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## East-West Theories of Tragedy: Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Ji Junxiang's 纪君祥 *Zhaoshi guer* 赵氏孤儿 (*The Orphan of Zhao*)

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### ABSTRACT

As a sally in reading across cultures, this paper takes two dramas conceived and performed at opposite ends of Eurasia as a point of departure for ruminations on the genre of tragedy. Though not considered a masterpiece by critics within or outside of China, Ji Junxiang's 纪君祥 *Zhaoshi guer* 赵氏孤儿 (*The Orphan of Zhao*) was the first Chinese drama to be rendered into any European language and the only Chinese play that has had a significant impact on European drama. Unreflectively known as the "Chinese Hamlet" by those first European readers who were eager to find their own selves reflected in the new encounter with China, the play has become bound up with the politics of cultural poetics, which govern how we read works from cultures outside of "the West." Here, I point to those larger structures of thought which underpin a given culture's literary production and use *Hamlet* and *The Orphan of Zhao* as a test case for thinking more broadly about how drama as an art form in two major cultural traditions reflects different answers to the same perennial human questions.

### 摘要

作为跨文化阅读的一个突破口，本文以欧亚大陆两端构思和表演的两部戏剧为出发点，对悲剧类型进行反思。季俊祥的《赵氏孤儿》虽未被国内外评论家视为杰作，但却是第一部以欧洲语言演绎的中国戏剧，也是唯一一部对欧洲戏剧产生重大影响的中国戏剧。这部未被欧洲第一批读者所熟知的“中国哈姆雷特”，他们渴望在与中国的新接触中找到自己的影子。这部戏剧与文化诗学的政治联系在一起，而文化诗学决定了我们如何从“西方”以外的文化中解读作品。在这里，我指的是那些更大的思想结构。这儿，我指的是支撑一个指定文化文学生产的更大思想结构，并以《哈姆雷特》和《赵氏孤儿》为例，来更广泛地思考戏剧作为一种艺术形式在两个主要文化传统中如何反映出对同一个永恒的人类问题的不同答案。

### KEYWORDS

East-West; cross-cultural; drama; tragedy; theories of tragedy

### 关键词

东西; 跨文化; 杂剧; 悲剧; 悲剧的理论; 哈姆雷特; 赵氏孤

At a first glance, it may not be obvious what a Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) *zaju* 雜劇 play and one of Shakespeare's four late tragedies might have in common.<sup>1</sup> The problem inherent in looking for western genres in other cultures' literary production has been well-critiqued within comparative studies. Lydia Liu reminds us that translating

between cultures and between genres always involves “hypothetical equivalences” and raises the question of “whether it is possible to have reliable comparative categories on universal or transhistorical grounds” (15). Josh Sternberg writes unequivocally that literary genres are “independent creations that have been adjusted to form equivalences, with cultural power strongly favoring western genres to the detriment both of the studies and production of traditional sinophone genres” (289). Cross-cultural encounters force us to rethink our assumptions (indeed sometimes to see them for the first time) about generic forms and the high literary or indeed moral, or ethical status accorded them. In the Chinese tradition, with “epic” deemed an unknown form, “tragedy” a much later development, the “lyric” (*shi* 詩) has been considered the most refined and valued form of artistic and philosophical expression.<sup>2</sup>

Western scholars (and indeed many Chinese scholars) have, then, tended to reflect upon why China did not produce an epic or a tragic tradition while ignoring any consideration of why the western literary canon lacks certain Chinese forms or of how various cultural traditions have their own internal logic and value.<sup>3</sup> Western notions of artistic greatness, human freedom, and subjectivity predominate and are internationally acknowledged and imitated. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, therefore, occupies a far more elevated position both within its own literary tradition and in terms of its global appreciation than Ji Junxiang’s *The Orphan of Zhao*.<sup>4</sup> The hypostasis of forms and genres is a problem in that it can erase the different sets of philosophical and literary presuppositions that inform any given cultural production. If Sophocles, Shakespeare and Chekhov all wrote something called “tragedy,” the signifier “tragedy” does little to help us in thinking through why *Antigone*, *Hamlet* or *Three Sisters* continue to exert an uncanny emotional power and speak to the perennial human problem of what Northrop Frye in his archetypal criticism of Shakespearean tragedy terms “being in time” (3). It also does little to help capture a Confucian-Buddhist tradition in which the ego is entirely illusory, or exists only to be destroyed so it cannot be loved for itself. The insignificance of the individual is a fundamental Buddhist axiom, which contrasts both with the Christian infinite value placed on the human soul and with the Classical Greek emphasis on the outsized exploits of a heroic self. Chinese cultural traditions tend to favor passively enduring evil rather than waging a courageous (yet doomed) assault upon it. This gives a different slant to the European tragic predicament of being a mortal trapped within a contingent and hostile world beyond one’s control.

Here, I want to move beyond a discussion of how *The Orphan of Zhao* is or is not like *Hamlet*, or of whether or not the Chinese *zaju* does indeed conform to what has been ever-shiftingly defined as “tragedy” from Aristotle to George Steiner.<sup>5</sup> I am interested in how these plays illuminate universal human traits as revenge, loyalty, cruelty, self-sacrifice, the parent-child bond, duty, honor, or prevarication within their own culturally specific matrix. In many ways, for example, in terms of content, *The Orphan of Zhao* has more in common with Euripides’ *Trojan Women*, Senecan tragedy or the Herod the Great mystery plays of Medieval Europe than it does with *Hamlet*. The dramatic power lies less in the figure of the grown-up avenger orphan than in the vulnerability of the child under threat and its eliciting of extreme self-sacrifice in devotion to ideals. If for Steiner and other theorists of tragedy, the production of tragedy requires a special mythology, one that supports a tragic view of life and a sense of mankind as an unwelcome guest in the world, then I want to probe how

the Chinese mythologies and patterns of thought which underpin the *zaju* form differ. If a belief in pure tragedy is predicated on a sense of the finality of evil, then surely any mythology that has faith in the justice and workings of the heavens, or in empirical reason, progress or the perfectibility of mankind is non-tragic. In this sense, it is the mood or modality of what might constitute the tragic rather than conventions of the form (five acts, unities etc.) that interests me. How does the predominantly Confucian worldview as glimpsed in *The Orphan of Zhao* present a distinctly Chinese tragic modality?

Although certain writers and certain of their works have been seized upon and made representative of a tradition, we must not forget how Shakespearean tragedy itself represents a definite rupture with its classical and neo-classical tragic forbears: “western” tragedy is not a monolithic, static genre any more than is Chinese drama. Shakespeare takes an oppositional stance toward the Aristotelian unities of action, time, and place, and his tragic universe is decidedly anthropocentric as opposed to the predominantly fatalistic, theocentric world of Greek tragedy. There is a complete absence of a chorus in Shakespearean tragedy, which would have been anathema to the Greeks. As critics, we do not declare that Shakespearean tragedy is not generically like Greek tragedy and, therefore, describe it in terms of lack or inferiority.<sup>6</sup> This same accommodation is not as readily made, however, when it comes to evaluating Chinese dramatic forms. Of course, Chinese drama is more “other” to students of European culture than Greek drama is to Shakespeare, but this does not imply that it has value only as exotic foil to those plays which, having been filtered through centuries of German Idealism, are now held up as glorious mirrors of the human spirit.

In *What was Tragedy? Theory and the Early Modern Canon*, Blair Hoxby argues that the idea that tragedy necessarily involves a conflict between freedom and determinism is not an ancient prescription but a modern invention. For the Idealists, whose work continues to influence modern philosophy and criticism, a tragedy must offer “either an unavoidable collision of ethical forces or a conflict between freedom and necessity” (Hoxby, 3). Hegel’s work on *Antigone* and his positing of Creon and Antigone as representative of clashing but equally valid ethical absolutes remains a hugely influential model for criticism on tragedy. For pure tragedy, the protagonist must recognize his fate, actively fight against it, but ultimately submit to it. The protagonist dies, but does so valiantly, as a “sacrifice dedicated to the national community” (Hoxby, 4). Most early modern tragedies themselves do not fulfill these criteria that are retroactively applied by the Idealists. Hegel writes “truly tragic action presupposes either a live conception of individual freedom and independence, or at least an individual’s determination and willingness to accept freely and on his own account the responsibility for his own act and its consequences.” With regard to Chinese drama, he writes “there is no question of the accomplishment of a free individual action but merely of giving life to events and feelings in specific situations presented successively on the stage” (Hegel, 2. 1205–6). I argue, however, contrary to this rather woolly statement of Hegel, that we do indeed see the accomplishment of free individual action on the Chinese stage. It is precisely the choices of Cheng Ying 程嬰, Gongsun Chunjiu 公孫杵臼 and Han Jue 韓厥 in particular, which propel the action to save the child and through which we glimpse the depths of the Confucian virtues of righteousness and loyalty. The innovation of Ji Junxiang as dramatist in having Cheng Ying sacrifice his own son and not just “another baby” as it reads in the source text of Sima Qian’s *Shiji* greatly enhances tension and pathos (W-C. Liu, 201

fn.22). These characters are not caught up in a fate beyond their control, but actively choose self-sacrifice and the sacrifice of their own posterity for a justice which transcends the individual.

It is interesting, then, to consider this Chinese drama within the conceptual matrix of how early modern European tragedies were evaluated during their own historical moment. If countless books and articles have wrestled with the great Shakespearean tragedies and interrogated every aspect of their language, form, performance, and reception history, a play like *The Orphan of Zhao* appears both befuzzlingly “other,” and yet with enough elements to be *recognizable* within a European poetics of tragedy. The problem of granting primary or exclusive universality to western cultural forms, as I have already suggested, is obvious. *The Orphan of Zhao* was, however, the first Chinese drama to be translated (albeit only partially) into a European language in 1731 precisely because it could be interpreted through the familiar lens of European tragedy.<sup>7</sup> Known unreflectively as the “Chinese Hamlet,” the name carries an underlying assumption that it is a pale and inferior copy of the Shakespearean “original” (though, of course, *The Orphan of Zhao* predates *Hamlet* and there is no direct influence between the two). All texts have their meaning generated in the encounter between the text and the reader.<sup>8</sup> The reception of *The Orphan of Zhao*, from the Ming through its translation into European languages, may tell us something about its intrinsic worth as a piece of literary culture, but it tells us more about the “standardized and culturally comfortable realm of traditional poetics” that governs *how* we read, and of course, how we read in and through translation (West and Idema 39).<sup>9</sup>

In the West, myth and metaphysics have held much of the authoritative, shaping power that has been traditionally filled by history and ethical philosophy in the Chinese tradition.<sup>10</sup> The Chinese elevation of history in works like the *Shiji* 史記, *Chunqiu* 春秋, and *Zuozhuan* 左傳 contrasts with dominant western principles on unity of plot over the episodic. The dominance of Confucianism from the Song onwards has meant that an emphasis on action, on the execution of the moral deed as the supreme good has vied with the Chinese intellectual tradition of thinking and interpretation. Zhang Longxi suggests that, “with a long intellectual tradition, the Chinese generally tend to privilege thinking over action, and a phrase from the Confucian *Analects*,” think thrice before taking action, “is widely accepted as a popular expression of wisdom and a warning against hasty action” (“*The Pale Cast*,” 283). For Confucians, although thought must precede action, there must be a concrete outer manifestation or a result in action or thought is useless. *Hamlet* is esteemed, amongst other reasons, because it dramatizes precisely this dilemma between reflection and action, and is seen to reflect a particularly individualist, existentialist quandary. Critics have argued back and forth over whether Hamlet’s tragic flaw really is indecision.<sup>11</sup> Hamlet’s hesitation and procrastination, however, allows for his rich philosophical soliloquies and it is his complexity in all its tortuous indecision that makes him so much more appealing than the straightforward have-a-go hero Laertes who has no qualms about avenging his father, Polonius. In *Hamlet*, it is the focused attention on the pathologies of the human conscience that forms the heart of the drama. The soliloquy in which the protagonist broods onstage alone to the audience about his or her inner turmoil is not a part of the *zaju* form. The drama relies less on the intensity of the individual introspection of its characters than in the painting forth of communal values.

In “The Tragic and the Chinese Subject,” Christopher Huang argues that if European tragedy is predicated on pity, fear, or torment of the individualized self in a hostile

universe, the Chinese tragic mode in Yuan and Ming drama is characterized by “the isolation of a redefined self and the isolation from the inescapable web of interpersonal relationship” (1). In other words, if Hamlet serves as an avatar of autonomy and interiority scrutinizing his actions or non-action according to his own conscience, the Orphan Zhao acts swiftly and unproblematically to avenge his ancestors. It is true that the speakers appear on stage in the Ming version of *The Orphan of Zhao* with a declarative transparency that to western ears appears quite awkward: “I am Tuan Gu, mighty general of the Jin [...] I am Zhao Shuo, and my office is that of commandant-escort [...] I am a princess of the house of Jin etc.” The characters voice their identities, motivations, and predicaments straightforwardly without betraying much hint of uncertainty, moral quandary, or existential ennui, or if such angst is hinted at it is certainly less profuse than the outpourings of a Lear or Hamlet. As Huang puts it, “the extremely stylized performance in Chinese theatre tends to understate the violence of emotional impact” (9). Though the play is filled with disastrous, pathos-inducing happenings: the betrayal of a noble Lord, the extinction of a clan, the death of an infant, numerous forced suicides, bloody revenge and more, that *experience* of the European tragic hero as naked, unaccommodated, alone, facing mysterious, demonic forces in his own nature and outside is notably muted or absent altogether. In *The Orphan of Zhao*, despite great suffering and sacrifice, there remains a faith in the workings of a just universe.

Huang’s emphasis on the “inescapable web of interpersonal relationship” hinges, I think, (though he himself does not discuss this) on the central role of the lowly doctor figure, Cheng Ying. If in *Hamlet*, the play really is all about Hamlet, the brooding, over-intelligent, thirty-something Prince of Denmark, in *The Orphan of Zhao*, the eponymous hero cannot play a major role in much of the play precisely because he is an infant; he cannot speak (*infans*). Even though Ji Junxiang does not assign Cheng Ying a male lead and so he has no songs through which he might fully express his emotions, it is the lowly doctor who is present in every aria (act) and plays a decisive role.<sup>12</sup> In the original source for the play’s story, Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 (c. 145-c. 85 B.C.) *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Grand Historian*), Gongsun Chujiu, and Cheng Ying are loyal subjects duty bound to protect the last remaining member of the Zhao clan from the murderous rage of the usurping general Tuan Gu 屠岸賈, a powerful minister and a favorite of Duke Ling (r. 621–606 B.C.) of Jin. The crucial dramatic difference in Ji Junxiang’s play, as I have mentioned, is that rather than the two loyal retainers of the Zhao clan, Gongsun Chujiu and Cheng Ying buying an unknown infant to substitute for the Zhao orphan, Cheng Ying makes the huge (one might say, Abrahamic) sacrifice of his only son. For Cheng Ying, his place in the broader interpersonal web of reciprocity, loyalty, and service trumps the personal bonds of love toward his own flesh and blood (and by extension, his own posterity). The slicing into pieces of Cheng Ying’s baby son by Tuan Gu in the belief that he is killing off the last member of his enemy’s clan forms the climax of the third act. This is accompanied by the suicide of the loyal servant Gongsun Chujiu, who agrees to undergo torture and death so that Tuan Gu may be more successfully convinced that the child he is killing truly is the Orphan of Zhao. Sacrificial suicide and child murder, then, form the precipitating action of the first three arias.

The play contains no less than four suicides, which is an unprecedented number in western tragedy where one suicide is typically deemed tragic enough (Antigone, Ophelia, Othello, Ajax, Heracles).<sup>13</sup> The first suicide is Zhao Shuo, the orphan’s father

who first instructs his wife to tell their unborn child to avenge his parents before singing his swan song of vengeance:

I enjoin her as tears stream like rain along her cheeks,  
Every sentence I speak becomes a single moment of sorrow.  
Wait until that child of mine has grown to manhood  
And say, "For the three hundred of us –  
Revenge! Take revenge for our injustice." (West and Idema 76)<sup>14</sup>

Here, Zhao Shuo fills, in generational reversal, the mandate of the Ghost of Hamlet's father who bids his son to "revenge [his] most foul and most unnatural murder" (I. V. 25).<sup>15</sup> Next to die is the widowed princess who commits suicide for the sake of her child having entrusted him to Cheng Ying: "If you rescue this child that I gave birth to / Then the Zhao family will have left a single root behind [...] his father died willingly by the point of a knife / Enough! Enough! Enough! / His mother now follows with her own death." For parents to die for their children fits with the order of things, a child is a vehicle of memory and futurity and knowing they are doomed to die anyway, Zhao Shuo and the princess betray no hesitation in giving up their lives if the injustice is righted by their child in the future. What is harder to understand is the swift willingness to die for another clan's child shared by Cheng Ying, Han Jue, and Gongsun Chujie. Their sacrifice is of a different magnitude and there is something quite shocking to a western sensibility in Cheng Ying's quiet resignation when he declares to the princess that: "If my own family should die, so be it" (West and Idema 78).

It makes more sense, however, if we try to understand it not from the perspective of western tragedy in which the death of one's child signals the worst imaginable scenario and an almost cosmic collapse (Lear holding the dead Cordelia in his arms, Hecuba's grief for her lost children at Troy, Macduff's "I must feel it like a man" in *Macbeth*) but from within a Chinese mode of representation. Cheng Ying tells the princess he is willing to sacrifice his family "So you can escape those calamities of heaven's net and earth's snare" (West and Idema 79). The combination of heaven and earth suggests that this is about more than a murderous general; there is also an element of fate at work. In his essay on heaven and man in a cross-cultural context, Zhang Longxi quotes Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE), the proponent of both cosmological and political Confucianism, when he writes:

The son of heaven takes orders from heaven; the nobles take orders from the son of heaven; the son takes orders from the father, male and female subordinates take orders from their master; the wife takes orders from her husband. All who take orders revere their superior as heaven; so it can be said that all take orders from heaven. (Zhang Longxi, "Heaven and Earth," 112)

This insight helps us to understand and situate Cheng Ying's actions as well as his fellow sufferers on behalf of the Zhao clan. Moral authority is situated in a hierarchical social order in which familial relationships are important, but those between subordinates and rulers are equally valid. Cheng Ying has been a loyal servant to the Zhao household who has treated him well and it is his duty that dictates his action. Similarly, when Han Jue who has been sent to guard the princess and her baby sees Cheng Ying he declares:



If I were to take this child and deliver it up, I would live in riches and honour for the rest of my life! But I am a real man who stands on earth with heaven above him – how could I willingly do such a foul deed! If I were to offer him up for the sake of glorious advancement would they not say, “He profited himself by destroying others”? (West and Idema 83)

Han Jue’s definition of being a “real man” means accepting his hierarchical place in the cosmos and acting like a true Confucian *junzi* 君子 or man of service. The impetus for sacrifice comes from outside the self; a sense of how one is perceived by the community trumps any interior desire for survival. Similarly, the scene between Cheng Ying and Gongsun Chujiu appears almost tragicomic as they both jostle to be the one that dies while the other goes on to save the child. Gongsun Chujiu (now disillusioned and retired to the countryside) declares: “I am a man of seventy and death is nothing out of the ordinary. It makes no difference when it happens! [...] The single death of an old man is not worth mentioning!” (West and Idema, 89–91 *passim*) Death is present on the Chinese stage but it is seldom feared. This is a far cry from the ontological vulnerability of a Lear or Macbeth who simply cannot face the prospect of their own demise and refuse to countenance a future without them in it. For the elderly Chunjiu, he will happily agree to be tortured and lay down his life out of a sense of duty. The scene in which Cheng Ying beats him with first a small stick, then a large stick, and then a medium-sized stick would descend into farce if it were not for the total seriousness with which both men play their roles before Tuan Gu. Chunjiu’s parting shot “Tuan Gu you traitor, just look! Above there’s a heaven that will not pardon you! My death is not of any importance” (97) reminds us that despite Huang’s claim that Chinese tragedy “does not reach up to the heaven for the ‘hidden God’ [...] rather it bends towards the earth and seeks communal memorabilia of grief and relief” there still remains a concept of heavenly justice in the Chinese worldview that with regards to justice and revenge fulfills a similar function to the Christian God. This glance toward the heavens for justice on earth also appears in European non-religious tragedy where the cosmos reacts to human injustice through natural phenomena such as thunder, lightning, a roiling of the seas etc.<sup>16</sup>

There is a pointed moral excellence in the male protagonists of *The Orphan of Zhao* who all act as foils to the dastardly Tuan Gu. Born out of a similar fear to the Biblical Herod, who ordered the massacre of all young boys in Bethlehem because of a prophecy that he would lose his throne to a newborn King of the Jews, Tuan Gu fakes an edict from Duke Ling to round up all infant boys under 6 months old and bring them to him. He reasons:

If I round up all the infants in the state of Jin,  
The Orphan, I reckon, will have no place to hide.  
Let him be a golden branch, a leaf of jade,  
He will never escape the disaster of death by my sword. (West and Idema 85)

Here the “golden branch” and “leaf of jade” remind us of the status of the Orphan as the last member of a noble house. In this sense, he is like the Greek Astyanax who as the last remaining legacy of the house of Troy constitutes a figure of heightened pathos in Euripidean tragedy. In the first wedge, Tuan Gu had stated: “I wanted to cut out all the grass and extirpate all the roots so that no sprouts should tendril out” (75). At the end of act 3, he recites: “Now that I have rubbed out this tiny little sprout / I will forever be

free of future trouble” (98). The imagery of the child as the “root” of the clan, “the last little sprout” recurs throughout the play. In his desire to kill the child of his enemy as a means of shoring up his own posterity, Tuan Gu recalls similar male megalomaniacal figures from the western tradition from Agamemnon to Herod, Thyestes to Richard III, and Macbeth. Imagery related to trees and plants is common in European tragedy and almost always underscores the unnaturalness of dying before one’s time. In Euripides’ *Hecuba*, for example, a Greek revenge tragedy extremely influential during the Renaissance, the ghost of Polydorus describes his time with the Thracian king while Troy still stood: “I grew like a young shoot under his nurture.”<sup>17</sup> In Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*, the future Richard III says of his elder brother Edward:

Would he were wasted, marrow, bones and all,  
That from his loins no hopeful branch may spring,  
To cross me from the golden time I look for! (3.2.125–127)

Here, we see a crossover of similar imagery of branches and gold in both traditions as Tuan Gu’s surety that rubbing out the Orphan of Zhao will bring him lasting peace represents the most perverse rage against time.

Of course, the dramatic irony that Tuan Gu adopts and raises as his own son and heir the very orphan he thought he had destroyed is particularly important for the ultimate revenge scene. We learn that he has lavished on the Orphan all the military and civil training of a future ruler: he is being raised to incarnate both the civil skills represented by his biological father Zhao Shuo and the military vigor enshrined in his adopted father Tuan Gu. The Orphan even bears the name Tu Cheng which means “brought to completion by Tu” but can also be understood to mean “completed through butchery” (West and Idema, 98 n. 79). Just as he is born into butchery, so will he butcher in return. It is significant that we learn of the Orphan’s affection for this man who has raised him for 20 years. In the original Yuan version, he even supports him in his latest murderous coup to oust Duke Ling and take the state of Jin for himself. By the rewriting of the Ming edition, however, the Orphan has no knowledge of the coup and supports both his father and “the enlightened ruler, Duke Ling of Jin.” The Orphan sings: “My father has no equal in heroic valour / And I support him, unhesitatingly, with all my heart!” (West and Idema 99). In the denouement, the Orphan can then stand for both personal vengeance and state-sanctioned justice as the two merge in his person.

When we compare the reaction of the Orphan to the revelation that Tuan Gu caused the deaths of his parents and his entire clan with the reaction of Hamlet to his father’s revelation that his brother Claudius (now married to Hamlet’s mother) murdered him while he slept, we can perceive two very different models of what it might mean to be a tragic hero. Critics have stressed Hamlet’s wordiness and the mental anguish he carries about with him as his father’s injunction “remember me” echoes through the play. The Orphan, on the other hand, wastes no time on revenging his clan and decisively acting. On hearing his father’s revelation, Hamlet enters a trance-like reverie:

O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?  
And shall I couple hell? – O, fie! – Hold, hold, my heart;



But bear me stiffly up. – Remember thee!  
 Yea, from the table of my memory  
 I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
 All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,  
 That youth and observation copied there;  
 And thy commandment all alone shall live  
 Within the book and volume of my brain,  
 Unmixed with baser matter. (1.V. 91–104)

Hamlet proclaims to erase the entire contents of his life to date and replace it all with the single paternal injunction to avenge his murder. All else is “baser matter.” But it will take Hamlet another four acts and an intricate staging of a cat and mouse scene before Claudius is killed (along with almost everyone else on stage). Hamlet’s pretty words prevent him from any decisive action because of his fear of death and what comes afterwards. He declares in a later speech:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,  
 And thus the native hue of resolution  
 Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought. (3.I. 83–5)

By contrast, once Cheng Ying finally reveals the truth to the Orphan, he declares in a reprise: “He, he, he had our whole clan executed / I, I, I will return the favour by butchering nine generations of his.” This decisiveness, expressed in the perfect balance of pronoun for pronoun, does not, however, mean that the Orphan is not fully humanized or emotional. His anger, grief, and shock have been elicited from him in piecemeal form because of Cheng Ying’s decision to use the method of a painted scroll to gradually reveal the truth to him.

The Orphan is saddened at the depiction of the massacres but he does not understand his role in them. There is an obvious parallel here with Hamlet’s attempt to prick Claudius’s conscience by showing him the theatrical representation of his crime. It is interesting to think about why both traditions include this mediated layer of artistic representation within their drama.<sup>18</sup> What do we gain by this layering view? Certainly, it allows for a developing response from the Orphan as he moves from confusion (“It’s painted in such a way that it puzzles me, leaves me confused and depressed”) to anger (“I’m no man if I don’t kill that traitor!”) to despair on recognition (“This is too much to bear!”). Before his declaration of vengeance, the Orphan pointedly suggests his inner turmoil that is being suppressed: “If we speak of the most desolate heartbreaking points / Even a man of iron would cry and holler” (West and Idema 105). Rage and anger are there on the Chinese stage though they are looked at refractedly, as the Orphan too looks on his story from a certain distance that gradually closes. If when facing his adopted father the Orphan can state categorically: “You old traitor, I am not Tu Cheng, I am the Orphan of Zhao!” it is not that this reassertion of identity has taken no toll, but that Confucian filial values (*xiao* 孝) and loyalty (*zhong* 忠) to one’s clan triumphs over personal anguish.

At the end of the play, we return to the figure of Cheng Ying whose dramatic role is to stage-manage the action and by extension the lives and deaths of the other characters. When he tells the story of the massacre to the Orphan, he speaks of himself in the third person: “He was willing to give up his own life, so you can imagine that child

was not so important!” (104). After he has revealed the Orphan’s identity, he cries: “Today I have kept the branches and leaves of the Zhao family tree alive, but I have turned my own family, all of it into nought but mown-down grass and plucked-out roots” (106). It is this primal sacrifice, the murder of Cheng Ying’s son, that resurfaces even as our attention is about to shift to the Orphan of Zhao’s showdown with Tuan Gu. Fittingly, for a play concerned with artistic representation, Cheng Ying’s reward is to be painted in the Zhao family shrine. The Orphan promises him:

Who was willing to abandon his own child to hide one of another surname?  
A virtue and grace like yours can never be forgotten!  
I will ask a fine artistic hand of extraordinary skill  
To depict your true likeness,  
To be honored in my family’s shrine! (110)

There is, however, no lasting memorial to the slaughtered child whose ultimate sacrifice ensured that the Zhao restoration so celebrated in the play’s final song might last for generations. The Orphan’s promise of enshrinement for the man who has sacrificed his own posterity offers an eerie prefiguring of Leontes in Shakespeare’s tragicomedy, *The Winter’s Tale*. In that play, the falsely accused and long thought dead Hermione is unveiled as a statue in the family shrine, only to come to life in a culminating moment of deception and wonder. In Shakespeare’s late play, the restoration of Hermione from death, first into an art object and then into the living woman, remains tinged with a sense of loss because she does not speak to Leontes. Her silence registers the irrevocable pain of her suffering and the haunting absent presence of her dead son. In *The Orphan of Zhao*, the preservation of Cheng Ying’s image as incorporated into the Zhao clan appears as an unproblematic recompense for his sacrifice and a fitting resolution of the dramatic action. The final lines sung by the Orphan and Cheng Ying: “In the history books we will leave our names / For later generations to praise!” ends on a note very familiar from western epic. The *fama* or *kleos* of perpetual fame is also present on the Chinese stage but it is achieved not through personal valor on the battlefield, but noble self-sacrifice for another’s name. This sacrifice of one’s own posterity for that of one’s superiors is distinctly Confucian. It is set against the individualism which so often characterizes western tragedy and has its roots in epic, that genre of outsized heroic lives.

Though products of a very different mental universe drawing on distinct literary and cultural traditions, *Hamlet* and *The Orphan of Zhao* have been yoked together by their readers, first by those early European missionaries and sinologists who sought something of their own tradition reflected in the literary output of China, and then by Chinese readers who from the early twentieth century were keen to find native representations of western genres. The way the Chinese play was appropriated, translated, and adapted reminds us of the difficulty inherent in grasping the literary production of another culture and granting it its “otherness.” The play was seized from all of Chinese drama for introduction to Europe because it was the only play in the well-known anthology of 100 Yuan plays, *Selections from the Yuan Drama* (1616) to have five acts instead of four. Propelled out of its own cultural matrix and made to conform to European expectations of what a tragic drama must look like, it would not be until 1834 that a full and accurate translation of both the

dialogue and the arias by French sinologist Stanislas Julien finally translated the play into the form in which it was originally written. The earlier Jesuit translator Joseph Henri Marie de Prémare (1666–1737) perfectly expresses the problem with how European scholars have engaged with the dramatic production and poetic forms of China. He explained that he left out all the lyrics in his 1731 translation of *The Orphan of Zhao*, for “these songs are difficult to understand, especially for Europeans, because they are full of allusions to things unknown to us and of figures of speech very difficult for us to grasp.”<sup>19</sup> The pleasure and challenge of Comparative Literature consists in rising to this challenge of translation in a very fundamental sense. The text of the *Zhaoshi guer* that I have used for this essay is, of course, several stages removed from any actual performance of the play in the Yuan dynasty. Filtered and filled in by its Ming collators, “Yuan” drama would be definitively changed by its Chinese readers before it faced the challenge of being communicated and made intelligible to non-Chinese audiences and readers through translation. *The Orphan of Zhao* contains a lyricism and a poetic value, a concern with the human, which puts it usefully into dialogue with Shakespearean drama. I hope to have shown how in reading a Shakespearean tragedy and a Yuan *zaju* together in a cross-cultural encounter, we may begin to interrogate the generic signifier of tragedy and to think more broadly about how drama as an art form in two major cultural traditions may reflect differently answers to the same perennial human questions.

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## Notes

1. *Zaju* is a form of musical theater rendered variously in English as “variety plays,” “variety shows,” “variety theatre,” “mixed plays/dramas,” or “miscellaneous comedies.” The latter is the favored term in the [West and Idema](#), *The Orphan of Zhao and Other Yuan Plays*, which emphasizes the plays’ usually happy endings. In this sense, the terminology *zaju* evokes a very different type of symbolic universe to Shakespearean high tragedy. The Yuan *zaju* version of *The Orphan of Zhao* is very different from that of Ming palace manuscripts or late Ming-printed editions. [West and Idema](#) juxtapose the Yuan text with a later Ming edition to show how if in the Yuan “we encounter a world of raw power and vitality, high passion and bloody revenge” these elements are toned down in the later versions “if not covered completely by a thick veneer of conventional Confucianism.” (*The Orphan of Zhao*, 2). The Ming edition in the *Yuanqu xuan* 元曲選 (*Selected Yuan dramas*), compiled and edited by Zang Maoxun 臧懋循 (1550–1620) of *The Orphan of Zhao* is certainly much longer due to the fact that the Yuan play does not contain any dialogue. It is a regular *zaju* of four suites of eight to twenty songs with the option of a wedge (*xiezi* 楔子) inserted between any two acts or at the beginning. The later *Yuanqu xuan* version includes a fifth act, which is rare amongst *zaju*. The overall movement from Yuan to Ming is one from commercially printed and performed aria scripts to literary texts emphasizing elite Confucian values. It is of course this Ming version that was taken up and translated by European translators precisely because it contained this fifth act and was thus more

- recognizable as tragedy to European readers. See, Patricia Sieber, *Theaters of Desire* (2003: 7-15).
2. Chen Shixiang (1912-1971) is well-known for his work on the lyrical tradition in Chinese classical literature, and in a short article entitled “Zhongguo de shuqing chuantong,” he observed that the roots of Western literature could be traced to the epic poems of Homer and to classical Greek comedy and tragedy but that unlike the West, Chinese literature did not glorify epic poems. Its best works can be found in the lyrical poems where words are like music and (speak in) the inner voice of the individual, thereby establishing the lyrical tradition. For Chen, all literary tradition in Chinese literature can be read as a lyrical tradition and stands in contrast to the powerful narrative tradition in Western literature. Wang Ching-hsien, a Taiwanese scholar, in his *The Bell and the Drum: Shih Ching as Formulaic Poetry in an Oral Tradition* (1974) and *From Ritual to Allegory: Seven Essays in Early Chinese Poetry* (1988) explores the question of why China did not produce epic and determines that China’s storytelling tradition was popular not elite. Beecroft draws on the scholarship of Idema (2010) and Denecke (2013) when he writes: “It’s not that China doesn’t have epic, but that the epic it has doesn’t play the cultural role it occupies in Europe.” (“Comparisons”) Denecke’s notion of “ellipsis” shows how scholars have been preoccupied with this question of how one side (usually China) lacks cultural features found in the other. The anonymous reviewer of this journal points out, quite rightly, that although long narrative epic-like forms are not part of the Han great tradition, many such forms have been found among ethnic minority groups in China. Most notable is the *Gesaerwang quanzhuan* 格薩爾王全傳 (Legend of King Gesaer) of the Tibetans. With over one million verses in 120 episodes, it is quite possibly the world’s longest epic. Today, its study and translation is highly prioritized by the Chinese government as a source of national pride. If Chinese literature had been deemed inferior throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries because it lacked a national epic, the PRC is now keen to show that the epic is native not only to the great ancient civilizations of Babylon, India, and Greece, but also to China.
  3. The great scholar and critic Qian Zhongshu lamented: “The highest dramatic art is of course tragedy and it is precisely in tragedy that our old playwrights have to a man failed” (85). Stenberg characterizes Wang Guowei (1877-1927) as similarly lamenting the lack of tragedy in the Chinese theater because he considered it “the highest possible poetic achievement.” Quoted in, “Two Questions,” (298). But then on closer inspection, Wang Guowei in his *Song Yuan xiqu shi* (*An Inquiry into the Drama of the Song and Yuan Dynasties*) of 1912 did single out *The Orphan of Zhao* alongside Guan Hanqing’s *Injustice to Dou E* as rare examples of Chinese tragedy. He writes: “some of the Yuan dramas are tragic [...] in these two plays [Orphan of Zhao and Injustice to Dou E] [...] the tragic heroes assert their will power to the full in precipitating the calamity and facing it without wince. Thus they are quite worthy of the company of the greatest tragedies of this world.” It was Wang Guowei who in this same work, first coined the term *beiju* 悲劇 to describe a “sad play.” He is, of course, attending to Han literature and takes no account of epic cycles in minority literatures in China.
  4. Wilt Idema points out that opinions on the greatness of Chinese drama vary enormously within China and that after 1949 general histories of Chinese literature would appear to be far more subdued in their treatment of this play than studies in drama (161).
  5. Steiner’s has probably been the most influential voice in twentieth-century musings on the genre. In *The Death of Tragedy* (1961), he distinguishes between “absolute” and “tempered” tragedy. Pure, absolute tragedy presents a stringently negative view of man’s presence in the world and is distinctly Hellenic. For Steiner, modern rationalism means that the tragic muse had died out by the twentieth century. A recent challenge to Steiner’s position on absolute tragedy is Rowan Williams’ *The Tragic Imagination* (2016).
  6. Unless, of course, we are Voltaire who famously dismissed the works of Shakespeare and Lope de Vega as “les farces monstreuses” because they failed to observe the classical unities of time and action. *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Moland (Paris, 1877), V, 297.

7. Working from the Ming version included in the *Yuanqu xuan* 元曲選 (Selected Yuan dramas), compiled and edited by Zang Maoxun 臧懋循 (1550-1620), the French Jesuit missionary Joseph Henri de Prémare (1666-1736) translated the stage directions and prose dialogues but omitted all the arias. It was published with the appellation “Tragédie Chinoise” thus cementing its inclusion into western hierarchies of genre.
8. Zhang Longxi in “Meaning, Reception and the Use of Classics” writes: “Reception acknowledges the historicity of understanding and sees all texts, including the classics, as having their meaning generated in the encounter between the text and the reader” (300). Zhang acknowledges the influence of Gadamerian hermeneutics and the notion of a “fusion of horizons” for any theory of reception: the work of art achieves its meaning in the presence of the contemporaneous viewer, a dual mode of making.
9. It is worth reiterating that in the case of both *Hamlet* and *The Orphan of Zhao*, what begins as an oral performance lives on principally as a body of literary work that is beholden to certain (often elitist) reading practices.
10. Though of course such a statement is not without light and shade. Socrates, for example, may be seen, like Confucius, to be a proponent of shifting man’s attention from speculation of the natural world to the ethical and political concerns of the real world, the world of physical reality, and meaningful action. This strain of moral philosophy, I would argue, though present in the western tradition is more dominant in its Chinese counterpart thanks to the triumph of orthodox state neo-Confucianism from the Song on and the marginalizing of those spiritual flights of fancy allowed by Daoism and Buddhism. For more on Confucianism as a deadening influence on speculative philosophy, see Bauer, 270-273.
11. A.C. Bradley refuted Coleridge’s influential take on Hamlet as too much the thinker with a list of all the actions he engages in too rashly, such as “rushing after the Ghost, killing Polonius, dealing with the King’s commission on the ship, boarding the pirate, leaping into the grave, executing his final vengeance – [...] Imagine Coleridge doing any of these things!” Quoted in Zhang, ‘The Pale Cast of Thought,’ (291). This is of course true, but does not detract from Coleridge’s central point that the tragedy of Hamlet is essentially a tragedy of what it means to be a thinking animal with a full awareness of one’s own mortality.
12. The lack of songs assigned to Cheng Ying and his official status in the play as “Extra” may be Ji Junxiang’s comment on the social status of doctors. As a lowly servant rather than a noble member of the ruling clan or court, Cheng Ying is not permitted the kind of emotional outpourings in song granted to the noble Zhao Shou and the Princess. Citizens from lower social classes are often the humble victims in Chinese drama, which is unlike European tragic protagonists who (in line with Aristotle’s provision that the tragic hero must be of some stature) are often kings, queens, and nobles.
13. A notable exception is *Anthony and Cleopatra*, which contains five suicides. It is also, of course, the nature of the suicides which is wholly different. In the *Orphan of Zhao*, suicides are brought on by the external force of Tuan Gu’s murderous wrath, but they are also chosen in the case of Han Jue and Gongsun Chujiu who could easily step aside, save themselves, and let the child be killed. These are not suicides born of madness, shame, or despair as in the western tradition, but practical self-sacrifices born of obligation to others and with a very clear goal in sight.
14. All quotations are taken from West and Idema, *The Orphan of Zhao*.
15. All Hamlet quotations refer to *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Ed. W. J. Craig. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945.
16. It also occurs most noticeably in the Chinese tradition in *The Injustice Done to Dou E* also known as *Snow in Midsummer* by Guan Hanqing. There nature mirrors the injustice meted out in the human world. Snow falls in midsummer and there is a drought for 3 years following the heroine’s death.
17. Polydorus is treacherously murdered by his host and his mother Hecuba will go on to wreak a bitter revenge by killing Polydorus’ own children.cf. Euripides, *Hecuba*, 26.

18. Another example that leaps to mind is the tale of Procne and Philomela in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. There the rape victim Philomela who has had her tongue cut out to avoid telling her sister of her brother's crime weaves the attack into a tapestry. This is then reworked in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* where the rape victim, Lavinia, has both her tongue cut out and her hands cut off by her attackers. Shakespeare has her use her stumps to leaf through a book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to identify herself with Philomela. In a famous scene in the first book of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas gazes upon the depiction of the Trojan War on the Gates of Carthage (4. 456-493). The pictorial representation of suffering and pain and its effect upon the viewer who has their own suffering and pain reflected back to them is a powerful trope in literature in which art self-reflexively reflects on the role of art.
19. Quoted in Détrie, "Translation and Reception of Chinese Poetry in the West," 46.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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