The Tragic Philosophy in Shen Congwen's Border Town

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Abstract. The novelle *Border Town* written by the Chinese writer Shen Congwen is an epoch-making literary masterpiece in modern Chinese literature which was once listed to the second of top 100 Chinese novels during the 20th century. It is a typical Chinese tragedy which offers readers mixed feelings and deep and philosophical thought. This essay establishes a three-level framework, attempting to analyse and comment on the tragic philosophy in *Border Town* within three different layers-the individual, social and the metaphysical tragedy with the philosophical theory of Zhuangzi and Nietzsche. By using this theoretical framework, this paper aims to explore the intertwined relation between the universality and personalization in Shen Congwen's tragic narration and offer a more sophisticated and interactive interpretation of *Border Town* philosophically. This paper argues that the tragedy in *Border Town* is not only shown in the destiny and emotional struggles of characters, but also in the delve into the invisible conflict between tradition and modern society, the ephemerality of beauty and the fleetness of life, conveying an Eastern philosophy blending oriental aesthetics and common values of mankind.

Keywords: *Border Town*, tragedy theory, tragic philosophy, Zhuangzi, Nietzsche.

1. Introduction

Border Town written by Shen Congwen is a widely-acknowledged milestone in modern Chinese literature, being famous for its poetic depiction of western Hunan landscape and a sophisticated consciousness of tragic narration as well. Different from drastic emotional outbursts and catharsis usually used in Western tragedies, the tragedy of *Border Town* is embedded in reserved and moderate narration and poetic symbolism, leading its readers towards philosophical reflection. This special form of tragedy poses a series of questions: how can *Border Town* be a Chinese tragedy? Can it be interpreted using traditional Chinese philosophy like Zhuangzi? Meanwhile, can Western philosophical frameworks like Nietzsche provide efficient interpretations for it, and what are the limitations? Ultimately, the tragedy in *Border Town* is a universal philosophical expression, or a personalized aesthetic creation of Shen Congwen?

To find an answer for the questions above, this paper establishes a framework of tragedy analysis-three layers including individual, social and metaphysical tragedy, borrowing the philosophical perspectives of Zhuangzi and Nietzsche as mirrors. The values of life and death and natural philosophy of Zhuangzi help interpret the enduring and relieved attitude of characters towards fate, whilst Nietzsche's theory about the metaphysical solace of tragedy elucidates the comprehension of the open and transcending end of the novel. Through this transcultural and layered interpretation, this paper attempts to reveal the deep philosophical meaning of the novel with both the benevolence for mankind and Chinese aesthetics in the tragic world shown.

The main part of the paper will be divided into three: firstly, it uses Zhuangzi philosophy to show the character's attitude towards death and accidental destiny, then analyses the fade of rural civilization in face of the opposition of modernity and the establishment and collapse of the author's cultural ideal, lastly utilizes Nietzsche's theory to explore the transcending solace embellished at the end of the novel. The end of the paper will further discuss the personalized narration and the shared value following the conclusion [1].

2. Individual Tragedy Through Zhuangzi's Philosophy

The first and the most preliminary type of tragedy in *Border Town* is individual tragedy, which means personal misfortunes caused by accidents and are acted upon by a specific person rather than a group of people. One of the most typical cases in the novel is the death of Cuicui's grandfather. Due to the tragic love of Cuicui's parents, her grandfather is her only family member. According to the logic of Western tragedy, when Cuicui is facing her grandfather's death, there will be roaring and proclaiming in lines, but in *Border Town*, throughout his death, the realm is full of euphemized slender pain. As the author mentioned, during the night before his death:

Even with the downpour, Cuicui was soon asleep again. When she woke up, it was already daylight. The rain had stopped without her noticing. She heard only the sound of torrents from the gullies entering the stream from the mountains on both sides. Cuicui got up out of bed. Seeing Grandpa still sound asleep, she opened the door and went out. The ground in front of the house had become a ditch and water splashed past in a muddy stream from behind the pagoda, having come straight down from the bluffs. Newly formed channels of water were everywhere. The vegetable garden was flooded, its sprouts all covered with sand and gravel. Going over to the stream, she could see that the water had risen so high that it was already brimming over the dock. Soon it would reach the tea vat. The path down to the dock was like a little river, splashing yellow mud. The cable over the stream used to pull the boat across was already underwater, and the ferryboat, previously tied up beneath the cliffs, was nowhere to be found [2].

It is obviously shown that even the death of her grandfather is a catastrophic and accidental strike for Cuicui, but when the author was planning to let the plot impend on the tragic moment, the technique of downplaying the emotion is strongly used with short sentences and phrases, and the seldom use of exclamation words and marks and the plain tone embellished within lines. Even if readers can still vaguely feel the sense of foreshadowing, but this kind of foreshadowing offers people a sense of obscurity rather than certainty or risk. The downplaying on the settings before the core moment embellishes the realm that nothing such bad is going to happen, signifying the reserved and implicative attitude of the character towards the big day of life.

The attitude of the character towards life and death is also connoted in the words describing the moment when Cuicui discovers the death of her grandfather in the novel:

Cuicui was too scared to know what to do next, so she shrilly called out for her grandpa. When Grandpa did not get up or answer her, she ran into the house and shook him back and forth. He made no sound. The old man had died as the thunderstorm faded away [2].

The words describing the process of Grandpa is exactly one sentence-the last sentence of the quote. In fairy tales or children's literature, it is always skipped when the author is going to make someone die tragically, it is technically called ellipsis or narration gap, also used in typical Chinese tragedy when the author would like to euphemise the sense of sadness within lines. This quote is a vivid example as it describes the process of death of Grandpa without portraying his agony before dying or depicting his sentimental attachment to his granddaughter. The reason why the author does not describe the process of death in detail is he would like to convey an idea that death is only a process or a station of living, not worth any exaggeration or hyperbolic embellishment, as shown in the funeral of Grandpa:

At midnight, the ceremony came to an end. They set off firecrackers and the candles nearly burned out. With tears still streaming down her face, Cuicui hastened to the kitchen to stoke the fire and prepare a midnight meal for those who had assisted. After the meal, the old priest lay down in the bed of the deceased and slept. The others attended the coffin through the night, as was the custom. The old horseman sang funeral songs to help the others pass the time, tapping out the rhythm on a wooden grain measuring cup as his drum. He sang songs about children who were legendary exemplars of filial piety: about Wang Xiang, who lay naked on top of ice to catch a fish for his mean stepmother, and little Huang Xiang, who fanned the pillow of his sick father against the heat and warmed him with his own body to ward off the cold [2].

This quote fully describes the setting of the funeral especially When the rite is about to end. This moment vividly embodying the concept on nfc and death of the characters because at the end of the funeral, everything is fading so the language style and word choice is specifically focused on the plain and downplayed sense of forlornness. As the funeral rite is going to an end. Just one day after the death of Cuicui's grandfather, everyone's life is going to end one day. Which is one of the key elements of Chinese idea towards life and death, typically shown in Zhuangzi:

The Genuine Humans of old understood nothing about delighting in life or abhorring death. They emerged without delight, sank back in without resistance. whooshing in they came and whooshing out they went, nothing more [3].

There are another famous idiom shows the relieved attitude towards life and death in Zhuangzi, known as 'pounding the tub and sing' [3]:

When Zhuangzi's wife died, Huizi went to convey his condolences. He found Zhuangzi sitting with his legs sprawled out, pounding on a tub and singing.

Huizi said, "You lived with her, she raised your children and grew old, and now not weeping at her death would be bad enough. But pounding on a tub and singing—isn't that going too far?"

Zhuangzi said, "Not so. When she first died, how could I, of all people, not be melancholy? But I looked back to her beginning and the time before she was born. Not only the time before she was born, but the time before she had a body. Not only the time before she had a body, but the time before she had a vital energy (qi). In the chaos of the murky inchoate, something changed and there was vital energy; the vital energy changed, and there was a body; the body changed and there was life. Now there has been another change, and she is dead. This is like the progression of the four seasons: spring, summer, autumn, winter. She is now going to lie down peacefully in a vast chamber. If I were to follow after her weeping and wailing, it would show I have no comprehension of how things are fated (ming). So, I stopped." [3].

It is clearly elucidated that to some extent, the philosophy towards life and death in Zhuangzi sets the cultural background for what is expressed in the novel. These three quotes from *Border Town* all above shows the typical Chinese attitudes towards life and death: a reserved, implicative. plain and downplayed attitude. The radical reason of this kind of attitude is rooted in Zhuangzi philosophy which proclaimed that Genuine Human views life and death as a normal process without delight or sadness. Just because of this cultural background, Shen Congwen could use ellipsis narration to deal with the death of the grandfather. He does not depict pang exaggeratedly, just like Zhuangzi did not wail for the death of his wife. Death is the final station all humans are going to stop at, the over-embellished portrayal would destroy the serene phenomenon instead. All in all, *Border Town* is the typical Chinese tragedy which in inherits the philosophical ideas in Zhuangzi of life and death.

3. Social Tragedy Through Zhuangzi's Philosophy

Different from individual tragedy, social tragedy is the misfortune of the whole society that leads to the misfortune of a group of people or a single person who symbolizes a group of people. In *Border Town*, the social tragedy is the collapse of the' white temple and the torpidity of stream water which symbolizes the urban civilization's oppression towards simple-minded rural civilization, the author repeatedly mentioned the limpidity of river in the text, which embodies the natural beauty which hasn't been interrupted by chaos from the outside world. white, as the main colour of the temple, is the indicating embodiment of the purest, builds up a co-establishing relationship with self-possessed West Hunan civilization which hasn't been interrupted by the outside world with the symbolism of water and white temple lays the background [4].

The settings of these peasants in *Border Town* being pure simple-minded and kind, forming Chadong (where most people lived in *Border Town*) a utopia alienated from the real world. As shown in quotes:

The ferry landing was owned by the whole community. So thte crossing was free to all, some passengers were a little uneasy about this. When someone grabbed a few coins and threw them down

on the boat deck, the ferryman always picked them up, one by one, then pressed them back into the hands of the giver, saying, in a stern, almost quarrelsome voice, "I'm paid for my work: three peeks of rice and seven hundred coppers. That's enough for me Who needs this charity?"[2].

Meanwhile, the Collapse of white temple and the torpidity of stream water also symbolize the collapse and catastrophe of the ideal utopia carried by rural civilization. The metamorphosis of the appearance of “water” and “temple”, adds to the tragic phenomenon of the context narration. In the text, both experienced the subverting change, with the pastoral phenomenon at an early stage being tore into pieces, the tragic hint of the work is being embellished [3]. What the white pagoda and clear river represent, is the world without calculation-the old man insisting on not receiving fees as a vivid example. However, the invasion of calculation is illustrated through the new workshop-the symbolism of a modern and industrial state of mind with all calculated by efficiency and profit. The reason for the toppling over of the white pagoda, is just the calculation which blindly pursues practical profit, sapped the spiritual world of the Chadong world. The reason why Shen Congwen forms a utopia and laments on the collapse of the utopia has its historical context. During the 1920s and the 1930s, with “aggressive invasion” of other nations, the charming characteristics in Chinese traditional culture is facing the crisis of being dismantled and striped of the vitality of tradition, facing the risk of cracking of ethnic cultural gene in the process of modernization, the aesthetic ideal Shen Congwen established in *Border Town* is key way to rebuild ethnic spirit [5]. This Kind of worry and anxiety towards modernity and development does not stands alone in history, with Zhuangzi stating the idea of anti-intellectualism in the treatise Zhuangzi:

Virtuosity is undermined by getting a name for it. Conscious understanding emerges from conflict. A good name is most essentially a way for people to one-up each other, and conscious understanding is most essentially a weapon of war. Both are inauspicious tools, not the kinds of things that can be used to perfect your own behavior [3].

With Shen Congwen's lament and Zhuangzi’s Statement there raises a series of questions: Is modernization bringing us only benefits or also drawbacks? Are these drawbacks inevitable? In other words, do modernization and development necessarily mean to increase living standards at the cost of sacrificing natural beauty and charming human characteristics? Broadly speaking, when countries begin to modernize themselves, are they inevitably all becoming instrumental mechanisms with high technology and booming, whilst being deprived of their unique spirit in the ethnic groups? This is the paradox that every newly industrialized country is facing, and in the 1920-l930s Chinese Context, Professor Wang Jie calls it a nostalgic utopia. This concept aims to show the moods and internal conflicts of himself while lingering and hesitating around the city and his hometown through a beautiful love story. These kinds of moods and internal conflicts were born under the entanglement of contemporary realities, also according to a romantic sentiment and the radical principles of aesthetics, which is called a utopia [6].

In conclusion, although in this context the tragedy of Shen Congwen is called a social tragedy whilst being put in comparison with contemporary Chinese writers as Lu Xun and Mao Dun the concept social tragedy of Shen Congwen is more a cultural and aesthetic tragedy, which focuses on the plight of living state of whole human being under the strike of modernism rather than revealing the agony and raising the awareness for rescue with strong sense and goal of criticism and enlightenment [7].

4. Metaphysical Tragedy Through Nietzsche’s Philosophy

Metaphysics is the concept created by Aristotle in his Treatise Metaphysics. In this treatise, he gives out the definition of metaphysics:

We assume that our research object is existence itself, because existence is the common foundation of all scientific inquiry. The research object of metaphysics is not a specific existence, but existence itself and its attributes as existence [8].

According to this definition, metaphysical tragedy then means the pity and misfortune that is large -scale and transcendental in the incidents itself and emotions which can't be embodied in physical existence.

In Birth of Tragedy, the philosophical treatise of Nietzsche, the author defined the metaphysical solace which is derived from every true tragedy, the solace that in the ground of things, and despite oi changing appearances, life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable this solace appears with palpable clarity in the chorus of satires ,a chorus of natural brings whose life goes on ineradicably behind and beyond all civilization, as it were, and who remain eternally the same despite all the changes of generations and in the history of nations [9].

This is a main feature of metaphysical tragedy, in this section of the paper, the feature will be elucidated with quote in *Border Town*:

Come winter, the white pagoda that had collapsed was geed as new. The young man who had sung under the moonlight, softly lifting up Cuicui's soul from her dreams, had not yet returned to Chadong. He may never come back or perhaps We will come back tomorrow [2]!

This is the very end of Border town, as well as the most famous quote of the novel. At this moment, definitely this novel is going to come to a tragic ending: after the death of Tianbao (the older brother) and loss of Nuosong (the younger brother), what Shen Congwen offers us at the end is the open ending: not telling us exactly when Nuosong would come back but just giving a vague guess by himself also by the reader. This forms a solace to Cuicui also to the reader because an open ending gives us a vague and distant hope when everything is destined to collapse. Furthermore, in the original Chinese text, the last word tomorrow is with a quotation mark, which means the word tomorrow has wider meaning beyond the next day [10]. It Connotes any time or moment in the future and also signifies the distant and naive hope Cuicui that prays for the faint love and happiness. This is the nature of metaphysical tragedy- it can't be embodied or solved by physical existence but can only be soothed by distant catharsis. Just as Nietzsche mentioned, the tragical solace aims to let the audience and readers still possess the spititual power to be assertive and proclamative to life as a whole even if they have already experienced individual destruction. The tomorrow introduced by Shen Congwen is just this kind of assertion. Cuicui lost her love and her family, but it is the act of waiting itself that makes her soul still bravely stare at the nature of life and do not collapse. This open ending is the artistic beautification of the novel, enables readers to hold hope and wish in the abyss of pain.

5. Conclusion

All in all. this paper discusses how Shen Congwen conveys his tragic philosophy in his novel *Border Town* with the analysis of death of Cuicui's grandfather, the loss of human nature and the wording of the very end of the novel.

Through this, the conclusion reached is that Shen Congwen's tragic philosophy is not that violent conflict of destiny or the destruction of heroes in western drama theory, but a kind if more deep and serene comprehension of life with more eastern aesthetic traits. Whilst there raises a question: the tragedy of Shen Congwen is radically a universalized tragedy or a personalized way of creation? This question is related to the nature of his tragedy and historical context.

Shen Conguen's tragedy conscious can be encapsulated as the loss of beauty and the hopelessness of life in which the key tension is the conflict between the constant and the variable the constant is the world of West Hunan where nature, human nature and divinity are gathered and regarded as together. It is the constant way which reoccurs forever with peace and harmony. People are brave and simple-minded, not calculating and almost befriend with hills and the celestrials. This idealized and divined appearance of life is the carrier of Shen Congwen's aesthetic ideals and values of human nature. The variable stands the opposite to the constant, which contextually means the process of modernization and industrialization which has happened since the 20th Century China, and historical and political conflict like wars and upheaval. This kind of exotic variation strikes the peaceful world

in West Human heartlessly and causes tine loss of beauty and the collapse of human nature and morality.

Consequently, the tragedy of Shen Congwen is not the misfortune of a single character, but a tragedy of a wholeness about civilization and ways of living, which appears as the serene lament and the powerless loveliness. Furthermore, the tragic philosophy of Shen Congwen is intertwined with personal experience and historical context. As a peasant coming from the countryside and living in Beijing, He vividly feels the large gap between two kinds of civilization. Being alienated and discriminated in the city and idealizing the memories of hometown, his perspective of the marginalized makes him examine the loss of traditional and drawbacks of modernity simultaneously a unique sense of tragedy is thus formed. Also served as a spectator in the large-scale narration trend of enlightenment and rescue, Shen Congwen sensitively feels that the cost of historical development. are the objectification and loss of beauty. His tragic philosophy is a fighting against the prevailing idea of linear historical development. Through his writings of the collapse of ideal world in west Hunan, he conveys his fear and anxiety of possible abrasion of industrial civilization towards human nature. Last but not the least, having experienced the war against Japanese aggression (from 1931) and the civil war afterwards, Shen Congwen witness how beauty being destructed by wars easily, which intensifies the fatalism of individuals facing gigantic history upheaval.

An in all, the answer of the question maybe is: Shen Congwen tragic philosophy reaches a universalized level of tragedy with personalized writings, Shen Congwen's tragic philosophy, with west Hunan scenery as its carrier, being lyrical poetic as its aesthetic style, the constant and the variable as its key conflicts, has obvious personal Inscriptions which are strongly deviated with Shakespearean and Greek tragedy. However, what his tragedy discusses is the eternal plight humans are facing :the conflict between the traditional and the modern, beauty being ephemeral and easily lost, individuals being minute and powerless in large-scale historical narration, the seek for about human nature and hopeless emotion through seeking for it -These ideas Shen Congwen were conveying is the ideal of human nature that hasn't being objectified which has the value beyond era and position.

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