ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to conduct a new examination on the application of the concept of tragedy in the study of classical Chinese drama.

Tragedy is a Western concept of genre that has been widely used in the classification of Chinese plays. However, at the same time, this application of the concept of tragedy to the study of classical Chinese drama has aroused a lot of controversy and triggered numerous discussions, as different scholars hold varying interpretations of tragedy.

This thesis suggests that the study of Chinese tragedy should not be based on Western theories of tragedy, which is an approach commonly adopted in the previous studies. To resolve past controversies, this thesis proposes that there is a need to examine how the Chinese interprets the term “tragedy”.

By conducting a historical study on the introduction and reinterpretation of the concept of tragedy in the study of classical Chinese drama, this thesis finds that while the Chinese uses the term “beiju” (悲剧) as a translation for “tragedy”, their interpretation of “beiju” differs from the Western concept of tragedy. Rather, it is closer to their own understandings of “kuxi” (苦 戏) or “canju” (惨 剧), terms commonly found in traditional drama criticisms. “Beiju”, to the Chinese, represents a category of plays that possesses a keynote of sadness and misery, and that is able to move its readers or audience to tears.

On the basis of this “Chinese concept of tragedy”, a new foundation can be built for future study of tragedy in classical Chinese drama. Past criticisms and inappropriate conclusions made on Chinese tragedy are identified and rectified. Furthermore, various concepts involved in the study of Chinese tragedy, such as “Chinese theories of tragedy” and the “Chinese tradition of tragedy”, are also redefined.