

# Tang Xianzu and Philip Sidney: A Comparative Study of Chinese and English Drama Theories

Huimin Wang 

University of Southampton

## ABSTRACT

There is a vast difference between theatrical traditions of China and England as the two countries are geographically apart. Tang Xianzu (汤显祖 1550–1616) and Philip Sidney (1554–1586) lived at opposite ends of Eurasia and they had no idea of the other's existence, let alone the other's thoughts. Yet, by close attention to Tang Xianzu's and Philip Sidney's drama theories, I have identified striking similarities in terms of their focus on depth of thoughts and true feelings in artistic creation, their opinions and/or practices towards tragicomedy, and their views on the social functions of theater. Despite operating within diverse contexts – Tang in late Ming dynasty China and Sidney in Elizabethan England – commensurabilities of their drama theories further mark the departure for ruminations on perennial questions of human cognition and emotion process.

摘要:由于中、英两国地理位置不同,两国的戏剧传统有很大的不同。汤显祖(1550-1616)和菲利普·锡德尼(1554-1586)生活在欧亚大陆的两端,他们不知道对方的存在,更不用说对方的思想了。然而,通过对汤显祖和西德尼戏剧理论的研究,我发现他们可公度性在思想深度和艺术创作真情的关注,对悲喜剧的看法和实践,对戏剧社会功能的看法等方面有着惊人的相似之处。尽管他们的戏剧理论在不同的语境中运作——中国晚明时期和英国伊丽莎白时代——但他们戏剧理论的共同点促使我们对人类认知和情感这一永恒问题的反思。

## KEYWORDS

Philip Sidney; Tang Xianzu; drama theories; mimesis; tragicomedy

## 关键词

菲利普·锡德尼; 汤显祖; 戏剧理论; 摹仿; 悲喜剧

## Failure Document

There is a vast difference between the theatrical traditions of China and England, owing to the geographic distance between the two countries, as well as their substantial political, social and cultural differences. Yet, a close observation of two coeval drama theorists from both countries has revealed striking similarities. This paper focuses on Tang Xianzu's and Philip Sidney's drama theories on artistic creation, and on theater's social functions. Despite operating within diverse contexts, Sidney in Elizabethan England and Tang in late Ming dynasty China, their theories are unified in the pursuit of depth of thoughts, true feelings, and artistic truth. They make the analogy between painting and writing to demonstrate their artistic ideal. Due to the distinct merits of dramaturgical and scientific methodologies, this paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach. Aligned with recent findings in cognitive

neuroscience, I argue that the echoing of their theories bears the similarities with human cognition and emotion process.

Early in 1988, Pauline Yu warned of the danger of comparing individual works without paying careful attention “to cultural assumptions and institutions and concrete extraliterary conditions and are therefore so inconclusive as to seem pointless” (163). She also warned of another tendency of constructing Western-centered “literary ‘universals’” which eradicate the significant differences that existed inside the whole of Chinese literature, and as a result, “entire richly varied traditions become unqualified monoliths in the face-off of ‘East-West’ Comparative Literature” (163). The danger and risks in comparing individual theorists cannot be the stumbling block in the field of comparative literature. Rather, this paper takes up the challenge and tries to forge a more inclusive paradigm for world dramaturgy by comparing Tang Xianzu’s and Philip Sidney’s drama theories. From the perspective of global aesthetics, this paper suggests that there remains fruitful work to be done precisely in bringing together theorists who have no direct influence upon each other. Besides, as a Chinese scholar, I will be cautious to avoid the Western-centered “literary ‘universals’” and try not to gloss over the rich traditions of Chinese literature.

To study a thinker’s philosophy will undoubtedly involve a holistic examination of the interactive dynamism of the thinker’s historical background. The macroscopic social background and the microscopic personal history will be concertedly taken into account to examine Tang Xianzu’s and Philip Sidney’s theories. Born in 1550, Tang Xianzu was four years older than Sidney. He was a Chinese dramatist and scholar-official of the late Ming dynasty (1573–1644) who was most noted for his depiction of true feelings in his four plays, *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 *Peony Pavilion*, *Zichai ji* 紫钗记 *Legend of A Purple Hairpin*, *Nanke ji* 南柯记 *A Dream under the Southern Bough*, and *Handan ji* 邯郸记 *A Dream of Handan*. His major theory on drama is the *Epigraph for the Theater God Master Qingyuan in the Yihuang County Temple* 宜黄县戏神清源师庙记 (hereafter, the *Epigraph*, c. 1602), and his other theories are scattered in his letter correspondences with friends. Philip Sidney was an English poet, courtier, scholar and soldier who is remembered as one of the most prominent figures of the Elizabethan age.<sup>1</sup> He elaborates most of his theories in *The Defense of Poesie*, also known as *Apologie for Poetrie* (1595). Other traces of his theories can be seen in his sonnet sequences, *Astrophel and Stella* (1591). In the following sections, this paper will look in turn at each of the key themes that run through both Tang’s and Sidney’s works.

## 1. Artistic creation: Shen 神 “spirit, essence”<sup>2</sup> and Xing 形 “physical form”

The perception that art is the imitation of nature is touched upon by both Tang Xianzu and Philip Sidney. They both transcend the literal meaning of “imitation,” and propose higher demand in artistic creation. To further explain their ideal of the artistic creation process, both Tang Xianzu and Philip Sidney make an analogy between the sister arts of writing and painting.

Tang Xianzu’s literary theories probe the mimetic and the nonrepresentational elements in writing, and explore the relation between the physical world’s form and spirit. Tang demonstrates that “[t]he subtlety of writing does not lie in chasing after form-likeness [of reality]” 文章之妙不在步趋形似之间 (1532). For Tang, the “form-likeness”

means the imitation of physical forms. Tang continues by stating that the charm of a painting or a play goes beyond superficially physical or textual manifestation. He proposes that a dramatist should prioritize *yi* 意 “intent and intention of a play,”<sup>3</sup> *qu* 趣 “liveliness of language,” *shen* 神 “spirit,” and *se* 色 “style” 凡文以意趣神色为主 in his letter correspondence with Lv Jiangshan 吕姜山 (1735). Tang’s artistic theory owes a debt to time-honoured Chinese *xing shen lun* 形神论 “form-spirit” theory which touches upon imitation of nature in artistic creation.<sup>4</sup> In the dialectic balance between *xing* 形 “physical form” and *shen* 神 “spirit, essence,” *xing si* 形似 means the mimicking of the external form; *shen si* 神似 refers to the “internal spiritual resemblance.” Most theorists favour the pursuit of *shen* over *xing*, because the pursuit of *xing* is artisanal, while the pursuit of *shen* is artistic.

In Tang’s analogy of dramatic poet and painter, he cites the example of Northern Song poet-calligraphers Su Shi (苏轼 1037–1101) along with painters Mi Fu (米芾 1051–1107) and his son Mi Youren (米友仁 1074–1153) who do not aim to paint the physical appearance of objects. Su’s paintings of trees, bamboo, and rocks deviates from accepted styles of painting; and the Mi family only apply a few strokes of a brush, and then the images come to life.<sup>5</sup> And yet their paintings become unusually fine because their paintings fuse their feelings and their interpretation of physical objects. Three painters prioritize their feelings over form-likeness. Even though the paintings may be as absurd as to the point of unbelievable, they are a combination of painters’ psychological states and physical reality, and are more interesting than paintings which rigidly represent nature.

To further explain his unconformity, Tang Xianzu uses the example of Wang Wei’s (王维 701–761)<sup>6</sup> controversial painting, *Plantains in the Snow* 雪中芭蕉. As green plantains require warmth and do not grow in snow, some painters who imitate this painting convert the plantains to plum trees, an archetype for the winter season in Chinese art. Tang laughs at those painters, and he argues that though this change makes the painting exactly represent winter scenery, it deconstructs the original idiosyncratic flavour of Wang Wei.<sup>7</sup> Through this painting, Tang demonstrates that what is not possible in nature can plausibly exist in the artistic dimension, like the plantains in the snow. In Tang’s defence of the four painters mentioned above, the painters have captured the internal essence of a work, thus their negligence of the physical details is excused.

In Chinese philosophy, the nonrepresentational and ambiguous *shen* is preferred due to the deep-trenched influence of Daoism. In the Daoism classic, *Tao Te Ching* 道德经, Lao-tzu says “[t]he thing that can be named is the ordinary thing that cannot transcend. The Dao that can be named is not the real Dao 名可名, 非常名。道可道, 非常道。” Dao 道, literally “the way,” means the way of life and the universe. Lao-tzu also gave specific examples that “the most elegant sound is soundless, and the most important thing is formless” 大音希声, 大象无形. The Daoist idea that what can be described, like *xing*, is not the most worthy thing that people should seek after. Instead, one shall pursue what cannot be named, described nor explained, like the Dao and *shen*. In Chinese *xing shen lun*, unreasonable elements in a work are justified as long as the work captures the *shen*.

Having discussed Tang’s theories on writing, it is time to turn to Sidney. The similarities between the works of Tang and Sidney are particularly striking in the comparative process. Putting Sidney’s theories in a larger structure of thought, the influence of the time-honored Aristotelian theory of mimesis is unmistakable.

Sidney's theories are deeply influenced by Aristotle as evidenced by the frequent quotes from *Poetics* in *Apologie for Poetrie*. For example, Sidney writes, "Poesie, therefore, is an art of imitation; for so Aristotle termeth it in his word *Mimesis*" (26). What Aristotle means by *mimesis* does not solely refer to the physical likeness, but also the imitation of the character's spirit, which is a direct link with the Chinese conception of *shen si* and *xing si*. In line with Aristotle's idea, Plotinus (205–270) defends artists as creators and visionaries rather than mere imitators or observers by arguing that the artists imitate not material but spiritual things.<sup>8</sup> His follower, Proclus (c. 410–485), applies Plotinus's view to poetry, and deals briefly with the drama and the epic. Plotinus and Proclus stress that the dramatists, are not merely imitating or replicating the action of human life; the dramatists visualize the nonrepresentational and futuristic things.

Sidney further develops the Aristotelian *mimesis* to theoretically construct his ideal of poetic creativity: "Sidney transforms the classical ideal of poetry as imitation into [...] a theory of poetic creativity" (Mack 6). Sidney regards poets not only as imitators, but elevates them as visionary "vates" meaning "a diviner, foreseer, or prophet" (23). The poet not only imitates, but also creates, with their intellectual power. The futuristic thinking distinguishes a time-transcending dramatist who acutely depicts the essence of a character with advanced insights, and does not imitate the visible elements in a literal fashion. Only in this way can dramatic poets be qualified as "vates." Sidney also compares drama to painting. In his word, the poetic drama is metaphorically "a speaking picture" (27), which emphasizes the multi-mediality of plays. Sidney argues that the first-rate poets choose to represent their objects with learned discretion and careful consideration rather than mirroring it. It is worth noticing that it is a common metaphor to compare the dramatic poet with painter since Plato's time. Unlike the inferior sort of painters "who counterfeit only such faces as are set before them," the best painters have 'no law but wit', and 'bestow that in colors upon you which is fittest for the eye to see' (Sidney 27). Good painters use their wit to interpret and represent the physical world. Their representation is superior than the ordinary painters' description because they use their artistic imagination to foresee and to predict the future. In the same vein, the best dramatic poets do not directly represent reality straightforwardly; they balance between 'what is, hath been, or shall be' and 'what may be, and should be' (28).

Both Sidney's interpretation of Aristotelian *mimesis* theory and Tang Xianzu's form-spirit theory are an exploration on the dialectic relationship between essence and form, and further between the subjective and the objective world. Some artists choose to depict the physical world with an unrealistic brush because they prioritize *shen si* over *xing si*. They violate the *xing* for the *shen* as "it is not the veracity of likeness to the reality that is key to judgment, but what the artwork can eventually reveal beyond surface appearance" (Doddington 583–584). *Xing* is the "surface appearance," while *shen* is the hidden core. The spiritual resemblance does not always occur in tandem with the physical likeness. Artists' subjective interpretation sometimes can be too abstract to be recognized by the untrained eye. The uninitiated may even criticize the artistic work as an unfaithful copy featured with "unlikeness." Both Western and Eastern artists are pondering over the degree of imitation and self-expression, and the two aspects are simultaneous in the process of creation. There is a continuum between the two poles of reality and the artistic fantasy. The mimetic faculty is a representation of the physical world, and the other pole

is of artists' exploration of the subjective world. The balance between likeness and unlikeness gives rise to the Aristotelian probable impossibility:

'a probable impossibility is to be preferred to a thing improbable and yet possible. [...] the impossible is the higher thing; for the ideal type must surpass the reality.'

(Aristotle *Poetics* 1460a –1461b, Trans. Butcher 33)

Probable impossibility refers to a situation that is impossible to exist in the real world, but is probable in the universe of imagination. According to Aristotle, a play shall be justified by the higher artistic reality. He notes that, "In general, the impossible must be justified by reference to artistic requirements, or to the higher reality, or to received opinion" (Aristotle *Poetics* 1460a – 1461b, Trans. Butcher 33). What Aristotle means by "the higher reality" is like *shen* in Chinese culture. The Aristotelian probable impossibility philosophically echoes with the Chinese preference on *shen si* to *xing si*. As long as the internal spirit is kept integrated, the unconformity with the external forms of play can be pardoned.

### 1.1. *Xing: meter and rhyme*

Tang Xianzu's and Sidney's emphasis on the spirit of a drama accounts for their flout of drama writing conventions, such as the restrictions on meter and rhyme. Philip Sidney argues that,

'verse being but an ornament and no cause to poetry [...] it is not rhyming and versing that maketh a poet [...] but it is that feigning notable images of virtues, vices, or what else, with that delightful teaching, which must be the right describing note to know a poet by' (28-29)<sup>9</sup>

Sidney lays more emphasis on the depth of thought in a piece of work than rhyming and versing. Its essence is in the depth of thought, not in appareling of verse. Again, Sidney's emphasis on a play's depth of thought is commensurate with Tang's theory on *yi qu shen se* 意趣神色. Tang's struggle with the drama writing conventions is more audacious and more difficult due to the performance style of traditional Chinese theater where the verse is to be sung in *chuanqi* drama. *Chuanqi* drama is characterized by its macrostructure – the arrangement of arias within sequences and of scenes within the whole play – as well as microstructure – the composition of text within the aria form – and the relationship of *chang* 唱 "sung verse" to *bai* 白 "dialogue." Thus if the written rhyme is against the rhyming rules, it is hard for the singer to sing and will sound hoarse. In traditional Chinese theater, especially Kunqu 昆曲,<sup>10</sup> there has long been the attempt to fit together tones of the words and the music of the arias harmoniously. Shen Jin (沈璟 1553–1610) defines competent and performable plays as those that "proportion diction to feeling" as a play's audibility is the basis for an audience's comprehension (Swatek 26).

Retired as a scholar official, drama was Tang's field of interest rather than a means of livelihood. He even personally taught players to sing arias and directs *Peony Pavilion* at his own courtyard 自招檀痕教小伶. Even when Tang's friends, like Sun Siju 孙侯居, advised him to adapt the play's musical tone so as to achieve greater popularity, he refused to change a single word. To emphasize his play's integrity of thought and structure, Tang made the exaggerated comment that "I would rather twist the singers'



throat than change my rhyme [in order to keep the poem's meaning intact]"正不妨拗折天下人嗓子 (1848).<sup>11</sup> Here, Tang is exaggerating his insistence on the integrity of poetry's thought, and argues emphatically that he will never sacrifice the meaning and thought of a play for its form, like the rhyme.

## 1.2. Shen: artistic truth

Tang's and Sidney's theories on *shen* and *xing* are all unified in the pursuit of artistic truth. Artistic truth is the unification of the objective and subjective conceptions, and is a typified representation of reality. To find artistic truth requires one to see beyond the physical forms and moreover to focus on essence, which has been emphasized in the drama theories across time and space. The abstract sculptor Constantine Brancusi (1876–1957) demonstrates the paradoxical relation between the abstract and the realist, and argues that the “abstract is the most realist, because what is real is not the exterior form but the idea, the essence of things” (qtd. in Herschel B. Chipp 365). To interpret Brancusi's words and to gain a thorough understanding of the dialectic relations between the relation of art and nature invites a thorough study on the dialectic balance between *yi shu zhen shi* 艺术真实 “the artistic truth” and *sheng huo zhen shi* 生活真实 “pure realism/literal truth.” According to neuroscientists, Kawabata and Zeki (2004), ‘the orbito-frontal cortex is differentially engaged during the perception of beautiful and ugly stimuli’ (1699). With the fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) technology, it is shown that the appreciation of beauty has physiological ground. The artists process beauty in the physical world through abstraction and ideal construction in the brain. The artists analyze, select and remold the ‘raw materials’, the reality, in order to reveal the essence.<sup>12</sup> In the words of the Chinese poet, Li He (李贺 790-816), “art enhances and improves nature by compensating the imperfection.”<sup>13</sup> In this sense, the ‘man-made’ artistic reality is paradoxically more real than the physical reality because the former is more capable of representing the essence and laws of the physical world. True art provides a more lasting interpretation of reality through the artistic imagination.

In this vein, Tang Xianzu denies step-by-step imitation and Philip Sidney demands the writer embody futuristic thinking in the creation process. The mere representation of reality is restricted by the temporal and spatial specificities and lacks the potential to grasp the core of art. Thus it can hardly transcend the boundaries of time and space. A dramatist's artistic freedom unbound by the law of probability is what Tang Xianzu and Philip Sidney explicitly emphasize. Rejecting the confinement of physical laws in reality, dramatists are endowed with greater artistic freedom to write and pursue artistic truth.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle famously demonstrates that wisdom occurs when the viewer can infer the relation between the particular work and the universal law. He states that “*mimesis* suggests how that same theme [of human life] ought to be developed through the creation of likenesses” (Marini 175).<sup>14</sup> Good poets try to reveal universal artistic truth by tapping into the potential of human behavior, and they try to enable their readers/audience to see beyond the confinement of ideology and reality. True art possesses “inexhaustibility of interpretation,” in the words of Theodor W. Adorno (qtd. in Hamilton 256). The mere imitation of real life will grow out of fashion as time changes, while the discrepancy between artistic truth and reality enables the audience to make new connections each time. The artists perceive the co-existence of multiple realities,

including but not limited to the physical and psychological realities, and they arrange their work in such a way that these semblances between different realities can possibly be illuminated (see Marini 181–2, 178). The artists metaphorically enable the audience from different realities to see “new likenesses” through the artist’s work each time. Rather than preaching to the audience how the work should be interpreted, good dramatic poetry has such enduring charm as it invites new interpretation and intellectual connections from each generation in light of different contexts, be that ancient Greece, Elizabethan London, Ming-dynasty China, or the contemporary world. From a neuroscientific sense, the possibility of connecting different realities indicates the similarity of human life and highlights the common threads in the ways in which people undertake cognition and knowledge learning. It is under this basis that those semblances can help to illuminate different realities.

Tang Xianzu’s and Philip Sidney’s theories are underpinned by their larger social structures of thought. Tang’s and Sidney’s shared preoccupation with the mind and spirit is deeply influenced by their Zeitgeist, i.e. the paradigmatic shift from Metaphysics of Nature to Metaphysics of Mind, which occurred in tandem in Ming China and Renaissance Europe. As Cai Zongqi demonstrates, in both Western and Chinese traditions, ‘new concepts of literature often arise in response to the broader paradigmatic shifts of cosmological thinking’ (2). This shift of ideology is the main reason for the changing literature styles that focuses on feelings, and it is a turn for subjective interpretation of reality.

René Descartes (1596–1650), the founding father of modern philosophy who believed in the centrality of the mind in defining the self; he says ‘nothing else to be in me over and above the mind’ in *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641).<sup>15</sup> Descartes argues that fundamental certainty is the existence of himself and his thoughts, from which the external world is to be inferred. Writing in the time of Sidney, Descartes’ focus on the inner mind and intuition is observed in the rise of Protestantism.

The Cartesian centrality of the mind is echoed with Chinese line of thoughts. The Chinese paradigmatic shift is specifically reflected in the changing focus from the 程朱理学 Cheng-Zhu school of *li xue* 理学 “school of reason/principle” to the school of *xin xue* 心学 (literally, ‘study/philosophy of the mind’, idealism). Wang Yangming (王阳明 1472–1529), seem to agree with Cartesian centrality of the mind to defining the self though the two have never met neither do they know each other’s theories. Wang proposes that we can learn about the universal truth through studying our mind as Wang states that *xin wai wu wu* 心外无物 “there is nothing outside the mind.”

Descartes’ and Wang’s theories are rather advanced for their time and influence their contemporaries, especially respectively in Sidney and Tang’s perception of the origin of inspiration. In sonnet 1 of *Astrophel and Stella*, Sidney writes “Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite:/‘Fool!’ said my muse to me, ‘look in thy heart, and write’” (1). “For Sidney, the poet does not need to experience ecstasy in order to discover the divine truth of things: he needs only to look within” (Mack 112). “To look within” indicates that the inspiration originates from one’s inner mind.

Influenced by Wang Yangming, in *The Preface for Er Bo’s Poetry Collection* 耳伯麻姑游诗序, Tang writes “poetry is originated from feelings” 情生诗歌, and in his letter correspondence with Gan Yilu 甘义麓, he says “Out of feelings dreams are developed; out of dreams drama is composed” 因情成梦, 因梦成戏. He emphasizes the vital importance

of inner feelings for artistic creation. In his interpretation of *Yin fu jing* 阴符经解 “the doctrine of longevity,” he even states that the truth of heaven’s working is the same as our heart 天机者，天性也。天性者，人心也， and he regards human feelings as the generative force of theater.

## 2. Tang Xianzu’s and Philip Sidney’s opinions/practices towards tragicomedy: the point of divergence?

Having discussed striking similarities between Tang and Sidney, people familiar with Sidney may ask, do they share similar attitudes toward tragicomedy? At first glance, Philip Sidney seems to talk against tragicomedy or any kind of mixed genres, as his discriminative term “mongrel tragicomédie” (65) suggests. But I argue that Sidney is not denying the genre of tragicomedy: Sidney draws on an ancient example of Plautus’s *Amphitrio* to demonstrate what a well-written tragicomedy should look like. Earlier in *Apologie for Poetrie*, he says “if severed they be good, the conjunction cannot be hurtful” (43). If ideally, a tragicomedy can be separated into two parts – the tragical and the comical parts, and both parts are well written, then this conjunction of tragicomedy can be a good play. Instead of criticising the genre of tragicomedy, Sidney is actually criticising inappropriate mixtures, especially dramatists who mingle kings and clowns, ‘not because the matter so carrieth it: but thrust in Clowns by head and shoulders, to play a part in majesticall matters, with neither decency nor discretion’ (65). Those dramatists causally mix different characters and genres without carefully paying attention to a play’s overall structure, and are thus the target of Sidney’s criticism.

Philip Sidney as a drama theorist is trying to make sense of the phenomenon of ‘tragicomedy’ by explaining it, while Tang Xianzu as a dramatist is trying to do the same work by embodying it.<sup>16</sup> Tang Xianzu’s *magnum opus*, *Peony Pavilion*, mixes ‘kings and clowns.’ For example, in the last scene ‘Reunion at court’ 圓駕, the emperor is present with comic characters like Tutor Chen, a pantaloone. More often than not, scholars categorise *Peony Pavilion* as a tragicomedy in the light of its structure and characters.<sup>17</sup> And I argue that Tang Xianzu’s mixed-genre practice has been conducted with discretion. For example, the scene 20 ‘Keening’ *Peony Pavilion* begins with the protagonist’s family bereavement and ends with comic characters’ word play. Though it may look inharmonious at first glance,<sup>18</sup> this mixture is actually very powerful and thought-provoking, not only from the perspective of dramaturgy, but also from the perspective of neuroscience.

A neuroscientific experiment by Mu Xia *et al*, demonstrated that tragic events introduced less intense mixed feelings than did tragicomic events.<sup>19</sup> In their experiment, they found out positive and negative events happening to the same people or things in a specific chronological order (i.e., a negative event following a positive event) induced more intense mixed feelings than the same events happening to different people or things. This experiment shows that feelings are rendered more powerful through contrast. A tragic story appears to be more pathetic if it is simultaneously or successively presented with a happy event. The Chinese theory of depicting sadness against a jubilant setting is an effective method of emphasizing tragic mood, and this tradition starts from *The Poetry* more than 2000 years ago – ‘willows were luxuriant when I left my loving



family to the battleground' 昔我往矣, 杨柳依依.<sup>20</sup> The cheerful spring scenery is at odds with soldiers' grief, thus the tragic mood is accentuated.<sup>21</sup>

To only represent the mourning is not adequate to the best, and detrimental to the theme to the worst because it does not enable the audience to see a full picture. It is through the contrast of different modes in a tragicomedy that the audience are encouraged to discern what is hidden behind the Du family's mourning over Liniang, the female protagonist.

### 3. Theater and society

#### 3.1. Theater's didactic functions

In Sidney's view, a play shall "imitate both to delight and teach" (28). A play imitates the goodness in human life, and "even those hard-hearted evil men [...] will be content to be delighted, [...] and so steal to see the form of goodness, which seen, they cannot but love" (41). The multi-media theater is like the wall paintings inside the church that have a moral lesson to coach, to lead the audience to the goodness.

This didactic view is echoed in Tang Xianzu's writing. While Sidney argues for the theological end, Tang mainly develops his ideas from the moral aspects and he is positive towards theater's social and educational function. Tang is a Confucian scholar-official whose idea is deeply influenced by the traditional Confucianism doctrine of *ru shi* 入世 "active participation in society."<sup>22</sup> In the *Epigraph*, Tang emphasizes the pragmatic function of plays, especially for moral instructions:

Theater reinforces the order between the emperor and his subjects, strengthens the tie between fathers and sons, improves the affection between the old and the young, and enriches the love between husbands and wives. Theater can express friendship, relieve conflict, soothe anxiety, and amuse the common people. (Tang 1596-1600, Trans. Fei 55-7)

For Tang, theater aims towards social wellbeing and better governance. A play moves the audience emotionally, and urges them to be authentic to themselves. Tang upholds the banner of *qing* 情 "feelings," and acknowledges its positive power to help people spontaneously abide by the Confucian ideal of benevolence more resiliently 以人情之大宝, 为名教之至乐也哉. In Tang's view, feelings generated by theater can be directed in a positive vein – rather than invoking social turmoil, feelings can help to ameliorate the state and domestic relations. In Tang's view, theater has eight specific values, to promote *jie* 节 "order" between the emperor and his attendants, to enhance *en* 恩 "gratitude" between fathers and sons, to augment *mu* 睦 "harmony" between the elders and the young, to boost *huan* 欢 "affection" among married couples, to initiate *yi* 仪 "politeness" between the host and the guest; meanwhile, the theater can also tackle *jie* 结 "controversies" between enemies, to cure patients' *ji* 疾 "illness," and to improve the commoners' *hao* 好 "taste."<sup>23</sup> Theater is both a product of the moral life and the thing that sustains it.

#### 3.2. Beyond didactics

The time-transcending dramatists and theorists share commonality in their human concerns, be it political governance, economic development, or human rights. They

embrace an advanced world outlook, and it is the depth and profoundness of their thoughts that endow their works with time-honored quality.<sup>24</sup> Sidney alleviates the end of poetry to the realm of highest knowledge, of “a man’s self” (30), which echoes with the scripture of “Know thyself” in Apollo’s temple at Delphi. Like all other sciences, poetry is directed to the highest end of knowledge, to artistic truth.

Tang’s exploration of the emotional potential of theatre is also a step beyond theater’s pragmatic functions, though he does not clearly state it in his works. Tang himself is acutely aware of the powerful emotional force theater can generate, but at the same time, he argues that the feelings can be reconciled with reason since both are channeled for the promotion of social well-being. In this way he justifies theater’s existence by referring to feelings’ potential in moral life. Tang’s thinking gains validity with the findings in neuroscience. In the light of cognitive neuroscience, reason is actually deeply involved in the emotional process – there is no feeling without thought or reason because feeling depends on an appraisal of personal meaning. Without meaning, without appraisal, there will be no feeling (See Lazarus 199).<sup>25</sup> For example, some people feel unhappy when they wake up and find it is a rainy day. It is tempting to link ‘unhappiness’ as an instinctive reaction to rainy days, but in fact, most people first go through an appraisal process before they feel upset. They figure out all the negative consequences rain brings, like getting wet and cold, having to bring clumsy umbrellas, and possibly being late for work. Thus they feel unhappy. In turn, “when we experience an emotion, our mind concentrates its attention on the emergency and what might be done to cope with it” (Lazarus 179–81). According to Damasio’s *The Feeling of What Happens* (2000), feelings are what happen when preconscious emotion is brought to consciousness. We can only feel something when we are conscious of it. And our conscious feelings are closely connected with our mind’s activeness. Without feelings, we are inactive, for example, when we are sleeping or in a trance. Our critical thinking can only be achieved when our mind is in a very active state, and feelings can help activate our mind. Feelings provide strength and endurance in helping us to better focus on tasks. In a word, there are no feelings without reason and vice versa. Tang’s insightful argument on the unification of feelings and reason gains its ground with neuroscientific evidence four hundred years later. This is potent evidence for his foreword thinking of theater’s functions beyond didactics.

Viewing Tang and Sidney’s theories from a Buddhist perspective, especially Zen 禅, theater is for cool observance of human beings and society. Theater beyond didactics rids itself of traditional societal functions, like educational and political ones. This new form of theater is featured with *wu yong zhi yong* 无用之用 “the use of uselessness,” and is a return to pure theater, when theater is created for theater’s sake.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the light of comparative studies, a balanced and constructive dialogue between English and Chinese drama theories can contribute to mutual illumination and, further our understanding of the early-modern time. A powerful theater is one in which the expression of feelings are authentic. In the spatial sphere, the common emotional ground enables worldwide audiences to appreciate theaters of different cultures, and in the scale of time, modern audiences are under the same emotional forces as those felt by our early modern predecessors. Both Tang Xianzu and Philip Sidney lay emphasis on the

*shen*, or essence of a play. They value theater's depth of thought and manifestation of feelings over pragmatic issues like rhyme and writing conventions. Further, Tang and Sidney are unified in their search towards authenticity of thought and towards artistic truth. The correspondences between their drama theories shed light on the common human feelings and cognition process, and contribute to the exploration on intercultural communication of different theaters. Tang Xianzu and Philip Sidney echo with each other in their drama theories, which represents human similarities in the process of cognitive and emotional development. It is the mutuality among people that makes it possible for Chinese and foreign scholars in comparative literature to conduct a fair and beneficial dialogue.

## Notes

1. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip\\_Sidney](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Sidney), last accessed on November 23, 2020.
2. Neither "spirit" nor "essence" is an accurate translation of *shen* due to the notion's delicious complexities. They are used here to tentatively suggest the possible connotations of the Chinese poetic notion. Since there is no English equivalent of *shen* and no existing translation in English to adopt, I use transliteration to maintain its connotative nuance in original Chinese.
3. For a more detailed discussion of *yi* in the context of Chinese poetics, see Duan, Lian. 'Yiqu: Implied Meaning and Its Conceptualization: A Comparative Approach to Chinese Poetics from Chinese and Western Perspectives. *Comparative Literature: East & West*, 12.1 (2010): 52–69.
4. The Chinese *xing shen lun* was first applied to the artistic field of painting, and it was Liu Xie (刘勰 465–520 of the Six Dynasties) who first introduced the concept of *shen* into the scope of literary theory in his *The Literary Mind and The Carving of Dragons* 文心雕龙. The original Chinese word is "神道难摹, 精言不能追其极; 形器易写, 壮辞可得喻其真" Li Zhi (李贽, 1527–1602) was argued to be the first to apply this theory to drama. Li distinguishes between the terms of *hua gong* 画工 "the excellent artistry of depiction," and *hua gong* 化工 "the ability to capture the essence of characters," and he opts for the later. See Xu Yanlin (2006) and An Kui (2014) for the development of this theory in drama. Xu, Yanlin. "Xing Shen Lun's Influence on Ming Dynasty Drama Theories." *Journal of College of Chinese Traditional Opera*. 27.2 (2006): 38–47 徐燕琳 形神论对明代戏曲理论的影响, 《中国戏曲学院学报》, 27 (2) 38–47; An, Kui. "Xing Shen Lun in Theater Aesthetics." *Sichuan Opera*. 10 (2014): 14–25. (安葵, 戏曲美学范畴之形神论, 《四川戏剧》2014年, 第10期, 14–25).
5. The original Chinese word is 《合奇序》予谓文章之妙不在步趋形似之间。自然灵气, 恍惚而来, 不思而至。怪怪奇奇, 莫可名状。非物寻常得以合之。苏子瞻画枯株竹石, 绝异古今画格。乃愉奇妙。若以画格程之, 几不入格。米家山水人物, 不多用意。略施数笔, 形象宛然。My translation borrows from Burkus-Chasson, Anne. "Like Not Like: Writing Portraits in *The Peony Pavilion*." *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 2.1 (2015): 134–172 (pp. 164–5).
6. Wang Wei, a Chinese Buddhist and poet of the Tang dynasty (618–907).
7. The original Chinese words are '昔有人嫌摩诘之冬景芭蕉, 割蕉加梅, 冬则冬矣, 然非王摩诘冬景也。其中骀荡淫夷, 转在笔墨之外耳。'
8. Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6 'Beauty,' Trans. Stephen MacKenna (London, 1969), 63, qtd in Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theater: A Historical and Critical Survey from the Greeks to the Present*, 1993.
9. In the 1909 edition of Philip Sidney's *A Defence of Poesie*, is stated: 'Its [Poetry's] essence is in the thought, not in apparelling of verse.' (p. 34), which directly pins down Sidney's

- preference of thought to verse. See Sidney, Philip, *A Defence of Poesie and Poems*. London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1909.
10. Kunqu 昆曲 is a traditional Chinese theatre that combines song, dance, acrobatics, highly stylized gestures and movement, and simplistic stage setting.
  11. The poetry tradition in Tang Xianzu's time is to be sung. Thus if the written rhyme is against the rhyming rules, it is hard for the singer to sing and will sound hoarse.
  12. For more information on the relation between artistic and physical truth, see Zhao, Yanqiu. "Artistic Truth: A Concept Which Need Collate and Stipulate Again." *Research of Chinese Literature* 3 (2008): 14. □赵炎秋, "艺术真实"辨析. 《中国文学研究》2008年第3期, p.14).
  13. The original Chinese poem is [李贺]长吉《高轩过》□笔补造化天无功。
  14. See Marini for a detailed discussion on the relation between 'mimesis' and 'likeness'.
  15. Stephen Trombley discusses Descartes' significance as the first 'modernist' in *Fifty Thinkers Who Shaped the Modern World*. London: Atlantic Books, 2012.
  16. Both Tang and Sidney write poems and drama theories, but Tang is, more importantly, a dramatist. While in contrast, there has not been evidence showing that Sidney writes plays.
  17. See for example, Ye Changhai叶长海. "Tragicomic Elements in *Peony Pavilion*" (1983).
  18. Most, if not all, modern performances of *Peony Pavilion* often cut the later comic part of Scene 20.
  19. Mu Xia, Jie Chen & Hong Li (2016) 'Tragedy or tragicomedy: Mixed feelings induced by positive and negative emotional events', *Cognition and Emotion*, 30:5, 857–867.
  20. The original Chinese word and its pinyin is *yi le jing xie ai qing* 以乐景写哀情. See Shu, Wu. *Shu Wu on Poem*. Beijing: Beijing Publishing House, 2016, esp. pp. 92–3.
  21. The contrast of tragic and comic elements can not only accentuate the tragic atmosphere, but also enhance the positive aspect, for example, in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, Jupiter says 'Posthumus will be 'happier much by his affliction made' (*Cymbeline*, 5.5.202).
  22. Tang Xianzu's idea is deeply influenced by Confucian scholars like Zhou Dunyi (周敦颐 1017–1073, Northern Song dynasty) who famously advocates that *wen yi zai dao* 文以载道 "literature is for conveying the Dao." *Wen* 文 not only refers to written materials, but can also refers to the literary creations, and *dao* 道 means the right way of life and universe.
  23. The original Chinese words are '可以合君臣之节, 可以浹父子之恩, 可以增长幼之睦, 可以动夫妇之欢, 可以发宾友之仪, 可以释怨毒之结, 可以已愁愤之疾, 可以浑庸鄙之好'.
  24. 'Generally speaking, if two poets' artistic ability do not differ much, their poetic achievement will ultimately depend on the depth of their thoughts. Only when their thoughts are closely linked with human concerns can poets be great. (Shu Wu, 2016: 165) Shu Wu (舒芜, 1922–2009, Chinese writer) '大抵诗人才力旗鼓相当者, 其诗之高下, 最终必视其情之高下深浅而决。惟其情与国脉人生息息相通, 诗人始能伟大'.
  25. Richard S. Lazarus and Bernice N. Lazarus, *Passion and Reason: Making Sense of Our Emotions* (New York: OUP, 1994), p. 199. Lazarus' statement comes before Antonion Damasio's distinction of 'feeling' and 'emotion'. In *The Feeling of what Happens: Body, Emotion and the Making of Consciousness* (2000), Damasio pointed out feelings are what happen when preconscious emotion is brought to consciousness. What Lazarus means by 'emotion' is actually 'feeling', thus I will use 'feeling' for my argument.

## Acknowledgements

My research is kindly funded by China Scholarship Council, No. 201806310136.

I would like to thank Prof. Ros King, Dr. Alice Hunt, Dr. Leanna Brinkley, Dr. Elliott Nikdel, Mr. Yun Lin, and the reviewers for their suggestions and encouragement!

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the China Scholarship Council [201806310136].

## Notes on contributor

**Huimin Wang** is a Ph.D. English Researcher at the University of Southampton, UK, with a CSC Scholarship. Her dissertation is titled 'A Rose by any other Word': The Performance Traditions of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Tang Xianzu's *Peony Pavilion* under the supervision of Prof. Ros King and Dr. Alice Hunt. She is one of the seminar leaders for 2021 World Shakespeare Congress and 2021 European Shakespeare Research Association Conference. She has been a visiting scholar to the Chinese University of Hong Kong with a Global Research Excellence Award. Meanwhile, she has presented several papers at conferences on Shakespeare and Kunqu 昆曲. Besides, she is a CATTI certified and award-winning Chinese-English translator and interpreter.

## ORCID

Huimin Wang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0403-3489>

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