropriation of "tragedy" in modern Chinese intellectual discourse. Alongside the emergence of a counter-traditional agenda featuring a complete rejection of the existing literary tradition were intensive

<sup>1</sup> Referencing Schopenhauer's theory, Wang Guowei perceived "tragedy" as an aesthetic idea for his assessment of *Honglou meng* (Dream of the Red Chamber), while Jiang Guanyun interpreted "tragedy" with a pragmatic purpose, as he believed it benefited society by cultivating human souls.

introductions of Western literary concepts and works. Scholars at the time compared traditional Chinese operatic dramas and Western tragedies in terms of the differences they revealed—usually concluding with a negative evaluation of the former's backwardness in contrast to the latter's superiority as claimed. These comparisons served a thorough reformation not only in theatrical circles but also in the whole literary field. As a result, the patternized *Datanyuan*<sup>2</sup> (grand reunion) which was popular in traditional Chinese literature received sharp criticism for its deliberate pursuit of perfection rather than facing directly the miseries in social reality; "tragedy" was thus widely accepted and mainly interpreted as a faithful presentation of life and society.

The trend of leftist literature arose when the tide of New Culture Movement started to ebb in the late 1920s, strengthening greatly the connection between political concern and literary creativity. The literary discourse on tragedy developed new features. On the one hand, the Western influences on both theory and practice were more specific and concrete, attracting intellectual focus in a rather exclusive way on the defining features of tragedy. On the other hand, literary realism prevailed in literary practice, especially in the critics' circle. The major trend in literary reviews at this time valued the social implications and political significance of the works without giving enough attention to the writers' literary concerns.<sup>3</sup> This feature revealed the decisive influence of the increasing politicization of literature on modern Chinese perception of tragedy, making social critique the continued thematic concern of the tragic narrative.

The outbreak of the war with Japan (1937-1945) changed fundamentally the formation of a modern Chinese tragic tradition, in that it homogenized the literary creativity with an overt and unified political theme. Accordingly, *the tragic* was enriched by a positive, uplifting, and optimistic tone, which served the purpose of promoting a revolutionary spirit encouraging the Chinese to strive towards a final victory. This new interpretation differed greatly from those in the past decades that emphasized mainly the miserable and grievous aspects in *the tragic*, and was thus a unique product of the wartime need to inspire and motivate the people with solemn and stirring emotions. It was also at this time when *the tragic* was totally assimilated into the indigenous literary practice to feature in the reconstruction of modern Chinese national identity—a case in point to reveal the closer-than-ever connection between literature and politics in Republican China.

### **Westernization: *The Tragic* as an European Imitation**

Due to the urgent need for cultural and social reformation, the introduction of *the tragic* into modern Chinese literature was mandated by a largely indiscriminate obsession with European models from across different literary traditions or phases, regardless of whether they were "in the Western context perceived to be largely at odds with each other" (Denton, *Modern Chinese* 33). This motivation explains the coexistence of different foreign influences within the same period of modern Chinese literature, as they were introduced and accepted not in chronological order but in light of their relevance to particular socio-political conditions at different historical periods of Republican China—usually known as the 1920s (1917-1927), the 1930s (1927-1937), and the 1940s (1937-1949). The intimate connection between social concerns and literary themes at each decade demonstrated close Western affinities with modern Chinese perception of tragedy, linking specific European authors and theorists with literary propositions and practice that were distinctively Chinese.

### **The Pursuit of Literary Realism**

Henrik Ibsen's modern social tragedies entered scholarly debates of the early 20th-century China largely as a result of the rejection of traditional Chinese literature, which was a major cultural and social agenda of China in the 1920s. Many New Culture intellectuals expressed contempt for the so-called deceptiveness of Chinese literature epitomized by the *Datanyuan*, and then went further to negate the existence of Chinese tragedies. For example, Hu Shi (1891-1962), a pioneering and influential figure in New Culture Movement, argued that what Chinese literature lacked most was "a concept of tragedy" (*beiju de guannian*); "grand reunion," on the other hand, was "never able to leave the audience with

<sup>2</sup> *Datanyuan*, or *Datanyuan jieju*, refers to the ending of a story with the happy reunion of the characters despite the hardships they have earlier gone through. It is particularly common among traditional Chinese literary works, folk tales, and operas; such stories as *Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai* (The butterfly lovers), *Kongque dongnan fei* (Peacock flies to the southeast), and *Mudan ting* (Peony pavilion) are examples of this pattern.

<sup>3</sup> As a case in point, Cao Yu (1910-1996), with his imitations of Western tragedies being a popular success both at his time and in the following decades, once denied any literary realist concern in his works. However, the mainstream critical review at the time still predominantly interpreted and assessed his tragedies from the perspective of social criticism, hence criticizing him for overlooking the social realities.

any profound feelings or thorough reflection [of social problems], except for a sense of illusive satisfaction" ("The concept" 316). Scholars of the same group regarded the *Datanyuan* to be "anti-tragic" because it was in essence "anti-realist". As a result, *the tragic* was closely associated with the truthfulness of literature, thus a trend of "counter-*Datanyuan*" was created and became a new favorite for realist writers.

It was at this time that Ibsen began to draw the attention of modern Chinese intellectuals and to satisfy their appetite for promoting a new literature depicting the gloomy and oppressive social realities.<sup>4</sup> Scholars considered Ibsen's plays to be models for establishing a tragic tradition as well as "a literature of realism and social criticism" (S-L. Yu 2) that were both absent in modern China. *A Doll's House* (1879), in particular, enjoyed great popularity at the time. Intellectuals referred to it as "a tragedy of high quality" depicting "the sadness of a wife leaving home" (Y. He 1). They saw in the play "a tragedy of a couple with huge differences from each other in character," and suggested that "women should first of all strive for human rights" in order to avoid similar tragedies (Fang 1). Leading short story writer, essayist, and literary critic in the New Culture Movement, Lu Xun (1881-1939), concentrated on "the most painful moment in life when one wakes up [to the current predicament] but finds no way out" ("What happens" 1219). He thus indicated his concern about the likely failure of the struggle of an individual against the environment, which brought to the play strong tragic senses. Hu Shi, similarly, termed "Ibsenism" (*Yibusheng zhuyi*)<sup>5</sup> the demonstration of life's predicaments and the portrayal of the direct confrontation between mankind and the environment. He held that "Ibsen's literature, as well as his outlook on life, is nothing but realism [*xieshi zhuyi*]" ("Ibsenism" 490). It is evident that New Culture intellectuals of this group interpreted Ibsen's tragic implications in relation to the social context that had produced those tragedies, which served the pragmatic purpose of making drama both "the X ray for searching for the root of society's disease" and "the mirror of the people and the nation" ("The declaration" 95).

The interpretation of Ibsen's tragic ideas inspired a new literary tradition in Republican China, which exposed directly the darkness of the society. This tragic perception sparked a great number of Chinese imitations, namely, social problem play/fiction (*shehui wenti ju/xiaoshuo*), which, as indicated by the name, concerned "all sorts of problems in society", such as "labor issues, women's emancipation, moral principles, and religion" (W. Chen 1921). A brief survey among works collected in the *Compendium of Modern Chinese Literature* (Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi)<sup>6</sup> shows that tragic works of this type accounted for a considerable proportion of literary creation during the New Culture Movement, among which were influential plays such as Hu Shi's *Zhongshen dashi* (The greatest event in life) (1919), Chen Dabai's *Youlan nüshi* (Miss Youlan) (1921), Ouyang Yuqian's *Pofu* (The shrew) (1922), and Tian Han's *Huohu zhiye* (The night a tight was caught) (1924). The female characters were all innocent victims of social chaos or injustice: they either resigned themselves to or resisted against the misfortunes, but all ended in physical or mental destruction caused by the feudal marriage system or the ceaseless warfare. In this light, they were regarded as the Chinese replicas of Nora (Q. Tian, *Drama movement* 35), while the playwrights also identified themselves as "budding Ibsen in China" (H. Tian 81). The central theme of these works was to claim that "it is the society that should be blamed for people's sins" (Hong, "Self-introduction" 490); therefore, writers saw tragedy as a tool to "voice social discontent" (Lee 452) or "expose social evils and deliver poetic justice to the downcast and the wounded" (Wang, "Chinese Literature" 504), and thus imbued their tragic narratives with a distinct realist perspective.

### The Exploration of the Function of Tragedy

Modern Chinese literature of the 1930s saw a growing influence of Aristotle's definition of tragedy, as intellectuals began to familiarize themselves with ancient Greek tragic ideas and works and therefore attempted at making a Chinese theory of tragedy. The shift of the theme of intellectual debates in the late 1920s offered scholars more space in their theoretical discussions; "tragedy" was therefore less considered as an ideological weapon to negate the existing literary traditions, but more engaged with

<sup>4</sup> In 1918, *Xin qingnian* (New youth)—one of the most influential literary magazines in the New Culture Movement—published a special issue (vol.4, no.6) on Ibsen, including Hu Shi's critical essay "Yibusheng zhuyi" (Ibsenism), Yuan Changying's biographical article "Yibusheng zhuan" (Biography of Ibsen), and the translated scripts of *A Doll's House* (1879, three acts), *An Enemy of the People* (1882, Act One), and *Little Eyolf* (1894, Act One). An "Ibsen craze" soon swept across China as more translated scripts, critical essays and biographies mushroomed in the following years.

<sup>5</sup> A term coined by George Bernard Shaw in Shaw, George Bernard. *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*. Boston: Benjamin R. Tucker, 1891.

<sup>6</sup> A comprehensive collection of modern Chinese literary works. The first compilation, being published between 1935 and 1936 in Shanghai by Liangyou book company, is the earliest of its kind, which collects major works from both theoretical discussions and literary creativity produced during the New Culture Movement.



the exploration of its intrinsic meaning and function. As a result, certain Aristotelian terms were translated into and enriched the vocabulary of modern Chinese literary discourse on tragedy, showing the intellectual concerns with tragedy's artistic nature (by "imitation"), means of expression (through "action"), thematic concerns (of something "serious"), and effects and functions (as "pity and fear").

Take the debates over the concept of "katharsis" as an example. It revolved around different understandings of tragedy's function, thus demonstrated the diversified scholarly efforts to make a definition of "tragedy" out of Aristotelian theories. Xiong Foxi (1900-1965), playwright and practitioner of modern Chinese drama, was keenly aware of the emotional experience of watching tragedies and hence suggested to understand "katharsis" as the "purgation of passions" in terms of the "unspeakable joy" provoked with tears. (57-58) This issue explored the distinctive effects tragedy left with the audience, and was typical among contemporary intellectual concerns. Some scholars went further to associate the emotional effects of tragedy with the release of feelings and the sublimation of life. Literary theorist and translator Liang Shiqiu (1903-1987) referred to "katharsis" (*paixie dijing*) as "the essence of artistic task" due to its ability to purify certain emotions it aroused in the audience. For him, watching tragedies was a process in which emotions got stimulated, released, and healed. Therefore, tragedy exerted its effects by making people more conscious and strong-minded ("On Aristotle's" 103). Similarly, literary theorist and critic Zhu Guangqian (1897-1986) regarded this process as a way tragedy offered its "tragic pleasure" (163), and therefore provided the audience with "an aesthetic activity" (15) in the shape of "a sub-species of the sublime" (89). Philosopher and aesthetician Zong Baihua (1897-1986) held that watching tragedies offered people chances to perceive the profound contrast from life's ordinariness (66-67), and regarded the emotional release as tragedy's beauty and charm as it revealed the true meaning of life brought about by everlasting struggle and tragic destruction (531). Interpretations of this kind remained largely faithful to the aesthetical features of Aristotle's definition, in which Tragedy was taken as an artistic form of expression distancing itself from people's daily life.

Meanwhile, some other scholars argued that the emotional experience tragedy offered the audience was as part of its task to enlighten the multitude. In accordance with his highlighting of literature's faithful representation of social reality, Ouyang Yuqian (1889-1962), one of the founders of modern Chinese spoken drama (*huaju*), emphasized the writer's role in artistic creativity by speaking highly of tragedy's capability to "purify the spirit" (35). The ultimate task for writers, as he believed, was to reveal tragic conditions of human progress, because it was "of profound significance and close to life" (46). Xiong Foxi considered tragedy "the most serious and solemn" among all the poetic forms as it could stimulate people's respect and fear and was therefore a wake-up call to the whole nation which was right in need of "a silver lining and a drop of sympathetic tear" (70-71). This pragmatic perspective fell in line with the standpoint of seeing theatre as the reflection of society in its faithful presentation of the true image of the world, making its view the inheritance of the New Culture pursuit of literary realism.

The above discussions of the function of tragedy reveals the variety of interpretations of Aristotle's theories among modern Chinese scholars, which was common in the theoretical reading of *the tragic* in 1930s China. The co-existence of an aesthetic interest in tragedy's idealization of people's daily experience and a pragmatic concern with tragedy's role in social enlightenment demonstrated both the recreation and the assimilation of Aristotle's tragic ideas in modern Chinese literary context. In this regard, the attempt at Westernization provided modern Chinese intellectuals with not only models for imitation, but also chances for integrating foreign inspiration into their literary and political proposals to renovate and reform the existing system.

### **The Changing Understandings of Tragic Conflicts**

Shakespeare's tragedies shaped modern Chinese tragic perception in terms of the presentation of dramatic conflicts, which, again, showed the integration of Western influences with the indigenous literary practice. Inspired by the staging of adaptations of Shakespearean tragedies since the early 20th century, modern Chinese intellectuals approached Shakespeare's tragic ideas through comparing Western tragedies in terms of their different types of tragic conflicts, and classified tragedies accordingly.

As a leading poet of romanticism in the early 20th century, Xu Zhimo (1897-1931) was among the first to discuss "tragic conflict" in the 1920s. After seeing the film adaptation of *Othello*, he believed the artistic essence of tragedy that made it stand out from the commonplace tragic events lay in the faithful recording and transforming of human beings' inner conflicts into dramas: "The stage for the genuine tragedy is not only the external world where the truth can be traced, but also should be the human soul where the deep and bottomless internal world is bitten, burnt, torn apart, and destroyed" (4). This preliminary understanding highlighted certain "confrontations" in the internal world of Shakespeare's tragic characters, and thus enabled further comparisons and classifications of different types of tragedies according to the ways tragic conflicts were presented.

A trichotomous categorization came into being in the 1930s, and later became a common norm for academic practice. Both Ouyang Yuqian and drama theorist Ma Yanxiang (1907-1988) proposed three types of tragedies as "tragedy of fate" (*mingyun beiju*), "tragedy of character" (*xingge beiju*), and "situation tragedy" (*jingyu beiju*) based on different types of tragic conflicts. Ouyang saw an evolutionary development among the three: the "tragedy of fate" presenting the "fight between human will and fate" was most represented in ancient tragedies; and when "man conquered nature," the "tragedy of character" emerged to "ascribe the protagonist's failure to his own character flaws." Modern tragedy, on the other hand, was produced mostly by the "conflicts between human desire and the external environment." Therefore, it presented "man's ceaseless but unsuccessful attempts to transform the outside world" (36-37). Ma illustrated his opinions with specific examples. He regarded the Greek tragedy *Oedipus the King* as "one of the best tragedies of fate" (65), because it presented the powerlessness of man against the god of fate (68). He saw certain features of a "tragedy of character" in most plays of Shakespeare's time: "In his [Shakespeare's] play [here he used *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Hamlet* as examples], the tragic hero suffers great pain only due to his reckless action driven accidentally by certain defects in his character, which is totally absent in Greek tragedy" (68-69). He considered the "situation tragedy" a product of the modern times, when man's desire for greater progress was manipulated by the environment he depended on: "man has to fight against the society and the environment; and tragedy comes from the failure of his struggle." Most of Ibsen's plays, according to Ma, belonged to this category (70). This trichotomy on the one hand kept "conflict" the central element in tragedy as was previously proposed. And, on the other hand, it extended its focus on the causal factors from the character's internal struggle to the opposition between man and the world, basing the differentiation among tragic conflicts on the progress of history and society.

The war in the 1940s focused intellectual attention on the external factors for tragic conflicts. To aesthetician and literary theorist Cai Yi (1906-1992), the era of tragedy came when dispute and confrontation constituted the main theme of social history (274). He maintained the trichotomy with an emphasis on the social origins that led to the dramatic conflicts of the "tragedy of fate" and the "tragedy of character" in Western tragedies: he referred to *Oedipus the King* as an example of the former, regarding its tragic conflict as a result of the changing institution of marriage rather than simply the irony of fate. He considered *Hamlet* an example of the latter, seeing its tragic conflict as emblematic of the struggle between feudalism and the bourgeoisie that was reflective of the human relationships in these two societies, which produced a self-contradictory and indecisive Hamlet. Cai also provided some examples, such as *The Lady of the Camellias* by Alexandre Dumas, *The Storm* by Ostrovsky, and *A Doll's House* by Ibsen, to illustrate what he called the "social tragedy." He regarded tragedy of this kind a "progress" from tragedies of the past, because it explored and revealed the social origins of tragedy (279-280). Journalist and writer Zhou Gangming (1909-1981) shared this standpoint by making clear different types of confrontations in tragedies: the ancient Greek tragedy presented conflicts between heroes and gods, and the feudal tragedy between slaves and their owners. The rising bourgeoisie produced conflicts between individuality and tradition, while the dominance of capitalism between the exploited and the exploiters (26). It is noticeable that both Cai and Zhou emphasized the external forces as the attributing factor to tragedy, while the internal struggle of the protagonist was left untouched.

Modern Chinese scholars built their understandings of Shakespearean tragic conflicts with the shifting focus of the causal factors from the internal to the external, and by comparing tragedies of Shakespeare with those of others from different Western tragic traditions. The classification of three types of tragedy showed not only an evolutionary view of "tragic conflicts" with the march of time, but also an increasing emphasis on social reality as the determinant of tragic conflicts, which was closely in line with the sharply intensified socio-political conditions in Republican China from the 1930s onward.

### **Localization: *The Tragic* as a Chinese "Misreading"**

The brief review of modern Chinese interpretation of *the tragic* at different historical periods indicates the inextricable link between literature and politics. It confirms statements of later scholars regarding modern Chinese literature as a whole to be "very much intertwined with politics" (Denton, "Historical Review" 287) and for this reason "the product of an infinite array of socio-political forces and cultural factors" (Mair xiii). The localization of *the tragic* in modern Chinese literature followed this mode, in that intellectuals from different generations cared greatly about tragedy's responsibility of engaging in the reconstruction of a new society, making it the ultimate purpose for their ostensibly Westernized interpretations. Since it is necessary for any foreign concept to coincide with the indigenous literary practice in order to be fully accepted, the political and pragmatic perspective is where *the tragic* negotiated itself into and became part of modern Chinese literary discourse. This perspective offered

both possibility and legitimacy for the deliberate misreading of *the tragic*, which endowed modern Chinese tragic tradition with unique features different from its Western models.

One of the misreadings is the popular but rather simple equation between "being tragic" and "being realist" especially in early New Culture Movement, which brought controversies to works being inspired by Ibsen's plays. New Culture intellectuals added to their interpretation of *the tragic* both the political agenda of iconoclasm and the literary task of "counter-*Datanyuan*". Their tragic ideas were thus largely biased, regarding the core of Ibsen's tragedies to be either the unhappy marriage caused by the unhealthy social institution, or the confrontation between the individual and the environment or among different classes. This realist tragic perception aimed at using tragedy for the exploration of "the darkness of society, the cruelty of genetic inheritance, the misunderstanding and alienation within the family, as well as the miseries resulting from hypocrisy, selfishness and prejudice" (Hong, "Drama that belongs" iv-v). However, disputes arose as early as in the later phase of the New Culture Movement, as criticism was voiced about some social problem plays of being over obsessed with political implications and thus diminishing the artistic qualities of the works.

Taking the Chinese imitations of *A Doll's House* as examples: some critics in the 1920s considered it "a pity that most of the works are following the same pattern due to a lack of originality" (Zheng 3), as they all began with the female characters' unhappy marriage and ended with their running away from home for independence and emancipation. To them, the writing purpose that "the problems must be highlighted and any implicitness is not at all necessary" (Pu 16) created a tendency "to solely concentrate on social problems without even allowing for any dramatic factors" (Xiang, *General review* 29). "The more problems are presented, the fewer artistic features are left" (Wen 6), because the playwrights were ignorant of "the profundity of human nature and life's impulse" (S. Yu 3). Some later scholars hold the same opinion. They consider it an "academic bias" (McDougall and Louie 157) for creative writing to deal with the actual life experience "without the artificial mediation of literary or cultural conventions" (Lee 493), which was "by no means a realistic prospectus" (Eberstein 7). In this regard, to indiscriminately equate "the tragic" with "literary realism" bears the risk of simplifying "tragedy" to "drama of sorrow" (*aiju*) or "drama of misery" (*canju*), because this perception only "seeks exclusively after shallow emotional stimulation rather than any tragic sublimity" (B. Tian 73). Therefore, a potential problem could be caused, as "[t]o introduce all kinds of miseries into the territory of *the tragic* will definitely degrade tragedy of its seriousness" (C. Zhang 81). The questioning of the artistic qualities of the social problem plays was in fact an objection to the misreading of *the tragic* in sole connection with the so-called "realism", which not only secularized the former but also simplified the latter. As a result, the strong pragmatic and political implications that influenced this deliberate misreading, which led to the popular trend of "perceiving in Ibsen not an artist but a social reformer" (Hu, "On translating" 333), revealed the real intention of promoting tragedy in the New Culture Movement as "in essence a social campaign rather than a drama movement" (Liang, "On modern" 187).

This preliminary tragic perception, although contested, set the tone for the construction of a modern Chinese tragic tradition with an unremitting pursuit of literary realism in both creativity and criticism. The "counter-*Datanyuan*" standpoint of facing directly the darkness and inequality of society was inherited by generations of writers after the New Culture Movement. Consequently, the overpowering external forces were highlighted as the determinant of tragic conflicts. Based on the understanding of different types of Western tragedies, this notion was shaped by the pragmatic concern with distinct socio-political reality in Republican China. It produced two trends of tragic narrative in modern Chinese literature: one was the depiction of the miserable experiences of the ordinary people, whose tragedies were indicative of the doom of the individual under the destructive social environment. The other was the extolling of heroic deeds against extreme predicaments imposed from the outside, which aimed to promote patriotism and revolutionary spirit among the people.

The first trend concentrated on common men's tragedies with senses of grief, helplessness, and compassion. *The tragic* therefore retained its secularity in "a display of the overwhelming environments against which men fight their ever-losing war" (Wang, *Fictional Realism* 144). Lu Xun, with his famous statement that "tragedy shows how what is worthwhile in life is shattered" ("More" 1; Yang 2:116), best represented this tendency with an established tragic narrative depicting the harsh living conditions and mental state of the depressed rural populace of the 1920s China. There were several examples in his works written both in and after the New Culture Movement, which, to quote the author himself, revealed "the unfortunates in this abnormal society" with the hope of "expos[ing] the disease so as to draw attention to its cure" ("How I Started" 526; Lee 484): the much oppressed ordinary people in the rural uncivilized villages, as represented by Mistress Xianglin in *Zhufu* (The new-year sacrifice, 1924) and Runtu in *Guxiang* (My old home, 1921); the frustrated men of letters living in abject poverty, such as Kong Yiji in *Kong Yiji* (Kong Yiji, 1919) and Wei Lianshu in *Gudu zhe* (The loner, 1925); and the ignorant



and indifferent mass of the public that incarnate the Chinese people whose mentality were manipulated by feudal ethics, as seen in Ah Q in *A Q zhengzhuang* (The true story of Ah Q, 1921-1922) and in Hua Laoshuan in *Yao* (Medicine, 1919).

Contemporary critics regarded the tragic senses in these works as "the sadness of the incomprehension and estrangement among people" (Mao 4), "a grief of loneliness" of those who "once struggled on their own and were finally swallowed by desolation" (Xiang, "On *The loner*" 133), and "a tragedy that mankind can never get rid of" as "one seeks happiness for the masses, who, in return, are going to eat his flesh" (Sun, "About" 4). To them, what Lu Xun presented in his short stories were "extremely ordinary people and commonplace things". Yet, "he demonstrates to us that it is exactly these people and things that are expressive of an encompassing, eternal sense of *the tragic*" (D. Zhang 13). This remark was reiterated by the author in his later explanations: "These extremely commonplace tragedies, some of them almost entirely devoid of incident, like speech without words, are hard to detect unless described by poets. Yet few men perish in heroic, remarkable tragedies, whereas many fritter their lives away in extremely commonplace tragedies almost entirely devoid of incident" ("Tragedies almost devoid" 288; Yang 4:211). Marked by an obvious literary realist concern that was to convey the urgent appeal for the reform of a diseased society, Lu Xun's tragic narrative, corresponding to his conception of *the tragic* at the time, placed much emphasis on the external forces that had produced what he termed as the "commonplace tragedy" (*jihu wushi de beiju*). These tragedies showed the good and innocent (the "worthwhile") being manipulated or destroyed by both the inhumane society and the indifferent viewers of others' misfortunes. Thus, the common people's daily life—which he saw as valuable—was destroyed in a way that was soundless and unnoticed—which he saw as tragic. Other examples sharing the same thematic concern were Yu Dafu's *Bodian* (A humble sacrifice, 1924), Lao She's *Luotuo Xiangzi* (Rickshaw Boy, 1937), and Ba Jin's *Hanye* (The cold night, 1947). Tragic characters in these works were either the underclass workers with miserable living conditions in an indifferent society of exploitation, or enlightened intellectuals with abject poverty and mental depression caused by social injustice and turbulence. In this sense, the common men's tragedy carried a down-to-earth literary view. Hence *the tragic* was perceived through a functionalist approach to serve the purpose of a faithful demonstration of the life of common people for the in-depth examination of prevailing social problems.

The second trend valued much the inspiring significance of *the tragic* in moving, stimulating, and encouraging the audience. This was a unique task for tragedy as well as for modern Chinese literature as a whole when the war of resistance broke out and hence changed profoundly people's understanding of the function of tragedy. The external forces were still overpowering and decisive in producing series of tragedies on the common men. Yet "the aim to present the triumph of evil forces and the sacrifice of revolutionary forces is to make the audience think deeply and learn from these plays" (Tang 167), in order to promote a "tragic spirit" which "cheers us on, makes us high-spirited, gives us courage, and leads us to the brightness and eventual success" (Y. Cao 1). For this reason, *the tragic* developed a sense of solemnity and grandeur to uplift the audience, and therefore resonated with the pragmatic political agenda of mobilizing the masses in wartime China. This new tragic perception even changed some previous understanding of Western tragedies. For example, Shakespeare's tragedies, which used to be studied of their presentation of the protagonists' inner conflicts and tragic flaws, were taken at this time as indicative of the "social significance of a revolutionary spirit" to "resist the manipulation of fate and the oppression of autocracy", and to "strive for an emancipation from harsh environments of fatuousness, dissoluteness, degeneration, and pessimism" which were "exactly what the Chinese need in the Anti-Japanese war" (Yu Shangyuan qtd. in Cao and Sun 105). To intellectuals in wartime China, there was a lesson to draw from Hamlet's tragedy which was caused by his indecisiveness and hesitation: "the victory of the war depends on the concerted efforts of the whole nation, and more importantly, on the immediate action without the least hesitation" (Jiao 167). This lesson was so significant that it "overweighs the success of performance skill which is not worth niggling over [at this stage]" (Jiao 168). The belief in tragedy as "the most powerful literary medium" (Lee 474) in promoting war efforts among the people was evident in these remarks.

The corresponding literary creativity also developed new features. The history play, with a thematic purpose of narrating the past in alluding to the present, became a major form for the dramatization of *the tragic* from 1938 onwards. Certain eras in Chinese history that had similar chaotic socio-political circumstances, such as the Warring States period (475-221 BC), the Southern Ming Dynasty (1644-1662), and the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (1851-1864), were all recurring themes for history plays of the 1940s. Examples were playwright Guo Moruo's (1892-1978) six history plays, namely, *Tangdi zhi hua* (Wild cherry blossoms, 1941), *Qu Yuan* (Qu Yuan, 1942), *Hufu* (The tiger tally, 1942), *Gao Jianli* (Gao Jianli, 1942), *Kongque dan* (The peacock gall, 1942), and *Nanguan cao* (South crown grass, 1943),

which were "the best-known pieces" of this genre in wartime China (Mair 864). Other popular ones were *Li Xiucheng zhisi* (The death of Li Xiucheng, 1938), *Tianguo chunqiu* (The spring and autumn of the Heavenly Kingdom, 1941), *Zhengqi ge* (Song of righteousness, 1942), and *NanMing shiju* (The Southern Ming historical cycle, 1939-1941). Wartime history plays of this kind placed their dramatic conflicts between the revolutionary, progressive forces and the reactionary, conservative forces, which co-existed within a society in transition. However, the former suffered serious setbacks due to the fact that they were not yet strong enough to triumph over the latter, and tragedies took place when the good and righteous were overwhelmed by the evil.

Despite the continuing emphasis on the overpowering external force as crucial to tragic conflicts, the wartime history plays differed largely from previous tragic works in terms of the emotional effects they produced on the audience: there were no longer feelings of grief for the destruction of the innocent individual as well as of resentment at the darkness of the society, but an uplifting and encouraging tone through praising groups of patriotic heroes of their spirit of struggle and resistance. This was a rather new perspective—not a negative, mere sadness filled with senses of desperation and helplessness caused by either the unfair socio-political system or the confrontation between man and the world, but a combination of the sorrow and the sublime, embodying *the tragic* in a positive, fighting spirit with which the Chinese were "able to resist against the invasion and even defeat the enemy although poorly equipped" (Sun, "Reading" 2). Here, again, what were greatly valued in these plays were the significance of literary realism and the constructive role tragedy played in "faithfully recording the true history while at the same time highlighting those historical events as wake-up calls to the present society" (Q. Tian, "On *Song*" 104). This tragic perception was based on the understanding of Western "situation/social tragedy" with conflicts between man and the world, and was greatly reinforced by the War of Resistance as a fighting spirit of changing the society for a better one; it thus marked a complete localization of *the tragic* in modern Chinese literature.

### Conclusion

In the field of transnational literary communication, "misreading" usually takes place where the receiving country unintentionally derives its understanding of the disseminated literature from the intrinsic link it possesses with "its own literary traditions, literary theories, and cultural rules", or when "the receiving country localizes the received literature" by request of the extrinsic factors hence resulting in a deliberate change of the original meanings of the borrowed concepts for the "renewal and recreation of the receiving country's literature" (S. Cao 57).

Modern Chinese appropriation of *the tragic* demonstrates both. Arguably, being "a fundamental part of the great tradition" (McDougall 40) of Chinese literature, the slogan *wen yi zai dao* (literature to convey the truth) has for long been regarded as inseparable from "the official and intellectual activities in the service of one's country" (C. Cheng 65). This "conscious political orientation of a majority of the writers" (Eberstein 7) can be said to have been inherited by modern Chinese intellectuals in their introduction of "tragedy" for "[revitalizing] the ancient Chinese idea of literature's important function" (C. Cheng 65) as a true reflection of society. But more importantly, throughout the process of the formation of a modern Chinese tragic tradition, the concept of tragedy carried different meanings and significance determined by different historical periods and the needs of the times. Yet, none of those meanings could "culminate in a faithful duplication of [their] Western prototypes" (Gregory xiii), and all of them turned into new conceptions with certain added or filtered contents censored by modern Chinese cultural and socio-political contexts. Accordingly, there was a central theme running through modern Chinese tragic narrative: to present the collective experience of the common people from different social stratum at an age of transition and great upheavals, where overpowering external forces played a crucial role in determining people's existential experience. The traditional emphasis on the "political/moral role for literature" and the belief in "writing's power to transform values" as well as in "literature as a 'tool' of politics" (Denton, "Literature and Politics" 467-468) were virtually aroused and enhanced by prevailing socio-political conditions. Therefore, the negotiation of *the tragic* into modern Chinese literary discourse was indicative of, and corresponded to, the fundamental differences between Western and Chinese social evolution in the first half of the 20th century.

Modern Chinese intellectuals approached the concept of tragedy more at an instrumentalist level; they retained the connotation of the term in their attempt of Westernization, and altered and reconstructed the denotations of the term as their efforts of localization. This "misreading" produced a modern Chinese tragic perception as secular, pragmatic, and optimistic, highlighting the functional role of *the tragic* which led people to "the practical struggles against a changeable tragic reality" (Yin 143). Therefore, in modern Chinese literary discourse, the aesthetic reading of *the tragic* as an approach to offer the audience emotional release and distance from reality had to give way to the pragmatic reading

of *the tragic* as a tool to transfer feelings of grief and indignation into deep concern over the fate of the nation, and also into great courage and determination to make a change. Through this transformation, *the tragic* was finalized and internalized as part of a unique literary reflection of the Chinese experience of modernity—no longer a reactive Westernization mandated by inferiority, but a proactive localization for the inventing of a new national literature.

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**Author's profile:** Tian Gu teaches English literature and cultural studies in the College of Foreign Languages, Nankai University. With academic background of Chinese Studies, she has research interests in comparative literature, literary sociology, and conceptual history. Email: <tian.gu@nankai.edu.cn>