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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## An Analysis of Differences between Greek Tragedy and Classical Chinese Tragedy (Yuanqu)

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| ABSTRACT

Though born almost 1800 years apart from each other, Greek tragedy and classical Chinese tragedies (Yuanqu) are the pinnacle of their respective culture and played significant roles in both societies. A comparison of the two allows for a deeper understanding of the diversity and richness of global theatrical traditions, contributing to a broader appreciation of the human capacity for artistic expression. Drawing upon historical, social, and cultural contexts, the analysis focuses on three key aspects: subject matter, structure, and performance styles, citing representative works from both forms. In terms of subject matter, Greek tragedies primarily draw inspiration from Greek mythology, in contrast to Yuanqu' depiction of the contemporary social reality of the Yuan Dynasty, emphasizing the hardships and injustices faced by the lower classes and exploring themes of love, loyalty, and social hierarchy. The structural differences are evident in their narrative progression and tragic versus happy endings. The differences in performance styles are found in locations, masks, chorus and dialogues. These differences can be attributed to their distinct historical backgrounds, social systems, and cultural traditions. The side-by-side examination explores the possibility of cultural exchange and cross-pollination of ideas between civilizations.

| KEYWORDS

Greek tragedy; Chinese Yuanqu; differences; cultural backgrounds

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### 1. Introduction

Greek Tragedy and Chinese Yuanqu (also known as Yuan Drama or Yuan Opera) are two distinct forms of theatrical performance from different cultural backgrounds (Nietzsche, 2012). Ancient Greek tragedy, born 2,700 years ago, was performed as part of religious festivals and explored themes of fate, morality, and the human condition, and has exerted a great influence on philosophy, art and theatrical performances in Western countries (Jean-Pierre, 2016). Yuanqu emerged during the Yuan Dynasty in China, which lasted from the 13th to the 14th century CE. It was heavily influenced by traditional Chinese opera and featured poetic dialogue, music, and dance. While both have their unique characteristics, there are several notable differences between them in terms of form, content and structure due to the different social and cultural contexts in which they were produced.

### 2. Analysis of Differences

The differences between ancient Greek tragedy and Chinese classical tragedy lie in three aspects: the subject matter, the structure and the performance styles.

The first difference lies in the subject matter. Ancient Greek tragedies were almost invariably adapted from Greek mythology, with the gods or heroes as the main characters, telling of some grand events such as the rise and fall of city-states and power struggles. Though the plays were written around the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, the stories were believed to have taken place in a more remote time. Initially, the main protagonists of ancient Greek tragedies were gods. *Prometheus*, an early tragedy by Aeschylus (525-456 BC), described the resistance of the Titan god Prometheus against Zeus and was set in the divine world. Later the focus of tragedies gradually transitioned from divine-centered to hero-centered. In *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles (496-406 BC) and *Medea* by

Euripides (480-406 BC), the protagonists are mortal heroes, and the setting is Athens or other city-states, but the divine power in those plays is not to be underestimated. Greek heroes are the descendants of gods (with mortals), featured by strength, bravery and a sense of honor, and are the founders and defenders of Greek city-states.

Fate and destiny are the most important concept in Greek tragedies. Characters are frequently caught in a web of circumstances they cannot escape, and their actions ultimately lead to their tragic downfall, as is demonstrated in *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles. Another important theme is hubris, or excessive pride or arrogance of mortals. Characters who exhibit hubris often defy the gods or moral codes, leading to their downfall and punishment, as demonstrated by Agamemnon. A third common theme is the nature of justice and the moral dilemmas. Greek tragedies raise ethical questions and present characters with moral dilemmas. Tragedies examine the concept of justice and its relationship to human actions, questioning whether justice is determined by divine intervention, societal laws, or the inherent nature of individuals. A case in point is *Antigone* by Sophocles and *The Eumenides* by Aeschylus. The protagonist defies the law of the city state with the law of nature. Besides, though family and personal conflicts are also often portrayed in Greek tragedies, they explore more complex dynamics of loyalty and betrayal closely related to the destiny of a country or an influential family, as in the case of *Electra* by Sophocles.

In contrast, Chinese tragedies are not as "grand" as Greek tragedies in terms of the subject matter. They portray the contemporary social reality of the Yuan Dynasty, telling of the miseries and injustices suffered by people of lower classes, in addition to a considerable number of tragic romances. The themes include love, loyalty and social hierarchy, emphasizing virtues of filial piety and Confucian values. For example, Zhao Wuniang, who highlights the traditional virtues of Chinese women in *Tale of the Pipa*, and Zhang Hao, a poor scholar in *Jian Fubei* by Ma Zhiyuan, are all humble characters; Dou E, who was born into poverty and struggles throughout her life in unjust circumstances, eventually dies of injustice in *The Injustice to Dou E* by Guan Hanqing, and the love between Wang Jiaoniang and her cousin Shen Chun is doomed because of the prejudice and snobbishness of the society in *Mistress & Maid* by Meng Chengshun. The audience will not find many prominent families or figures in the tragedies, maybe with the exception of Yue Fei, the prominent patriot general.

Secondly, the ending is almost the opposite. The ending of Greek tragedies usually is a reversal of the beginning, with the fall and demise of the hero or protagonist, as in the case of Oedipus, who starts out as the lord of a country, the father of a noble family. With the progress of the investigation into the death of the former king, the fact that he killed his father and married his mother is revealed, turning him into a disgraced wanderer. Whereas the Chinese Yuanqu, despite their many twists and turns, always has a happy ending, uplifting the spirit of the audience. For example, Dou E is eventually vindicated after much suffering. Overcome by lovesickness, Du Liniang, the protagonist in Tang Xianzu's play *The Peony Pavilion*, wastes away and dies. But in the end, she is resurrected and joined in marriage with Liu, her dream lover.

It is, therefore, important to explore the cause of this contrastive ending. The dichotomy of good and evil, the prevalence of the latter being the cause of the tragedy in Yuanqu, does not exist in Greek tragedies. There is always a conflict between good and evil in Yuanqu, such as the stark contrast between the good Dou E and the evil Zhang LvEr and Sai Luyi. However, it is the manipulation of fate or the 'invisible hand' that sets the course for the tragic events. Oedipus is a wise and sensible king who leaves his homeland to escape the oracle of patricide but unwittingly commits patricide. The king in *Antigone*, Creon, is not an evil man but inevitably gets involved in the conflict between the law of the city-state and the divine law. Greek tragedy is therefore also known as the 'tragedy of destiny', embodying the contradiction between the free will of the human subject and the hidden inevitability, with profound philosophical ideas that reveal the roots of life's tragedies (Jean-Pierre, 2016). While Yuanqu is similar to modern Western tragedy in that it is a 'moral tragedy' that expresses the moral opposition between good and evil and the relationship between the two, with strong social relevance. In fact, Aristotle's first definition of tragedy in his *Poetics* embodies the grand destiny of ancient Greek tragedy: "Tragedy is an imitation of a serious, complete action of a certain length; its medium is language, with various pleasing sounds, used respectively in the various parts of the play; the imitation is expressed by the action of the characters, not by the use of the narrative method; by eliciting pity and fear to ennoble, catharize and purify such emotions (Aristotle, 1996)."

Finally, there are also differences between ancient Greek tragedy and classical Chinese tragedy in terms of the performance styles. Greek tragedies follow a specific structure consisting of three main parts: the prologue, which establishes the background; the parodos, which includes the entrance of the chorus; and the episodes and stasimon, which contain the main dramatic action. They are performed in large open-air amphitheatres, and the actors wear masks to portray different characters. Chinese Yuanqu is characterized by its poetic dialogue and musical elements featuring a combination of spoken dialogue, singing, and stylized movements. The performances often involve elaborate costumes, makeup, and props. Yuanqu can be performed on indoor stages or in open-air settings.

While the music played a role in Greek tragedy, it was predominantly choral in nature. It accompanied the performances and added emotional depth to the storytelling. Instruments like the aulos (a double-reed wind instrument) were used. Yuanqu heavily relies on music and incorporates various musical instruments, such as stringed instruments (Pipa and Zheng), wind instruments (Dizi and Xiao), and percussion (drums and cymbals). The music enhances the dramatic impact and helps convey emotions and moods.

### 3. Analysis of the Causes

The above-mentioned differences can be analyzed in terms of historical backgrounds, social systems and cultural traditions.

It is believed Greek tragedy developed from earlier forms of choral performances, religious rituals, and storytelling traditions prevalent in ancient Greece. As early as the seventh century B.C., the prototype of Greek tragedy came into being when people gathered to worship Dionysus, the god of wine, by humming chants and dancing group dances. Later during the 5th century BCE in Athens, dramatic festivals were held in honor of the god Dionysus. These festivals provided a platform for playwrights to showcase their theatrical works, including tragedies. The original form of collective song and dance gradually diverged to form performers on stage and spectators off stage, which gave birth to Greek tragedy (Nietzsche, 2012). It's not hard to find traces of rituals in the chorus. The Greek society then was deeply influenced by mythology, philosophical inquiry, and religious beliefs, so it is only natural that the tragic performances have gods or heroes (descendants of the gods) as the focus. The suffering and rebirth of the god of wine at the festival was the earliest form of the 'tragic spirit', the spiritual quest of the ancient Greeks to be reborn in the midst of suffering. Aristotle's term 'purification' can be understood as a kind of 'rebirth', which also illustrates the spiritual significance of tragedy. The Greek city-states were known for their democratic governance and intellectual pursuits, which influenced the themes and narratives of Greek tragedy. Ancient Greek tragedies were generally not very realistic, exploring metaphysical things such as life and death and fate and will, resulting in tragedies that were essentially the result of the conflict between man and fate and were epic and tragic in character.

In contrast, Chinese theatre was first produced in the Tang Dynasty mainly for the purpose of entertainment. In the Song dynasty, with economic development and the emergence of cities, the theatre became an even more popular entertainment tool for the public. The Yuan Dynasty was the golden age of classical Chinese tragedy, with the emergence of a large number of Yuanqu dramas and playwrights. Most playwrights at that time were of lower social classes. They had a clear knowledge of the plight of the common people as well as their emotions. Yuanqu, therefore, depicted the lives of common people and tried to give psychological comfort to the audience. The plays often ended in the punishment of evil and the prevalence of good, meeting the aesthetic needs of the common people and conforming to the mainstream moral and ethical narratives of Confucian values, Taoist philosophy, and Buddhist ideas.

The differences in social systems also resulted in the different contents and purposes of Greek tragedy and Yuanqu. Greek city-states, also known as polis, were independent self-governing entities in ancient Greece. Around the fifth century B.C., in ancient Greek city-states such as Athens, Sparta, and Corinth, citizenship was limited to a specific group of people known as citizens. Citizenship was typically granted to free adult males who met certain requirements, such as being born to citizen parents, completing military service, and participating in civic duties. The city-states emphasized citizen participation in decision-making. In democracies like Athens, eligible citizens had the right to participate directly in the political process, attend assemblies, and vote on matters of governance. Oligarchies and monarchies, however, restricted political power to a select few. In this social context, public life was more important to the citizens of the city-state than personal life, and it was natural for ordinary people to take an interest in the affairs important to city-states. Similar to the ritual or festive activities, the cost of tragic performances in ancient Greece was shouldered by governments or shared by all citizens. The Athenians even carved the name of the winning playwright of the festival competition on a stone tablet, and ancient Greek tragedy thus functioned as a chance for moral education and an admonition to the gods, conveying to the people the history of the city-state and the deeds of its national heroes.

Some Greek tragedians adapted mythical stories to express their ideas on the affairs of their city-states, expressing their views or teaching the public the values. For example, *The Eumenides* by Aeschylus raises questions about justice, vengeance, and the establishment of a legal system. It can be seen as reflecting the transition from a more primitive form of justice, based on blood feuds and personal vendettas, to a more organized and civil system of justice, which may have been relevant to the political and legal developments of Aeschylus's time. But it is important to note that the primary focus of Greek tragedy was often on exploring timeless themes and universal human experiences rather than providing direct political or social commentary.

In contrast, ordinary people in ancient China were not that much concerned with public affairs as the centralized political system in such a big country was very different from the democratic system of ancient Greece. Thus, those aspects of private life, such as marriage, wealth, education and career, and Confucius values, such as social harmony and filial piety, become the subject matters of Yuanqu. Unlike in Athens and other city states in ancient Greece, where citizens could watch plays free of charge or even got paid for doing so, Chinese theater-goers had to pay for their own tickets, and playwrights naturally wrote to cater to their

audience's immediate needs, such as stories of personal sufferings and social injustice, and the happy endings offered the views a moment of escape from the real life. Therefore, the most important purpose of the Chinese Yuanqu is pleasure, not catharsis.

Finally, different cultural backgrounds have led to very different forms of tragedies. The Greek maritime culture, with its emphasis on exploration, trade, and interactions with diverse cultures, played a role in shaping the themes of Greek tragedy. The exposure to different societies and ideas would have influenced the playwrights' perspectives, allowing them to incorporate a broader range of experiences and perspectives into their works. The sea was both a source of sustenance and danger for the ancient Greeks. As journeys were always full of uncertainties, the ancient Greeks had to find the rules of living with nature first and with strangers second, and so they resorted to the will of the gods to regulate the relationship between man and nature and between man and man. The gods themselves were the embodiment of the forces of nature, and dealing with strangers was also linked to the gods. A typical example of this is the "Xenia" (hospitality), whereby a host must treat a stranger who comes to him or her without asking where he or she comes from or what he or she wants, and a person who has been helped by another must return the favour to the host and to others in the same way. The king of the gods punished them severely. Thus, the conflict at the heart of ancient Greek tragedy is between the will of the gods (as in *The Oresteia*, where Orestes avenges his mother's death, a conflict between Apollo and the goddess of vengeance) or between the will of man and the gods (as in *Oedipus Rex*), rather than between man and man, or man and society. The unequal power relationship between gods and men inevitably results in the tragic end of an absolute and irreparable tragedy while provoking what Aristotle called 'pity and fear' in the minds of the tragic audience. The unpredictability and power of the sea could also be seen as reflecting the concept of hubris (excessive pride) in Greek tragedy. Hubris often led to the downfall of tragic heroes, just as the arrogance of sailors challenging the seas could result in their destruction. The notion of fate and the recognition of human limitations, prominent in Greek tragedy, may have been influenced by the Greeks' reliance on the whims of the sea and the forces beyond their control.

In contrast, the agricultural background of ancient China, with its emphasis on farming, rural life, and seasonal cycles, influence the themes and aesthetics of Chinese Yuanqu. When people lived in fixed circles and social relations were mature and stable, it's natural for them to seek harmony and order, tranquility and beauty in interpersonal relationships, and embrace the concept of "the golden mean" and "generosity" (Baillieu 1991:28). So we can find Yuanqu expresses neutral and tranquil emotions, and the pain brought about by tragic events is often turned into a happy ending resulting from the retribution of the evil, thus bringing two opposite but harmonious experiences to the viewers.

The close connection with the land and the rhythms of agricultural life also provides inspiration for many Yuanqu plots and characters. Chinese Yuanqu often celebrates the beauty of nature, incorporating seasonal changes, landscapes, and natural elements into the performances. The agricultural background would have deepened the appreciation for nature and its symbolism in Chinese culture, leading to the integration of these elements into Yuanqu.

#### **4. Bridging the Gap**

In recent years, a number of Chinese playwrights have staged ancient Greek tragedies through adaptations and cross-cultural theatre experiments. One of the more prominent is Yao Jinlin, a director from the Central Academy of Drama, who has adapted the ancient Greek tragedy *Medea* for Hebei opera and received much applause for this adaptation. Apart from adding to the content of the play and bridging the gaps in the background knowledge of the Chinese audience, director Luo has also made many adaptations and innovations to the chorus and performances. His chorus retains the original role of the omniscient narrator in the ancient Greek tragedy but also shoulders other roles, such as props and scenery, highlighting the expressive power of stage art. *Medea* in Luo's play is imbued with the spirit of a classical Chinese woman fighting against her fate and her determination for revenge, expressed through her singing and her body movements, which are both immersive and fresh to Chinese opera audiences.

Another famous cross-cultural theatre experiment is the 2010 Peking opera *Oedipus the King* (adapted from *Oedipus the King*), written by Sun Huizhu and directed by Weng Guosheng (2012). Since 2015, the play has been staged more than 130 times in China and abroad. The playwright made adaptations to the theme of the original, turning it from a "tragedy of fate" into a "tragedy of heroes". Instead of a struggle between man and his fate and emphasizing the limitations of man, the localized play expresses Chinese humanistic ideology, emphasizing the care and responsibility of King Oedipus for his people and his fight against the plague. The plague and disaster are turned into a motivating force for Oedipus' actions. Oedipus is known as a tragic hero who takes the initiative to face up to his demise in order to save the people from the plague and disaster, which is very much in line with the expectations of the Chinese audience for a heroic figure. In addition, the director creatively adopts a clown character from traditional Beijing opera in this play, which reduces the original solemn atmosphere of Greek tragedy and adds to it a touch of the humorous and entertaining element of Peking opera, which is also very much to the liking of Chinese audiences (Chen, 2018).

## 5. Conclusion

Turner (1986) argues that through the study of social drama, we can understand the diverse ways in which different societies deal with crises. Furthermore, it allows us to uncover the worldview that exists within a society. The concept of worldview encompasses the sum of all human moral, religious, aesthetic, attitudinal, and value systems, serving as the basis for all human actions. In other words, through social drama, we can uncover the connection between society and theater and discover the values and thoughts of society within the realm of drama, thereby giving theater social significance. Greek Tragedy, deeply rooted in mythology and divine narratives, delves into the complexities of fate, morality, and the human condition. Its focus on the gods and heroes of ancient myths reflects the religious and philosophical beliefs prevalent in ancient Greece. In contrast, Chinese Classical Tragedy, specifically Yuanqu, centers around the realities of social life and the examination of moral virtues like filial piety. These tragedies shed light on the societal struggles and the ideals upheld by the Chinese people during the Yuan Dynasty.

While both forms of tragedy share a common foundation in exploring profound human experiences and emotions, they diverge significantly in terms of subject matter, purpose, and performance. By examining and appreciating these differences, we gain a deeper understanding of the unique ways in which Greek Tragedy and Classical Chinese Tragedy shaped and mirrored their respective cultures. Their enduring legacies continue to captivate audiences and offer valuable insights into the complexities of the human experience across different times and societies.

As the essay relies on available historical and literary sources, it may present biases or gaps in understanding. Furthermore, the comparative analysis may overlook certain nuances and regional variations within each theatrical tradition. In the future, empirical studies and fieldwork could be conducted to explore contemporary adaptations and interpretations of Greek tragedy and the Chinese Yuanqu, considering their relevance and impact in modern society.

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