Innovative or Rather Traditional? Confucianising Tragedy in May Fourth China

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Abstract A key aspect of the May Fourth Movement was the critical discussion of Western tragedy. While the interest in tragedy was sparked by the assumption that China lacked an analogous genre, its interpretation and adaptation to the Chinese context suggests that a traditional 'indigenous' filter was applied to define its supposed 'modernity'. Through cross-comparing Chinese conceptions of *beiju* 悲剧 in the May Fourth era and traditional Chinese views of *bei* 悲, this paper will seek to show that the Chinese reception of tragedy was informed by the rejuvenation of traditional ideas rather than the introduction of purely 'Western' theories.

Keywords Tragedy. Beiju, 悲剧. Melancholy. Sadness. May Fourth movement. Modernity.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Tragedy in Late and Post-imperial China: Debating the Significance of *beiju*. – 3 Poetry and Autumn Melancholia: The Historical Roots of Beiju. – 4 From the Theatre to Real Life: Confucianising Tragedy. – 5 Conclusive Remarks: Beiju or Rather Aiju?.

1 Introduction

China's first encounter with the theatrical form of Western tragedy happened during the late Qing dynasty and more precisely in the early years of the twentieth century, albeit indirectly via the mediation of Japanese translations of European literary and philosophical works. The compound word that designates 'tragedy' in modern Chinese, namely *beiju*, is in fact a historical neologism as well as a loanword from the Japanese *higeki*. The reception of tragedy and its integration within China's emerging "discourse of modernity"

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(Denton 1995, 3) reached its height within the context of the New Culture Movement, which led to the creation of Western Style New Drama also known as *huaju*. The latter's origins are conventionally traced back to the founding of the *Spring Willow Society* (1907), a drama group composed entirely of Chinese expat students in Japan who started their activity by staging adaptations of popular Western novels and operas such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Lady of the Camellias*.[1] The unifying trait of these plays consists in their ending tragically, thereby breaking the tradition of 'roundism' (*tuanyuan zhuyi*) that typified the majority of classical Chinese dramas and was deeply ingrained in the Chinese theatrical imagination of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Devising plots that did not issue in a 'great reunion' (*da tuanyuan*) became the imperative of the new generation of Chinese playwrights as this was perceived, as we shall see, as the only possible gateway to civilisation, modernity and enlightenment in May Fourth China. Particularly, the appropriation of Western tragedy and tragic thought was a direct consequence of what Denton has defined "a tremendous psychological blow" (Denton 1995, 65), namely the realisation of China's military and cultural inferiority vis-à-vis the Western colonial powers and a Japan that had strengthened itself while creatively appropriating Western cultural values. Observing dramatic characters struggling with an ill-fated destiny and witnessing to dramatic plots revolving around the clash of good and evil forces was to have powerful pedagogic effects, teaching audiences how to grapple with setbacks, calamities and misfortune in a time of unprecedented historical crisis. However, the creation of fully-fledged Chinese tragic plays was preceded by scholarly discussions aimed at defining the effective value and purpose of introducing tragedy to the Chinese stages.

While some effort has already been done in reconstructing the main tenets of China's discourse on the effectiveness of tragedy and its role in the modernization process,[2] further work needs to be undertaken in order to discern the impact of traditional Chinese culture on the transculturation of (Western) tragedy by May Fourth intellectuals. This paper will therefore examine some key ideas on (modern) *beiju* expressed by writers of the like of Hu Shi, Lu Xun, Ouyang Yuqian and Xiong Foxi over a timespan of two decades (1918-1933) and compare them to traditional notions of *bei*. Ultimately, this paper will seek to prove that there is a fundamental mismatch between the original meaning of *bei* and its acquired meaning forged by Chinese writers during the New Culture Movement.

1 As testified by Ouyang Yuqian in his memoir *Tan wenmingxi* (On Civilised Drama), tragedies outnumbered comedies in the repertoire of the Spring Willow Society.

2 In particular, see chapter 2 of Wang 2004.

Kirk Denton amply highlights that May Fourth literary theory is generally characterised by a coexistence of radical and conservative forces. These, albeit apparently in reciprocal contrast, on a closer inspection clearly belong to a common root. Although tradition was attacked iconoclastically on many fronts, it was not at all destroyed but was – perhaps unwittingly – infused with a new life. As Denton puts it: "What the radicalness of promoting fiction cannot conceal is a profoundly traditional view of the social-moral function of literature" (Denton 1995, 67). As we shall see next, what he maintains with regard to Liang Qichao and his concurrently innovative and traditional view of fiction can be applied to *beiju* as well.

Below, I will argue that the newly-constructed, transcultured notion of *beiju* does not represent a complete break with the past as it is informed by traditional ideas embedded in Confucianism. Still, it certainly expresses a new and original take on an originally Western yet now globalised dramatic genre/intellectual category. The modern concept of *beiju* fits the definition of 'a site of contending discourses' (Denton 1995, 5), once again corroborating the idea that "traditional philosophical and literary values played a role in shaping the reception of those Western literary concepts" (33). I will endeavour to prove that the purpose of *beiju* as it emerges from the conceptualisation of May Fourth intellectuals is not the representation or aestheticisation of suffering and moral pain, but the arousal of a sense of compassion and indignation meant to facilitate the overcoming of melancholy, pessimism and passivity. Furthermore, and for the avoidance of any doubt, I shall anticipate that the present study is not meant to engage in-depth the long-standing question of whether or not China has ever produced plays that can be compared to tragedies in the Western sense of the term,[3] nor is it concerned with analysing the dramatic output that emerged between the 1920s and the 1940s and which was clearly inspired by Western tragic models. The reason for excluding consideration of the latter is that the focus of this paper is on how May Fourth writers and critics interpreted and recreated the *perception* of a foreign literary genre by applying a culturally-embedded filter to inform their analysis. Nevertheless, to show the characteristics of such a filter, some passing reference will inevitably be made to relevant traditional works of Chinese drama.

3 Isabella Falaschi has already dealt with the issue of the existence of a Chinese tragedy in her 2002 French-language PhD dissertation entitled *Beiju: la question de la "tragédie Chinoise" dans le théâtre des Yuan (1279-1368)* (2002).

2 Tragedy in Late and Post-imperial China: Debating the Significance of *beiju*

The notions of tragedy and comedy are generally absent from ancient Chinese dramatic theory. The term *beiju* 悲剧, which represents the Chinese translation of the word 'tragedy', entered modern Chinese through the influence of the Japanese theatre reform movement of the Meiji era (1868-1912). 'Tragedy' stems from the Greek word *tragoidia*, whose literal meaning is 'goat-song' (*tragos*: goat and *oidia*: song), possibly a reminiscence of a certain kind of ritual symbolism harking back to the sacrificial killing of a goat offered to Dionysus – the patron-god of drama in ancient Greece. Here, the emphasis is on performance and betrays the theatrical origins of tragedy as an artistic genre. *Beiju*, instead, might better translate as 'mourning play' or 'play of grief' (*bei*: sadness and *ju*: play) and, in its original Japanese translation (*higeki* 悲劇) was probably coined as a calque of the German word *Trauerspiel*. The latter is a form of bourgeois drama which originated in the 17th century pre-Enlightenment culture and which, in the words of his most famous theorist Walter Benjamin, is separated from tragedy by 'a gulf' (1998, 135). Although a full discussion of the alleged differences between *Trauerspiel* and tragedy falls outside the scope of this essay, it is worth mentioning that, according to Benjamin, the contents and structure of the *Trauerspiel* were influenced by the Lutheran doctrine of human nature as irremediably corrupted by original sin. Therefore, unlike tragedy, which portrays the heroic deaths of mythological/legendary heroes acting out of *hybris*, *Trauerspiel* features characters who mourn their creaturely condition and whose demise is not caused by an act of wilful transgression but by their sinking into the ruthless cycle of history, whose undisputed ruler is Satan. In other words, while tragedy extols humanity, showing a tragic hero that is ultimately "superior to the gods" (Pensky 1993, 80), *Trauerspiel* broods over the ruinous effects of history in determining the destiny of a community. Since it does not seek to portray an optimistic picture of the trials of earthly life, there are no individual tragic heroes in *Trauerspiel* and no intention of ennobling the human role in history. As we shall see next, these characteristics clash with the dominant view of *beiju* during the May Fourth era.

One must bear in mind that tragedy for the Chinese was a doubly foreign concept and therefore *beiju* can be construed as a doubly 'altered' product of the Chinese imagination. The word first appeared in *The Poem of The Prisoner* (1892) by Kitamura Tokoku 北村 透谷 who was the leader of the Japanese Romantic movement. It is agreed that the first individuals to make use of this term in a Chinese context were scholars Jiang Guanyun 蒋观云 and Wang Guowei 王國維. In an article published in 1903 (see Jiang 1960), Jiang encouraged his compatriots to populate the nascent *huaju* repertoire with trag-

edies. He advocated so, primarily because he believed that, if comedy prevailed over tragedy, this could have disastrous effects over the Chinese society.[4] Furthermore, his invective was meant to defy the accusations of a Japanese journal who had condemned Chinese theatre for being 'childish, stupid and ordinary' due to an apparent lack of tragic works.

Wang Guowei's interpretation of tragedy was influenced not only by the ideas of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche but also by those of the Japanese thinker Taoka Reiun 田岡 嶺雲, one of whose essays was entitled "The Pleasure of Tragedy" and who, unlike Jiang, did not endorse an utilitarian view of literature (Li 2011, 199). Wang discussed tragedy in two of his essays. In "Hongloumeng pinglun" 红楼梦评论 (1904), he presented the Qing-dynasty eponymous novel as a 'fully-fledged tragedy' (彻头彻尾的悲剧) and 'a tragedy within a tragedy' (悲剧中之悲剧). He further argued that there had never been any tragedies in the classical theatre of China. Almost a decade later, in his history of the Song and Yuan theatre (*Song Yuan xiqu kao* 宋元戏曲考, 1913), he indicated *The Orphan of Zhao* (*Zhao shi gu'er* 赵氏孤儿) and *Injustice to Dou'E* (*Dou'E yuan* 窦娥冤) as plays with some tragic characteristics. Wang Guowei's merit lies in having rectified the claim that China's classical theatre has never had any plays comparable to the great Western tragedies.

At this early stage of the debate, a thoroughly 'Chinese' view of tragedy seems to be still missing as little to no reference is made to existing Chinese dramatic concepts. Paradoxically, this situation will take a new turn with the May Fourth writers who will criticise the old theatre for his supposed un-tragicness, yet will ascribe to *beiju* a moral and didactic task deeply embedded in the tradition and totally affranchised from the original meaning of *bei*.

Below, I will summarise and comment on the views of Hu Shi, Lu Xun, Ouyang Yuqian and Xiong Foxi.

In a 1918 essay entitled "The Concept of Literary Revolution and Theatre Reform" (see Hu 1996), Hu Shi stresses the necessity for Chinese theatre to innovate itself through the adoption of Western concepts and motifs, and characterises tragedy as the next stage of an evolutionary process that should bring about the liberation of Chinese theatre from the shackles of conservatism and apathy. The adoption of tragedy, which is a genre that, according to Hu, the West has been continuously developing throughout the centuries, will instil a sense of historical consciousness in the mind of the Chinese. In this sense, Hu Shi highlights the benefits of re-assessing Chinese theatre against foreign forms of drama through the perspective of comparative literature

4 Jiang warns, rather dramatically, that an overabundance of comedies could cause 'calamities' (惨剧) and bring 'demons' (孽) into the society (51).

studies. He notes that the Chinese struggle to portray real life dramatically as they tend to end their works with what he defines a 'great reunion' (*da tuanyuan*), which normally consists in a literal coming back together of a separated couple (principle of *beihuan lihe*) and/or in the punishment of wrongdoers. Hu calls this tendency to 'roundism' 'superstitious', because it implies that problems and contradictions can be solved through the intervention of a higher will, namely Heaven. He further mentions that Heaven is neither benevolent nor malevolent (like Fate in Greek tragedy), that there is no such phenomenon as karmic retribution and that good and evil are not clearly distinct categories. In his view, the problem of evil and the reality of human suffering have a social origin, therefore he urges dramatists to represent social ills credibly, honestly and realistically, and to dispense with the device of the final 'reunion'. In so doing, dramatists can act as social reformers because their works will be purified by any trace of fraudulence and will stimulate the audience to ponder concrete ways of stopping those injustices in real life and to combat the negatives of a patriarchal society. Moreover, Hu Shi thinks that tragedy is endowed with a 'deep moral force' because by representing situations of extreme suffering, and by fostering emotional engagement by the audience, it forces the latter to develop introspective skills, critical thinking skills and, most importantly, the virtue of compassion. As he puts, it is in times of hardship that "people become close to each other" (Hu 1996, 113) and put aside their natural selfishness.

In a 1925 essay entitled "On Looking with Closed Eyes" (see Lu 1973), Lu Xun laments the fact that the Chinese people lack the courage to face up the realities of human life and explains this apparent deficiency as a consequence of the old Confucian saying whereby one should not act in any way that transgresses the norms of ethical behaviour, including the act of seeing (非礼勿视). Although this has nothing to do with tragedy, it is possible to discern some veiled references to the beneficial powers of this form of drama. Later on, Lu Xun underlines the necessity to experience personally the distress generated from conflictual, contradictory situations that affect society. He strongly rejects the idea of sitting back and resign to Heaven's will, and condemns as illogical the national predisposition to explain the difficulties of the present time as a temporary training period imposed by Heaven on the individual who is tasked with an important mission to accomplish and who is predestined to a happy conclusion. In this sense, he seems to condemn, albeit indirectly, the tragicomic structure that characterises innumerable plays of the classical repertoire, where obstacles and contradictions are only a transient phase of a dramatic process that advances towards the good. In this, he sees the will of writers who encourage the whole nation to close their eyes in an act of deception and self-deception. What Hu Shi had called with more indulgence 'great reunion', Lu Xun

views as dishonest 'gratification' (满) and fundamentally a 'lie' (骗), something that does not only obscure the true face of reality and its underlying mechanisms but that also that relieves humankind of its social and civic responsibilities. While casting doubts on the proverb 作善降祥, which encapsulates the karmic law of retribution, another leitmotif of classical theatre, he blames the tendency to retrospectively add a great reunion to works that were originally devoid thereof, including *Hongloumeng*, which ends, realistically, in tragedy.

Lu Xun clearly foresees a socio-political danger in the systematic, inconsiderate usage of traditional ideas and literary techniques that tend to embellish reality and cautions against the degeneration of the Chinese society, which is too anaesthetised by these deep-seated practices. He concludes that a radical renewal of the literary arts is the only condition to aid the renaissance of the Chinese nation and pleads for a literature that can proactively teach and effect earthly justice, rather than one that celebrates the national martyrs by simply singing their virtues. In *Zhongguo xiaoshuo de lishi bianqian* (1924), he further argues that *da tuanyuan* is a means of making up for the injustices of life and history. If history does not bring any reunion, then this will be effected in fiction. He mentions that the Chinese do not like troubles and depressions.

In a 1928 essay entitled "Theory and Practice of Drama Reform", Ouyang Yuqian defines *beiju* as "an inevitable catastrophe" (Ouyan 1989, 213), the essence of real life and a type of drama that does not have a satisfactory, fulfilling end. In his opinion, modern *beiju* revolves around a conflict between the individual's will and the social circumstances, thereby excluding the concept of blind fate. Interestingly, he ascribes to this form of drama a psychological function, which consists in arousing compassion and ultimately generating "peace and consolation" (214) in the world. He also emphasises tragedy's educational role and powerful influence in directing the course of history towards a positive outcome. In Ouyang's words, tragedy describes an individual's drive to progress by seeking to attain freedom and happiness. The many hardships and obstacles that the protagonist encounters throughout the tragic plot all contribute to strengthening the audience's spirit and building up hope for the future. The main mission of tragedy is to foster in the spectators the consciousness of living in a 'transitional age' and that one should not be contented with the "status quo" (218).

Finally, in a 1933 essay entitled "Tragedy" (see Xiong 1985), Xiong Foxi further develops the above-mentioned views, as he believes that the value of tragedy lies in generating a feeling of happiness through the experience of suffering. His notion of catharsis implies that, by watching characters who agonise on stage, the spectator can purify his own passions by developing high moral qualities such as compassion and a sense of justice. In defining tragedy as "an art form that

fosters human honesty and good conscience" (265), he ascribes significant ethical properties to it. He further argues that tragic dramas are particularly welcome in an age of crisis when an increasing number of people are drawn to commit suicide out of hopelessness. This is because, rather than death, he considers anguish the tragic element par excellence in a play, while 'tragic' is the struggle that a character undertakes to achieve a given objective, which, however, remains unattained.

It is evident how these May Fourth writers tried to define tragedy from the perspective of traditional Confucian values, especially benevolence (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*), which they contributed to revitalise. However, I argue that, rather than a dramatic genre, their reflections issued in the conceptualisation of a tragic spirit (*beiju jingshen*), which they hoped to infuse into the Chinese society of their time. Rather than fostering individualism and iconoclasm, they placed tragedy within a communitarian dimension in which individuals feel compelled to join each other to share the same adversities and work together to resist them. It seems to me that they did not explicitly connect tragedy with modernity, except for their varied references to the topicality of the tragic genre, its suitability to an age of historical decadence like the Chinese post-imperial era and its aesthetics of anti-reunionism, which was perceived as new and innovative. By finding beauty in grief rather than in harmony (*yi ai wei mei* vs. *zhong he wei mei*), they sought to revolutionise 'old' aesthetic principles that they interpreted as the main cause of cultural backwardness and moral apathy of which they accused their compatriots to be guilty. Nevertheless, they neglected the fact that, as will be shown next, Chinese culture does have its own traditional aesthetics of *bei*, which however does not exactly mirror the May Fourth angle on *beiju*. Below, I will present and discuss the ancient roots of the term *bei*, which is linked not to Confucianism but to Taoist ideas on humankind and nature, and I will concurrently seek to prove that an attitude of defiance and resistance to grief and suffering is not at all absent from traditional Chinese culture.

3 Poetry and Autumn Melancholia: The Historical Roots of Beiju

Below, I aim to carry out an in-depth etymological analysis of the term *beiju* from the perspective of traditional Chinese literary and dramatic theory, independently from Western tragedy.

From an etymological viewpoint, the word *beiju* has to do with the experience of melancholic pain, as suggested by the character *bei* 悲, which means 'sad', 'sorrowful', 'pessimistic'. Other terms that appeared in pre-modern Chinese theatre criticism to designate this kind of drama are *yuanpu* 怨谱, which literally means 'expressing resentment'; *aiqu* 哀曲, which could be variously rendered as 'elegiac drama', 'melodrama', 'pathetic drama' or 'drama of grief', and *kuxi* 苦戏 or 'drama of hardships' (Xie 2010, 377). All these terms, which date back to the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing periods, emphasise the element of pain and suffering, thus suggesting that in traditional Chinese theatre particular attention was given to the portrayal of the pathetic emotion. Moreover, works such designated were also generally known as *can jue bei ji zhi shu* 惨绝悲极之书, namely, works imbued with a sense of extreme and absolute grief (Zhou 1991, 151). Zhu Quan's 朱权 *The Supreme Harmony Chart of Correct Sounds* (*Taihe zhengyin pu* 太和正音谱), a work of dramatic criticism published in 1398, contains a list of Yuan (1271-1368) *zaju* 杂剧 plays, which are categorised according to common themes and motifs. Some of these plays are listed under the category of *beihuan lihe* 悲欢离合. This terminology indicates dramas characterised by an alternation of "sad and joyful scenes" and of "separations and reunions", which somehow echo the notion of tragicomedy in Western dramatic culture (Falaschi 2002, 10).

According to Alexa A. Joubin (2003, 11), the birth of a Chinese poetics of the tragic should be ascribed to the poet Qu Yuan 屈原 (343-278 BC), whose poem *Encountering Sorrow* (*Li sao* 离骚) (late third century BC) is a remarkable example of "poetry of lament" (*beitan shi* 悲叹诗). Throughout this work, the author expresses his deep suffering for being unjustly dismissed from his position as a political counsellor of the king of Chu, whom he had always served with great loyalty and faithfulness. He was exiled twice and eventually committed suicide by drowning himself in the Milo River. The predominance of the elegiac component (*ai* 哀) is particularly evident in this poem, where the author's prevalent emotional state seems to be that of *bei* 悲, as evidenced from (Joubin's translation of) the following excerpt: "In sadness plunged and sunk in deepest gloom, alone I drove on to my dreary doom".[5] Joubin's statement resonates with the

5 The original reads: "忳郁邑诧傺. 吾独穷困乎此时也!" (Qu 2012, 66).

views of other contemporary scholars, such as Xie Boliang and Zhou Anhua, who maintain that the Chinese have approached and dealt with the theme of suffering and its corollary of emotions first in lyrical poetry (*shi* 诗), and only subsequently in the drama. Therefore, unlike tragedy, which has its origins in theatre and dramatic performance, *bei*(*ju*) would denote a kind of poetic emotion (*qing* 情) associated with a particular scenery (*jing* 景).

In classical Chinese literary theory, the fusion of *qing* and *jing* creates what goes under the name of *yijing* 意境. This term refers to a higher and sublime artistic/creative/poetic dimension and is usually translated as 'creative mood', but escapes an exact theorization owing to its ethereal and rather intuitive quality. More specifically, *yi* means 'meaning' or 'sense' and *jing* means 'realm' or 'situation'. According to Libing Bai, the earliest occurrence of the term in Chinese poetry criticism is in the work of the Tang dynasty poet Wang Changling 王昌龄 (698-756), who describes it as the third stage of poetry writing after *jing* (nature) and *qing* (emotion), and which would consist in an intellectual synthesis of these in order to "attain the very essence of Truth" (Bai 2014, 416). The notion of *yijing* – not to be confused with the concept of *yixiang* 意象 (imagery), which rather indicates "individual physical objects or beings that, through the poet's artistic conception, have acquired human sentiments and can be used as 'objective correlatives' to denote the poet's feelings" (Tang 2014, 195) – is crucial to understand and demarcate the specificity of *beiju* in the context of world drama. In fact, although another term (*dianxing* 典型, or model-scenes) is generally preferred to critique those literary genres which are more focused on the imitation or re-enactment of reality such as fiction and drama, dramatic theory and criticism in China cannot dispense with the concept of *yijing*, which is applicable to all genres showing a strong lyrical tendency. In effect, drama in China has traditionally been intertwined with poetry, dance and music, thereby placing considerable emphasis on the representation of emotions accompanying the narrated events. In this sense, the union of *bieqing* 别情 (farewell sadness) and *suiqing* 随情(submitting to one's emotions) is very close to the idea of *yijing*, which still remains the main aesthetic core of classical Chinese poetry and drama (Yang 1994, 206).

In order to extrapolate the original lyrical and poetic matrix of *beiju*, an investigation of the sphere of lyrical emotions connected to the word *bei* 悲 is in order. First, is it correct to translate it simply as 'sad' or 'sadness'? Ye Zhengdao has undertaken a text-based semantic study of the emotion term *bei* along with other sadness-like basic emotion terms such as *ai* 哀and *chou* 愁. She notes that there is no exact equivalent of *bei* in English, nor is *bei* only about sadness *per se* (2001, 397). *Bei* is usually listed among the five basic emotions in classical Chinese texts and features as a constitutive element of a

few compound words such as *beiliang* 悲凉 (sad and dreary; somber; dismal), *beitong* 悲痛 (painfully sad) and *beican* 悲惨 (tragic; tragical; pathetic) (367). Most importantly, *bei* features in the compound word *beiguan* 悲观, which literally means "having a *bei*-like view/*Weltanschauung*" and is usually translated into English as "pessimistic". By examining specific excerpts from a selection of key texts from premodern Chinese poetry and fiction, such as Wang Wei's poem *Qiu ye du zuo* 秋夜独坐 (Sitting alone on an Autumn Night, 8th century BCE), and Cao Xueqin's *Hong lou meng* 红楼梦 (The Dream of the Red Chamber, mid-18th century), Ye argues that *bei* does not simply equal "sadness" but a kind of "fatalistic hence tragic sadness" (363). In order to better understand what the source of *bei* might be, namely its 'objective correlative', we need to refer to the theory of the interplay of *qing* and *jing* in classical Chinese literature. In this context, *bei* designates a specific psychological disposition (*qing*), which is traditionally associated to a particular landscape imagery (*jing*), whose function is to evoke a particular feeling arising in the poet's heart and mind through contemplation. The *yixiang* (poetic imagery) that triggers off the *bei*-like feeling can be found in the natural changes of the autumnal season.

In Wang Wei' poem, the author contemplates the autumnal landscape and compares the falling of a fruit from a tree under the autumn rain to his whitening hair, lamenting the irreversibility of the ageing process for the human being. Jia Baoyu, the male protagonist of Cao Xueqin's novel, is immortalised whilst brooding over the imminent wedding of Xiuyan, a girl in his entourage. He reckons that marriage is an event that everyone must go through during life, thereby ascribing a sense of preordained fatality to it. Moreover, staring at an apricot tree full of fruits, he sighs over the fact that in a few years' time the bride will bear children and with the passage of time her hair will inexorably turn silver and she will lose her beauty, exactly as the tree is bound to lose its fruits in autumn.

For Ye, "what makes one *bei* is not just a bad happening at that moment, but an uncontrollable force pulling towards a subsequent 'tragic' happening determined by nature" (2001, 364). Hence, it can be argued that the source of *bei*-like feelings is not linked to a single, unexpected catastrophic event somehow akin to the Aristotelian concept of 'misfortune' – but lies in the consciousness that something disagreeable is bound to happen in the near future, and which cannot be avoided because it is inscribed in the cyclical course of nature. In the concept of *bei*, there is no malevolent god, no transcendence, no fatal flaw that makes the human being guilty of violating some preexisting divine order, but there is rather a despondent acceptance of the natural order, of the cosmic and incessant flow of the *yin* and the *yang*. Therefore, it can be argued that, similarly to tragedy, *bei* too can be construed as a culture-bound emotion term, deeply root-

ed in traditional Chinese literature and culture, where the tendency to associate this kind of fatalistic sadness with the autumnal imagery represents a codified poetics called *beiqiu* 悲秋, a lexicalized term that could be roughly translated as 'autumnal melancholia', and which Xie Boliang designates as the ancestor of *beiju* (2010, 556), its original aesthetic matrix.

Originally dating back to the Warring States period (5th century-221 BC), the poetics of *beiqiu* was formally initiated, again, by Qu Yuan in his poem *Xiang Furen* 湘夫人 (The Lady of the Xiang) from the anthology *Chuci* 楚辭 (Lyrics of Chu) and by his disciple Song Yu 宋玉, who contributed to further popularise this trend in traditional lyrical poetry (Xie 2010, 556-7). In *Jiu Bian*九辩 (Nine Changes or Arguments – also part of the *Chu ci*), Song depicts the image of the falling leaves being shaken off by the bleak and cold autumn hair, and uses it as a backdrop to express the depressive, melancholic mood stirred by the autumnal landscape where everything seems to be heading slowly and inexorably toward death. Other scenes that can be subsumed under the umbrella term of *beiqiu* are those focusing on the gloomy mood associated with a sorrowful separation, with the injustices suffered by a righteous scholar, with the melancholy of travelling alone. The corresponding objective-correlatives are the autumnal rain and wind, the falling leaves, the wild geese, the cooler weather and the waning plant life. The corresponding emotions are those of a lonesome and desolate mood, whereas the resulting *yijing* or poetic world, which is something more intuitive and should be co-created by the author and the reader, is one of relentless and irreversible decadence that affects man's life and the natural world alike and which compels the poet to engage in deep reflection about the sorrows of the human condition. One such example can be found in a *ci* 辞 attributed to the Han emperor Wudi 武帝(156-87 BC) entitled *Gu Qiu feng* 古秋风 (Old Autumn Wind). Here, the author laments the ephemerality of the human life against the everlasting recurrence of the natural phenomena. Whilst observing that in the natural world "the past recedes, the present arrives and still they flourish and perish, these affairs" (*shui liao ta, gu wang jin lai yu wang xing* 誰料他,古往今來興亡事),[6] he wonders how many years an individual can expect to live.

Premodern Chinese literature abounds in examples of *beiqiu* as a traditional aesthetic mode, particularly Tang poetry with the poet Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770) as one of its masters. He coined the terms *qiuyi* 秋意, namely what hints at autumn (the slight chilly air), and *qiusi* 秋思, namely the lonesome and desolate mood that autumn evokes in the poet's mind (Xie 2010, 559). As Ye Zhengdao observes, the liter-

6 The full text of this poem can be found at "John Thompson on the guqin silk string zither" (`http://www.silkqin.com/02qnpu/10tgyy/tg35gqf.htm#1525lyr`).

ary motif of *beiqiu* indicates that this close correspondence between emotions and seasons is distinctive of Chinese culture. This aspect is also codified in the earliest work of literary criticism in the history of Chinese literature, the *Wen xin diao long* 文心雕龙 (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons) by Liu Xie 刘勰 (465-521), as follows:

> Springs and autumns follow on in succession, with the brooding gloom of dark Yin and the easeful brightness of Yang. And as the bright countenances of physical things are impelled in their cycles, so the affective capability of mind (*xin*) too is shaken… And when autumn's skies are high and the animating air takes on a chill clarity, our thoughts, sunken in the darkness of Yin, touch on far things. The year has its physical things, and these things have their countenance; by these things our emotions are shifted, and from emotions language comes. The fall of a solitary leaf finds its place in our understanding [and we know that autumn is coming].[7]

Lo Wai Luk contends that "*bei*" is the chief aspect of what he calls "the Chinese tragic spirit", which also entails a corollary of related emotions stirred up within the realm of *beiju*, leading to four different "tragic dimensions".[8] Lo terms the Chinese tragic spirit as *beizhuang* 悲壮, which he translates as a "tragic-heroic mood" or a "combination of sad and heroic spirit" (1994, 70) and uses compound terms containing the character *bei* as a linguistic basis for his theory of the four tragic dimensions of traditional Chinese drama. These are: *bei'ai* 悲哀 (pathetic mourning), *beiyuan* 悲怨 (lamentation for the irrepleceable loss), *beifen* 悲愤 (protest with invincible will) and the aforementioned *beizhuang* 悲壮 (heroic action against the odds). Moreover, he acknowledges that "the semantic space these four compound words create, however, still remains a land of subjective feeling. There is no act, in the sense of Western dramaturgy, involved" (72). This statement suggests that the analysis of the etymological origins of *beiju* must proceed from the concept of creative mood, *yijing* in Chinese literary theory. For Lo, the *yijing* of *beiju* is a "tragic spirit with a very strong Chinese flavour: lyrical, aesthetic, and intermingles the emotion (*qing*) and the scene (*jing*)" (61). Lo extrapolates the essence of each of these four tragic dimensions by analysing a selection of Yuan *zaju* plays. With reference to the plays *Fengyulan* 冯玉兰 (The Misery of the young lady Feng) and *Huolangdan* 货郎旦

7 Liu Xie, cited in Ye 2001, 372.

8 It should be noted that Lo uses the term "dimension", or "spirit", almost as synonyms of 'atmosphere' and 'mood', but not as synonyms of 'consciousness' or 'structure of feeling' à la Raymond Williams. In *Marxism and Literature* (1977), the latter explains that he chose the word "feeling" in order to distinguish it from "more formal concepts of worldview and ideology" (132).

(Woman Singer of the Huolang Style), he defines the first dimension, or *bei'ai*, as "pathetic mourning". The second kind of *bei*-like atmosphere, or *beiyuan*, is translated as "lamentation for the irreplaceable loss" and defined against the plays *Hangongqiu* 汉宫秋 (Autumn in the Han Palace) and *Shuangfumeng* 双赴梦(Dream of two on a Journey).

As to the remaining two dimensions, *beifen* is translated as "protest with invincible will" and is elucidated against the plays *Dou'e yuan* 窦娥冤 (The Injustice Done to Dou'e) and *Huoshao Jie Zitui* 火烧介子推 (Burning Jie Zitui Alive), whereas *beizhuang* is rendered as "heroic struggle against the odds" and extrapolated by the plays *Zhaoshi gu'er* 赵氏孤儿 (The Orphan of the Zhao Family) and *Zhang qianti sha qi* 张千替杀妻 (Zhang Kills His Sworn Brother's Wife). He then concludes by contrasting what he calls "the tragic mode" with the concept of *beiqiu*, a term that, as previously explained, encapsulates "the sentiment of autumnal grievance in Chinese literature" whereby "witnessing time's passage and nature's decay, the poet sighs for the finitude of life" (185). Furthermore, Lo concludes that only *beifen* and *beizhuang* are comparable to the tragic,[9] whereas *bei'ai* and *beiyuan* rather tend toward the pathetic.

Examples of the *beifen* and *beizhuang* spirits can be found in a series of ancient Chinese myths, which narrate episodes of resistance against the natural powers such as "Nüwa Mending the Sky" (女娲补天), "Jingwei Filling Up the Sea" (精卫填海), "Houyi Shooting the Sun" (后羿射日), "Yu the Great Taming the Waters" (大禹治水), and "Kua Fu Chasing the Sun" (夸父追). In their attempts at confronting and opposing the natural course of phenomena, the characters portrayed in those myths show some kind of *hybris*, and as such they are indicated as epitomes of an active tragic spirit. With the passage of time and with the advent of the agricultural revolution, this aggressive spirit of resistance gradually subsided, being replaced by a psychology of submission, adaptability and passivity, more akin to the *bei'ai* and *beiyuan* mood.

It is evident that the notion of *beiju* as theorised by the May Fourth writers previously discussed does not fully align with the original meaning of *bei* as discerned by Ye in her study. There is in fact no fatalism and no feeling of impotence and/or inevitability involved in the May Fourth conceptualization of *beiju*, whereby change and revolutions are not effected spontaneously by a divine will (*tianming*) but are man-made. Ye has noted that the feeling of *bei* is embedded within the Taoist doctrines and the Yin-Yang cosmology and I would add that it reflects really well the theory of non-action (*wuwei*), which encourages its adepts to second the transformations of the natural order rather than aiding or opposing them, thus developing a com-

9 For more on this, see Wang 2011 and Wan 2004.

munion with the natural landscape and its cycles. This decidedly untragic view of life implies the non-existence of evil and of iniquitous events. It suggests that nature is to be trusted rather than feared or defied. In this sense, in the *bei* of *beiju* there is no sense of indignation towards the source of pain and suffering. This, instead, is present in another basic emotion, namely *ai* 哀, which Ye defines as a form of altruistic pain of Confucian descent, which includes the feeling of compassion, the desire to eliminate what causes disruption in other people's lives and is therefore more compatible with the tragic spirit of the May Fourth era.

As we shall see next, the May Fourth idea of *beiju* was in many ways a product of the revivification of Confucian teachings. Its purported civilising power harks back to a shared desire to restore social harmony in a critical historical moment that was not so dissimilar from other previous transitional periods in Chinese history, such as the Spring and Autumn period (771-476 BC) in which Confucius lived and preached.

4 From the Theatre to Real Life: Confucianising Tragedy

Contrary to the opinion of the May Fourth writers mentioned in this study, contemporary Chinese scholars generally agree on envisioning a given set of traditional Chinese plays as *beiju*. Among others, these include the already cited *Orphan*, *Dou'E* and *Autumn in the Palace of Han*. What these works have in common is the fact that they do not focus on an unconditional and vehement conflict but show a marked tendency to neutralise the effects of past evils and restore the original harmony. For example, Dou E, the female protagonist of the eponymous *zaju* play, is unjustly executed but a few years after her death, her ghost appears before her father, who decides to re-open her law case thereby managing to demonstrate her innocence. In *The Orphan of Zhao*, the protagonist eventually avenges his father's death by murdering the evil General Tu'an Gu. In *Autumn in the Palace of Han*, the ghost of the beautiful concubine Wang Zhaojun, who had drown herself to avoid marrying the barbarian Khan, visits the Han emperor in the shape of a lonely wild goose in the hope of obtaining justice for herself. The emperor, who is now aware of the evil Mao Yanshou's plotting, orders that he is punished in order to do justice to the spirit of the concubine Wang.

Wan Xiaogao connects this Chinese *Weltanschauung* of harmony and non-aggressive resistance (*duili er bu duikang* 对立而不对抗) to the complementary interdependence of the *yin* and *yang* principles as reflected in the *Zhou'yi* 周易 (the earliest version of the *Yijing* 易经, The Book of Changes). Albeit opposite forces, the *yin* and the *yang* do not fight against each other for predominance but mould

and transform each other into its opposite so that their mutual and pacific interchanges give birth to the natural phenomena (2004, 26). As Wan explains,

> not only has this brought about the lack of an acute and irreducible conflict in the Chinese *beiju*, but has also deprived it of a soul-stirring, breath-taking passion, and of other dramatic devices such as suspense (*xuannian* 悬念), and a shocking recognition (*faxian*/*zhenjing* 发现/震惊). Traditional *beiju* lacks a tragic-heroic aesthetics whilst showing a preference for the pathetic, for a gentle aesthetic model (*rouxing mei* 柔性美) grounded on intimate sadness (*feice* 悱恻), tranquillity (*pingjing* 平静), moral suffering (*beiku* 悲苦) and grief (*aichou* 哀愁). (27)

For this reason, in *beiju* the harmony of feelings also entails a patent balance of sadness and joy, which is a direct consequence of the cyclical thinking patterns (*xunhuan sixiang* 循环思想) underlying ancient Chinese culture and philosophy. These patterns are not confined to the seasonal changes (*ziran chunxiaqiudong* 自然春夏秋冬) and the historical changes of rise, progress, decline and fall (*cheng'ai xingmang* 盛衰兴亡), but also involve the motions of the soul passing from joy to anger and from grief to happiness (*xinu'aile* 喜怒哀乐) (Zhou 1991, 221). This view of life as a combination of joys and sorrows has significant implications in the dramatic structure of *beiju*. The idea that "after deep misfortune comes bliss" (*pi ji tailai* 否极泰来) and that "when things reach an extreme they turn into their opposite" (*wu ji bi fan* 物极必反) entails that most traditional *beiju* dramas end with the purging of the malevolent force that have caused the injustices inflicted to the tragic protagonist(s). Hence, it can be argued that dramatic mechanism leading to a more or less 'satisfactory ending' turns the dramatic conflict into a temporary confrontation where there are no absolute winners or losers.[10]

This spirit of faith in the mutability of external circumstances is also a characteristic of the May Fourth interpretation of *beiju*. A fundamental difference, though, is that in the latter case the audience is staunchly compelled to effect those radical changes in real life, rather than finding a momentary satisfaction in the fictionality of the theatrical event. In light of this, the proposal to abolish the 'old' device of the great reunion should not be seen as a way of eradicating the alleged 'secularism' inherent to the traditional Chinese worldview,

10 Although, in *Song Yuan xiqu kao* 宋元戏曲考 Wang Guowei observes that not all the plays in the *zaju beiju* repertoire fit in the usual pattern whereby "separation is followed by reunion, hardships are followed by relief" (先离后合, 始困终亨, Wang 2001, 63), and that the *da tuanyuan* or happy ending still constitutes a major characteristics of *bei*-like plays.

which was indicated as a reason for the lack of 'tragic' dramas in pre-modern China. Rather, it can be considered a means of reinstating the pragmatism contained in the humanistic teachings of Confucius whereby social harmony can be achieved by fostering interpersonal relationships, by learning to serve other human beings and by perfecting oneself not in contemplative isolation or in waiting for the equivalent of a *deus-ex-machina* but "in the form of social and political action" (Yao 2000, 64).

Akin to Confucius, the May Fourth writers denounced the corruption, the contradictions and the degeneracy affecting the Chinese society of their time and saw in *beiju* a means of transforming resignation into strength, and selfishness into altruism and empathy. While the classical form of *beiju* offered a comfortable solution to the problem of evil, the new one, informed by the rebellious spirit of the May Fourth movement, was meant to break the dramatic cycle midway, freezing the dramatic conflict and leaving the spectators with a sense of inconclusiveness. This would empower them to make informed decisions aimed at overcoming hopelessness and grief.

What was advocated by the May Fourth writers with regard to *beiju*'s empowering effect is strikingly reminiscent of the empowering function attributed to melancholy (*you* 忧, not *bei*) in pre-modern Chinese literary thought. This, incidentally, is indicated as a *trait d'union* between ancient Chinese and Western culture, where "melancholy was discovered to be a creative stimulus" (Motsch 2001, 22). Monica Motsch mentions that metaphor of the silk-knot whereby in pre-modern Chinese poetry melancholy is likened to a "knot which cannot be untied" (28). She argues that melancholic verses were composed to heal the melancholic state of mind rather than simply to express it (30). Poetry writing and reading were said to be able to facilitate the disentangling of the emotional 'knot'.

As shown by Chen Chung-Ying in his study of the creative power of melancholy in ancient Zhou philosophy, the concept of harmony (*he* 和) entails that a certain external event triggers an adequate feeling or emotional response in the individual's heart-mind. When the event in question is negative, not only will this cause the individual to experience melancholy feelings but it will also inspire them to find within themselves the necessary strength to correct the wrong and overcome those adversities alongside the corresponding melancholic feelings. Through an analysis of poems excerpted from the *Shijing*, Cheng notes that a particular type of melancholy (*youhuan* 忧患, which arises from the worry of losing the Mandate of Heaven, therefore having political implications) facilitates the practice of self-cultivation and, most importantly, enhances the individual's 'alertness' to the laws that regulate the bestowing and withdrawal of the mandate. This means that he will refine his ability to discern the signs of his own misconduct and act accordingly for his own and for the

social good. Cheng further observes that the possibility for change and transformation ascribed to the individual who possesses the consciousness of *youhuan* has links with the Confucian morality, which denies a fatalistic outlook on life (2001, 97).[11] He characterises Confucianism as a "dynamical and forward-looking system of ethics" (99) that provides sufficient intellectual tools for turning melancholy from passivity into action, based on the premise that social progress and the resolution of unavoidable conflicts stem from the collaboration between man and Heaven.

This takes us back to the May Fourth interpretation of *beiju* as the quintessence of the dynamic side of melancholy, sadness and grief. In this sense, despite its focus on misfortune, injustice and catastrophe, the experience of *beiju* is understood as an uplifting one because it is from conflict and oppositions that an individual's moral strength is fortified and he can apply his virtue (*de* 德) "to do good to all people under heaven and […] eliminate many causes for social injustices for other members of the society" (100).

5 Conclusive Remarks: Beiju or Rather Aiju?

As I sought to evidence in this study, although the term *beiju* was borrowed from the Japanese language and in the context of the theatre reform movement of the late-Qing and early Republican period, in China a poetics of *bei* had been present since antiquity. *Beiju* as a form of drama does not have a strictly theatrical origin, but stems from elegiac reflections about life and its cyclical phenomena, which match those occurring in the natural landscape. In pre-modern literature, those plays that have *bei*-like characteristics portray the full cycle of hardships and joys, thereby providing compensation and relief to the audience, fuelling belief in Heaven's benevolence, and in the cosmic law of the *dao*, whereby every given situation is naturally bound to evolve into its opposite, yet also through human intervention. During the May Fourth era, *beiju* as synonymous with (Western) tragedy was reconceptualised as a form of drama whose function was to teach the audience how to handle conflicts and contradictions in real life, to alert them to the urgent need for social reform, and to give them compelling reasons to collaborate in building a better society in times of radical transformations.

Nevertheless, two fundamental observations must be made. Firstly, the May Fourth interpretation of tragedy-*beiju* appears to be heavily informed by Confucian considerations rather than purely West-

11 Chung-Ying Cheng, "Morality of *Daode* and Overcoming of Melancholy in Classical Chinese Philosophy", in *Symbols of Anguish*, 97.

ern (hence innovative) ideas. Albeit a seemingly radical claim, the condemnation of the great reunion by the May Fourth writers merely reinforces the idea that human beings are fully responsible for the promotion of equity and social justice. The feeling of sadness and melancholy engendered by watching an ill-fated play should induce the audience to pause and think about potential solutions for tackling similar real-life situations. The attitude of viewing melancholy not as an end in itself but as a stimulus to effect positive changes in a social context is inherently Confucian. Secondly, considering the traditional meaning of the concept of *bei,* which expresses resignation and acceptance of the negative, *beiju* does not seem to adequately mirror the concept of 'tragedy' as theorised during the May Fourth era. It could be argued that a much more fitting term would have been *aiju*, for *ai* designates that kind of grief that leads to indignation and triggers a willingness to change the negative for the benefit of others.

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