Salomé: A Tragic Muse to Modern Chinese Drama

Xiaowei Wang
Soochow University, China

Abstract

It has frequently been claimed that there is a lack of tragedy in the tradition of Chinese literature. The modern Chinese tragedy is very much the result of influence from the Western theatre. This essay examines Oscar Wilde’s tragedy Salomé as an example of the significant role that Western tragedy plays in the constructing of modern tragedy as an independent genre in China. Salomé, regarded as a tragedy in the Greek manner, with its inheritance of the tradition and elements of classical Greek tragedy in terms of setting, plot, morality, ending, and style, has enabled modern Chinese dramatists to establish connections with the tradition of Western tragedy. At the same time, Wilde’s rebellious protagonist has also given modern Chinese dramatists inspiration to retrieve femme fatales from traditional Chinese literature and transfigure them into the New Woman of the post-May Fourth era. With its iconoclastic spirit and aesthetic style, Salomé has become a trope for Chinese modernity, which is linked closely with the anti-traditional consciousness and the drive to modernize Chinese theatre and literature for the building of a new China. Therefore, it is safe to say that the deep impact of Western tragedy on modern Chinese theatre would not have been possible without the mediation of Wilde’s Salomé, and that this is true especially for modern Chinese tragedy.

Keywords: Salomé, Oscar Wilde, tragedy, modern Chinese theatre, modernity
1. Introduction

In ancient Greece, tragedy was regarded as the noblest literary form and the most philosophical and serious artistic representation of life and history as it dealt with questions that seemed most profound to define mankind. Later scholars also claimed it as “the summit of poetical art, both on account of the greatness of its effect and the difficulty of its achievement” (Schopenhauer, 2016, p. 333). Aristotle defined tragedy in the following terms:

> Tragedy is a representation of an action of a superior kind—grand, and complete in itself—presented in embellished language, in distinct forms in different parts, performed by actors rather than told by a narrator, effecting, through pity and fear, the purification of such emotions. (Aristotle, 2013, p. 28)

The greatest tragedies are also among the most outstanding works in the history of world literature. However, despite the great tradition of Chinese literature, it is often argued that there is no tragedy in China. Jiang Guanyun (蒋观云) and Wang Guowei (王国维) were among the first to make this claim. In Jiang’s essay “China’s Drama World” (1904), he held up the social function of tragedy, and through the comparison of Western and Chinese theater he argued that “a major deficiency in Chinese theatre is that there is only comedy but no tragedy”. Therefore, he maintained that in order to “save the Chinese theatre . . . the genre of tragedy should be developed” (Jiang, 1960, p. 51). Around the same time, Wang Guowei introduced in the essay “Comments on Dream of the Red Chamber” (1904) his views about Chinese dramatic tradition and his understanding about tragedy, which was heavily influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer’s theory of tragedy. In this essay, he singled out the novel Dream of the Red Chamber as “contrary to all comedies . . . a complete tragic piece” (Wang, 2014, p. 144), while stating that other works could not be counted as tragedies mainly due to their “grand reunion” (大团圆) endings or happy finale, a common feature in traditional Chinese literature.

The notion that there is a lack of tragedy in the Chinese literary tradition was highlighted around the May Fourth Movement period, as the proponents of China’s New Culture Movement linked it to the deficiency of the national character.
Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培) criticized the lack of tragedy and the prevalence of clichéd plots and “grand reunion” endings in traditional theatre (Cai, 1997, p. 501); Hu Shi (胡适) also asserted that “what Chinese literature lacks most is the sense of tragedy as both novels and plays are with none other than ‘grand reunion’ endings” and attributed it to the deficiency of Chinese people’s character (Hu, 1918). Hu’s views were echoed by Lu Xun (鲁迅), who also dismissed the “grand reunion” endings as a literary ploy for deception, a result of the lack of courage to look life in the face (Lu, 1981, p. 316), contributing to his negative critique of the national character.

As theatre was seen by Hu and other May Fourth reformers as an important tool for China’s modernization agenda, the role of tragedy has been further highlighted as being able to inspire, awaken, and liberate the nation by rectifying the deficiency of the Chinese character (Hu, 1918). They believed the old theatre with “grand reunion” endings was anti-tragic and more importantly, ran contrary to the anti-traditional ethos of that period; thus, it became imperative for them to create and develop modern Chinese tragedy as a new genre.

The question then was how. As the reformers of that period looked to the West for social and political models, modern dramatists regarded Western tragedy as the model for their creation of Chinese tragedy. Amidst the efforts to learn from Western tragedy, they introduced and translated many tragic works into Chinese for reference. Among these, Salomé had a wide and substantive influence on the constructing of both the theme and form of modern Chinese tragedy (Xiao, 2000, p. 123) and it was seen as “the foreign ‘alternative’ to the prototype the Chinese dramatists are seeking” to build (Wang, 2001, p. 138). But why was Salomé taken as a model for the creation of modern Chinese tragedy? Was it chosen at random? Or was it chosen on purpose? I argue that the convergence of its classical tragic style and rebellious spirit was exactly what modern dramatists were looking for at that time. Hence, it was chosen to serve as a tragic muse to modern Chinese drama.

2. The Tragedy of Salomé

Salomé is the only tragedy created by Oscar Wilde in his lifetime, and as the epitomization of his aesthetic views, this one-act play is widely recognized as both an anomaly and a crown jewel in the oeuvre of Wilde. It was first written in French
in 1891 and then translated into English in 1894, with Aubrey Beardsley’s erotic illustrations. Oscar Wilde never saw it performed as it was banned in England on the basis that it was illegal to depict biblical characters on stage.

The tragedy was based on the biblical story recorded in the New Testament, in the Gospels of Matthew [14:3-12] and Mark [6:17-29] about the martyrdom of Saint John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, who died for his defense of the uncompromising holiness of the Christian faith and moral truth. According to the Bible, John the Baptist censured the adulterous relationship of Jewish tetrarch Herod Antipas and Herodias, who was the wife of Herod’s half-brother, and insisted that they repent of their sins and separate. Inflamed by his open condemnations, Herod gave orders to have John arrested and put him into prison. During John’s imprisonment, Herodias, who held a grudge against him, took advantage of Herod’s sexual interest in her daughter Salomé by asking Salomé to dance at Herod’s birthday celebration in exchange for John’s death. Therefore, it’s clear that John’s death in the original biblical story was due to the viciousness of Herodias and the lust of Herod. Salomé was not portrayed as having an independent identity and subjectivity, but only as succumbing to the will of her mother. In other words, Salomé was merely a tool of her mother’s vengeance. As a supporting role in the story, Salomé was only sketchily described, and even her name was not clearly recorded. However, this biblical story has become a source of creation for countless artists in the history of Western art, especially during the nineteenth century, where she was appropriated by European Decadence as a representative myth of eroticism, taboo, and transgression (Becker-Leckrone, 1995, p. 239). Artists and writers such as Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880), Joris Karl Huysmans (1848-1907), Jules Laforgue (1860-1887), and Mules Massenet (1842-1912) have all participated in the rewriting and interpretation of this biblical story through poetry, novels, and operas; however, in these artistic creations, Salomé continued to largely exist as a murderous tool for her mother Herodias, and was not really given strong subjective consciousness.

It was not until Wilde’s rewriting of the story that Salomé was given an independent identity and a strong desire, a radical departure from the narrative focus and logic of the biblical story and previous literary and artistic versions. The passive supporting role of Salomé became the absolute protagonist, driving the development
of the plot. Though inheriting the description in the Bible that John the Baptist had been imprisoned for opposing and condemning Herod marrying Herodias, Wilde, at the very beginning, drew readers’ attention to Salomé through the dialogue between the young Syrian and the page of Herodias. The plot then went on as Salomé took a perverse fancy for Jokanaan (John the Baptist) after hearing his voice, and praised his body in bold and sensuous language. Her unrequited sexual desire, however, was categorically rejected and cursed by Jokanaan. For revenge, she asked Herod to behead Jokanaan by offering to perform the “Dance of the Seven Veils”. The climax of the tragedy was that Salomé held the severed head of Jokanaan and kissed his cold lips frantically, and continued to confess her perverted desire to the bloody head. In the end, Herod could no longer bear the madness of Salomé and ordered soldiers to kill her with a shield.

Wilde’s Salomé has long been regarded by many critics as “a drama in the Greek manner” (Zagona, 1960, p. 128), which embodied the essence of classical Western tragedy in terms of setting, character, plot, ending, and style. Classical Greek tragedy focuses on the sense of distance of space and time and often borrows from ancient legends and myths. The sacred and supernatural atmosphere of tragedy arouses curiosity and respect for the tragic characters. The story of Salomé took place in the ancient times of Jesus. The scene was set on a moonlit night in Herod’s palace where the prophet Jokanaan was jailed. This spatial and temporal setting enhanced the mysterious and gloomy atmosphere, typical of Greek tragedy. The classical “unities” of time, space, and action advocated by classical Greek tragedy have also been perfectly followed in this one-act tragedy. Salomé was a self-contained narrative with a clearly marked beginning, middle, and end, with the whole plot unraveled on a moonlit night at the palace.

Protagonists in classical Greek tragedy are rarely commonplace characters but heroes of noble rank, great willpower, and excessive pride; or, they at least “must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous” (Fergusson, 1961, p. 76). The protagonist of Salomé meets that criteria to the extent that she is the stepdaughter of Herod the Jewish tetrarch, thus of noble origin. In an interview with Pall Mall Gazette, Wilde characterized Salomé as being a “great and ennobling subject” and explicitly defined her as “moral and elevating”, “almost chaste”, and of “blazing innocence” (Carrillo, 1979, p. 193). Therefore, although she is sometimes accused
of being a “femme fatale” or criticized for her perverted desires, Salomé, with strong personality and unyielding spirit against traditional ethics, possesses the characteristics of a Greek tragic hero.

The construction of plot for Greek tragedy, according to the principles raised by Aristotle in *Poetics*, should revolve around “fearsome and pitiable events” and only involve “a change not from bad fortune to good, but from good fortune to bad. The cause of the change will not be depravity, but a serious error on the part of a character” (Aristotle, 2013, p. 155). Also, though Aristotle believed that “the traditional stories should not be tampered with”, he stressed that the dramatists needed to “be inventive and make the best use of the traditional material” (p. 159). The original story about Salomé was of course “fearsome and pitiable” as it was based on the death of a biblical figure, but Wilde cast another layer of dread and pity over it as he invented the “error” and death of Salomé. In Wilde’s narration, the fall of Salomé was not because of her vice or badness in nature but her moral character, which has been destroyed by misconduct. She made the error of falling into uncontrollable lust and desire, which led to her destruction, the change from good fortune to bad in the sense of classical Greek tragedy.

The disastrous endings with the deaths of protagonists are common in classical Greek tragedy, which often help to accomplish the catharsis of emotions. Although no previous literary treatment had ever punished Salomé for her perverted desires, Wilde nonetheless invented her death as the end of this tragedy. Salomé’s final declaration of love and the kisses she gives to the severed head, as well as her death, were all Wilde’s contributions to the Salomé myth. This is also Wilde’s borrowing from the endings of death and destruction in classical Greek tragedy.

The style, or the literary quality of the expression of tragedy, is also an important element for classical Greek tragedy. The story of the tragedy should be presented in the embellished language, “language with rhythm and melody” (Aristotle, 2013, p. 113). The style of *Salomé* was conspicuously poetic and ornamental, with a prevalence of figurative language such as metaphors and similes. The rhythmic and melodious language pattern has given *Salomé* “an aria-like singing” (Guan, 2009, p. 86), and indeed Wilde himself claimed that he wrote *Salomé* as a piece of lyric poetry.

In addition to its classical style by modeling the Greek tragedies, *Salomé* was also reckoned as a bold practice and exploration of symbolist, decadent, and modernist
aesthetics, representing Wilde’s “transgressive aesthetic in its ability to destabilize the audience’s ideals of gender, desire, and power” (Price, 1996, p. 162). Therefore, it holds a unique position in the history of modern Western literature, as it is both a canonical text which inspires more than a century’s worth of creative cultural reproductions, adaptations, and transformations in various genres, and, for its decadent style, one of the most criticized plays in the history of theatre, to the extent that it has been a byword for controversy.

3. Interpretation of Salomé in Modern China

Now let us look at how Salomé was received and interpreted in modern China. It was first introduced to Chinese readers in 1904 by Chen Duxiu (陈独秀), a pioneer of China’s New Culture Movement. As early as 1915, Chen introduced Wilde’s Salomé in his preface to Su Manshu’s (苏曼殊) novel The Crimson Silk (1915), which is an account of tragic stories about the forbidden love between monks and their lovers. In the preface, Chen focused his discussion on the themes of love and death permeating Su’s writing, and claimed “the two most difficult issues one might encounter in life are death and love” (Chen, 1989, p. 542). He then referred to Wilde’s Salomé, as he saw a parallel in the theme of these two works and applauded Wilde for being able to perfectly capture love and death in his writings.

In 1917, Wilde’s literary reputation in China was further promoted when he was hailed by Chen in the influential essay “On Literature Revolution” as a literary giant in the world who “openly and boldly . . . declared war to the devils” (Chen, 1917, p. 1). Obviously, as a man with rebellious spirit, and battling against an oppressive feudalistic tradition, what Chen saw both in the play and the playwright was not the excessive and erotic style, but the bold pursuit of love and its anti-traditional spirit. In his eyes, Salomé, instead of being an archetypical femme fatale, was a role model of the New Woman who had the passion and courage to fight for love and freedom and to break with repressive traditions and conventions. Thus, the redefinition of Salomé fit well with the modernization agenda of that era. Due to Chen’s interpretation and extolment of Salomé and Wilde, most Chinese readers were oblivious to the decadent side of the play and the playwright. On the contrary, they were fascinated by the iconoclastic and rebellious spirit, which was regarded as an inspiration for the renewal
of Chinese society and culture.

After the initial introduction by Chen, *Salomé* saw its first Chinese translation in the early 1920s, and afterwards there were many renditions published during the following two decades, among which the most influential and popular one was that of Tian Han (田汉). During that period, there were fervent interests both in Wilde and aestheticism. With the early introduction of Wilde’s comedies, and especially with the successful staging of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* by Hong Shen (洪深), Oscar Wilde had already been established as one of the most popular foreign dramatists in China. Meanwhile, with the spread of aestheticism in China, many were interested in *Salomé* as it epitomized Wilde’s aesthetic ideals. Thanks to the interests both in Wilde and aestheticism during that period, *Salomé* successfully attracted the attention of writers and readers alike. Interestingly, the translation and staging of *Salomé* also contributed to the reputation of Wilde and the reception of aestheticism in China. In the 1920s, not only there was a wave of “Wilde-mania” (Zhou, 2000, p. 98), but also with the frequent discussion and appropriation of the aesthetic elements in *Salomé*, “the spread of aestheticism in China reached its zenith” (Xu, 1996, p. 171).

*Salomé* was most warmly received by the members of the romantic Creation Society (创造社) represented by Tian Han and Guo Moruo (郭沫若) in the 1920s. In his poem entitled “The Night Song of Misanthrope”, which was put at the beginning of Tian Han’s rendition of *Salomé* as a motto, Guo Moruo revealed his admiration for Wilde by assimilating the style and theme of the tragedy in it. This poem, composed of two stanzas, approximated a surrealist painting with its rich imagery and imagination. In the first stanza, Guo painted a fantasy world with a lonely persona in an ivory boat wearing a white peacock robe and looking at the boundless sea. The contrast between the sober “self” and the sleeping “other” revealed the conflicts between the poet’s pursuit of art and the mundanity of life. The image of the “white peacock robe” was clearly borrowed from the famous illustration of *The Peacock Skirt* by Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898) for *Salomé*. In the second stanza, we could see more clearly Guo’s identification of the aesthetic theme of *Salomé* as he expressed his preference for dying for transient and dazzling beauty over living in darkness and gloom, “Towards the ‘infinite’ fall! Advance! …Advance! Do not disappoint the moon in front of me” (Wilde, 2013, p. 3). The Wildean influence on this poem was noticed by many scholars at that time. It was hailed by Wen Yiduo (闻一多) as “a
special and surprise exception” (Wen, 1923) to Guo’s poems for having successfully combined the passion of the West and the tranquility of the East. Zhang Wentian also commented, “Guo Moruo’s introductory poem to Salomé revealed that he truly understood Wilde” (Zhang & Wang, 1922, p. 2). This poem was later included in Guo’s most influential anthology of poems entitled Goddess (1921).

Later, Salomé and Wilde’s writings attracted wider attention across the literary spectrum as it sparked the famous debate on “art for art’s sake” and “art for life’s sake”. Despite different interpretations and perspectives, the rebellious spirit and unyielding struggles of Salomé were fully explored and resonated deeply with the intellectuals who sought to break with the traditions and establish a new cultural identity for China. Therefore, the unconventional discourse of Salomé was employed as a gesture of resistance against the orthodoxy, offering a socially subversive and culturally transformative interpretation of what literature and art could or should be.

The classical style of Salomé has also attracted the attention of many Chinese scholars. Zhang Wentian commented on the excessive linguistic style and ending of Salomé. He held that the “language in Salomé was similar to [Wilde’s] poems” and the death of Salomé at the end of the tragedy evoked passions and emotions towards beauty and love (Zhang & Wang, 1922, p. 2). Yuan Changying (袁昌英) commended its classical style regarding the mysterious setting, completeness of plot, and lyrical language (Yuan, 1945, p. 35).

In 1929, Salomé enjoyed a sensational reception in China with the performance staged by Tian Han’s theatrical group South China Society (南国社), which started a wave of Salomé mania in Chinese theatre. The production was extremely popular with the audience, but it also elicited harsh criticism. Mao Dun (茅盾) and other members of the realist Literary Association (文学研究会) penned bitter attacks both on the play and aestheticism. Mao Dun criticized the aesthetic philosophy which contained in Salomé as “unethical” and representing the art of “the parasitic aristocrats and loan sharks” (Mao, 1935, p. 245). Hu Luo (胡洛) also portrayed Salomé as a representation of the decadence and hedonism (Hu, 1937, p.114) of bourgeois morality. Liang Shiqiu (梁实秋), the prominent translator and scholar of the Crescent Moon Society (新月社), also blasted it for its hedonism and sentimentalism, and deemed its production a waste of effort (Liang, 1929, p. 95). From the mid 1930s all the way to the early 1980s, due to its incompatibility with the dominant political ideology and literary discourse
in China, the initial warm reception of Salomé was followed by a long eclipse and oblivion.

It is true that the reception of Salomé was characterized by contradiction and paradox, with both adulation and criticism. But putting aside the disputes over its aesthetics, the radical personality and unyielding passion of the character caught the imagination of intellectuals of that era. To some extent, they redefined Salomé as a revolutionary and rebellious tragic hero who could help to build a new national identity. One can argue that the modern dramatists were first drawn by the rebellious spirit in Salomé, but after delving deeper into it, they discovered and also grew interested in its classical tragic style. This coincided with their urge to seek a model for creating modern tragedies at that time. No wonder Salomé inspired so many Chinese transfigurations in the 1920s, both on and off stage, and contributed to the birth of modern Chinese tragedy.

4. The “Salomé” Mode in China’s Modern Tragedy

As a large number of tragedies created in China during that period employed and appropriated resources from Salomé, the “Salomé” mode not only contributed to the birth of modern tragedy, but also affected the development and aesthetic choices of the modernity of new Chinese literature (Ni, 2007, p. 193). Salomé has become a tragic muse to modern Chinese drama in the following aspects:

4.1 The internalization of conflicts

Traditional Chinese drama mainly focuses on external conflicts revolving around the helplessness and involuntary actions of weak and good-hearted protagonists after being bullied and suppressed, while inner conflicts deriving from the desires and passions of the protagonists are often neglected. In classical Western tragedy, however, the protagonists’ unflagging determination and death-defying struggles carried only by the force of their own will are at the core of the conflicts.

Modeling their creations on Salomé, many Chinese playwrights in the 1920s focused on the protagonists’ unyielding struggles for love and artistic ideals in works such as Tian Han’s Violin and Rose (1920), Death of a Noted Actor (1927), and Echoes of the Ancient Pond (1928), Wang Tongzhao’s Victory after Death (1924), Bai
Wei’s (白薇) Linli (1925) and *A Visit to Qingwen* (1926), and Hu Yepin’s (胡也频) *Madman* (1928).

Tian Han, prior to his translation of *Salomé*, has already accepted the influence of *Salomé* during his stay in Japan, where it was extremely popular. In his early works, he created a series of tragic characters who sacrificed their lives for beauty and art. His debut work *Violin and Rose* told a story about a strong-willed folksinger, Liu Cui, and her lover Qin Xinfang. In order to finance Qin to study music in Paris, Liu sacrificed her own artistic dream and decided to marry a rich businessman as his concubine. However, after breaking up, Liu and Qin realized art and life without love was meaningless, so they decided to give up everything for their love. However, this meant giving up their artistic pursuit, revealing the seemingly unresolvable conflict between life and art. In the tragedy *Death of a Noted Actor*, Tian Han portrayed a famous Peking Opera actor Liu Zhensheng, who had deep feelings for Peking Opera and placed high hopes on his talented female disciple Liu Fengxian. To his dismay, though, she gave up art and fell for worldly temptations. In contrast, though destitute and sick, Liu continued his unrelenting pursuit of art and never yielded, even to the threat of death.

Tian’s one-act play *Echoes of the Ancient Pond* also reflected the conflict between life and art, and even touched upon the philosophical aspect of this conflict. The female protagonist Meiying never appeared in person in the play, but the entire plot was constructed around her. The male protagonist was a poet who advocated the superiority of art over life, which was reflected in his determination and effort to transform Meiying from a dance girl into the embodiment of art and beauty. But after her metamorphosis in seclusion, Meiying was inexplicably drawn to her balcony, where she heard voices calling her and urging her to jump into the pond beneath. She regarded the echoes of the ancient pond as a representation of art and wondered what kind of echoes the pond beneath would make when she “kissed” it by jumping into it. After he found out what happened to Meiying, the poet also jumped into the ancient pond, despite the persuasion of his old mother, who represented life and reality. In this play, Meiying’s response to the temptation of the echoes of the pond, just as Salomé to John’s kiss, reflected the conflict between life and art. Meiying and the poet’s jump into the pond and Salomé’s kiss on John’s severed head are both the triumph of art over life, soul over body.
While Tian Han’s works mainly focused on the conflicts between life and art, the three-act tragedy *Madman* created by Hu Yepin revolved around the themes of love and death. It fully articulated the pursuit of love and erotic desires of the protagonist. The female protagonist Manli fell in love with Danlai, a young musician, but her love was rejected by Danlai. In order to possess his love, she killed him before committing suicide. This whole tragedy was constructed around the fetishist desires of the female protagonist, which was seen by many as an imitation of *Salomé* (Xiao, 2000, p. 128).

With the spread of aestheticism during the 1920s, the interpretation of conflicts in *Salomé* has expanded from only revolving around the conflicts between love and death (Chen, 1989, p. 542) to the unrestrained passions and single-minded pursuit of love, beauty, and art (Tian, 1993, p. 211), thus contributing to the shift of conflicts from external to internal.

4.2 The characterization of rebellious women

*Salomé* serves as an important subtext behind the characterization of the iconoclastic protagonists in many modern Chinese tragedies with a paradigmatic image of “rebellious women”. Under the historical and political background of the New Culture Movement, the emancipation of women was seen to be a critical means of breaking with the culturally entrenched hierarchies and feudal heritage in order to build a new and modern China. Therefore, *Salomé* was taken as a role model and prototype for the writing of the New Woman by Chinese writers. Many playwrights assimilated the rebellious nature of *Salomé* in the creation of their own protagonists, and through their protagonists’ relentless fight against oppression to advocate iconoclasm, female emancipation, and freedom, furthermore to help build a modernized China. The awakening of the female sexual consciousness was an important aspect for women to shake off the oppressive norms and stereotypes assigned to them, and to assert their rights to modern independence. In the tradition of Chinese theatre, most of the love stories were only about emotions, while sexuality remained a taboo. The sensual description in *Salomé*, however, allowed modern Chinese drama to extend the realm from love and romance to sexuality. Under its influence, many Chinese playwrights transgressed gender conventions and subverted the roles of those women who were considered the “femme fatales” in traditional Chinese literature and culture, making them instead tragic protagonists with revolutionary passion and moral...
courage, among which Guo Moruo’s drama collection *Three Rebellious Women* (1926), Wang Duqing’s (王独清) *The Death of Empress Yang* (1926) and *The Story of Diaochan* (1928), Ouyang Yuqian’s (欧阳予倩) *Pan Jinlian* (1927), and Xu Baoyan’s (徐葆炎) *Da Ji* (1929) are the most representative.

In his poem written as the preface to Tian Han’s rendition of *Salomé*, Guo Moruo had already expressed his empathy for the rebellious and anti-traditional female protagonist. However, it was not until his creation of the historical trilogy comprising of *Wang Zhaojun* (1923), *Zhuo Wenjun* (1923), and *Nie Ying* (1925) that he actually combined his inspiration from *Salomé* with Chinese elements and his own unique literary and artistic treatment. Guo was so deeply influenced by *Salomé* that some critics even accused him of copying *Salomé* in his own plays. For example, Su Xuelin (苏雪林) once openly censured him:

In his play *Wang Zhaojun*, the Han Emperor kissed the severed head of Mao Yanshou because his cheek had been slapped by the female protagonist Wang Zhaojun. Guo plagiarized this plot from *Salomé*’s kissing of the severed head of John the Baptist. In the play *Wang Zhaojun* (author’s note: actually should be the play *Zhuo Wenjun* instead of *Wang Zhaojun*), Hong Xiao killed her lover Qin Er who had betrayed her before committing suicide. This copied the suicide of the Syrian soldier in *Salomé*. In the play *Nie Ying*, the plot about the fight among the soldiers also copied *Salomé*. (Su, 1983, p. 72)

Interestingly, despite her strong criticism of Guo, Su Xuelin herself unwittingly reproduced many elements from *Salomé*. Her tragedy *The Eyes of Kunala* (1935) transformed Jingrong (the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit name Tīṣyarakṣitā), King Aśoka’s Queen, who desired her stepson Prince Kunāla and had his eyes plucked out after having been rejected, into a new Salomé (Ni, 2019, p. 31). As Wilde’s *Salomé* has its story originated from the Bible, *The Eyes of Kunala* is also based on a religious legend, originating from the ancient Sanskrit text Aśokāvadāna. Su even quoted the words from the final monologue of *Salomé*, “Ah! Thou wouldst not suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan. Well! I will kiss it now” (Su, 1935, p. 862), as the epigraph of her play, which speaks to the kindred spirit of these two plays. Both of the protagonists, Salomé and Jingrong, were innocent princesses before they fell into their
obsessive carnal and spiritual desires. Just like Salomé, whose obsession was merely reinforced after Jokanaan’s repeated rejections, Jingrong was also vitriolically rejected by Prince Kunala and was even reviled by him as a “shameless . . . slut” (Su, 1935, p. 866). In order to satisfy her uncontrollable desires, she plucked out his eyes and played with them in her hands, reminiscent of Salomé’s kissing of Jokanaan’s severed head. Jingrong was the reincarnation of Salomé in the East, and they were both femme fatales retrieved from religious texts and reimagined as rebellious women. Their unflinching devotion to passion and desire led them to smash the strictures of ritual and religious propriety.

However, as a female dramatist who emerged from the May Fourth Movement and completely broke free from Confucian code of conduct and gender norms, Su Xuelin paid more attention to feminist narrative than Wilde did. At the end of the play, Jingrong even confronted and challenged the authority of the King with a long and vehement rant against the appalling atrocities he had committed. Su further deconstructed the authority of the King by rewriting the death of Jingrong from being executed in the Indian legend to committing suicide in her play. She used a sarcastic tone in her rebuttal to the King’s accusation, “Your Majesty, if you want to kill me, you just do it. Why bother giving those grandiose remarks about your justice and benevolence? Why must you the powerful exploit trickery to oppress the powerless? Anyway, I’ve had enough of your justice and benevolence” (Su, 1935, p. 882). Su went on to support the feminist narrative by legitimizing Jingrong’s pursuit of desires through Prince Kuṇāla’s plead for her: “She did hurt me, but she did it out of love for me. Sin out of love could be forgiven. My eyes are blinded now, and killing her could not make me see again. So why bother?” (Su, 1935, p. 881).

Among all the plays that featured protagonists retrieved from femme fatales in traditional literature during the 1920s and 1930s, Ouyang Yuqian’s Pan Jinlian (1928) had the most extensive influence. Portrayed both in the sixteenth-century classical novel Water Margin and in the seventeenth-century novel The Plum in the Golden Vase as a sex maniac, Pan Jinlian was the most notorious villainess in classical Chinese literature, making her name synonymous with adultery. But rather than a promiscuous slut and bloodthirsty killer, Ouyang Yuqian’s Pan Jinlian was a sympathetic character, the very victim of male-dominated society. Jinlian’s passion for illicit and impossible love and desire for her brother-in-law Wu Song reminded
us of the infatuation of Salomé towards Jokanaan. Jinlian very well represented the free-spirited New Woman in tune with the ethos of the post-May Fourth era. At the end of the play, when Pan Jinlian and Wu Song found themselves vis-à-vis at the funeral meal for her husband, against Wu Song’s accusations and censure, Pan Jinlian defiantly retorted that though she was the one who poisoned her husband, the real culprits were none other than Wu Song himself and the other men who ruined her life. Thus, she was painted as a fighter against the Confucian confines, while Wu Song was a cruel and hypocritical conformist to traditional morality. As Tian Han commented:

In the final act of Wu Song killing Jinlian, Jinlian ripped open her shirt and responded to Wu Song, “You see, in this snowy chest contains a passionate heart... I gave it to you a long time ago. Now take it!” Apparently, we can see the affinity between her and Salomé. (Tian, 1983, p. 546)

As Wu Song thrust his sword into Jinlian’s chest, the audience did not see justice served; instead they saw the martyrdom of a valiant New Woman who defied death in her pursuit of love and freedom. Many other archetypical “bad women” in traditional Chinese literature and culture have also been rewritten with the Salomé style—an iconoclastic and rebellious touch by modern dramatists. Their desperate rebellion actually derived from their awakening from the inequality and suppression of the male-centered social order of the past.

Besides the discussion about gender discourse and politics, the contradiction and paradox around those protagonists also disentangled them from the stereotypes of tragic characters in traditional Chinese drama. They were neither portrayed as one-dimensional innocents nor villainesses, which echoed Aristotle’s definition about tragic heroes, who “must be neither supremely good nor supremely bad” (Aristotle, 2013, p. 30). The intertwining of the “good and evil” features of these female protagonists helped to construct the modernity of Chinese tragedies with the creation of multi-dimensional characters.

4.3 The poetic style
Salomé also served as a paradigm for the modern Chinese tragedy in terms of its
poetic style. The style of a typical tragedy, Aristotle tells us, should represent the literary quality of its expression. *Salomé* was acclaimed for its richness of language, with the frequent employment of hyperboles, similes, and metaphors. What’s more, the use of interjections and recurring phrases has enhanced its verbal musicality, making it “like a piece of music with recurring motifs . . . the artistic equivalent of the refrains of old ballads” (Wilde, 2000, p. 874).

The poetic style of *Salomé* was also noted by many Chinese scholars during that period. It was regarded as a piece of artwork by the famous poet Zhu Xiang (Zhu, 2017, p. 198). Yuan Changying also commented that “the style of *Salomé* is a wonderful piece of music with all its features. It is a piece of flawless agate. Its lines are melodious, the structure is neat, the imagery is fantastic, and the words are sad and beautiful . . . No other one-act play has achieved this” (Yuan, 1945, p. 35). The influence of *Salomé* on literary expression can be found in many modern Chinese tragic pieces.

Yuan Changying assimilated the inspirations from the style of *Salomé* in her own tragedies. In her tragedy *Southeast Flies the Peacock* (1929), the language with rhythm and melody was very similar to that of *Salomé* (Yu, 2008, p. 265). For example, in the protagonists’ declaration of love before they died for love, Yuan wrote:

Lan: I am willing to follow you to the top of the mountain covered by thousands of layers of white snow, to brace for the freezing wind and to die in your arms! I am willing to follow you to the bottom of the ravine, to drink from the melancholy pond and to die in your arms!

Zhong: I am willing to embrace you under the splendid sunset in the evening! I am willing to hold you above the warm and gentle tide in the afternoon! There…we can have our eternity!

Lan: I am willing to kiss you to death in the fiery white flames of the sunlight! I am willing to enter the sublime with you in the blood-red crater of a volcano! (Yuan, 1985, p. 42)

The employment of parallel sentences was typical in *Salomé*. For example, to express Herod’s desires to Salomé, Wilde wrote:
All that thou askest I will give thee, save one thing only. I will give thee all that is mine, and save only the life of one man. I will give thee the mantle of the high priest. I will give thee the veil of the sanctuary.

While the long sentences helped to build the tension and emotions to a culmination, Wilde also combined them with interjections, recurring phrases, or punchy short sentences, which is shown in the following dialogue between Herod and Salomé:

No, no, it is not that thou desirest…
No, no, thou wouldst not have that… Oh! Oh! Bring wine!… Ah! What would I say?… Ah, I remember it! (Wilde, 2013, p. 177)

A similar rhythmic pattern can be seen in many modern tragedies such as Wang Duqing’s The Death of Empress Yang and Xu Baoyan’s Da Ji. In The Death of Empress Yang, Wang used interjections and short refrains in the female protagonist’s monologue calling for love and freedom:

Oh! Oh! An Lushan, I see you! I see you! I see you armed to the teeth, riding on the horse and commanding numerous soldiers… Oh, you are heroic! You are heroic! I know that your passionate blood is flowing with the gentle life of love… Oh, I love you! Love you! You are strapping and charismatic, automatically evoking delight and admiration. (Wang, 1927, p. 56)

As one of the many translators of Salomé in the 1920s, Xu’s inheritance of Wilde’s linguistic style was clearly reflected in his tragedy Da Ji. In Bi Gan’s lengthy rebuke to King Zhou, a strong beat was given by the frequent repetitions of the phrase “Muddle-headed King! Muddle-headed King! You are talking nonsense!” (Xu, 1929, pp. 57-68). That reminded readers of the recurring phrases of Herod, “Salomé, Salomé, dance for me” (Wilde, 2013, pp. 144-147). The rhythmic pattern enhanced the flow and beat of the dialogue while conveying bursts of strong emotion.

To reflect Salomé’s erotic desires towards Jokanaan, the play was replete with
figurative descriptions about Jokanaan’s physical attributes, with the hyperbolic and exaggerated blazon on his body, hair, and lips:

Thy body is white, like the lilies of a field that the mower hath never mowed. Thy body is white like the snows that lie on the mountains of Judaea, and come down into the valleys. The roses in the garden of the Queen of Arabia are not so white as thy body. Neither the roses of the garden of the Queen of Arabia, the garden of spices of the Queen of Arabia, nor the feet of the dawn when they light on the leaves, nor the breast of the moon when she lies on the breast of the sea... There is nothing in the world so white as thy body. (Wilde, 2013, p. 70)

This kind of excessive language has also been used in many modern Chinese tragedies. For example, in the one-act tragedy of Amnon (1926), by Xiang Peiliang, the protagonist Amnon praised the voice of Tamar, his half-sister and object of lust:

Your voice is as lively as the waters of Jordan, and as soft as the wings of the cherubim. Your voice is like a breeze from Lebanon, with the warmth of the southern sun and the fragrance of the cypress trees on the hills of Lebanon... Deborah’s voice is not as beautiful as yours, and her victory singing over the king of Canaan is not as loud as yours. (Xiang, 1926, p. 68)

The similarity of figurative language used to portray the physical attributes of Jokanaan and Tamar, both as objects of attraction, was conspicuous. The use of exotic expressions such as “mountains of Judaea” and “garden of the Queen of Arabia” in Salomé and “waters of Jordan” and “wings of the cherubim” in Amnon have made “a style solemn and elevated beyond the norm” (Aristotle, 2013, p. 159).

The influence of Salomé’s poetic style contributed to the literary expression of modern Chinese tragedy. Hong Shen has stated, “Since Tian Han and Guo Moruo and others have written their poetic and lyrical plays that can either be performed on the stage or read in the study as novels and poems, the status of drama in modern literature has finally been established” (Hong, 1936, p. 48).

4.4 The disastrous ending
Classical Western tragedy is often ended with the sublimation and culmination of conflicts, resulting in the death and devastation of protagonists, while traditional Chinese drama is often ended with the reconciliation of conflicts in typical “grand reunion” endings. The disastrous tragic ending in Salomé deconstructed the “grand reunion” endings in traditional Chinese drama, promoted the tragic sense, and changed the understanding and writing of disastrous events in modern Chinese tragedy.

In his play, Wilde subverted the ending of the story of Salomé in all previous literary narratives. By doing so, Salomé’s determination and the rebellion behind her passion and desires were brought to the fore. More importantly, her death at the very end of the play helped to evoke pity and fear from the audience. Traditional Chinese drama often ended with the prevalence of justice, with the redress of protagonists’ wrongs and the punishment of the perpetrators, which contributed to the reconciliation of conflicts. It was aimed at reinforcing moral judgment rather than arousing pity and fear from the audience. The influence of Salomé has been reflected in the disastrous endings of many modern Chinese tragedies created during that period, such as Wang Tongzhao’s Victory after Death, Yu Shangyuan’s Sculpture (1928), and Bai Wei’s Linli.

Wang Tongzhao’s tragedy Victory after Death ended with the death of the protagonist, He Feishi. He was a young painter and in the conflict of art and life, he chose art over life. Wang Tongzhao explicitly expressed his understanding of death and the influence of Salomé through He’s last words:

To me, the art of life is not that hard to be expressed. But for the art of death, it is most difficult to find a tone to express it. Oh!... I remember during my school days I read the script of Wilde’s Salomé. Isn’t Salomé an extremely beautiful girl? She would rather kiss the severed head for her special fondness for beauty. How special and solemn is that… Death may well be praised and remembered. Death is also the last victory...

Victory after death! Victory after death!… If I fail again this time, only death can greet me! Guide me!... (Wang, 1924, p. 32)

By connecting He Feishi with Salomé, Wang Tongzhao revealed the ultimate defiance and invincibility of the tragic protagonist. The death of the tragic hero did not only arouse pity and fear from the audience, just as the death of Salomé did, but
also produced a sense of triumph of spirituality.

In Yu Shangyuan’s *Sculpture*, the female protagonist Wu Jiqing sacrificed everything for her husband’s artistic pursuit of creating sculptures. After being separated for eleven years, her husband’s artistic work, a marvelous sculpture was completed and the couple finally met again. But instead of having a “grand reunion”, this tragedy ended with the female protagonist Wu Jiqing being drowned in the sea.

One could also clearly see in Bai Wei’s tragedy *Linli* the inspirations from the disastrous ending of *Salomé*. The tragedy revolved around a triangular love relationship which some claim was modeled on the relationship of Salomé, Herod, and Jokanaan (Duan, 2006, p. 46). The protagonist Linli was a young artist who saw love as her only hope in life, and confessed her infatuation and love with Qinlan, a young musician. Later, though, she found her love was betrayed when Qinlan fell in love with her sister, Lili. At the end of the tragedy, Linli committed suicide in a pond with roses around her as her dream of love was shattered with both the betrayal and the accidental death of Qinlan. The death of the protagonist represented the dramatist’s ultimate expression of belief in the supremacy and purity of love, which successfully evoked strong tragic emotions among the Chinese audience.

5. Conclusion

This essay reflects upon the influence of Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* on the transformation of Chinese theater, and especially on the birth of modern tragedy in China. In the early decades of the twentieth century, modern Chinese theatre was looking to the West for examples and models, and this was especially true for the genre of tragedy, “the highest dramatic art” (Ch’ien, 1978, p. 37), as tragedy was claimed by many as absent from the Chinese dramatic tradition.

Among the Western tragedies introduced and translated into China during that period, *Salomé* held a conspicuous position with its radical aestheticism and classical tragic style. From the very beginning, its aestheticism has been explored and redefined with political considerations by the pioneers of China’s New Culture Movement. This redefinition of *Salomé* struck a deep chord with modern Chinese dramatists, as it matched the emotional, intellectual, and political desires of that era. Thus, the fatal carnal desires in *Salomé* have inspired the creation of many tragedies focusing on
the protagonists’ passion and unyielding pursuit of love, beauty, and art, representing an iconoclastic stance against literary tradition, dominant gender discourse, and social conventions. Meanwhile, as Western tragedy was taken as the model for the construction of tragedy in China, classical Greek tragedy—from which Western tragedy originated—enjoyed a prestigious reputation. Therefore, Salomé, regarded as Wilde’s homage to the classical Greek tragedy, played an important role in linking the transforming Chinese theatre with the tradition of classical Western tragedy.

With the interplay of influences on the conflicts, characters, style, and endings, we can argue that modern Chinese tragedy has been constructed with inspirations, both old and new, from Salomé. It is old because, through the mediation of Salomé, modern Chinese theatre has connected itself to the age-old tradition of classical Western theatre; at the same time, it is new in the sense that through Salomé, the understandings of cultural, sexual, and political modernity were redefined and reflected in modern Chinese tragedy.

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(Copy editing: Curtis Harrison)

**About the author**

Xiaowei Wang (wangxiaomao2000@126.com) is Lecturer at the Department of Translation and Interpreting, School of Foreign Languages, Soochow University, China. She is also a PhD candidate in Comparative and World Literature Studies at the School of Chinese Language and Literature, Soochow University, China and Visiting Scholar at the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Duke University, USA. Her research interests include contemporary Irish drama, modern Chinese drama, and drama translation.