

Tragic beauty and cultural taste: a case study of *Farewell My Concubine*

Mihua Qin

School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Southwest Minzu University, Chengdu, China

461418338@qq.com

Abstract. This paper examines how tragic aesthetics is reshaped through a culturally embedded sense of beauty. Drawing on the classical theory of paradox and on the insights of scholars such as Qiu Zihua, it explores the ways in which the tragic spirit is absorbed into, and transformed by, a broader aesthetic tradition. Taking *Farewell My Concubine* as its case study, the paper focuses on how the film uses Peking opera not merely as a visual or narrative device, but as a medium through which restraint, harmony, resilience, and inner tension are brought into contact with the tragic subject's pursuit of freedom and resistance. In doing so, the paper argues that the work offers a meaningful reference for contemporary artistic creation.

Keywords: tragic aesthetics, cultural aesthetic tradition, *Farewell My Concubine*, contemporary artistic creation

1. Introduction

The theory of tragedy originated in the Western tradition, and its early development may be roughly divided into three stages: Aristotle's theory of tragedy, centered on "mimesis" and "catharsis"; Hegel's dialectical view of "ethical conflict"; and Nietzsche's mythic account, in which Dionysian wisdom is given visible form through Apollonian art. Since the twentieth century, theories of tragedy have increasingly related to social critique, ideological critique, and cultural politics. However, studies that approach tragedy from a distinctly aesthetic perspective remain relatively limited. As Professor Qiu Zihua observes in *Tragic Spirit and Cultural Consciousness*, theories of tragedy have often proceeded from a utilitarian standpoint, while "the fundamental characteristics of tragic beauty as an aesthetic form have rarely been revealed or applied" [1].

Although tragedy, both as a genre and as a theoretical category, originated in the Western tradition, the resistance that human beings display in the face of inevitable suffering and destruction carries a universal value that transcends regional boundaries. If tragedy is simply applied to local artistic and literary practice as a ready-made theoretical tool, it may easily become subordinate to Western discourse. General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized that foreign theories, concepts, discourses, and methods should be approached with analysis and discernment: those that are applicable may be adopted, while those that are not should be mechanically imposed. He further notes that philosophy and social sciences must maintain a critical spirit, which is among the most valuable qualities of Marxism [2]. In fact, the existence of tragedy within the local artistic tradition is no longer a matter of dispute. Yet the tragic forms of any cultural tradition are closely

bound up with its own aesthetic habits and modes of consciousness, and this tradition is no exception. For this reason, some scholars have argued that relevant studies should keep a locally grounded sense of inquiry consistently present, rather than allowing their interpretation to be absorbed into the cultural logic and value system of Western theory [3].

In this sense, Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* offers an important point of reference. Through the artistic lives and emotional entanglements of Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou, the film not only portrays the individual's persistent pursuit of selfhood and dignity amid the sweep of history, but also draws on the classical image of "the hegemon-king bidding farewell to his concubine" to bring together lyrical melancholy, a sense of fate, and subjective resistance within a shared aesthetic tradition. The "tragic spirit" embodied here is neither the serene sorrow of classical tragedy nor merely the social critique often found in modern works. Rather, it is a spirit of resistance formed within a culturally rooted aesthetic temperament and made visible through destruction. As one of the artistic forms most frequently encountered by the public, film and television reflect broader patterns of social taste and collective psychology. Yet works that meaningfully combine cultural aesthetic tradition with the tragic spirit remain relatively few in contemporary artistic creation. On this basis, this paper takes *Farewell My Concubine* as a case study to explore what the integration of tragic aesthetics and cultural aesthetic tradition may offer to contemporary artistic creation.

2. From theories of tragedy to tragic aesthetics

The earliest definition of "tragedy" is generally traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics*. For Aristotle, tragedy is the imitation of a noble and complete action, presented through dramatic performance and artistic language, with the aim of purging the audience's emotions by arousing pity and fear, a process known as catharsis [4]. This definition understands tragedy primarily in terms of artistic form and emotional release. Hegel, by contrast, developed a more profound account of tragedy through his theory of ethical conflict. In his analyses of the death of Socrates and Antigone, he argues that true tragedy arises from a conflict between two legitimate and rational ethical forces [5]. On this basis, he revises the Aristotelian idea of catharsis: "fear" is rooted in the power of ethical order, while "pity" emerges from sympathy for the ethical justification upheld by the sufferer [6]. The tragic hero, therefore, is not destroyed because of personal fault, but because of a steadfast commitment to a justified position. Such destruction consequently carries a sense of ethical sublimity. Marx and Engels further transformed Hegel's ethical framework by placing it within dialectical and historical materialism. They understood tragedy as the conflict between old and new forces in the course of historical development, namely "the tragic conflict between a historically necessary demand and the practical impossibility of its realization" [7]. From this perspective, the fate of the tragic figure can no longer be reduced to personal flaws or to a single ethical contradiction. Rather, it becomes an unavoidable ordeal within historical practice. It not only reflects the awakening of human self-consciousness, but also reveals the tragic necessity embedded in an entire age and society [8].

If the above accounts of tragedy still retain a certain utilitarian dimension, Nietzsche was arguably the first theorist to explicitly treat the "tragic spirit" as the essence of tragedy. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he develops his theory of tragic myth through the symbolic opposition between Apollo and Dionysus, arguing that tragic myth is the "figuration of Dionysian wisdom through Apollonian artistic means" [9]. Nietzsche further points out that every genuine tragedy offers us a form of metaphysical consolation: no matter how the world of appearances may change, the foundation of life remains indestructible and full of joy [9]. Unlike Hegel, Nietzsche places greater emphasis on "aesthetic sublimity", that is, the affirmation of life itself through destruction.

Since the modern period, theories of tragedy have moved beyond the classical emphasis on form or ethical conflict, increasingly foregrounding tragedy's social-critical and cultural functions. Overall, however, most discussions have continued to focus on its practical or functional significance, while systematic attempts to define tragedy from an aesthetic perspective remain relatively rare. Professor Qiu Zihua has therefore pointed out that the tragic, as an important aesthetic form, should possess its own detached and independent characteristics, and should not be replaced by judgments derived from other ideological frameworks [1].

From the perspective of this study, however, once the element of "practical utility" is set aside, it becomes clear that the definitions discussed above all contain, to varying degrees, a sense of tragic spirit. For instance, Chen Mingzhu's principle of "interpreting Aristotle through Aristotle" [10] has been particularly illuminating for this study. In the ethical sense of Aristotle's thought, tragedy imitates actions directed toward virtuous happiness, yet such actions may fall into misfortune through error. It is precisely through these misfortunes that the nobility of virtue becomes perceptible. When calamities occur one after another, happiness is destroyed; yet nobility becomes all the more visible through endurance and steadfastness. Aristotle describes this condition in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as one in which a person calmly bears great misfortunes not because of insensibility, but because of the generosity and greatness of the soul [11]. This suggests that Aristotelian tragedy is not merely concerned with form and emotional release; it also contains a tragic spirit in which human beings uphold virtue amid destruction.

Returning to Hegel's account of ethical tragedy, many scholars remain at the level of the definition of "ethical conflict," while overlooking his more profound discussion in *The Philosophy of History*. Hegel points out that historical development is a negative process: while an old system gives rise to a new one, it also moves toward its own self-destruction. It often commits all of its rationality and vitality to action, only to arrive at an outcome in which "motivation and result stand in complete contradiction". Hegel applies this principle to the analysis of both historical tragic events and artistic tragedy, thereby grounding his theory of tragedy in the philosophy of history. This contradiction between motivation and result itself embodies the tragic spirit: even amid destruction and negation, the subject continues to act with full commitment, and in doing so reveals a sublimity that transcends destruction. It may therefore be said that the depth of Hegel's theory of tragedy lies in the fact that he articulated what earlier thinkers had not yet brought to light, profoundly revealing the essence of the category of tragedy: the tragic spirit [12].

Nevertheless, Hegel explains history through the notion of "Absolute Spirit". Although this enables him to grasp the necessity of historical development, his account remains limited by idealism. Marx and Engels, by contrast, transformed this principle into a materialist conception of history and further explained the contradictions and conflicts within social reality, thereby giving the principle genuine scientific validity and universality. From this perspective, tragedy emphasizes the relationship between human beings and history, foregrounding historical subjectivity. Tragic conflict arises from social contradictions, while the tragic nature of character becomes the internalization of historical conflict. In this way, tragedy reveals the arduous process through which human beings struggle with themselves and participate in social development. Considered in aesthetic terms, this ultimately points to the immense potential contained in human subjectivity and agency in the process of overcoming alienation [13]. Within this definition, the tragic spirit lies in the fact that individuals and classes, despite being fully aware of the inevitability of failure, still consciously devote themselves to historical practice. Their sacrifice not only exposes the cruel necessity of history, but also affirms the sublimity through which human beings confirm their own value amid destruction.

As for Nietzsche, his "Dionysian spirit" requires no extended explanation here. Its meaning already consists in a passionate affirmation of life and a will to resistance, which are precisely the core features of tragic aesthetics.

Therefore, although early theories of tragedy often carried a functional dimension, they nevertheless reveal, in different ways, the presence of an aesthetic spirit. In the modern period, this aesthetic spirit has increasingly been understood in relation to social, historical, and cultural critique [14]. Ancient Greek tragedy often highlights sublimity in destruction through the confrontation between human beings and fate, the gods, or the polis. Modern tragedy, by contrast, tends to turn inward, internalizing external conflict as psychological rupture and value contradiction within the character. In other words, the tragic spirit is no longer manifested solely through the destruction of heroic figures, but is also presented through the struggles of ordinary individuals amid social transformation and ethical crisis. These elements constitute the essence of the tragic spirit once the external layer of "functionality" is removed. It can thus be seen that, although theories of tragedy originated in the Western tradition, the aesthetic spirit they contain possesses a universal significance. In order to give aesthetic tragedy a broader claim to truth and a wider range of applicability, Professor Qiu Zihua offers a definition of it. To summarize, tragic spirit refers to the sublimity of spirit and the full value of life revealed when the subject, faced with unavoidable suffering and destruction, still seeks to transcend suffering at the cost of life itself [1]. This study argues that the key term in this definition is "subject". The subject is no longer merely an appendage of external forces or a puppet of fate, but an existence endowed with self-consciousness and free will. In Greek tragedy, the hero preserves dignity through resistance against fate. In ancient myths and classical tragedies of the local tradition, the subject often manifests responsibility and harmony through sacrifice and restrained endurance. In modern tragedy, the focus shifts toward inner contradiction and spiritual rupture. These differences vary across historical periods and cultural contexts, yet the "subject" remains the core of the tragic spirit, and its significance has not been diminished by changes in time or context. Therefore, in the analysis of tragedy, form and context may change, but the most fundamental issue remains how the subject confronts suffering and destruction. The establishment of self-consciousness is precisely the core condition that makes the tragic spirit possible.

3. The tragic spirit within a culturally rooted aesthetic tradition

In *The Origin and Goal of History*, Karl Jaspers proposed the concept of the "Axial Age", referring to the period from approximately 800 to 200 BCE, during which human civilizations broadly entered a stage of self-reflection and spiritual awakening. One of the defining features of this period was that "the age of myth, in its tranquility and naturalness, came to an end" [15]. In Mesopotamia, myth was subjected to philosophical critique and transformed into metaphors of tragedy and reason; in the local intellectual tradition, myths such as those of Nüwa and Pangu gradually receded into the cultural background, while the central concerns of thought shifted toward "benevolence and righteousness" and the "Dao". This suggests that the rationalization and ethical transformation of myth were common phenomena across civilizations during the Axial Age. Greek tragedy was only one artistic form of this broader transformation and should not be regarded as a spiritual creation unique to the Western tradition. Classical myths of the local tradition also contain a profound tragic spirit: Gun and Yu, father and son, devoted themselves to flood control; Nüwa sacrificed herself to repair the heavens and save the world; Kuafu pursued the sun until his strength was exhausted and he died; Hou Yi succeeded in shooting down the suns, yet was left in solitude and loss. Centered on sacrifice, these stories reveal a tenacious posture of resistance in the face of disaster and adversity, while also reflecting the resilience and tragic grandeur through which early Huaxia civilization struggled to survive in a harsh environment.

As an aesthetic feature, the tragic spirit should be situated within the broader category of aesthetics, and aesthetics itself may be understood through both Eastern and Western traditions. According to Jaspers, before the arrival of the Axial Age, ancient high cultures shared a condition in which there was a "lack of genuine

self-reflection" [15]. At the same time, however, each spiritual form within an overall culture remained distinctive [15]. Although myths from the local tradition and epics from Mesopotamia both contain, to some extent, a tragic sense of "subjective resistance", the former is marked by a pronounced view of the relationship between human beings and nature, whereas the latter reveals a persistent concern with fate. Such differences in spiritual orientation influenced the distinctive development of philosophy and religion in various civilizational traditions after the Axial Age. These differences were also reflected in aesthetics, that is, in culturally grounded forms of aesthetic sensibility. Later, under the influence of geographical patterns, social organization, and other factors, different cultural traditions gradually developed their own aesthetic concepts and artistic forms. In doing so, they increasingly diverged from one another and followed relatively independent paths of development [16]. In other words, although the "aesthetic spirit" contained in tragedy may be regarded as relatively independent, its historical development remains closely connected with the consciousness and aesthetic sensibility of particular cultural traditions.

In other words, the analysis of the tragic spirit must take into account a culturally grounded aesthetic consciousness. The Greeks revealed the cruelty of fate through conflict and resistance. By contrast, under the influence of agrarian civilization, kinship-based ethics, and Confucian and Daoist thought, the Huaxia cultural tradition tended to respond to suffering through harmony, calmness, and restraint. This difference does not imply a hierarchy of value; rather, it reflects the projection of different aesthetic sensibilities into artistic form. As Li Zehou points out in *The Path of Beauty*, the categories of the classical aesthetic tradition, when embodied in artistic images, place greater emphasis on emotionally charged grace and beauty, associated with the feminine or yin quality, and on grandeur, associated with the masculine or yang quality, rather than on fatalistic terror or tragic sublimity [17]. This observation also indicates the most fundamental difference between the classical aesthetic tradition under discussion and Western tragedy: the unity of yin and yang allows its art to place greater weight on the balance between emotion and reason than on conflict with fate. The power of beauty does not lie in rupture, but in reconciliation; not in destruction, but in fulfillment. This spirit can be found repeatedly in the tragic tradition: Dou E's steadfast commitment to innocence and righteousness in *The Injustice to Dou E*, and the sacrifice of life for moral duty in *The Orphan of Zhao*, are both examples of this tendency.

However, in current academic research, Western theories of tragedy are often directly transplanted to analyze literary and dramatic works from the local tradition. On the one hand, this approach tends to overemphasize the formal originality of Greek tragedy; on the other, it easily overlooks the distinctive creativity of tragic works from other aesthetic traditions in terms of emotional expression, ethical concern, and culturally grounded sensibility. As a result, these works are often discussed within a framework that asks whether they conform to Western standards, while the historical experience, aesthetic logic, and cultural spirit they embody have not received sufficient attention. This study argues that whether this tradition "has tragedy" or "has a tragic spirit" should not be judged according to its conformity with Western formal standards. The core of the tragic spirit lies in the establishment of the "subject", as well as in the resistance and sense of sublimity that human beings display in the face of suffering and destruction. This is a universal value that transcends cultural and historical boundaries. At the same time, different cultural traditions, shaped by their historical environments and collective psychology, have developed their own modes of aesthetic expression. The distinctive temperament expressed in tragic works from the local tradition—through an acceptance of nature, endurance of adversity, and adherence to moral duty—does not indicate an absence of resistance. Rather, it reveals another way in which the subject confronts fate. Therefore, truly meaningful research does not consist in measuring this tragic tradition against the framework of Western theory. Instead, it lies in

grasping the tradition's own aesthetic distinctiveness while preserving the universal core of the tragic spirit: the "subject" and "resistance".

In the contemporary context, the traditional tragic spirit is reconfigured into the narrative structures and psychological depths of modern art. *Farewell My Concubine* is a typical example of this transformation. Through Peking opera, which embodies a culturally rooted aesthetic temperament, the film turns the classical image of "the hegemon-king bidding farewell to his concubine" into an allegory of modern tragedy. It uses lyrical softness to carry a firm and unyielding will, and Cheng Dieyi, the protagonist, becomes the concrete embodiment of this dynamic. Cheng is repeatedly pushed by fate toward extremity. He cannot escape the role he performs, nor can he break free from the age in which he lives. Yet he preserves the spirit and integrity of the subject in the most absolute way: in the final scene, he moves toward destruction and becomes one with art and fate.

From this perspective, the success of *Farewell My Concubine* lies not merely in its reactivation of a classical image, but in its genuine integration of culturally grounded aesthetic sensibility with tragic aesthetics. This achievement derives not only from the film's own artistic excellence, but is also inseparable from the particular social atmosphere of its time. By contrast, although contemporary screen works cover a wide range of subjects, works that successfully combine culturally rooted aesthetic expression with the tragic spirit remain relatively rare. This is related not only to creative choices, but also to audience taste and the broader context of the age. For this reason, *Farewell My Concubine* appears all the more valuable. It prompts us to consider seriously how this kind of spiritual force may be continued and rearticulated in the present.

4. Aesthetic tradition and tragic beauty in *Farewell My Concubine*

More than two thousand years ago, on the historical stage of the Chu-Han contention, the Hegemon-King of Western Chu and Consort Yu parted at the moment of life and death. Consort Yu drew her sword and took her own life, responding to love and moral duty through self-sacrifice. Known for its tragic grandeur, this story has long been repeatedly rewritten and performed in literature and opera. In the 1990s, Chen Kaige's film *Farewell My Concubine* reactivated this classical image. Adapted from Lilian Lee's novel of the same name, the film takes the joys and sorrows, separations and reunions of Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou over half a century as its central thread, interweaving the Peking opera stage of *Farewell My Concubine* with lived reality. Cheng Dieyi's life trajectory overlaps with Consort Yu's self-sacrifice: he struggles repeatedly amid the sweep of history, yet continues to guard art and dignity in his own way. In this sense, the film connects classical pathos with a modern condition, allowing aesthetic tradition and tragic beauty to find concentrated expression in the individual's posture of resistance. As a representative art form of the classical cultural tradition, Peking opera in *Farewell My Concubine* is not merely a decorative background, but a central thread that runs through the film's narrative from beginning to end. The opening scenes of young opera apprentices in training—the ruler in the master's hand, the repeated correction of vocal technique, and the daily practice of stylized bodily movement—reveal not only the harsh discipline of the opera troupe, but also the highly codified and regulated nature of Peking opera itself. As the plot unfolds, the camera turns to the stage of adulthood. The sudden sound of gongs and drums, the long and winding vocal lines, the flowing water sleeves under the stage lights, and the heavy makeup and ornate costumes together create a powerful theatrical effect. As a quintessential form of the inherited artistic tradition, Peking opera is not simply a mode of performance, but an artistic tradition deeply rooted in cultural memory. Through Peking opera, the film closely connects individual fate with a broader cultural inheritance. It is precisely within this aesthetic tradition of suggestion, symbolism, and restraint that the film presents a distinctive mode of classical beauty.

For Cheng Dieyi, Peking opera is not merely a professional choice, but a form of destiny that determines the course of his life from the very beginning. From childhood, he is fixed in the role type of the dan, and the role almost comes to replace the self. The stage becomes the space in which he breathes, the language through which he speaks, and the mode through which he exists. His personal identity is gradually absorbed by the role through years of training and performance. When he sings onstage, "By nature I am a delicate girl, not a boy," the line that originally belongs to Consort Yu becomes his most intimate form of self-expression. Years of training as a dan performer allow the role to penetrate his life, and onstage he gradually becomes another version of "himself". At this moment, he is no longer simply performing Consort Yu; rather, within Consort Yu's song, he loses his own subjectivity, the "self" shaped by others and replaced by discipline. What the audience hears is not only an artfully stylized vocal line, but also the monologue of Cheng Dieyi's life. Here, the Peking opera stage has already moved beyond the level of artistic form and becomes the most truthful reflection of the character's inner world. At the same time, the magnificent stage effects of Peking opera stand in sharp contrast to the character's inner loneliness. Behind the liveliness of gongs and drums lie the solitude and repression of training, as well as inner rupture and confusion. The film thereby creates a distinctive atmosphere: it differs from the direct, outward, and even obsessive emotional expression often associated with ancient Greek tragedy, presenting instead internalized suffering, delicate emotional entanglement, and divided spiritual conflict. It is precisely for this reason that the standards of ancient Greek tragedy are difficult to apply as a measure of tragic works from the local tradition. Because drama and related art forms in this tradition emerged relatively later, the characterization and emotional expression within them appear more mature and refined, while the emotions themselves often become more complex and obscure [1]. As an artistic form rooted in this tradition, Peking opera carries its own distinctive aesthetic features. Its suggestive mode of expression emphasizes spiritual resemblance rather than realistic reproduction. In the film, it is through this combination of the real and the imagined, and through a restrained yet lyrical mode of expression, that the character's fate and inner world are most fittingly presented between stage and reality, thereby highlighting a culturally rooted aesthetic temperament.

The authors may now turn to the tragic aesthetics embodied in the film. If Peking opera provides *Farewell My Concubine* with a strong culturally rooted aesthetic foundation, what truly gives the film its emotional force is the tragic power displayed by its characters within this artistic atmosphere. In addition to the definition of tragedy as an aesthetic form derived above through the discussion of Western theory, writers and theorists within the local tradition have also offered their own reflections on the tragic spirit. Zhu Guangqian, for example, once pointed out that "without resistance to disaster, there is no tragedy. What gives us pleasure is not disaster itself, but resistance" [18]. At its core, this view also places emphasis on the "subject" and on "resistance". In traditional narrative forms of this cultural tradition, tragedy often tends toward lyrical expression. The destruction of the character may be transformed into a form of serene release, and the ending of tragedy often moves toward reconciliation or reunion, while the resistance and transcendence within destruction are less directly emphasized. This is also one of the major reasons why many have questioned whether tragedy truly exists in this tradition. However, if we return to the earliest theoretical source in the Western tradition, Aristotle does not stipulate in the *Poetics* that tragedy must end in death or destruction. Rather, he emphasizes that tragedy should arouse pity and fear through events, thereby achieving emotional catharsis. It can therefore be seen that judging whether a work is tragic solely by the form of its ending is not necessarily reliable. The point here is not to measure works from this tradition according to Western standards, but to emphasize that the existence of tragedy should not be assessed through excessive reliance on the ending alone. More importantly, as argued above, the concept of tragedy in this tradition has always been closely

connected with cultural consciousness and aesthetic tradition. *Farewell My Concubine* is precisely a representative example of this integration.

The tragic force of the film accumulates throughout the course of Cheng Dieyi's life and finally reaches its climax in his suicide onstage. When he performs *Farewell My Concubine* for the last time, he can no longer distinguish whether he is Consort Yu or Cheng Dieyi. His choice to end his life onstage is an active decision: it is a response to a shattered emotional bond, a protest against violated dignity, and a final act of fidelity to the art and identity he has upheld throughout his life. What appears to be destruction is, in fact, the final confirmation of subjectivity. Cheng would rather preserve his integrity through death than continue to live in a distorted reality. This ending bears distinct features of a culturally rooted aesthetic temperament. It is not a form of open confrontation in the ancient Greek sense, but rather transforms destruction into self-sacrifice through restraint and lyricism. At the same time, it reveals the universal value of tragic aesthetics: even amid unavoidable suffering, the individual still chooses to resist in his own way. Cheng Dieyi's death, therefore, embodies both the lyricism and sense of fate within this aesthetic temperament, and the tragic spirit of completing the self through destruction. He does not fear death; on the contrary, when it is no longer possible to live with pride, he chooses to die with pride [9]. In summary, through Peking opera, an artistic form deeply rooted in cultural tradition, *Farewell My Concubine* intertwines a lyrical and fatalistic aesthetic temperament with the tragic aesthetics of subjective resistance, thereby presenting a distinctive form of tragedy. The film not only responds to the debate over whether tragedy exists within this tradition, but also offers a vivid example for understanding the tragic spirit embedded in its aesthetic tradition. At the same time, it prompts further reflection on whether such a tragic spirit can still be inherited and rearticulated in contemporary artistic creation.

5. The current state of contemporary artistic creation

When analyzing the aesthetic features of tragedy, it may be possible to separate them from functional definitions. Yet once we turn to a specific work, the social ground and historical context on which it depends cannot be ignored. Even a classic such as *Farewell My Concubine* is deeply embedded in the historical conditions of its time. The expressive form of traditional Peking opera functions not only as a vehicle for emotion, but also as a reflection on modernity within the film [19]. The same is even more evident in contemporary artistic creation. Although current works cover a wide range of subjects and respond to diverse demands, relatively few are able to achieve a deep integration between culturally rooted aesthetic sensibility and tragic aesthetics. This scarcity is not only a product of the creative context but also reflects the particular value of the tragic spirit in the present. Among mythological adaptations, *Nezha* is undoubtedly one of the most representative figures.

The 1979 film *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* follows the traditional narrative and presents Nezha's resistance and sacrifice in an intensely tragic manner. By returning his bones to his father, Nezha actively confirms the self through the destruction of life. This extreme form of resistance not only reflects a strong sense of subjectivity, but also echoes the sublimity, within a culturally rooted aesthetic tradition, of fulfilling moral duty through self-sacrifice. It embodies the tragic spirit of active resistance, while also reflecting the needs of its time. By contrast, *Ne Zha* (2019) presents a markedly different temperament. In this film, Nezha no longer resists through the destruction of his own body, but is instead saved by "love": the love of his parents and the protection of his teachers. This study argues that such an adaptation responds to the contemporary desire for familial affection and emotional care. In an age more concerned with emotional healing and domestic warmth, audiences may need "love", rather than tragic resistance, to relieve the anxieties

of reality. The film therefore places greater emphasis on family ethics and the power of love, while its extensive use of comic elements also expands the plot and enhances its entertainment value. Yet when Nezha declares, "My fate is determined by myself, not by Heaven", the line still produces a certain sense of contradiction. After all, his existence remains bound to the predestined opposition between the Demon Pill and the Spirit Pearl, and his subjectivity has not truly broken free from the structure of fate. In this sense, the tension of tragic aesthetics is weakened. By comparison, Shen Gongbao in the film seems to carry a faintly anti-traditional tragic quality. His line, "Prejudice in people's minds is like a great mountain", reads almost like a footnote to his fate. He is forever treated as a villain and forever misunderstood; all of his struggles seem to be directed against fate itself.

In realist works, the integration of tragedy with culturally rooted aesthetic sensibility is more difficult than in mythological or operatic narratives. Realist works tend to emphasize social contradictions and moral choices within human nature. Lacking the stylized expression and lyrical temperament of traditional artistic forms, they are less able to carry the imagistic and symbolic qualities associated with this aesthetic tradition. This does not mean, however, that realist works are entirely disconnected from cultural spirit. On the contrary, they often reflect a tradition's understanding of value and ethics through the moral choices and destinies of their characters. Yet in such works, tragedy is more often presented as the helplessness and passive endurance of ordinary individuals. These characters are kind, simple, and upright, corresponding to the aesthetic admiration for goodness and endurance within the cultural tradition. However, they often lack a posture of subjective resistance, and therefore remain at a certain distance from the deeper implications of tragic aesthetics.

Within this context, the character of Qi Tongwei in *In the Name of the People* appears particularly distinctive. His choices are undoubtedly wrong: he betrays justice and descends into corruption and moral degradation, and his "evil" must not be praised. Yet if he is treated merely as a stereotypical villain, it becomes difficult to explain the complex emotions he arouses among viewers. Qi Tongwei comes from a poor background and once had ideals, but he is repeatedly defeated by reality. In the end, with no way out, he chooses to end his own life. It should be noted that this is not a form of "righteous resistance", but a desperate choice made in the face of collapse. He does not use death to defend an ideal or a truth; rather, death becomes the final way out for a defeated individual. Therefore, his ending should not be confused with heroic self-sacrifice. From the perspective of tragic aesthetics, however, his ending still carries a sense of "subjective confirmation". Qi Tongwei chooses not to be judged by others or dissolved by the system, but to bring his life to an end with his own hands. Although this choice stems from error, it nevertheless becomes his way of preserving subjectivity at the final moment: he determines the end of his own life, rather than allowing it to be determined by others. This differs from Cheng Dieyi's final curtain call, yet it similarly contains the meaning of "completing the self through destruction". For this reason, Qi Tongwei's image functions not only as a foil to positive characters but also possesses a stronger emotional impact than villains who are evil merely for the sake of being evil. This impact is, to some extent, similar to catharsis. The audience's sympathy for him does not arise from approval of his choices, but from the fact that his experience itself is tragic. Precisely for this reason, his image is more easily understood within the framework of Western theories of tragedy, while it remains difficult to integrate directly with a culturally rooted aesthetic tradition.

As for *Dying to Survive*, the film holds landmark significance within locally produced realist cinema, but it is not a tragedy in the strict sense. The protagonist, Cheng Yong, does not move toward destruction; on the contrary, his sacrifice leads to institutional improvement and public recognition. From the perspective of tragic aesthetics, his choice is not a form of resistance "for the self", but a form of responsibility "for others". This posture does not fully embody the meaning of the "subject" struggling alone in adversity within tragic

aesthetics. Yet within this cultural tradition, the act of living for others is closely connected with the idea of goodness. The sacrifice of the individual self in order to fulfill a larger moral purpose is a deeply rooted value ideal within this aesthetic tradition. It is in this sense that Cheng Yong's actions still possess a tragic appeal: he exchanges his personal suffering for the hope of others. This image of "suffering on behalf of others" has become extremely rare in contemporary artistic creation.

This does not mean, however, that such integration is impossible. What makes *Farewell My Concubine* distinctive is precisely that it achieves a fusion within the tension between culturally rooted aesthetic sensibility and tragic aesthetics. Cheng Dieyi's life both carries the lyrical and fatalistic temperament of this aesthetic tradition and embodies the subjective resistance, central to tragic aesthetics, of "completing the self through destruction". This success demonstrates that, even amid complex creative conditions and diverse demands of the age, a point of convergence between the two can still be found. Once such convergence is achieved, it can release a force powerful enough to move and unsettle the audience.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the integration of tragic aesthetics and culturally rooted aesthetic sensibility in contemporary artistic creation is by no means easy, but neither is it impossible. The canonical status of *Farewell My Concubine* lies precisely in the fact that it finds a distinctive point of convergence between the aesthetic tradition to which it belongs and the essence of tragedy as an aesthetic feature. Although contemporary creation is constrained by its context and by diverse demands, and although works that can truly combine the two remain rare, every successful exploration is therefore all the more valuable. It reminds us that, whether in mythological adaptations or realist works, as long as the core of tragic aesthetics can be preserved within the soil of a cultural aesthetic tradition, artistic achievements with profound emotional force can still emerge. As Plato states in the *Symposium*, everyone would rather give birth to such children of the soul than to ordinary children of the body; and whether among Greeks or non-Greeks, those who have produced great works and given birth to countless virtues are forever loved and remembered [20]. Homer and Hesiod left behind spiritual descendants through poetry, while Solon and Lycurgus nurtured later generations through thought and law. These creations endure beyond their own age, leaving a lasting memory within the cultural tradition.

The classical ideal of "establishing virtue, establishing achievement, and establishing words" expresses a similar view. "Establishing virtue" lies in the steadfastness of moral character; "establishing achievement" lies in dedication through action; and "establishing words" lies in the transmission of thought and culture, through which the spirit may endure. Qu Yuan's *Li Sao*, Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*, and even the Kunqu opera *The Peony Pavilion* all transmit the cultural essence of this tradition through writing, art, and thought, giving birth to its own "children of the soul". To establish words is not only the mission of earlier sages, but also the responsibility of every age. In this sense, *Farewell My Concubine* may be understood as a continuation of the spirit of "establishing words" in contemporary visual art. Through the medium of film, it carries forward both aesthetic tradition and tragic aesthetics. It is not merely a film, but also a form of cultural inheritance. Thus, if contemporary artistic creation can cultivate the force of tragic aesthetics within the soil of an inherited aesthetic tradition, what it contributes will be more than innovation in visual art. It will also become a form of spiritual wealth capable of sustaining cultural spirit and moving later generations.

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