

On Tragic Heroes: A Comparative Study of *Hamlet* and *The Orphan of Chao*

Junqing Liang

Foreign Languages College, Inner Mongolia University, Huhhot, China

Abstract—This essay makes a comparative study between the tragic heroes in Shakespearean tragedies and classical Chinese tragedies with *Hamlet* and *The Orphan of Chao* as examples. Shakespeare usually depicts a noble person's final calamity resulting from his own defect in personality; most of the heroes in classical Chinese tragedies are common people with a perfect moral quality, who suffer a lot to defend justice and end up with a good result.

Index Terms—*Hamlet*, *The Orphan of Chao*, tragic heroes, social status, tragic flaw, ending

I. INTRODUCTION

John Dryden (1631-1700), a famous British dramatic critic pointed out to the effect that the tragic feeling of fear and pity must be mainly, if not wholly, constructed on one chief character, because if fear and pity is scattered onto several characters, the feeling will be greatly weakened. Therefore, a tragedy usually develops around one chief tragic character, that is, the tragic hero, who plays the leading part in the whole play and whose destiny arouses most pity and fear. But as for the selection of tragic heroes, the Shakespearean tragedy and the classical Chinese tragedy follow quite different traditions.

II. SOCIAL STATUS OF THE TRAGIC HERO

A. Aristotle's Theory of the Social Status of Tragic Hero

In the history of tragic criticism, Aristotle is the first person to explore the quality of tragedy and it is this ancient Greek philosopher who laid the foundation for the Western tragic theory. His *Poetics*, which discusses tragedy systematically, had a dramatic influence on the tragedy creation and tragic theory in the West. The Renaissance was a peak period for European tragic creation, during which the tragedians including Shakespeare followed the rules fixed by Aristotle in his *Poetics* in the process of their creation. As a matter of fact, we cannot even discuss tragedy without mentioning Aristotle. So let's first of all examine the principles prescribed by Aristotle as for how to choose a tragic character: "The very same difference distinguishes tragedy and comedy from each other; the latter aims to imitate people worse than our contemporaries, the former better" (Aristotle, 1996, p. 5). "Epic poetry corresponds to tragedy in so far as it is an imitation in verse of admirable people" (Aristotle, 1996, p. 9).

From these two statements of Aristotle about the difference between tragedy and comedy and the similarity between tragedy and epic, we can find out that Aristotle's ideal tragic character should be someone who is "admirable" and "better" than us. The word "admirable" reappeared in Aristotle's definition for Tragedy in Chapter Six: "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and processes magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions" (Aristotle, 1996, p.10).

But what kind of people can be properly called "admirable"? According to Malcolm Heath, the English translator of the Greek *Poetics*, the original Greek word equivalent to "admirable" is "spoudaios". "Like many terms of commendation and disparagement in Greek, "spoudios" and its opposite embrace social status as well as moral qualities"(Introduction to *Poetics*, xliv). As for the high social status of Tragic Character, we have completely no doubt, because Aristotle restates, "he is one of those people who are held in great esteem and enjoy good fortune, like Oedipus, Thyestes, and distinguished men from that kind of family"(Aristotle, 1996, p. 21). He thinks it is most tragic that these people in high status end in bad fortune. So "nowadays the best tragedies are constructed around a few households"(Aristotle, 1996, p. 21).

Therefore, according to Aristotle's theory, Tragedy is essentially concerned with those people who are of high social status.

B. *Hamlet*: A Tragic Hero of High Status

On the basis of studying Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, Aristotle decided that tragedy is an imitation of great people, whereas comedy is that of common people. Aristotle's principle for the selection of tragic characters has been not only practiced by Western tragedians ever since but also recommended by Western dramatic theorists as a classical guiding principle. The Spanish dramatist Vega once clearly pointed out that there is only one difference between tragedy

and comedy, that is, comedy imitates the actions of the inferior people while tragedy imitates kings or nobles. Have a bird's eye view over the history of the Western tragedy, and you will find out that since Aristotle's ancient Greece to Shakespeare's Renaissance, all the Western tragedies chose kings, generals or nobles as their leading roles, such as Prometheus, Oedipus, Hamlet and Macbeth.

It was Aristotle who first gave a definition for tragedy and began the theoretical study on tragedy in the West. But it was Shakespeare who made tragedy more mature than ever before. He wrote so many excellent dramatic works among which tragedians aroused the greatest interest. But basically speaking, his creation echoed the Aristotelian tragic theory in terms of the selection of tragic characters. Characters portrayed by him always have high social status. Most of them are kings, princes, generals or ministers of state. What they experience and suffer from is quite particular. Look at what the most famous Shakespearean scholar Bradley said in terms of the status of the tragic characters: "Tragedy with Shakespeare is concerned always with persons of "high degree"; often with kings or princes; if not, with leaders in the state like Coriolanus, Brutus, Antony; at the least, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, with members of great houses, whose quarrels are of public moment" (Bradley, 1965, p.18).

The reason for choosing those people of "high degree" is that their private sufferings are closely connected with the fate of the nation and that "his fate effects the welfare of a whole nation or empire; and when he falls suddenly from the height of earthly greatness to the dust, his fall produces a sense of contrast, of the powerlessness of man, and of the omnipotence ---- perhaps the caprice ---- of Fortune or Fate, which no tale of private life can possibly rival"(Bradley, 1965, p. 19).

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare describes the Danish prince Hamlet like this:

His greatness weighed, his will is not his own,
For he himself is subject to his birth.
He may not, as unvalued persons do,
Carve for himself, for on his choice depends
The safety and health of his whole state.
(I. iii. 20-24)

As a prince, Hamlet is fully aware of his responsibility for his people and that his decision might have effects on the whole country, so when it is time to take actions, he always hesitates. For example, when the players come to the court, Hamlet conceives and arranges the plan of having a scene of murder played before the King and Queen. Hamlet's device proves a complete success. When only six lines have been spoken by the player on the stage, the King starts to his feet and rushes out of the hall. Hamlet is beyond himself with the joy of discovery. He declares that now he could "drink hot blood, / and do such bitter business as the day, / would quake to look on" (III . ii. 397-399).

In this mood, and on his way to his mother's chamber, he comes upon the King, who is kneeling, conscience-stricken and praying. The enemy is now delivered into his hands:

Hamlet: Now might I do it pat, now he is praying:
And now I'll do it: and so he goes to heaven:
And so am I revenged. That would be scanned.
(III . iii. 76-78)

And he scanned it; and the sword that he drew at the words, "And now I'll do it," is thrust back into its sheath again. The reason Hamlet gives for his refusing to kill the King is that if he kills the villain now, he would send his soul to heaven; and he would fail to kill his soul as well as his body. But according to some critics, what he really shrinks from is the responsibility of killing of a king and its political result, because at that time the sudden death of the King might cause panic to the people and danger to the state. So what he considers now is no longer his personal wrong but the fate of his country. This is the real reason for his delay in action. Supposing that he were not the prince, when taking actions, he would not think too much about the possible results and he would have fulfilled the task of revenge much earlier without sacrificing himself.

Chu Kwang-t sien also states in his *The Psychology of Tragedy* that:

It is equally undeniable that the higher the personages, the greater the fall that follows, the more tragic would be the effect. No tale of misfortunes of a private citizen could possibly rival the sudden calamity of a prosperous prince which often carries with it consequences fatal to a whole community. If we examine the masterpieces of tragedy, we shall see that the usual practice of great tragedians bears out this truth. Among the Greeks, tragedy centers around the life of heroes and kings, God-like men whose fame was known and revered far and wide. French tragedy, modeled on the classical type, is even more rigid in selecting its personages. Even tragedies of the Romantic type do not offer any exception. Shakespeare's four great tragic-heroes, Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth and King Lear, are all men of high distinction. (Chu, 1933, p. 93)

As we see, according to the Western classical tragic theory, the tragic effect increases proportionally with the status of the character. The higher his status is, the more tragic his fall will be. Being a prince, Hamlet's death is no longer a personal matter and is regarded as a vanished star, and the tragic feeling it brings to the whole nation is incomparable by any common person's death.

C. *Cheng Ying: A Tragic Hero in Low Status*

Unlike the Western Tragedy, the Classical Chinese Tragedy never had any limitation on the social status, family

background of the Tragic Character. The Westerners are fond of abstract thinking, inducing and defining. From Aristotle, Horace to Hegel, Lessing and Goethe, they expounded features and effects of Tragedy and made formulations on Tragedy for tragedians to follow. The Chinese are used to giving appreciative prose commentary, instead of abstract definitions, so the tragedians in China could choose their characters in a relatively free way. Sometimes, just like the Western tragedians, they choose kings and nobles as tragic characters. For example, among the four greatest classical Chinese tragedies, both *Autumn in the Han Palace* and *Wu Tong Rain* describe the tragic imperial love story; while *Dou Er is Wronged* and *The Orphan of Chao* depict common people who suffer from unjust treatment.

Judging from the title ----for the full title of the play is "*The Great Revenge of the Orphan of Chao*"---- one might expect that the hero of the play is the Orphan and the climax of the play is how the orphan fulfills the revenge by filling the stage with corpses. But the fact is that the author emphasizes the escape rather than the revenge of the orphan. The orphan appears only in the last two acts and the revenge is promised only by a royal decree and not represented on the stage at all. So the chief tragic character in *The Orphan of Chao* is not the orphan, the son of the late princess, but Cheng Ying, a village physician, who risks his life to take the orphan out of the court and heroically sacrifices his own son to rescue the orphan. During the whole play Cheng Ying plays the leading role and is the one whose behaviors arouse most pity and admiration. Cheng Ying is only an ordinary doctor whose social status is by no means high, but his moral excellence cannot be surpassed.

So, for the Chinese tragedians and dramatic audience, it doesn't matter whether the hero is in a low social position or high social position, as long as the hero's behavior can arouse pity and admiration and make them shed tears. In fact, most of the classical Chinese tragedies deal with the life of the common people, especially the misfortunes of those oppressed women in feudal society. That is why some scholars name those plays as "Plays of Sufferings". In contrast, Shakespeare seldom let a heroine play the leading role in a tragedy. "it is only in the love tragedies, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, that the heroine is as much the center of the action as the hero"(Bradley, 1965, p.16).

The famous Chinese writer and scholar Bing Xin once made a speech at an academic conference, in which she claimed that China had no tragedy at all and one important reason is that the hero of a tragedy should be a person in high status. She even joked that if anyone became the hero of a tragedy, he should be happy since only "a very important person" could be chosen as the hero of a tragedy. Some other Chinese and foreign scholars also consider this to be a proof that China has no tragedy.

But one thing we should note is that in the eighteenth century with the rising of the bourgeoisie, there appeared a tendency that some Western dramatists began to abandon the rigid classical tragic principle for choosing a tragic hero and, instead, appeal for the "bourgeois tragedy". The most influential ones are Diderot and Lessing. Lessing pointed out to the effect that the high status of kings and nobles can surely add magnificence and splendor to a tragedy, but it does not follow that the play becomes even more touching. Common citizens' sufferings can more powerfully touch the hearts of the audience since they have experienced similar sufferings. But some classical theorists have been strongly against breaking the traditional tragedy format. When Chu Kwang-Tsien claimed that "With the ascendance of the bourgeois tragedy, tragedy in its real sense has disappeared from the stage" (Chu, 1933, p. 94), obviously he denied the kind of tragedy which writes about the common citizen's life. The reason he gives is that "With the disappearance of hero-worship, everything is leveled down to the reach of the common humanity, the sense of sublime dwindles and Tragedy dies" (Chu, 1933, p.94). However, during the early period of the twentieth century, Tragedy flourished again. Some playwrights, such as Eugene O'Neill, Ibsen, and Arthur Miller all chose to reflect the human life of the common people so as to reveal social contradictions. They vividly depict a group of common people who struggle to survive in the cruel capitalist society. Their sufferings in life and their trouble in hearts greatly moved the audience. Is it reasonable for us to stick to the ancient principle and exclude those masterpieces, such as *A Doll's House*, *The Death of a Salesman* and *Desires Under the Elms* from the family of Tragedy? If the answer is negative, how wrong will it be to exclude the Chinese masterpieces such as *Dou Er is Wronged*, just because it describes an oppressed common woman instead of an influential person?

III. THE MORAL QUALITY OF TRAGIC HERO

A. Aristotle's Theory of "Hamartia"

As we have mentioned before, Aristotle's ideal tragic character should be someone "admirable", and according to the explanation of Heath, the translator of *Poetics*, an "admirable" person should not only occupy high social status but also morally good. Among the four things Aristotle requires for a tragic hero, "goodness" is listed prior to the other three, which are "appropriateness", "likeness", and "consistency" (Aristotle 1996:21). But a "morally good" character should be by no means morally perfect. According to Aristotle, the distinctive feature of Tragedy is that this kind of imitation evokes fear and pity. Then what kind of character can evoke such feelings?

"it is clear first of all that decent men should not be seen undergoing a change from good fortune to bad fortune---this does not evoke fear or pity, but disgust. Nor should depraved people be seen undergoing a change from a bad fortune to good fortune---this is the least tragic of all." (Aristotle 1996:20)

"we are left, therefore, with the person intermediate between these. This is the sort of person who is not outstanding in moral excellence or justice; on the other hand the change to bad fortune which he undergoes is not due to any moral defect or depravity, but an hamartia of some kind." (Aristotle 1996:21)

So the ideal tragic plot cannot be constructed around an exceptionally virtuous person or a wicked person; it must be based on someone between the two — broadly speaking virtuous, but not outstandingly so. Because their virtue is not outstanding, we do not find their downfall morally repellent; because their downfall is undeserved, we can pity them. Here, the Greek word “hamartia”, together with another word “catharsis”, which we will discuss later, have caused a great confusion and argument ever since.

As for the word “hamartia”, we will turn to Malcolm Heath, whose translation of Aristotle’s *Poetics* is generally recognized. According to the explanation in the introduction to *Poetics* supplied by Heath, “the Greek word “hamartia” covers making a mistake or getting something wrong in the most general sense”(Introduction to *Poetics*, xxxii) and “hamartia, then, includes errors made in ignorance or through misjudgment; but it will also include moral errors of a kind which do not imply wickedness”(Introduction to *Poetics*, xxxii). Heath thought that hamartia can take a variety of forms.

Another problem remains that there seems to be a contradiction in Aristotle’s theory, since he once said that the tragic character should be better than us but later when discussing the effects of tragedy he said that our fear is evoked because the person is like us. Then a problem arises: is it possible that the character is like us and at the same time better than we? A passage near the end of chapter fifteen may point to a resolution of the apparent inconsistency. There Aristotle compares poets to portrait painters. Portrait painters, he says, “paint people as they are, but make them better-looking”(Aristotle 1996:25). Heath gives us a further explanation of this sentence:

There is therefore a combination of likeness and idealization in portraiture; in the same way characters can be made better than we are while still retaining some imperfections of character; in this respect they will be like us, despite the element of idealization. They are like us, in that they fall short of the moral perfection whose downfall we would find outrageous; but they still tend to the better than the worse. (Introduction to *Poetics*, xlv)

To sum up, in Aristotle’s opinion, an ideal tragic hero should be someone in high social status and morally good, but by no means free of flaws.

B. *Hamlet’s Tragic Flaw in Disposition*

For Aristotle, the center of tragedy is “action”, for he says, “Tragedy is not an imitation of persons, but of action and of life”(Aristotle 1996:11). And for him, “Character holds the second place” and “there could not be a tragedy without action, but there could be one without character”(Aristotle, 1996, p. 12). But for Shakespeare, there could not be any tragedy without character. Shakespeare also emphasizes action, but for him character is more important since one’s character decides the actions that he may take. In fact, Shakespeare’s attention to the hero’s character is not his personal idea. According to the medieval medical theory, four humors exist in human bodies and different characters are attributed to the excess of certain humors: melancholy (black bile), cholera (yellow bile), blood and phlegm. This theory had a great influence on the theatrical creation in the Renaissance. Playwrights began to attach much importance to the depiction of characters, and so did Shakespeare.

In Shakespeare’s works, tragic disasters do not fall down from the heavens. They mainly result from a character’s action, which springs from various flawed dispositions. Othello is driven by envy and suspicion to strike his fair wife in public, and then, in her bed-chamber strangle her in spite of her pleading. Some say that the death of Desdemona is attributed to her husband’s love, but this sounds ridiculous and unreasonable. A survey of the whole plot tells us that her tragic end is destined by Othello’s flawed disposition. His credulousness pushes him into the trap prepared by Iago, first. Then, owing to his own jealousy, suspicion and narrow mind, he is increasingly agonized by Iago’s lie day after day and could not prevent himself from wrecking his own happiness. Cordelia falls out of favor with King Lear because her aged father is too self-willed, irritable and tends to swallow flattery. No matter how wise he once was, his bad temper this time and forever makes him lose what he has actually wanted and finally lose his own life. The same is true of other heroes in Shakespeare’s tragedies. The flaws in their dispositions play an important role in devastating their lives, which used to be happy, noble and magnificent.

Hamlet is no exception to this rule. It is said that the most striking feature of Hamlet’s character is melancholy, and there can be no Hamlet without melancholy. His melancholy is the result of his speculative and contemplative mind. He is a man of thought. It doesn’t mean that he never takes actions. In fact, in order to revenge Hamlet does act. He keeps the secret of the Ghost; he arranges for the play; and he kills Polonius (taking for Claudius). The problem is that at some critical moments when a sudden demand for difficult and decisive action arises, he becomes a thinker. He would examine the nature of action by asking himself, “How as I am to do it? When? Where? What will be the consequence to the State? What is the good of doing it in such a world as this?” However, after such an examination, the possibility of action is denied. Thus, the murdering of Claudius is postponed due to his hesitation.

Consequently, someone says that with Shakespeare, character is destiny. This statement is a little exaggerated, since the peculiar social circumstances contribute more to the tragedy as we discussed in the first part and if not meeting with such circumstances the characters would have lived a fairly untroubled life. But it is safer to quote Bradley’s words: Hamlet “contributes to the disaster in which he perishes” and the center of the tragedy “lies in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action” (Bradley, 1965, p. 20).

As we mentioned above, Aristotle’s ideal tragic character should be not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. Definitely, in Shakespeare’s plays, most of the heroes bear these features. The deaths of Desdemona and Cordelia are caused by the misbehaviors of

Othello and King Lear. The readers would condemn them for their errors but never consider them to be naturally evil and wicked. However, there are exceptions, such as Macbeth. He is doing something that even he himself feels evil. Aristotle denies a man of this kind to be the hero of a tragedy, since it cannot arouse pity. For Shakespeare, he accepts this character and depicts him successfully. He imbues Macbeth with ambition which urges him to murder Duncan as well as his own conscience itself which warns him frighteningly and plagues him to craziness. The picture of the unbearable internal torture overwhelms us with terror and simultaneously wins our pity and fear. In doing so, Shakespeare achieves success and also enriches tragic theory. An evil character can also be the tragic hero of a tragedy, as long as the dramatist is skillful enough to do so.

C. *Cheng Ying: A Perfect Tragic Hero*

The tragic heroes in Classical Chinese Tragedy are usually both morally and temperamentally perfect. It doesn't mean that those characters have no personal defects. Nobody in this world is perfect. It means that those heroes are innocent people and their tragedy has nothing to do with their own defect of any kind; instead, it is imposed by the evil forces. They are usually honest, royal, just and virtuous, such as Tou Er and Cheng Ying. Although they are people of little importance, their undeserved sufferings excite our pity and their virtuous behaviors arouse our admiration. Take Cheng Ying as proof: in order to keep his promise to the princess that he will save the orphan so that the only offspring of the Chao family could avenge for the family in the future, he sacrifices his own son. How much determination does it cost to make such a decision? Despite his inferior position, his moral quality touches the heart of the audience and arouses their admiration. Knowing what Cheng Ying has done for his family, the orphan expresses his admiration and gratitude like this:

Cheng Po: How many would sacrifice their own child for one of another name?

Such generosity and goodness are not easily forgotten.

I shall summon a painter of the highest rank

To make a memorial of your true likeness,

To be worshipped ever after in our family temple.

(Act Five)

A person of such eminent virtue, in order to defend justice, makes unusual sacrifices. His name, as we Chinese people always say, will go down in history and be remembered for all generations. As we will discuss later, one of the important purposes of the Chinese tragedy is moral instruction, and these heroes, as a matter of fact, have become the incarnations of virtues and are always depicted as perfect moral idols. In contrast, the heroes in the Shakespearean tragedy are usually complicated in character and have both good qualities and weaknesses as well. We have to admit that the characters in the classical Chinese tragedy are usually flat and stereotyped, while the characters in the Shakespearean tragedy are full-blooded and three-dimensional.

IV. THE ENDING FOR TRAGIC HERO

A. *Hamlet: Ending in Deathbed*

In the thirteenth chapter of *Poetics*, when discussing the plot of tragedy, Aristotle gives the best structure and the second best structure for tragedy. He holds that "a well-formed plot will be simple rather than (as some people say) double, and that it must involve a change not to good fortune from bad fortune, but (on the contrary) from good fortune to bad fortune" (Aristotle, 1996, p.21). So in his minds, "the best tragedy, in artistic terms, is based on this structure." (Aristotle, 1996, p.21) According to Aristotle's tragic theory, the best plot of a tragedy is one in which a moderately virtuous person moved from good fortune to bad fortune and Aristotle said that plays of this kind are the most tragic, and tragedians such as Euripides, despite some faults in his techniques, are considered to be the most tragic of poets. (Aristotle, 1996, p. 21)

Make a survey of the Shakespearean tragedy, and you will discover that all his tragedies end up with the death of the heroes. In Bradley's words, "no play at the end of which the hero remains alive is, in the full Shakespearean sense, a tragedy" (Bradley, 1965, p.16). As a matter of fact, one typical characteristic of the Shakespearean Tragedy is that "every deathbed is the scene of the fifth act of a tragedy" (Bradley, 1965, p.18). At the end of a tragedy, the hero is bound to die.

Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, has been obsessed with the question of "to be, or not to be" through the play. His life is occupied and consumed away by this obsession. He falls in love with Ophelia but could not do anything to make her happy, what is even worse is that quite by accident he stabs her father to death. Heartbroken over the death of her father, Ophelia goes crazy and gets drowned in a stream. Then, one after another, death befalls to Laertes, Ophelia's brother, Gertrude, Queen of Denmark, King Claudius and Hamlet himself. So as for the plot, the Shakespearean tragedy corresponds with the best plot recommended by Aristotle. In summary, we may say that the Shakespearean Tragedy is the story of a man in high status and the story of "human actions producing exceptional calamity and ending in the death of such a man" (Bradley, 1965, p.23).

B. *The Orphan of Chao: Ending in Triumph*

Then Aristotle mentions that "Second-best is the structure which some say comes first---that which has a double

structure like the *Odyssey*, and which ends with the opposite outcome for better and worse people.” Thus, the second-best plot is the kind with a double line of development, that is, the good characters ultimately enjoying good result and the wicked ones end up in misfortune, just like *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus triumphs and the wicked suitors are killed. Although he lists this kind of structure as the “second best structure”, Aristotle actually denies it to be the plot of a tragedy, because the pleasure derived from this kind of play is “not the pleasure which comes from tragedy; it is more characteristic of comedy”(Aristotle, 1996, p. 22). He says that the fact that the audience enjoy these plays more than the ones with the best plot is because of the weakness of audiences, that is, their good-heartedness and their inability to bear seeing the tragic ending; and the poets are misled by the audience and compose whatever is to their taste(Aristotle, 1996, p.22).

The classical Chinese tragedy usually adopts the second best plot mentioned by Aristotle, (there are exceptions though). The Chinese playwrights often insist on a happy ending in which the virtuous is rewarded and the wicked punished. *The Orphan of Chao* is no exception. It ends with the emperor’s decree:

Wei Chiang: The orphan’s name shall be restored to him; we bestow upon him the name of Chao Wu. He shall inherit all the titles and positions of his father and grandfather. The son of General Han Jue shall hold the rank of general; a thousand acres of land shall be given to Cheng Ying; for Gongsun Chujiu a tomb shall be erected with a memorial in stone; and all those remaining who lost their lives in this cause shall be honored by public proclamation. (Act Five)

This ending is characteristic of the classical Chinese tragedy and is totally against the classical Western tragic theory, which calls for “pure tragedy”. According to Aristotle’s theory, a good tragedian should not be misled by the audience’s taste. But we know that nothing in this world exists alone and nothing can develop without being influenced by surroundings. So, when doing research on a certain literary work, we should not only focus our attention on the work itself, but also notice its relationships with the writer, the social background and its reader or audience. This is particularly important for the research on drama, since unlike poetry and singing which is to some extent self-amusing, drama is a form of art which is commerce-oriented. The audience, as their money source, is particularly important for the actors and playwrights. Therefore, the playwright cannot compose plays only “for art’s sake”, ignoring the aesthetical habit and psychology of the audience. A Chinese playwright named Chen Renjian once talked about one of his experiences: I once wrote a play which ends in the death of a good person. After the performance, the audience felt indignant and some even cursed outside the theatre. The theatre had no other way but ask me to change the play and make the good person triumph in the end. I did as they told me and the audience stopped complaining and went home satisfactorily.

So we can see that the Chinese playwrights have a preference for a happy ending over a bad one, which is by no means a private hobby, but a cultural phenomenon. The playwrights must follow the Chinese audience’s aesthetical habit, which is shaped by the traditional Chinese culture. First, the core of the Chinese culture is Confucianism, which has influenced the Chinese people’s ideology so much. Confucianism advocates “the doctrine of the golden mean”, which has become the Chinese people’s guiding principle for their behaviors. As for art, Confucianism holds to the aesthetical standard of “joy without wantonness, sorrow without self injury”. So for the Chinese people, everything shall not go extreme and harmony is beauty. When appreciating a tragic play, after watching through the strong tragic conflicts, the audience always expect a harmonious and balanced ending to relieve their previous sorrow. Second, the traditional moral principle of the Chinese people is to be kind and just because they firmly believe that the wicked will always be punished and the virtuous awarded. So no matter what sufferings the hero or heroine endures, he or she will end up with a good result. Third, the Buddhist instruction of “transmigration and retribution”, reinsured the Chinese people that the virtuous will be awarded, if not in this world, then in the next. Fourth, in the Yuan Dynasty, the social status of the intellectuals was so low and their life was just a little better than beggars. So, no matter what suffering they had described in the plays, they would express their wishes for justice and harmony at the end of the plays.

The relatively better ending of the classical Chinese tragedy is the most important reason why many critics deny the existence of tragedy in China. Chu Kwang-t sien even puts them into the category of comedy: “As a matter of fact, drama in China is almost a synonym for comedy” (Chu, 1933, p. 219).

But in fact, the quality of a play should be decided by its climax, not its ending. A good character may start off in bad fortune because he or she is oppressed by the bad character; this kind of play will evoke fear and pity because of the good character’s initial misery. Or one could imagine plots in which fear and pity are evoked by the apparent imminence of a fall into misery, which is averted at the last moment. Plots like these will excite tragic emotions in spite of their happy ending, since the characters with whom we sympathize pass through or anticipate misfortune. For example, the emphasis of *The Orphan of Chao* lies not in the revenge but the hard process of rescuing the orphan and the sacrifices of those virtuous people during the whole process. The climax of this play is that in order to deceive Tu Anku and save the orphan, Gongsun Chujiu has to be beaten hard by Cheng Ying, and then Cheng Ying witnesses Tu Anku stabbing his son to death and at last Gongsun Chujiu commits suicide by dashing his head against the steps. The whole play is going on in an extremely sorrowful atmosphere, except that in the last act the revenge was fulfilled with the emperor’s help. The ending, I think, cannot change the tragic quality of the whole play. It is only an expression of the people’s wishes. After watching the horrible scene where the good people are being terribly maltreated and enduring the strong emotions of pity and fear that the play brings to them, a relatively happy ending can provide the audience

with an emotional relief and let them leave the theatre satisfactorily.

Bradley says that “Such poetic justice, in flagrant contradiction with the facts of life, and it is absent from Shakespeare’s tragic picture of life” (Bradley, 1965, p. 35). And some other critics also think that a tragedy with a happy ending is against realism, since actually in most circumstances the good people end up in misfortune. The famous Chinese playwright Tian Han expressed his opinion on this problem in *The People’s Daily* (Aug. 4th, 1959), when he was ordered to change the happy ending of his play *Guan Hanqin* into a sad one, because it is held that the happy ending had weakened the criticism of the cruelty of the Yuan rulers, “Some people think that only a tragic ending conforms to realism. But in my opinion, I end it happily because it combines realism with the people’s wishes”.

In fact, the longing for a better life for the tragic hero is not unique to the Chinese. There is in man a natural desire to turn every tragedy into a comedy and the audiences always sincerely wish a better fortune for the tragic hero, no matter he is a Chinese or a Westerner. The stage history of *King Lear* is a convincing evidence. From 1681 to 1838, for a century and a half, the play was made to appear on the stage in the adapted versions of Garrick and others, in which Cordelia married Edgar and Lear was restored to his kingdom. The dictum that “truth and virtue shall at last succeed” was faithfully observed, although according to aestheticians, such practices are just guided by psychological motive and should be blamed from artistic point of view. But there are also some scholars who are opposed to the ending that good people suffer and the wicked people enjoy good fortune. The most famous one is Plato, the teacher of Aristotle, who once attacked the tragedians in his famous work *Utopia* and excluded them out of his ideal state, because they always made the wicked people enjoy good fortune and the good people suffer.

V. CONCLUSION

In Conclusion, the Shakespearean tragedy requires tragic heroes to be great, heroic and in high position, while the classical Chinese Tragedy often requires tragic heroes to be weak and common (there do exist exceptional cases); the Shakespearean tragedy usually has a tragic hero with a complicated character and the tragedy was caused, to some extent, by the tragic flaw in the disposition of the character, while the classical Chinese tragedy usually depicts the tragic heroes as both morally and temperamentally perfect people whose suffering is imposed by the evil forces; the heroes in Shakespearean Tragedy usually end in death, while the heroes in the classical Chinese tragedy usually have a relatively better result after the unbearable suffering.

REFERENCES

- [1] Aristotle. (1996). *Poetics*. England: Penguin Books.
- [2] Bradley, A.C. (1965). *Shakespearean Tragedy*. New York: Fawcett World Library.
- [3] Chu Kwang-t sien. (1933). *The Psychology of Tragedy*. Strasbourg: Librairie Universitaire d’Alsace.
- [4] Liu Jung-en, trans. (1972). *Six Yuan Plays*. London: Penguin Books.
- [5] Shakespeare, William. (1998). *Hamlet*. Beijing: The Commercial Press.

Junqing Liang was born in Ordos of Inner Mongolia, China in 1977. She received her M.A. degree in linguistics from Inner Mongolia University, China in 2003.

She is currently an English lecturer in the College of Foreign Languages, Inner Mongolia University, Huhhot, China. Her research interests include sociolinguistics and English literature.

Ms. Liang is a member of the Chinese Association of Foreign Language Teachers.