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Heavy Snow in Empty Mountains: Tragic Spirit and Aesthetic Generation of the Stage Play "A Dream of Butterflies"

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Abstract: Through the dramatic encounters of the Kunqu opera troupe Hexuchun during the Chinese Civil War, the stage play "A Dream of Butterflies" places classical aesthetic forms and revolutionary cultural forms on the same stage, generating a unique tragic spirit within the nested structure of a "play within a play." Using dramaturgy as an analytical tool, this paper examines how "A Dream of Butterflies" completes Tong Xiaozhang's spiritual transformation from "a troupe leader who upholds professional rules" to "a person who lives the rules as faith" through the progression of the event chain, the compression of triple conflicts, and three irreversible actions. On this basis, it focuses on analyzing the visual, auditory, and spatial construction of the closing scene "Heavy Snow Fills the Empty Mountains," demonstrating how this ending, through the core event of "performing "A Dream of Butterflies" for the dead," completes the aesthetic sublimation of the tragic spirit from "structural tragedy" to "faith-based tragedy," thereby revealing the play's deep implications regarding cultural memory, artistic faith, and how individuals "return as spirits" amid historical violence.

1. Introduction

In 2021, the stage play "A Dream of Butterflies", written by Yu Yue and directed by and starring Chen Peisi, opened the Seventh Shanghai International Comedy Festival and subsequently embarked on a national tour, achieving remarkable success in both attendance and critical reception. The play continues the "trilogy of the stage" in its attention to the fate of opera troupes, setting the story in the city of Pingzhou on the Central Plains during the Chinese Civil War and narrating the struggles of the Kunqu opera troupe Hexuchun to survive amid the seesaw battles between the Nationalist and Communist armies. Chen Peisi defines "A Dream of Butterflies" as "a tragedy wrapped in comedic technique," noting that it "carries through our comedic spirit within tragedy." This self-positioning precisely reveals the play's aesthetic character: it presents tragic conflicts of significant import through comedic form, weaving the audience's laughter and tears into the same narrative texture.

In a paper published in China Literature and Art Criticism[1], Wang Jie summarizes the unique aesthetic experience of "A Dream of Butterflies" as a "modern tragic life experience," pointing out

that the play "combines the aesthetic forms of classical Chinese civilization with the aesthetic forms of revolutionary culture in the process of Chinese-style modernization within a concrete dramatic event," and that its core artistic pursuit lies in "expressing and presenting tragic conflicts of significant import through comedic form." Luo Ting and Liang Xiaochang, from a cross-media perspective, treat "A Dream of Butterflies" as a typical case of the "cross-media return" of traditional opera, exploring the possibility of cultural exchange achieved by traditional opera within the medium of stage drama. Wu Song examines the intertextual relationships between "A Dream of Butterflies" and Teahouse, Farewell My Concubine, and The Peony Pavilion from the perspective of intertextuality. These studies provide diverse perspectives for understanding "A Dream of Butterflies", yet there remains a lack of attempts to organically combine the analysis of internal mechanisms of dramaturgy with the theoretical examination of tragic spirit.[4]

This paper uses the dramaturgical chain of "event–conflict–action–character" as an analytical tool to examine how "A Dream of Butterflies" generates tragic spirit through structural dramaturgical strategies and completes aesthetic sublimation in the closing scene. The term "tragic spirit" here does not refer to Aristotelian tragedy of fate or Hegelian ethical tragedy, but points to a more contemporary form of aesthetic experience: the tragic and the comic are no longer two independent aesthetic categories, but a life experience fused into one within a specific historical time and space. The paper's argumentative path is as follows: first, analyze how the event chain and conflict chain construct tragic dramatic tension; second, examine how the action chain drives the spiritual transformation of character; finally, focus on analyzing the scene construction of the closing "Heavy Snow Fills the Empty Mountains," demonstrating how this ending completes the aesthetic generation of tragic spirit through the core event of "performing for the dead."[3]

2. The Progression of Events and the Compression of Conflicts: The Construction of Tragic Dramatic Tension

(1) The Event Chain: Layer-by-Layer Progression from "Inviting the Troupe" to "Seeking Survival"

The opening of "A Dream of Butterflies" is an extremely clean event: Chang Shaokun, the son of a landlord, invites Hexuchun to Pingzhou to perform The Peony Pavilion; Chang Shaokun himself is willing to play the "Sleeping Demon God" just to share the stage with the famous performer Tong Peiyun. This event presents the typical form of existence of traditional opera in peacetime—theater is a world enjoyed by the wealthy and leisurely. When the sound of guns and cannons suddenly rings out and a great battle violently crashes into the peaceful Central Plains, the troupe is trapped in the city, cut off from food, and their lives hang by a thread. After the People's Liberation Army enters the city, they invite the troupe, out of admiration, to rehearse The White-Haired Girl, offering three hundred catties of grain per performance. These three events constitute a clear chain of progression: inviting the troupe (old order) → war (collapse of order) → seeking survival (arrival of new rules). The events themselves are not unusual, but their tragic significance lies in the fact that they fall upon an old troupe leader who regards "rules" as the foundation of his existence. The troupe "came originally to make a living, yet in an instant their lives hung by a thread"—this reversal of circumstances itself contains tragic structural tension.

(2) The Progressive Structure of Triple Conflicts

The first conflict is the insistence on "transmitting the opera" versus the coercion to "change the opera." Tong Xiaozhang follows the ancient maxim "the opera is greater than heaven" and "a promised performance must be sung," but what the PLA gives is life-saving grain. The troupe internally splits as well: the clown refuses to perform, insisting "I don't sing operas my master didn't teach"; Tong Peiyun questions that Xi'er's costume and headdress do not conform to the rules and

refuses to wear modern workers' clothing. The deep substance of this conflict lies in the fact that the contrast in artistic form between the Kunqu The Peony Pavilion and the opera The White-Haired Girl reflects the stark gap between Hexuchun's closed theatrical tradition and the survival reality of the common people in dire straits.

The second conflict is the incompatibility of artistic form. When Tong Peiyun and He Fengqi use the melodious Kunqu vocal style to deliver the dialogue of Xi'er and Da Chun from The White-Haired Girl, and when Xi'er appears in the guise of "Lady White Snake" and Da Chun in the guise of "Zhao Zilong," a strong sense of incongruity is produced, provoking loud laughter from the audience. Yet this comedic presentation does not merely create laughs; it simultaneously reveals a more serious problem: how can a closed artistic tradition find the possibility of dialogue with a reality undergoing drastic social change? Wang Jie points out that "the tragic and the comic in life are actually presented in a fused form within a specific historical time and space"—this judgment precisely captures the aesthetic substance of this conflict.

The third conflict comes from the troupe being repeatedly pulled back and forth by the two armies. The PLA leaves, and the Nationalist corps arrives, also wanting to "boost morale." Either side's "host" might shoot the troupe for having performed for the other side. This conflict pushes Tong Xiaozhang into the most deadly predicament: there is no "safe path" to take. The three conflicts compress simultaneously, forming an airtight structure of predicament, and tragic dramatic tension is thereby generated.

3. The Irreversibility of Action and the Generation of Character: The Internalization of Tragic Spirit

(1) Three Irreversible Actions

The first action is breaking the rules to perform The White-Haired Girl. After reading the script, the musician Shao Wu is deeply moved; the tragic fate of "Yang Bailao selling his daughter to pay debts and drinking brine to commit suicide" reminds him of his father and his own fate, generating strong empathy with the characters' destinies. Driven by this empathetic force, Tong Xiaozhang agrees to the performance. This action is irreversible: once he performs, he changes from "a troupe leader who only sings Kunqu" to "a troupe head who sings everything."

The second action is personally playing Huang Shiren. When the troupe's laosheng finds excuses to refuse the villain role, Tong Xiaozhang takes it on himself. He plays it so convincingly that he is "shot and wounded by a soldier in the audience." Chen Peisi incorporates the real experience of his father Chen Qiang into this segment, endowing this action with historical weight beyond fiction. The tragedy of this plot lies in: "playing it too convincingly" becomes a crime, and "rules" become both absurd and heroic in the face of gun muzzles.[5]

The third action is singing "A Dream of Butterflies" at gunpoint. The Nationalist intelligence officer wants to shoot Tong Peiyun and He Fengqi; at gunpoint, the two "neither scream nor grovel, but gaze at each other hand in hand and sing a melodious and splendid aria." The soldiers who were about to pull the trigger find themselves unable to shoot before this vocal art where "love can cause death, and death can revive." This is the highest point in the action chain: when all "realistic actions" fail, art itself becomes action.

(2) The Completion of the Character Arc and the Generation of Tragic Spirit

Tong Xiaozhang's initial character label is "rules above all." He "puts rules first; the troupe has the troupe's rules: having accepted someone's deposit, one must sing for them; having promised someone a performance, one must respect first come, first served." But each of these three actions creates cracks within "rules": the first action tilts rules from "professional codes" toward "empathy"; the second action turns rules into something that must be defended at a cost; the third action

completes a fundamental transformation—"a promised performance must be sung" changes from "a promise to the host" to "a promise to heaven and earth, to the dead, and to one's own profession."

Tong Xiaozhang's character arc is not a change from "conservative" to "progressive," but from "a person who upholds professional rules" to "a person who lives the very act of upholding rules as faith." Wang Jie points out that under conditions of war, "the troupe still upholds the basic principles (rules) of doing things and being a person in Chinese culture, manifesting a kind of sublimity in modern life." This "sublimity" is precisely the internalization of tragic spirit: rules are no longer external constraints but internal backbone. Tragic spirit here completes a key transformation—it is no longer merely external to the character's situation (war, survival predicament) but internalized as the character's spiritual quality (the upholding of rules becomes faith), thereby acquiring a more profound aesthetic power.

4. Heavy Snow Fills the Empty Mountains: The Scene Construction of the Ending and the Aesthetic Sublimation of Tragic Spirit

(1) The Composition of the Ending Scene

The final chapter of the play is a highly distilled stage scene: the battle has ended, countless lives have perished, and amid heavy snow, the ancient stage stands alone upon the ruins left by war. Tong Xiaozhang stands alone on the vast, empty stage in the wind and snow, saying, "A debt of a performance, a deal I accepted from you, we must sing it—this is the rule set by the patriarch." Then Liu Mengmei and Du Liniang appear on the stage in the wilderness, and the melody of "A Dream of Butterflies" rises again. Chang Shaokun—the theater fan who wanted to play the "Sleeping Demon God" in the opening—now plays the Sleeping Demon God, leading twelve spirits onto the stage to listen to the opera, echoing the twelve flower spirits in The Peony Pavilion. Throughout the entire county, no living person has heard the scene "Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream" from The Peony Pavilion. Only the dead, each step a returning spirit.

In the swirling snow of the ending, a question and answer: "What is that vast white expanse over there? — A grave. Whose grave? — Ours." This dialogue completes, in the simplest possible way, the transition from individual fate to collective memory. As one commentary notes, the ending "is dedicated to all lovers of theater, above and below heaven, in both the yin and yang realms, regardless of political stance or class affiliation."

Visually, "heavy snow" constitutes an image of profound classical Chinese aesthetic significance. The heavy snow covers the ruins of war, the bones, and the bloodstains, returning everything to "a vast white expanse, the earth truly clean." This white is both the color of death and the color of purification. The isolation of the stage in the snow creates a highly symbolic space—it is the last stronghold of cultural memory amid the ruins of history. "At the end, accompanied by the swirling snow, the clear and melodious The Peony Pavilion is sung on the stage, placing a faint hope within desolation, displaying the warm light of art and humanity."

Auditorily, the melody of The Peony Pavilion: "A Dream of Butterflies" from Kunqu opera resounds in the theater, forming a sharp contrast with the coarse and intense arias of The White-Haired Girl in the first half. The Kunqu aria "such beautiful companions, like flowing water and fleeting years" echoes over the vast ruins, no longer a "performance to boost morale" for either side, but sung for the dead, for heaven and earth, for opera itself. One commentary notes that the Kunqu at the end is "the most expressive and stunning touch in the entire play," which "uses art to soothe the pain brought by the chaos of war and to awaken the discovery of humanity."

Spatially, the ending completes an exquisite circularity: at the opening, Chang Shaokun asks his servant, "In the scene "A Dream of Butterflies", there is a flower spirit—do you think I look like one?" At the end, he plays the Sleeping Demon God leading twelve spirits onto the stage to listen to

the opera, echoing the twelve flower spirits of The Peony Pavilion. This echo (implicitly corresponds to) the spiritual trajectory of Du Liniang, who "dies for a dream and is reborn through it": Tong Xiaozhang "dies" through opera (his identity as "a troupe leader who upholds rules" is killed by war and gunfire) and is "reborn" through opera (as a person who lives rules as faith, standing once more on the stage). As one commentator notes, the entire play "uses the classical opera The Peony Pavilion: "A Dream of Butterflies" as its meta-narrative blueprint to structure the whole play," and the singing of The Peony Pavilion on the ancient stage at the end both constitutes the open ending of the stage play and, through the freehand techniques of opera, lets the departed walk around the stage, resolving the fates of the characters.

(3) The Ending as the Core Device for the Aesthetic Sublimation of Tragic Spirit

The function of the ending in dramatic structure goes far beyond "concluding the plot." It substantively constitutes the most core "event" of the entire play—Tong Xiaozhang, on the ruins, performs a play for the dead that no one watches. This event is not the endpoint of the plot but the starting point of meaning. All the preceding conflicts—transmitting versus changing the opera, Kunqu versus The White-Haired Girl, the two armies versus the troupe—are all transcended in this ending. When the only ones sitting in the audience are the souls of the dead, for whom the opera is sung, what opera is sung, and to which camp it is sung all cease to matter. What matters is only this: the opera was sung.

This ending completes a triple reversal. The first is the reversal of emotional tone: from comedic absurdity and clamor to tragic solemnity and tranquility. The second is the reversal of value order: the "useful/useless" and "correct/incorrect" previously defined by war and ideology are thoroughly suspended, leaving only the simplest choice of "to sing or not to sing." The third is the reversal of narrative logic: all preceding events are about "breaking" rules, while the ending returns to the very origin of rules—"a promised performance must be sung." But this "rule" is no longer the original professional code of "having taken a deposit, one cannot accept a new performance," but a faith forged through all the actions that broke the rules.

(4) The Multiple Metaphors of "Return of the Spirit" and the Final Generation of Tragic Spirit

The most intriguing treatment in the ending lies in the setting of "only the dead listen to the opera." No living person has heard "Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream" from The Peony Pavilion; only the souls of the dead have heard this scene—soldiers, common people, and all individuals who perished in historical violence. This setting (implicitly corresponds to) the core image of Du Liniang's "return of the spirit" in The Peony Pavilion. Luo Ting and Liang Xiaochang point out in their research that, facing the impact of modern culture and mass popular culture, traditional opera is falling into the predicament of gradually losing its appeal, and media such as stage drama provide traditional opera with a breakthrough opportunity for cross-media return. They treat "A Dream of Butterflies" as a typical case of the "cross-media return" of opera, and the snow-covered stage at the end is precisely the aesthetic crystallization of this "return."[2]

"Return of the spirit" here has at least three layers of meaning. The first is the return of artistic form: after undergoing the "transformation" of The White-Haired Girl, Kunqu opera is presented once again in its original form as The Peony Pavilion—a return to the artistic essence. The second is the return of the character's spirit: after undergoing the crushing of war and the tearing of identity, Tong Xiaozhang returns to the most fundamental belief—"a promised performance must be sung"—a sublimation of professional ethics. The third is the return of cultural memory: after everything has been destroyed by war, opera becomes the last carrier of cultural memory; those spirits pacing around the stage are like cultural memory refusing to disperse amid the ruins of history.

(5) The Significance of the Ending: Aesthetic Sublimation from Structural Tragedy to Faith-Based Tragedy

Chen Peisi explicitly states: "The final ending of "A Dream of Butterflies" is tragic; this is beyond doubt." But the power of this tragedy lies precisely in: Tong Xiaozhang did not win, the troupe did not win, Kunqu did not win. Yet that rule—"a promised performance must be sung"—is sung on the ruins, in the snow, before an audience of only ghosts. The "A Dream of Butterflies" at the end is not consolation but a witness. It proves that something repeatedly crushed and torn throughout the play has ultimately stood firm. The way it stands firm is: one person, in a place where there is nothing, finishes singing the line that should be sung.[6]

The reason this ending possesses transcendent power is that it does not evade tragedy but simultaneously extracts something akin to faith from tragedy. It is not cheap optimism—the dead will not revive, the ruins will not be rebuilt, and the predicament of Kunqu will not disappear because of one performance. But it is also not thorough nihilism—when Tong Xiaozhang stands in the snow and says, "A debt of a performance, a deal I accepted from you, we must sing it," a transcendent force is born from the ruins. This force belongs neither to any political camp nor to any ideology; it belongs to a craftsman's simplest and most profound commitment to his own profession.

Wang Jie summarizes "A Dream of Butterflies" as a "modern tragic life experience," pointing out that it "expresses and presents tragic conflicts of significant import through comedic form." The ending is the highest realization of this aesthetic strategy: it wraps the deepest sorrow in the most poetic manner, and reaches the most intense shock in the quietest way. In the image of heavy snow filling the empty mountains, the dramatic spirit of "love can cause death, and death can revive" attains its purest expressive form. Tragic spirit thereby completes a fundamental aesthetic sublimation: from "structural tragedy" (the character's struggle amid war and survival predicament) to "faith-based tragedy" (the character, in the simplest way—finishing singing the opera that should be sung—completes the guardianship of cultural memory). This is not the dissolution of tragedy but its purification.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of dramaturgy, the success of "A Dream of Butterflies" lies in its strict adherence to the internal logic of "events break the balance → conflicts force choices → actions exact a price → the price settles into character": the progression of the event chain constructs tragic dramatic tension, the compression of triple conflicts forms an airtight structure of predicament, the three irreversible actions tear open the multiple shells of the character's personality, and the closing scene "Heavy Snow Fills the Empty Mountains" condenses all of this into a highly distilled stage image. Tong Xiaozhang's spiritual transformation is not proclaimed through dialogue but grows naturally through one irreversible action after another—from breaking rules to perform The White-Haired Girl, to personally playing Huang Shiren and being shot, to singing "A Dream of Butterflies" at gunpoint. Each action tears away a layer of the old self, and finally, in the snow of the ending, a person who lives rules as faith rises from the ruins.

From the perspective of tragic spirit, the "Heavy Snow Fills the Empty Mountains" at the end of "A Dream of Butterflies" is not only a visual image but also a philosophical proposition: when all external orders, meanings, and values have been destroyed by violence, what is still worth upholding? The play's answer is: the opera itself. Not the political function of opera, not the commercial value of opera, not even the aesthetic form of opera, but the simplest promise: "a promised performance must be sung." This promise requires no audience, no applause, not even understanding—it requires only one person, in a place where there is nothing, to finish singing the line that should be sung.

This may be precisely the most profound revelation of "A Dream of Butterflies": the

transmission of culture does not rely on museum-style preservation, nor on ideological indoctrination, but on every "craftsman" transforming "rules" from external constraints into internal faith through concrete action. When faith resounds on the ruins, heavy snow fills the empty mountains, yet the opera is not ended. The aesthetic generation of tragic spirit reaches its completed form at this moment: not heroic destruction, but after destruction, still singing the line that should be sung, to the end.

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