

Ruins, allegory and redemption --The Writing of Urban Tragedy in the 1990s from the Perspective of Benjamin's "Wanderer"

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Abstract: Tragedy, as one of the aesthetic categories, has developed and turned such as 'tragedy of fate', 'tragedy of negligence', 'tragedy of character' since ancient Greece, and its core bearing and direction are also different. Benjamin's "ruins aesthetics" is based on *the origin of German tragedy*, which sets up a new direction for tragedy in modern fables, and gives tragedy new meaning in the form of "ruins-allegory-redemption". In the cultural context of China, the most representative feature of 'ruins' is the breakthrough of 'fracture' writers in the literary world in the 1990s. The urban landscape they constructed is to a certain extent consistent with "ruins-allegory-redemption", which potentially shows the tragic direction and ultimate pursuit of 'fracture' writers and Benjamin's 'redemption'.

Keywords: Benjamin; Tragedy; Ruins aesthetics; Fracture' New Generation Writers; Wanderers

1. Introduction

The earliest known definition of the word tragedy is found in ancient Greece, and it is attributed to Aristotle. In Chapter 6 of his work, *Poetics*, Aristotle initially suggested that "tragedy is the imitation of an action that is complete and in itself complete, and of which the several elements are so united and fitted to one another as to produce through its several stages a sense of catharsis (katharsis) of such and such an emotion." This invests tragedy with its "cathartic" function (katharsis), by which the human spirit is cleansed in the act of cleansing. It has deep structural links to ethical codes and continues to transcend the course of human civilization. Yet when tragedy is translated through various cultural practices, the very essence it carries tends to deviate, and the hierarchy of allegedly superior and inferior tragic expressions is created. Tragedy then

assumes multifaceted scholarly attention, and it invites study from various disciplinary areas.

The conceptual history of tragedy as an aesthetic model within Western philosophy presents several levels of interpretation. Upon the basis of Aristotle's original "tragedy of error", succeeding thinkers enriched the tragic lexicon through different analytic prisms. The framework of the "tragedy of fate" ascribed human loss to unyielding divine volition, exemplified by Oedipus Rex's futile resistance to oracular destiny in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. Renaissance humanism reworked the model through "character tragedy", where tragic disaster is the result of inherent psychological defects, as with Macbeth's insatiable ambition in *Macbeth*, Othello's consuming jealousy in *Othello*, and Hamlet's epistemically immobilizing indecision in *Hamlet* all serve to illustrate how Shakespearean drama psychologized Aristotelian hamartia[1].

This vision further developed in classical aesthetics, as Schelling reconceptualized the tragedy as the ontological struggle between objective necessity and subjective volition, integrating human agency into fatalism. The dialectical system of Hegel raised the tension to the collision of equally legitimate ethical demands, as in the insoluble conflicts between familial duty and civic responsibility in traditional Chinese theater. Schopenhauer's iconoclastic alternative dichotomized existence into the pendular swing between the ennui of satiated desire and the anguish of unsatisfied longing. His revolutionizing thesis that sovereign tragedy lies in ordinary human complications-beautifully exemplified by the "Grave of Ten Thousand Blossoms" scene in *Dream of the Red Chamber*-democratized tragic consciousness[2].

Modern thinkers extended these conceptual grounds further: Nietzsche's Apollonian/Dionysian divide redescribed tragedy as ancient psychic negotiation and Marx's historical materialism found tragedy in

the gulf between historical necessity and its delayed actuality. This intellectual lineage illustrates how each reinterpretation of tragic essence is echoed by epistemological change between civilizations to turn Aristotle's mimetic system into a pluriversal diagnostic framework for the human condition[3].

This analysis discloses how the inherent core of tragedy materializes in differing conceptual orientations. The Benjaminian concept of "tragedy" to be discussed in the paper discloses, through its allegorical construction, the devastation inherent in the exponential growth and consumerist hegemony of cultural industry since World War I and at the same time outlines a redemptive path that lends contemporary relevance to this tragic paradigm. Placed within China's cultural landscape, there are implicit resonances between the tragic theory of Benjamin and the pioneering rise of the 1990s "Fractured Generation" authors of Chinese literature. Their new wave departure from prevailing literature conventions shows remarkable conceptual congruity with Benjamin's vision of the tragic, placing them within China's developing tradition of tragic debate as key figures for the examination of the unique meaning of the tragic modality in present contexts[4].

2. The Urban Literary Context of the 'Fractured Generation' Writers

The New Generation writers who came to prominence during the 1990s were a unique body of writing comrades whose emergence and rise were deeply reliant on certain cultural-historical circumstances. In the literary universe, the group existed as an enclave against mainstream and authoritative discourses, struggling to survive on the margins of the established literature hierarchies as it persistently developed its imaginary praxis to fashion discursive locations for aesthetic occupation. In an ironic twist, the incremental gain of developmental ground-mediated through the evolving paradigms of legitimate literature and the incremental marginalization of literature as a discursive arena-was still hitched to underlying socioeconomic shifts, notably China's rapid economic modernization[5].

The sociopolitical landscape since 1949, and since the landmark Reform and Opening-Up policies of the 1980s in particular, has undergone an unprecedented

transformation-condensing into decades long-term developmental paths that took centuries to unfold in Western contexts. By the early 1990s, China's fast-paced modernist endeavor became intertwined with the "global economic integration" paradigm. In the face of the seismic effects of Western capitalist expansion, the country formalized its unique socialist market economy with Chinese features, the systematic improvement of which deepened the country's urbanization effort. It is exactly such nascent metropolitan culture that became the main textual terrain of the 1990s "Fractured Generation" authors. This paradigmatic change through market economic reforms actually instantiated a new discursive object-an urban lifeworld radically different from traditional rural topographies in spatiality and modes of existence-is what recast the ecological grounds and creative coordinates of New Generation literature production[6].

The metropolis, as new discursive construct, is ever-in-flux-its limits continuously remoulded by socioeconomic dynamism. As previously argued, the new spatial configuration and existential paradigm of the city necessarily led writers to pin their eyes on the variegated subjects inhabiting its landscape, unearthing the triadic consciousness of selfhood, sociality, and aesthetic sensibility. This is literature's peculiar potential to shed light on the dialectical relationship between cultural space and its human occupants. And yet the very economic growth that gave rise to metropolitan consciousness also led to its undoing: the prevailing consumerism of the 1990s witnessed the subsumption of subjective consciousness by commodity fetishism, visual semiotics, and material surfeit-a Baudrillardian hell where the promise of urbanity mutated into disorientation, ethical rot, and existential nullity. These shared experiences converged on what can be labeled the modernity complex: the tangible dissonance between technonomic advancement and the loss of ontological anchors, as traditional ethical structures disintegrated in the face of market forces[7].

It is exactly in the sociocultural crucible that the New Generation authors-Han Dong, Zhu Wen, Qiu Huadong, Dong Xi, Bi Feiyu, Lin Bai, Wei Hui, and others-developed their literary praxis through experiential city life. Their writing praxis consisted of an extra-institutional trajectory through actual rejection of tradition

and canonical voices and binary reasoning. The literary orientation acted as the Fractured Generation's introduction into urban stories and an early conceptual pathway to Benjamin's "ruins"[8].

3. China's Fractured Generation: Representing Ruins and Urban Allegories

In interrogating the creative praxis of the New Generation authors through the triadic lens of ruins-allegory-redemption, one has to first consider how the 'ruins' are materialized and how the 'fable' is actualized. The materialization of Benjaminian ruins is found in its most immediate form in the sociomaterial landscape-not as abstracted contextual atmosphere, but as tangible, allegorized living space infused with symbolic richness. The characters directly interact with urban space, where symbolic things-skyscrapers, luxury vehicles, neon billboards-positively influence the characters' experiences and mental dispositions. This material engagement is instantiated most strongly through fractured visual encounters: broken cityscapes, winking billboards, maddening crowds. These fragmented percepts are consonant with Benjamin's "ruins"-a visual similitude of fragmented modernity. In the works of Qiu Huadong, as in *The Starlight in My Hands*[9]:

"The Beijing International Hotel, Customs Mansion, Gloria Plaza Hotel, CITIC Building, Changfugong Hotel, Guiyou Shopping Mall, Scitech Shopping Mall, China World Trade Center, and China World Hotel flickered past the window like fleeting mirages. ""That towering sapphire prism-the Jingguang Center, Beijing's architectural pinnacle resembling a three-hundred-faceted cobalt crystal-flashed past alongside the Great Wall Sheraton, Kunlun Hotel, Capital Mansion, Fortune Plaza, Yuyang Hotel, Landmark Towers, Lufthansa Center, Jingxin Building, Oriental Arts Center, and Hilton Hotel, their neon silhouettes dissolving into velocity-blurred streaks against the nightscape."

Similarly, in *The Weeping Game*:

"When I stood gazing from the revolving restaurant atop the International Hotel by Chang'an Avenue, what I felt was pure wonder and joy. My gaze swept from east to west: I saw COFCO Plaza, Chang'an Guanghai Tower, the Ministry of Transport Building, China Women's Activity Center, the Ministry of Foreign Trade

Building, and Henderson Center. These structures seemed like giant building blocks that had been placed there overnight."

The term "giant building blocks" vividly encapsulates the abrupt, fragmented emergence of skyscrapers-layered vertically over once-barren land-exposing compressed urbanization's visceral immediacy[10].

Careful reading discloses that the author's renderings of the workings of the city-objective phenomena, heteroglossic crowds, traffic streams, skyscrapers, billboards, and commodities-amount to something beyond mere aestheticization. Arising as an aestheticized city space is actually an analogous function, these textual inscriptions essentially function as allegorical figures. Rather than eulogizing metropolitan spectacle through traditional tropes of vibrant thoroughfares and orderly arrays of buildings, nor recording metropolitan transformation under heightened marketization, the novel reconfigures these into figural signifiers-each as an icon within the scroll of postsocialist modernity. Where then is the "allegory"? It is argued in this book that these city signifiers-transfigured through the writer's imagination-form a mode of spectacle production. These portrayed objects all embody three cardinal features: accumulation, compression, and fragmentation[11]. As dumped "debris" or stacked "building blocks", these collocated visual presences construct an imaginary totality-the city spectacle. According to Guy Debord's formulation: "In societies where modern conditions of production dominate, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded to the status of representation." Accordingly, the New Generation authors' exhaustive cataloguing of city excess functions not as realistic representation, but as manufactured spectacles-integral ruins made of broken signifiers. This is an extreme departure from traditional modes of spatiality typified by organic flow (Change scenery as you move) or meditative unfolding (A soothing presentation), instead existing as a sudden juxtaposition of commodified fragments. This spectacle thereby necessarily assumes metaphorical meaning-becoming an icon for city power, an 'imagistic' cityscape embodying greater values and ideologies[12]. Thus, in 1990s city literature, the city in novels is not just the material setting

or historical context for characters. Instead, the city and its dwellers exist in an intimate spirituality.

In his later work, the Arcades Project, Walter Benjamin specifically engaged with this allegorical mode of ruins. Louis Aragon's Paris Peasant deeply influenced Benjamin's scholarship. The description of the "Passage de l'Opéra" surely registers Aragon's own ruminations on the conditions of allegory. He once wrote: These arcades, many and secret, which glint on the streets beneath the rubric of 'passages'. These aquariums of human beings, deprived of the initial vigor, are worthy of being thought of as repositories for the modern myths. Clearly, these disjointed ruins are purposefully built, indeed constituting a so-called "human aquarium"-just as marine animals torn out of the oceanic settings, cut off from the very original places and modes of living. They become the allegorical myths, loaded with the ideological apparatus of modernity[13].

4. Urban Allegories and Ruin-Dwellers: Pre-Redemptive Tragedies

The presentation of accumulative, fractured cityscapes functions on two planes simultaneously: firstly, through sensorial immediacy-most notably through visual registers acting directly on perception; secondly, as metaphorical registers transporting ideological constructs. These double meanings then arrive at the same destination: the human subject in the metropolitan matrix. The rapid growth of social capital and cityscapes puts humans through three existential experiences: seeing sky-scraping towers consuming familiar topographies, being immobilized in disorienting city flows, or buried beneath glittering seductions of commodity fetishism. These appearances nourish Benjamin's shock effect-a sensorial assault bursting existential coherence through capitalism's optical barbarism. These figures are exposed to the supremacy of the urban spectacle, existing marked through postindustrial disgregation and multidirectional disorientation. For Zhao Yiheng, this yields "existential inertia and teleological erosion" and simplifies life to spectral drift. Different survival modes therefore converge tragically as disoriented souls in the glittering ruins of modernity[14].

City residents embody different stages of being but possess the same tragic fate, and there is convergence of diverging trends. The

commodity fetishism-distorted are the most visible among them. The consumer culture inflates to the maximum extent of materialism, where desire and socialization collaborate to subject individuals to commodified space and objects. This noxious influence chains personal freedom and demilitarizes the spirit of human subjecthood. The most externally realized is the pursuit of wealth, status, and domination at all cost. Life complicates itself at an accelerated rate and human contact is transient and isolating. Each is occupied with utilitarian pursuits to satiate material appetite and illusions through de-personalized cityscapes-transient crashes in the pace of the frantic metropolis that dematerialize human relationship into transactional ephemera. Evident in the case of Qiu Huadong's Environmental Drama[15].

Every day, my friends and I pass through the evolving streets at a whirlwind pace-spilling through the oral and dentition of the city as human vomit-only to be at the mercy of the relentless spread of building giants: luxury hotels, corporate skyscrapers, office towers, shopping centers, hyper-markets, and Euro-American fast-food chains that loom large in overbearing omnipresence.

As further exemplified in Zhu Wen's *I Love Dollars*:

That beast called the dollar has such an alluring face, its surface bearing exotic charm. A dollar check is instantaneously converted mid-air into multiplied RMB checks at the hands of economic magic-pouring downwards as sacramental confetti. With spread arms to the cobalt heavens, I accept this rain of many colours of fortune in reverent thanksgiving-a liturgical act of commodity fetishism where the transubstantiation of commodity duplicates the theology of postmodernity.

The main character shows grotesque greed and hallucinatory piety towards money and becomes an automaton controlled by consumerism's inscrutable puppeteer, jerking through the stage-managed drama of capitalism. Brother's Performance and Zhu Wen's Five-Mao Journey also reveal estranged desire and religious emptiness, exemplifying the dehumanizing effect of market-led modernity. Under the dictates of Kant, the universal principle of morality-derived from the categorical imperative of practical rationality-loses its normative grip when estranged subjects trample ethical maxims into the ground by superadding self-serving

inducements of felicity to ethical reasoning. The corruption of unadulterated practical rationality makes the law of morality ineffective, breeding needs-generating creatures, ethical deforming, and discredited beliefs. This existing failure is an ultimate tragedy: the universal of ethical community allegorized through fragmented subjectivity[16].

Another tragic group of characters are the rural migrants. Numerous marginal characters written by authors of the New Generation migrate from countryside to metropolitan areas-out of necessity or attracted by possibility-and, as in the case of Xiangzi in *Rickshaw Boy*, become the city's perpetual strangers. Shorn of rural origins, they are submerged in the dislocated metropolitan space, dazed by the sensorial shocks of Walter Benjamin's shock experience. In Bi Feiyu's *The Good Brothers*, heroes Yin Tunan and Yin Tubei drift between tradition and modernity, ideal and real. Gradually overwhelmed by the city's kaleidoscopic charm, turn to metropolitan entrepreneur to survive but are still lost-do not gain intelligible selves or epistemic orientations. Rural subjecthood is dispersed by the metropolis's so-called "civilization" and are stranded as perpetual strangers. This polarization between tradition and modernity resonates deeply with Ferdinand Tönnies' conceptual framework in *Community and Society*, specifically his nostalgia for *Kultur* (culture as cultivated, aesthetic, and organic connections attached to German aristocratic tradition) and criticism of *Zivilisation* (civilization as frivolous, materialistic, and merchandise-based values endemic to degenerate capitalist modernization). Conforming to theory, Tönnies believed that *Kultur* was an agrarian-aristocratic ethos-an organic cultivation of religious connections to the earth and to heritage-condemning *Zivilisation* as the pathological victory of utilitarian rationality where human connections are dispersed to transactional points of contact within industrialized alienation. In China's cultural context, the heroes of *The Good Brothers* reveal sorrowfully the binary conflict between rural and metropolitan lifestyles behind the "marginalized figure" archetype-a crash between rural rootedness and metropolitan disorientation. Their story concludes with yet another universal tragedy.

5. Wanderer and Selfhood: From Tragedy to

Redemptive Aesthetics

Benjamin's aesthetics of the ruins transforms tragic theory-it reinterprets tragedy to new philosophical heights by unearthing redemptive potential within the ruins of modernity. The experimental works and historical-literary import of the "Fractured Generation" authors are to some extent an unconscious engagement with Benjaminian redemptive strains. Post-Reform China (1980s-1990s) saw the gradual importation of Western critical theories such as the Frankfurt School, but authors such as Han Dong did not approach them through studying them on purpose, but through textual praxis. This unconscious conversation betrays the common quest for the ruins-allegory-redemption nexus through comparative grounds as opposed to adherence to theories.

The wanderer figure, derived from Walter Benjamin's *The Writer of Modern Life*, portrays figures who are rootless but commodity-engrossed-"each vaguely defying conventions while facing an unknown future." This imagery strongly speaks to the "extra-institutional" metropolitan figures produced by the New Generation authors. Contrary to the alienated figures and marginal characters dealt with previously-who are the bearers and performers of tragedy on the ruins of modernity-the wanderer figure is an agent of salvation on these ruins along the path of redemption. For example, in Han Dong's *Heroes of a Small Town*:

"I would often ride on the back of Ding Xiaohai's motorcycle as he aimlessly roamed the streets of Nanjing. Without destination or purpose, we drifted wherever the roads led. Once, with the engine already rumbling, we found ourselves revving into motion yet utterly directionless"

Another example is Han Dong's *Three Comrades*:

On New Year's Eve 1993, as over a million Nanjing families gathered for reunion feasts, Dongping and his comrades wandered the streets-wandering as existential liturgy. Driven by inarticulate compulsions, they had traversed two major avenues. The thoroughfares remained densely populated; even as twilight thickened, the human currents showed no ebb.

They walked on, growing weary as they lost all concrete purpose for their next step.

Other examples include Han Dong's works such as *Five-Mao Journey*, *How Far to the Factory*

Complex, *I Love Dollars*, and *What Is Trash, What Is Love*, among others.

These characters exemplify Benjamin's ruins nomads-people who lack distinct personalities or archetypes but serve as symbols of broken collective memory and decayed ethical standards in the debris of modernity. They are a collective portrait of Benjamin and the Fractured Generation authors as thinkers-cultural anatomists that dissect the necropolis of capitalism. According to Michel Löwy: "Academics suffer deeply under capitalism's socio-cultural domination, their despair so deep that the 'soulless specter' of our times haunts every subject they articulate. Even their imagination carries the mark of high-efficiency fear-or in their jargon, terror in the face of an era of shallow materialism." So through these nomadic characters, the New Generation authors figuratively represent their intellectual vagrancy-a redemptive vagrancy through the ruins where critical consciousness resists the undertow of commodity.

These nomadic wanderers are repositories for an arch-transcendental impulse beyond tragedy. For Benjamin, the idea of progress has to be rooted in the notion of catastrophe. What is progress is, as it were, just this catastrophe. Catastrophe is not what at any moment is about to occur but what is always occurring. Redemptive space is to be found only in catastrophe's infinitesimal crevices. It is through these very Baudelairean wanderers-moving through tragic ruins and fractured modernity-that one recuperates through catastrophe's crevices historical debris, recovers the smoldered aura of common memory, and redeems lost communal ties, finally becoming redeemed from tragic destruction-a transcendence through excavation. In the same vein, the Fractured Generation authors transcend bare tragic representation of ruins. Their vagabonds-and typically intellectual or spiritually educated characters-naturally embody common lives weary of the burden of life but persevering through redemptive wanderlust. Think of the narrator in Han Dong's *Heroes of a Small Town: Yingtemaiwang*: as an intellectual stranded between warring values and dislocated places, he is different from numbed alternatives such as Zhu Hongjun or Ding Xiaohai. Through diligent recollecting and exploring, the narrator labors to "grasp the essence of modernity, feel its spirit and soul" through the torrents of life. These characters

knowingly avoid ideological battle and cultural burden, embodying enlivened singularity-the Fractured Generation's self-declared motto of extra-institutional freedom and ceaseless becoming. This is tragic transcendence as well: both Benjaminian vagabonds and these textual kin enact the ruins-allegory-redemption trilogy, discontent to catalog debris but plowing into buried truths, gathering fragments to fashion redemptive potentialities from the ruins of modernity.

6. Conclusion

The submerged conversation between Benjamin and the New Generation writers betrays mutual tragic orientation-both reveal the apocalyptic core of modernity and plot an ruins-allegory-hope praxis. The real worth of their ruins aesthetics lies in excavating the essentials beneath the wasteland surface: the very shards and debris, rejected as mere wreckage, function as nodes of meaning that reconstruct totality on the basis of fracture, distil essence as well as ruins, and disclose the bare ruins of the soul. Through the archaeology of the soul, they transform rubble into epiphany, unfolding buried truths regarding common trauma and soul erosion. In the process, both paradigms actualize different humanistic agendas-Benjamin's messianic materialism and the Fractured Generation's anti-institutional poetics-alike converging on common redemptive cultural criticism. Following incorporation into the praxis of contemporary Chinese literature, Benjamin's theory not only expands into the areas of applicability of critical theory but also excavates the internal workings of resistance creativity within post-reform China.

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