Tragic hero and hero tragedy: reimagining *Oedipus the King* as *Jingju* (Peking opera) for the Chinese stage

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Although the 2009 *jingju* (Peking opera) adaptation of *Oedipus the King* does not completely indigenize the Greek classic, i.e. relocating it to a time and place in Chinese culture and history, it Sinicizes the names of characters and places and retools the plot so it would better appeal to Chinese audiences. More than anything, this *jingju* remake of the Greek classic, as Chinese adaptations of Greek classics typically do, demythologizes and thus de-emphasizes the agency of gods, Greek or their native divination substitutes, by way of highlighting the ‘heroism’ of the titular protagonist. What results is a Sinicized Oedipus, virtuous\(^1\) and well-beloved, whose nobility sustains to the very end without being ‘flawed’ by excessive pride, a fiery temper or paranoia. He remains devoted to the public good—to bring deliverance to his people—instead of being consumed by a headstrong quest for personal truth although the two, the public and the personal, are painfully intertwined. This reinterpretation of what is considered a quintessentially classic Greek tragedy as a ‘hero tragedy’ is overdetermined by the aesthetics of *jingju*, the sociocultural needs of the Chinese people today, and the challenges and possibilities of such transcultural adaptations, thus engendering interesting and enriching intertextual reverberations across cultures.

Compared to classical Greek drama, traditional Chinese drama (*xiqu*) is a late bloomer. Although, like classical Greek drama, *xiqu* can be traced back to communal festivals featuring song and dance and to rites and rituals performed to exorcise evil spirits and to give thanks to the gods for their blessings at the dawn of Chinese civilization, it remained in that early, fetal state for centuries.\(^2\) By the fifth century BC, ancient Greek drama had reached a golden age in artistic form and occupied a central place in Athenian cultural life. There were no comparable achievements in

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1 Traditional Chinese (Confucian) virtues include loyalty (*zhong*), filial piety (*xiao*), benevolence (*ren*), affection (*ai*), trustworthiness (*xin*), righteousness (*yi*), harmony (*he*), peace (*ping*), propriety (*li*), wisdom (*zhi*), integrity (*lian*), and shame (*chi*).

drama in China until the Northern Song, Yuan, and early Ming dynasties (12th to 14th century). It was during this period that traditional Chinese drama, particularly nanxi (southern drama) along China’s southeastern coast and zaju (variety play) in northern China, matured and acquired its distinctive characteristics, e.g., blending song, poetry, and dance in the same theatrical event, stylized acting, elaborate system of roles for men, women, heroes, and villains, etc.

The direct introduction of classical Greek drama in China did not happen until modern times, in the forms of published translations, e.g. Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* (1926), *The Persians* (1936), and *Agamemnon* (1937); Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* (1936) and *Antigone* (1937); and Euripides’ *Medea* (1937) and *The Trojan Women* (1938). New translations or newer editions of earlier translations were published during the first seventeen years of Communist rule in China between 1949 and 1966, before the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Like everything else in arts and literature, classical Greek drama experienced a boom in the late 1970s and early 1980s as China reopened its door to the outside world. By 1983, the entirety of ancient Greek tragedies, all 32 plays by Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles combined, had been translated into Chinese. Many studies of ancient Greek drama, by way of translation (from English and other languages) or original scholarship, had been published too.

Other than a 1942 adaptation of Euripides’ *Medea* by a drama school in Sichuan and a 1946 adaptation of Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* in Shanghai, under the Chinese title *Nüren yu heping* (Women and Peace), as China was plunging deeper into another civil war (1945–9), performances of Greek drama on the Chinese stage had been rare before the early 1980s. In March 1986, theatregoers in Beijing saw the first public performance of *Oedipus the King* mounted by the Central Academy of Drama—adapted and codirected by Luo Jinlin, a scholar of classical Greek literature. The challenge, as Luo knew only too well, was how to make this Chinese production of a two-millennia old Greek classic relevant and appealing for the Chinese of the 1980s. Therefore, instead of aiming for complete fidelity or going into full postmodern experimental mode, Luo and his team chose the middle way: streamlining the dramatic action and scene flow and injecting elements of *xiqu* into the production while trying to stay true to both the story and the spirit of the classical tragedy. In the summer of the same year, by invitation from the European Cultural Center of Delphi, the academy took the adaptation to both Delphi and Athens. Since then, several classical Greek plays, e.g. *Oedipus the King, Antigone, Medea, The Trojan Women, Prometheus Bound, Thesmophoriazusae (Dimujie)*, have seen Chinese productions in the forms of modern spoken drama or traditional Chinese drama such as Peking opera.

This article studies the 2009 jingju (Peking opera; Beijing opera) adaptation of *Oedipus the King*, one of the most popular Greek plays in China that have seen

3 Tan (2011); Qi (2012: 135–62).
4 See Luo (2016).
several notable adaptations since the 1980s. Although this production does not completely indigenize the Greek classic, i.e. relocating it to a time and place in Chinese culture and history, it Sinicizes the names of characters and places and compresses and retools the dramatic action so it would be easier for Chinese audiences to follow and appreciate and so there would be ample time and space to give full play to the art of jingju, especially song and dance. More than anything, this jingju revisitation of the Greek classic demythologizes and thus deemphasizes the agency of gods, Greek or their native divination replacement, by way of highlighting the ‘heroism’ of the tragic hero. There is still the Aristotelian peripeteia (reversal) and anagnorisis (recognition), although there is no apparent hamartia (tragic flaw) in the character or action of the protagonist. The Sinicized Oedipus is a noble and virtuous man, as noble and virtuous a king as Sophocles portrays in the opening scene of the play: His heart ‘is heavy with/The city’s pain, my own, and yours together’; he vows not to rest until he brings ‘deliverance’ to his people. His virtuous and noble character, however, remains to the very end without being complicated (or tarnished) by his fiery temper or paranoia, as is the case of his Greek ‘forebear’ who is quick to suspect the worst from Teiresias and Creon and punishes them harshly. The Sinicized Oedipus remains devoted to the public good—to bring deliverance to his people—instead of being consumed by the personal quest for his own identity, although the two, the public and the personal, are painfully intertwined. Indeed, this 2009 adaptation translates a quintessential Greek tragedy into a ‘hero tragedy’ (yingxiong beiju), which would evoke an old and oftentimes emotionally charged debate: whether China has ‘true,’ ‘authentic’ tragedy as understood in the Western dramatic tradition. This jingju reinterpretation is overdetermined by the aesthetics of jingju, some important sociocultural needs of the Chinese people today, and the challenges and possibilities of transcultural adaptations, as Chinese theatre artists continue to take their creative endeavors to stages outside their own country, and thus engendering interesting and enriching intertextual reverberations across cultures.

**Jingju (Peking opera) as quintessential traditional Chinese drama**

For centuries since the Northern Song and early Ming dynasties, traditional Chinese drama has flourished in more than 300 local, regional, as well as national genres. Each genre of traditional Chinese drama (xiqu) has its own rich history of gestation and development although many are closely related through kinship of one kind or another. Jingju (Peking opera), for example, known to the outside world as a fundamentally representative genre of xiqu, is a relatively recent development of the Qing dynasty (1636–1911), having evolved from huiju (popular in the southern province of Anhui) and hanju (popular in Hubei, Shaanxi and other central

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6 Sophocles (1994), pp. 49–51. Unless otherwise noted, hereafter all references to and citations of the original play of *Oedipus the King* are from this text.
provinces) in the decades from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century. Like many other genres of xiqu, jingju is known for its blend of singing (chang), acting (zuo, mix of dance and performance), speech (nian), and fight (da, mix of acrobatics and martial arts).

This ‘intermultimodal’\(^7\) tendency of many genres of xiqu can be traced back to the early days of the Chinese civilization when yue (art, entertainment) meant a composite performance of poetry, song, and dance. As noted in Yueji (Art records), a book from the Spring Autumn and Warring States periods (chunqiu zhanguo, approximately 771–221 BC) and Maoshi xu (Mao poetry preface), written around the same time as that of the monumental Shijing (Book of Songs, the earliest collection of Chinese poetry dating from the 11th to 7th century BC): poetry is an expression of zhi (soul, spirit); when zhi in one’s heart and mind expresses itself in speech, it becomes poetry. Similarly, qing (emotions, sensibilities) originates from one’s inner being and expresses itself in speech: when speaking does not express oneself fully, augment it with exclamations; when exclaiming does not express oneself fully, sing; when singing does not express oneself fully, dance. Indeed, it would take no less than all three—poetry, song, and dance, blended in one act—to give full expression to the human spirit.\(^8\) This artistic and aesthetic ideal long upheld from antiquity, as applied to xiqu, would manifest itself in the amalgamation of all three—poetry, song, and dance—to give full, multimodal expression to the full range of human experiences.

Another characteristic of jingju as a representative xiqu is its highly conventionalized way of acting, although stylization is inherent in all artistic—including dramatic—performances and it is present even in the most realistic theatre.\(^9\) As a language or grammar of sorts, established from long tradition and understood by the audiences, stylization is an especially necessary condition for the minimalist and highly suggestive xiqu to work. A few quick steps across the simple, makeshift stage would be enough to suggest a journey of ten thousand li and three or four actors tumbling in a carefully choreographed sword and spear play could convey a sense of armies coming at each other on an epic scale. Spring, summer, autumn, winter; rain, snow, thunderstorm; climbing a mountain, setting sail on a river, charging forward on horseback, etc.—all could be invoked with a few simple but highly conventionalized gestures, movements, and/or a quick declaration in the lyrics or speech, without resorting to elaborate audio-visual technology to achieve verisimilitude. All a traveling troupe needs are a few good actors, a minimal supply of costumes and cosmetics (whereby to paint the faces red, black, or white according

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\(^7\) See Lavender (2014).

\(^8\) Ye and Zhang (2004: 4).

\(^9\) Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874–1940), when speaking of the art of Mei Lanfang (1894–1961, one of the most accomplished and famous Peking opera artists), went so far as to say, ‘It is a mistake to contrast stylized theatre with realistic theatre. Our formula is stylized realistic theatre.’
to the roles), two or three simple string and percussion instruments, and a small set of ‘swords’ and ‘spears’.

The roles in jingju are typically organized into four major groups: sheng (male), dan (female), jing (painted-face), and chou (clown), each of which then falls into secondary and even tertiary subcategories. Under the general category of sheng (male), for example, there are xusheng or laosheng (bearded male, old male), xiaosheng (young male), wusheng (martial male), and wawasheng (young boys), whereas under the dan (female) role there are qingyi or zhengdan (bluish-dressed female, decent, dignified, and righteous female), huadan (young, lively female), laodan (old female), and wudan (martial female). Even music for xiqu—its songs and melodies—is highly conventionalized both in composition and in performance with an elaborate system of arias, fixed tune melodies, and percussion patterns.10

Although traditional Chinese drama (xiqu) such as jingju remained popular throughout the centuries, it has enjoyed a depressingly smaller market share since the 1980s thanks to the onslaught of television, film (especially in the form of Hollywood blockbusters), the internet, and other popular and readily accessible media of entertainment. Feeling the mounting pressure of the marketplace, many xiqu troupes invest much of their hope of survival and vibrancy in their adaptation endeavours, including adaptations of classical Greek drama for the Chinese stage.11 Such transcultural revisitations and reinterpretations of classical Greek drama, as understood by Julie Sanders in Adaptation and Appropriation (2006) and Linda Hutcheon in A Theory of Adaptation (2012) are particularly challenging because they entail relocations in cultural and temporal settings and shifts in dramatic genre and style.12 Much of their success or failure rides on how Chinese theatre artists approach their adaptation endeavours, given the vast differences in history, culture, religion, customs, language as well as theatregoers’ tastes, sensibilities, and habits.

Typically, Chinese theatre artists go about their adaptation endeavors via three routes, i.e. fidelity (faithful to the original play in story, structure, and production), indigenization (appropriating a Greek classic as source material to make a new traditional Chinese play), and hybridization (interfusing two distinctive dramatic traditions into the same theatrical event). Whether they choose to go about their adaptations in the ‘fidelity,’ ‘indigenization,’ or ‘hybridization’ mode, in practice there is considerable experimentation and indeed fluidity among the three modes, as exemplified by the 1986 Central Academy of Drama production alluded to earlier. This is also the case of the 2009 ‘experimental’ jingju adaptation of Oedipus the King under the Chinese title Wangzhe Edi (King Edi).

The 2009 adaptation of Oedipus the King under discussion here was an ‘experimental’ (shiyuan) endeavor, mounted by Zhejiang Jingju Company in partnership with the Shanghai Theatre Academy. It was adapted by William Huizhu Sun and directed by Weng Guosheng, a talented young actor starring as the protagonist. The Chinese title for this jingju venture is Wangzhe Edi (King Edi), edi (two syllables) as transliteration for Oedipus instead of the usual edipusi (four syllables and much more ‘foreign’ sounding). Thebes becomes Tiguo (Ti country), one syllable Ti plus the familiar ‘morpheme’ guo (country), instead of Tebat, the usual transliteration. Corinth, likewise, becomes Keguo (Ke country). All the other main characters are known only by their relationships to Edi (Oedipus), e.g. Wanghou (queen) for Jocasta, and Guojiu (royal brother-in-law) for Creon. The chorus in the Sophoclean original, who represent the Theban citizens and offer plot as well as philosophical commentary as the dramatic action unfolds (sometimes going several long rounds between strophe and antistrophe), is taken out. Gone also are the offspring from the doomed union of Oedipus and Jocasta, so there are no references to Antigone and Ismene as daughters/half-sisters of Edi (Oedipus) and no bidding them farewell before Edi goes into exile. The messenger who comes with the news of the death of the old Corinthian king is now Runiang (old nurse) for young Edi. She happens to be the same servant who, many years ago, was given the baby by a Tiguo (Thebes) man who turns out to be the only surviving eyewitness of the killing of the old king. This gender change for the Keguo messenger/shepherd, minor as it seems, creates an emotionally charged moment when she sees Edi again, providing a female counterpoint to the old Tiguo messenger/shepherd, and enriches the dramatic experience for the audiences with a laodan role type (old female).

More significantly, this jingju adaptation erased the presence of the Olympian gods (Apollo, Zeus, Athena, etc.), oracles of Delphi, the blind prophet Teiresias, and the Sphinx to demythologize and further indigenize the story. In their stead are three diviners, or fortunetellers, drawn from the native culture, who are of nondescript religious or spiritual persuasion (Confucian, Daoist, or Buddhist). Steeped in an ancient cosmological system that goes as far back as 1700 BC or earlier, these diviners could reach deep into the world of yin, the vast reservoir of cosmic forces that emanate from darkness, to tell fortune or solve riddles in the world of yang, the world of light inhabited by the living. They appear in the beginning, middle, and end of the production to provide the necessary supernatural agency for the story to work and to function as a chorus of sorts, too. As an ‘experimental’ jingju undertaking intended for performance in the venue of ‘little theatre’ (xiao juchang), this production utilized contemporary sound and lighting technologies as well as tapping the full range of artistic tools granted by jingju, zuo (mix of dance and performance), chang (song), nian (speech), da (mix of acrobatics and martial arts), to capture the emotive depth and intensity of the classic story and create an engrossing dramatic experience for the audiences.

What results from this extensive compression and retooling of plot, character roles, and demythologization (or rather, replacement of Greek gods with native diviners) is a much leaner storyline (about 70 minutes actual performance time) that would require much less knowledge of Greek mythology to follow it, but much more willing suspension of disbelief (e.g. how a young outsider could have come and married the widowed queen and succeeded to the throne is never explained) to appreciate it. It turns a ‘flawed’ tragic hero, in the Aristotelian sense, into the tragedy of a hero, virtuous, noble, who is willing to ‘martyr’ himself—to bear all the suffering of the world—so his people are saved from the catastrophic plague.\textsuperscript{14}

This \textit{jingju} reinterpretation of the Greek tragedy was based on an interpretation of the Sophoclean play that, as explained by William Huizhu Sun, who initiated the project and wrote the script for the adaptation, saw Oedipus as an extraordinary heroic figure:\textsuperscript{15}

To sacrifice one’s kin for righteousness (\textit{dayimieqin}) is not that uncommon. What is extremely uncommon is to sacrifice oneself for righteousness (\textit{dayimieji}). Sacrificing himself for righteousness is exactly what Oedipus did, an extraordinary selfless act that has no parallel in history, Chinese or otherwise, a heroic figure who stands alone in the history of drama too.

Weng Guosheng, director of the production, also viewed Oedipus as a hero in the moral and ethical sense:\textsuperscript{16}

A hero, righteous, just, and progressive, who suffers egregiously, body and soul, in his unrelenting struggle against the realities of his environment. Oedipus remains an unforgettable figure and wins recognition and admiration all over the world thanks to his unselfish, all-out defense of justice for humanity.

Sun, Weng, and their team had a full appreciation of the challenges (as well as possibilities) of the transcultural adaptation endeavour they were undertaking. Sun, for example, in a co-authored article published in 2006, discusses at length a major challenge facing the theatre artists of a 1983 \textit{jingju} adaptation of \textit{Othello} mounted by Beijing Experimental Beijing Opera Company: ‘How could Shakespeare’s subtly depicted, well-rounded characters be tailored to fit the fixed types of Beijing opera’.\textsuperscript{17} Similarly, Weng expressed the concern that as a performance-centered production, \textit{jingju Wangzhe Edi} could result in weakened thematic development (\textit{sixiangxing}) and disharmony between the performance and the spirit of the tragedy.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{14} This portion of the discussion is based on \textit{Jingju Wangzhe Edi} [Peking Opera \textit{Oedipus the King}] DVD published by Zhejiang Yinxiang Press, 2010.
\textsuperscript{15} William Huizhu Sun, email correspondence, December 16, 2017.
\textsuperscript{16} Weng (2011: 4).
\textsuperscript{17} Fei and Sun (2006: 125).
\textsuperscript{18} Weng (2011: 8).
As befitting a jingju production, the characters for Wangzhe Edi are each assigned a codified xiqu role type:19 Edi (King Edi, Oedipus): wenwu xiaosheng (educated and martial young male) and guansheng (high-ranking, distinguished male), a leading role that requires virtuosity in zuo (mix of dance and performance), chang (song), nian (speech), da (mix of acrobatics and martial arts); Wanghou (Queen, Jocasta): zhengdan (righteous female); Guojiu (royal brother-in-law, Creon): zhengjing (dahualian, big-painted-face), typically a righteous, loyal official or general; Shensuanzi (fortuneteller), Shenzhuzi (clairvoyant), Shenlingzi (astromancer), the three diviners: chou (xiaohualian, small-painted face; sanhualian, three-painted face), clownish, funny, cunning, and insidious; Weibing (royal bodyguard); wujing (painted-face martial male); Runiang (old nurse): laodan (old female), and Lao Weibing (old royal bodyguard), wuchou (martial clown). All of these role types are readily recognizable to jingju (Peking opera) enthusiasts who go to the theatre not necessarily to be educated or enlightened, but to be entertained by performance of zuo, chang and da, especially performance by well-known, star actors.

Acutely aware of what would be lost in the subtlety of characterization (the ‘well-rounded’ Oedipus becoming a relatively ‘flat’ Edi) and depth of thematic development, thanks to the restraints of codified role types as well as compression and retooling of the story and dramatic action, the Chinese theatre artists tried to compensate with what could be gained in emotional depth and intensity, especially in the portrayal of Edi, by tapping the full range of artistic power that jingju (Peking opera) can bring to bear. For the 70-minute performance, Edi, as portrayed by Weng Guosheng, a virtuosic actor with accolades both before and since this 2009 production, sings a big aria at each of the several important moments in the dramatic action, e.g. the opening scene, the anagnorisis (recognition) scene, and the climactic self-blinding scene. Edi (Weng) also performs a range of stylized yet stunning movements from the repertoire of jingju oftentimes as he sings, to externalize and indeed to give full-throated expression to the depth and intensity of his emotions, e.g. guibu (rapid knee steps), jiangshi (stiffened body spin), shuaila (hair spin), shuixiuwu (long ‘water’ sleeve dance), etc. The other characters, especially Wanghou (Mao Mao), Guojiu (Wang Yuying), and Runiang (Liu Guohua), each have their share of song and dance to perform, too. The three diviners, Shensuanzi (Mao Yi), Shenzhuzi (Ying Jun), and Shenlingzi (Jin Min), who open the show and appear at the other important scenes in the dramatic action representing the otherworldly forces Edi (Weng) is up against, have their moments to shine with their amazing performance.

For stagecraft, the production tries to follow the proverbial ‘one-table-two-chair’ minimalist approach, although in this case it is a grand golden dragon armchair sitting upstage center, its presence alone a powerful representation of the magnificent royal court where much of the tragic action unfolds. For music, this production uses the usual jinghu (two-stringed fiddle), yueqin (moon-shaped mandolin), sanxian (three-stringed banjo), xiao (vertical bamboo flute), muyu (wooden clapper), luo

19 This portion of the discussion draws from Weng (2011).
(gong), *gu* (drum), and *zhong* (bell), as well as modern electronic instruments such as synthesizers to enrich and enhance the musical effect. Modern sound and lighting technologies are also used to optimize the dramatic experience for the audiences.

The original play by Sophocles begins with Oedipus addressing a priest who, on behalf of the Theban citizenry, asks the king to save the city, as he did before when he came and set it free from ‘the blood tribute that the cruel Sphinx | Had laid upon our city’. Then Creon, sent to Delphi by Oedipus ‘to ask in Phoebus’ house what act of mine, | What word of mine, may bring deliverance’, returns and informs the king that the cause of the plague is the unresolved murder of the former king, Laius. Oedipus responds with an impassioned pledge to find the truth, to seek ‘vengeance on behalf of Thebes | And Phoebus too’. This is followed by the chorus (in three rounds of strophe and antistrophe) singing, by way of commenting, reflecting, and praying and Oedipus, once again, vowing to do justice for the murdered king, to ‘defend his cause | As if it were my father’s’. He also puts a curse on ‘the man that slew him, whether he | Slew him alone, or with a band of helpers’: ‘the wretch | In wretchedness and misery may live’.

In contrast, right before the curtain rises for the 2009 *jingju* production, a one-minute offstage narration, accompanied by solemn, mood-setting music from *xiao* (vertical bamboo flute) and percussion instruments, gives a quick background, or rather prologue, of the story to prepare the audiences for what is about to unfold on the stage. It presents *Edi*, the titular character, as a young king who has ruled *Tiguo* wisely for the last three years and is well loved by his people who have enjoyed peace and prosperity. Then, a disastrous plague hits and *Tiguo* plunges into deep misery. This ‘once-upon-a-time’ nondescript prologue could place *Edi* and *Tiguo* just about anywhere in world history and culture, hence giving the story a more universal reference.

When the narration ends, in the midst of massive cries of agony, loud beats of *dagu* (big drum), *tanggu* (mid-sized drum), and ominous music and thunderous lighting, *Shensuanzi*, *Shenzhuzi*, *Shenlingzi* (the three diviners), in clownish makeup (painted-face) and costumes (as befitting their *chou* roles), arrive on stage, each under the intense beam of a spotlight from above (red, green, and blue, respectively) signifying their otherworldly aura and ‘the psychological spaces’ they each occupy. Accompanied by ominous music and special effects of fire and smoke in the background, they dance in sinister fashion (reminiscent of the three witches of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*). Their dance, a mix of traditional *xiqu* movements (e.g. hand gestures and pose-striking) and kinetic rhythms of modern dance, projects a visual representation of ‘the supernatural motif for the production’. The diviners continue their ill-boding dance, to ‘warm up the stage’, so to speak, and more

21 This portion of the discussion on the *jingju* performance of the 2009 production draws from Weng Guosheng, personal interview.
22 Weng, personal interview.
importantly, to introduce the motif of supernatural forces, when a tenor aria arises backstage, as if from far away—an overture to the play of man versus fate:

In the universe vast and infinite,  
All seems empty and preordained.  
Karma or fate, which carries more weight in deciding one’s fortune?  
Having committed no sin or crime,  
Why am I feeling such apprehension,  
arriving at this crossroads? I wonder which path to take and to go where?

As the song—the theme song for the production—draws nearer, expanding between heaven and earth and before the diviners’ exit, the music transitions to a different timbre created by jinghu (two-stringed fiddle), yueqin (moon-shaped mandolin), sanxian (three-stringed plucked instrument), pipa (Chinese lute), zhongruan (mid-size moon-shaped four-stringed instrument), and daruan (big moon-shaped four-stringed instrument) to pave the way for the entrance of Edi, as his ‘hard journey in the rugged valley’ continues. Then, a young wusheng (martial art actor) enters, executing a series of tumbling and other gongfu/acrobatic moves typical of the wusheng role, to clear the way for Edi. The young king, in the leading sheng (male) role, dressed in royal blue and white, urges his horse (suggestively, by way of stylized movements such as tangma, horse riding) onto the stage as he continues to sing and act for more than six minutes to give full-throated expression to his love for his people and his pain at their suffering. This scene alternates between singing and acrobatics to gradually build up the dramatic tension on the stage. Edi has tried all kinds of remedies to free his people from the plague, but to no avail. As a last resort, Edi comes to seek help from the diviners who dwell at a place (crossroads) straddling yin and yang, enveloped in an ominous, otherworldly aura. After Edi swears that he is willing to die ten thousand times (wansi buci) to save his people, the diviners reluctantly tell him the ‘heavenly secret’ (tianji):

To relieve Tiguo of the plague,  
A murder mystery has to be resolved;  
A person (the murderer) has to be punished.

In the source text by Sophocles, the mystery of the unresolved murder and Oedipus’s fate, messily entangled in one deadly juggernaut, begins to unravel with the arrival of Teiresias, the blind prophet. The hitherto loving and beloved

23 Unless otherwise noted, all English translations from Chinese sources are by the authors of this article. Translations of lyrics for arias are more literal than expressive to give full flavor of the original texts as well as the transcultural relocations.

24 Weng, personal interview.
king now shows the not so ‘virtuous’ side in his character: hot-tempered and para-

noid. Without a shred of evidence, he accuses the truth-telling Teiresias and loyal Creon of plotting to dethrone him. When Jocasta, the queen, arrives on the scene and pleads to Creon by way of explaining the oracle and the murder of Laius, as it has been generally known in Thebes for the last three years (killed by brigands ‘at a place where three ways meet’), Oedipus, seized with terror, reacts by plunging even more precipitously into the twin-mystery of regicide and his birth. Although Oedipus’ fate is preordained at Delphi at the time of his birth, his ‘pride’, as manifested in his belief that he can control or change his fate and his headstrong pursuit of the truth of who he really is, proves to be the hamartia that makes him a tragic hero in the Aristotelian sense.

Edi, as reimagined in the 2009 jingju production, is similarly determined to solve the murder mystery, but not so much out of pride, in prideful defiance of his personal fate, as out of love for his people. Back in court (represented by the grand golden dragon armchair upstage centre) after the visit to the diviners to seek answers, Edi shuts himself in his chamber, pensive, sleepless, his heart being wrung even more by the misery of his people. There is no Teiresias to name him as the murderer he seeks (‘a father’s and a mother’s curse | Shall join to drive you headlong out of Thebes | And change the light that now you see to darkness’).

Neither is there rash accusation of treason against the blind prophet and Creon, now Guojiu (royal brother-in-law), his face painted deep red signifying honor and loyalty. A short scene between Wanghou (queen) and Guojiu reveals a bit more of the back-story: Three years ago, right after the murder of the old king, young Edi came to Tiguo, married the widowed queen, and has been a kind and beloved king ever since. It is at this juncture of the dramatic action that Runiang, Edi’s old nurse, arrives to deliver the news that the old king of Keguo has died and asks Edi to return to succeed to the throne.

The tidings brought by the old nurse kick the dramatic action into overdrive, so to speak, and the untangling of the murder mystery assumes a momentum of its own. Suspecting the worst, Wanghou (queen) sings a big aria of her petrifying fear while dancing in excruciating agony a series of jingju movements for dan (female role): shuixiu (‘water’ sleeve), yuanchang (fast steps around the stage) in circular, triangular, and braiding patterns, and piguzuo (jump and land on crossed legs):

Lightning bolt from blue sky shakes heaven and earth,
A thousand disasters and ten thousand misfortunes befall me.
The ill-starred baby given to the guard to abandon long ago,
How on earth could he return to send his father to the netherworld? [. . . .]

She beseeches the heavenly father to have mercy, ‘Never to allow such ungodly sin to see the light of day.’ When Lao Weibing (old royal bodyguard), the last strand in the mystery murder, is found and arrives on stage, Wanghou knows that the worst is about to happen. Terrified, she beseeches Edi not to continue with the investigation. A gut-wrenching scene between Wanghou and Edi ensues: they circle each other, he advancing a few steps as she retreats backward, each trying to read and change the mind of the other. Beside herself with unspeakable sorrow, Wanghou falls on her knees and begs Edi not to press on. Edi pushes Wanghou away, and then, feeling the pain he has inflicted on her, helps her back on feet. They hold each other’s eyes, and, as if struck by lightning, Edi finally senses the horrific truth of his birth—although this is not a full-blown moment of Aristotelian anagnorisis (recognition) and peripeteia (reversal) yet. However, there is no going back on his sworn oath, as sinister laughter from the three diviners offstage reminds him. Anguished as he is, Edi presses on, as determinedly as his Greek ‘forebear’ (See Fig. 1):

\[ \text{Wanghou, please do not blame Edi,} \]
\[ \text{Please do not hate Edi.} \]
\[ \text{To save Tiguo, Your King} \]
\[ \text{is resolved to get to the bottom of it all today.} \]

In the original play, when Jocasta begs Oedipus to seek no further and Oedipus insists on bringing in the shepherd (‘I will know the truth’), Jocasta bids him a bitter farewell (‘O man of doom! For by no other name | Can I address you now or evermore’) and exits. The next we hear of her again is the news of her death by her own hand reported by a messenger. In the jingju remake, Wanghou bids one last farewell from Edi with a heart-rending aria and jumps to her death upstage. After the last strand of the murder mystery is forced out of him, the old guard kills himself too, the seppuku style, on stage, driven by misery and loyalty to the king and the now dead queen. The two deaths performed grandly on stage not only provide the audiences with harrowing and awe-striking spectacle, but also serve to exemplify one of the cardinal Chinese virtues, zhong (loyalty, wholehearted devotion, especially to the king or country), celebrated from time immemorial. They set the stage, so to speak, for how Edi, the young king, will choose to punish himself.

Indeed, as Luo Jinlin indicates, when reflecting on his three decades of experience adapting and directing classical Greek plays on the Chinese stage, there is much potential in translating what is auditory in the original plays into direct visual spectacle to ratchet up the emotional intensity of the dramatic presentation and experience. For the theatre artists of the 2009 jingju reimagination, how Edi chooses to punish himself towards the end of the play proves too full of dramatic potential not

to be made full use of. In the original Greek play, the unrelenting Oedipus finally gets to the bottom of it all and thus laments: 28

Ah God! Ah God! This is the truth, at last!
O Sun, let me behold thee this once more,
I who am proved accursed in my conception
And in my marriage, and in him I slew.

With this he exits. The same messenger who delivers the news of Jocasta’s death also reports to the chorus, the Theban citizenry, as well as the audiences, the news of how Oedipus cries and raves in searing agony upon seeing Jocasta’s dead body and how he uses her golden brooches to strike himself blind. When he returns on stage again, Oedipus sings of Apollo who ‘decreed that I should suffer what I suffer: | But the hand that struck, alas! Was my own, | And not another’s’, and curses the man ‘Who took the savage fetters from my feet, | Snatched me from death, and saved me’. 29—lamentations on the theme of fate versus free will and the tragic sense of life. To

optimize the effect, the jingju adaptation once again moves what happens off stage in the Greek original to center stage and makes it the climax of the whole production, both thematically and emotively.

The last segment of Wangzhe Edi (King Edi), with the horrifying naked truth of Edi’s birth completely uncovered, begins with the reappearance of the three diviners, each under the intense beam of a spotlight (red, blue, and green, respectively) from above, accompanied by the same drumbeats and music from jingju instruments when they entered the stage in the opening scene. They dance the same mix of traditional xiqu movements and kinetic modern aerobatic moves, accompanied by massive, fast-rhythmed chanting ‘Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!’, adrenaline-pumping drum beats, and spasms of thunderous lightning (thus creating an ambience not unlike that of a high-stake boxing prize fight or a WWE championship match, albeit with a more ominous touch), to prepare the scene for the last heroic act by Edi in the epic battle between fate and free will, person and state, and crime (albeit committed unwittingly) and punishment. As the theme song (sung at the opening scene of the play) arises again, Edi enters, now dressed in white and blue, signifying his essential innocence of guilt and purity of spirit. In a soliloquy perhaps worthy of a Shakespearean tragedy, Edi deliberates and decides on what his punishment should be:

[...] To die a thousand times, for Edi, would not be atonement enough for the ungodly sin; To die a thousand cuts, for Edi, would not be atonement enough for the crime of ten thousand lifetimes. [...] Then he sings another aria, the last for the production, in the suona erhuang tune (suona, a double-reeded Chinese horn; erhuang, a xiqu tune style originated from Anhui province) which, pure, solemn, and elemental in character, features a big vocal range and high notes to give full-throated expression to his emotions—pain, sorrow, and resolve. According to Weng Guosheng, the aria, which lasts for four minutes, begins in sanban (rubato), followed by yuanban (moderate tempo), liushuihuaiban (fast tempo), and culminates in gadi (high-pitched singing) often used for laosheng (old male) role as Edi protests fate that has inflicted so much misery on his people, and reconfirms his resolve to punish himself for a crime not of his own making:30

To blind these unenlightened eyes of mine as atonement and To banish myself in darkness never to return and see light again.

30 Weng, personal interview.
Then, centre stage, back to the audience and besieged by the same three diviners, Edi, as channelled by Weng Guosheng, readies himself for the act of self-punishment: He turns around and bursts through the siege, tossing two very long red sleeves into the air, a direct and full visual representation of blood shooting forth from his pierced eyes. An anguished, gut-wrenching *shuixiuwu* dance (long ‘water’ sleeve dance) ensues as Edi (Weng) masterfully executes a series of *xiqu* movements—recalling the long sleeves and tossing them out again, twirling them fast and spasm-like, *shuaifa* (hair swing), *cuobu* (trudge steps), *guibu* (rapid knee steps), and *fanshen* (body spin on the floor) as he fights the three diviners (who jump over the dancing long sleeves, like circus dogs, and roll and tumble in all directions), giving one last expression of his heroic defiance against fate and the excruciating pain he bears—body and soul. This long-sleeve dance, which lasts for two full minutes, ends with Edi (Weng) executing a *qiankongfanbiankezi*, a forward somersault, landing hard and clean on his back, his right foot sticking heavenward, as if lodging one last protest against his fate (See Figures 2 and 3). The play ends with a tableau of Edi (Weng), blindfolded, standing tall on the stone steps in front of the royal court, ready to be led by the diviners—one leading in front, one on each side holding the long “water” sleeves—out of *Tiguo* into the land of darkness, never to return.

How much is this 2009 *jingju* reimagination of *Oedipus the King* still a Greek tragedy? Is it a ‘displacement,’ as Tian Min posits in his study of Hebei *bangzi* (another popular traditional Chinese drama genre) adaptation of Greek tragedy, i.e. Greek tragedies being displaced from the theatric art and tradition of their source culture and appropriated as raw material for the artistic and performance needs of Chinese *xiqu*? There is perhaps no easy and simple answer to the question. However, the fact that this *jingju* production is based on Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, as explicitly acknowledged in the production’s credits, its readily perceptible intertextual connections with the Greek source text and culture, and the display of the art of *jingju* at full blast, give the production a mesmerizing vibrancy of hybridity.

The 2009 *jingju* adaptation of *Oedipus the King*, as discussed above, can be seen as a hypertext, to borrow from Gérard Genette, that can stand alone for the enjoyment of Chinese theatregoers unfamiliar with the hypotext, the original play as well as its mythological origins. However, some knowledge of the hypotext and indeed Western culture and dramatic tradition would help enrich and deepen their theatrical experience and appreciation. This is evidenced by the enthusiastic reviews the production has since received from drama enthusiasts and scholars. Audiences in rural China, however, may not be as thrilled. In fact, as William Huizhu Sun recalls, one of the performances during the Chinese lunar New Year (spring festival) ended with the audience dismayed with the implications of ‘bad luck’ of the theme of incest, all but ready to smash the stage and kick the actors out of town.

Similarly, Western audiences, e.g. Westerners who attended this jingju production performed at the Barcelona International Drama Festival in 2008, the Shanghai International Little Theatre Festival, or various drama festivals in New York and Washington, DC in 2009, and who were familiar with the hypotext, could also have a

Fig. 2. King Edi (left, performed by Weng Guosheng) tosses two long ‘water’ sleeves into the air in the climactic scene of the jingju adaptation of *Oedipus the King*. (Photo: Zhejiang Jingju Company)

Fig. 3. King Edi (performed by Weng Guosheng) fights the last battle with the three diviners (left, performed by Jin Min; middle, performed by Ying Jun; right, performed by Mao Yi) in the jingju adaptation of *Oedipus the King*. (Photo: Zhejiang Jingju Company)

Similarly, Western audiences, e.g. Westerners who attended this jingju production performed at the Barcelona International Drama Festival in 2008, the Shanghai International Little Theatre Festival, or various drama festivals in New York and Washington, DC in 2009, and who were familiar with the hypotext, could also have a
powerful dramatic experience. For example, as recalled by William Huizhu Sun, Annie Ruth, then Director of Toi Whakaari New Zealand Drama School, was moved to tears during a 2008 Barcelona performance, especially by the *Wanghou* (queen) jumping to her death scene, despite the fact that there were no English subtitles due to a technological malfunction. Her emotional response speaks volumes to the degree of success on the part of Chinese theatre artists in their efforts to compensate the ‘weakening’ of character portrayal (‘well-rounded’ versus ‘flat’) and thematic development by ratchetting up the emotional intensity of the dramatic experience. Indeed, many Western audience members were awestruck by the power of *jingju* in retelling the story of this Western classic on the stage.\(^{33}\) However, without knowledge of the Chinese language, culture, and dramatic tradition (English subtitles for the production, for example, were functional, but could not capture the elegance, cadence, and richness of the dialogues and lyrics for the arias—so much is lost in the translation), they would not be able to understand and appreciate this transcultural production as fully as would be desired.

**Wangzhe edi (king edi) as hero tragedy**

The 2009 *jingju* production of the Greek classic, which chooses to highlight the heroism of *Edi* (Oedipus) in defiance of fate, should also be considered in the context of a long and contentious debate: whether there is ‘true’, ‘authentic’ tragedy in China as the term is understood in the Western dramatic tradition.\(^{34}\)

The negative answer to this question can be traced back to Jean–Baptiste du Halde (1674–1743), a French Jesuit historian who specialized in China although he had never been to China and did not speak Chinese either. Halde concluded, after reviewing the few translations of Yuan plays such as *L’Orphelin de la Maison de Tchao* (The Orphan of Zhao) available then, that there was not much difference between fiction and drama in Chinese culture nor, for that matter, between comedy and tragedy, both of which purported to serve some overtly didactic and moral purpose. Many important figures of modern Chinese cultural movements and prominent scholars in arts and literature, such as Wang Guowei (1877–1927), Lu Xun (1881–1936), and Zhu Guangqian (1897–1986), held such a negative view, too, although they each did so from a different philosophical and/or political perspective and concern: Wang Guowei measuring traditional Chinese drama by the Aristotelian ideals of tragedy, Lu Xun out of a concern for culture and people renewal as China struggled with its existential crisis, and Zhu Guangqian through an aesthetic and psychological lens informed by Schopenhauer. Many of the nay-sayers blame this perceived absence of tragedy on the happy endings (*datuanyuan*) of

\(^{33}\) See *Wangzhe Edi haiwai yanchu yu zhizuo huaxu* [Scenes from *Oedipus the King* overseas performances], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNe1fRrFWvc [accessed 11 February 2017].

\(^{34}\) This portion of our discussion draws on Chen (2011), and chapter one, ‘From the Neo-Classical to the Early Avant-Garde: Europe’s First Encounters with Traditional Chinese Theatre,’ of Tian (2008).
classical Chinese plays, which, they contend, are symptomatic of a weakness (or flaw) in the Chinese national character, i.e. the Chinese propensity for an easy way out thanks to their lack of courage to face the dark and ugly, and for their acting to remedy what is amiss in life.

This view, which tries to fit Chinese drama/theatre into the procrustean bed of Western classical and neoclassical paradigms (which amounts to seeing oneself as the ‘Other’ as one is seen by others) and finds it woefully deficient, has to be understood in the intellectual, cultural, and socio-historical context of China in the early decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, for a generation of Chinese intellectuals living in the late Qing and early Republican period (late 1800s to early 1900s), the only way to renew, strengthen, and save China from its perceived moribund fate was to learn from the West—its science, technology, sociopolitical philosophy, as well as drama and literature (whereby to awaken people’s consciousness and inspire their patriot feelings). It is only natural that since the 1980s, with the fast and sustained rise of China in economic power and cultural self-confidence, assuming an ever more consequential role on the world stage, the negative view on the question of ‘true’ and ‘authentic’ tragedy has been challenged.

Many of a new generation of scholars reject the ‘Eurocentric’ theories of tragedy as unsuited to classical Chinese plays. They instead argue for the need for a theory and definition of ‘Chinese tragedy’, or rather, tragedy with Chinese characteristics. Xiong Yuanyi, for example, based on extensive research of classical Chinese and Western tragedies, concludes that the classical Chinese tragedy shows these three defining characteristics: tragic heroes are morally impeccable (cf. the Aristotelian notion of ‘hamartia’ or tragic flaw); tragic conflicts or tensions happen between good and evil, right and wrong (cf. the Hegelian theory of tragedy resulting from collision of opposing but equally valid moral/ethical powers); tragic heroes, in their heroic fight against evil, accomplish a perfect fusion of historical progress and moral progress (cf. the Aristotelian notion of ‘catharsis’ or Schopenhauer’s idea of tragedy bringing before our eyes ‘the aspect of the world which directly strives against our will’: ‘the wail of humanity, the reign of chance and error, the fall of the just, the triumph of the wicked’). Xiong, along with others, embraces ‘happy endings’ not as a weakness or flaw, but as a sign of strength and courage because those ‘happy endings’ are not really ‘happy’; they, instead, rather ironically, serve to augment and drive home the tragic sense of the whole play. These scholars also argue for a more

37 See Xiong (2007).
38 Quoted in Drakakis and Liebler (1998), p. 5.
evolving and polymorphic definition of tragedy to replace the ‘monolithic’, ‘Eurocentric’ definition of tragedy (which, we might as well add, has been evolving and is polymorphic anyway). These scholars prefer to see not only Chinese tragedy (as opposed to Western tragedy) as a category or genre in and by itself, but also many sub-categories or sub-genres such as hero tragedy (yingxiong beiju), women tragedy (nüxing beiju), fate tragedy (mingyun beiju), political tragedy (zhengzhi beiju), love tragedy (aiqing beiju), or common people tragedy (shimin beiju), etc.

To view the 2009 jingju adaptation of Oedipus the King in the context of this old (and renewed) debate of whether China has ‘true’, ‘authentic’ tragedy as outlined above, one could say, with full awareness of the risk of oversimplification, that Wangzhe edi translates a classic Western ‘fate tragedy’ (mingyun beiju) into a Chinese ‘hero tragedy’ (yingxiong beiju) to make it more appealing to the Chinese audiences and indeed to better meet the needs of a culture and people as they transform with ever increased confidence in the globalized world today. China, even in the twenty-first century, is a land, happy or unhappy, that still needs heroes, as evidenced by the fact that Mao Zedong (1893–1976), a tragically flawed figure in modern Chinese history by the accounts of almost all historians, is still a revered hero decades after his death. Hero-worship (‘transcendent admiration of a Great Man’), according to Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), is deep-rooted. Edi, as portrayed in the 2009 jingju production, would fit the kind of hero Carlyle envisioned back in his days: He embodies both ‘a sort of savage sincerity—not cruel, far from that; but wild, wrestling naked with the truth of things’ and ‘a most gentle heart withal, full of pity and love, as indeed the truly valiant heart ever is’. Whether we agree with Carlyle or not, Edi, virtuous and noble, who willingly ‘martyrs’ himself for the public good, is a hero by just about any ethical and moral sense of the term. To put it in the words of Weng Guosheng:

Wangzhe Edi is not only a fate tragedy (mingyun beiju), but more importantly, a tragedy that highlights heroism.

39 See, for example, Drakakis and Liebler (1998); Palmer (1992); Corrigan (1963).
40 ‘Andrea loudly: Unhappy the land that has no heroes!
[...]’
   Galileo: No. Unhappy the land where heroes are needed.’
   (Scene 13)
43 Weng (2011: 5).
His tragedy is that of a hero who triumphs even when beaten egregiously by the unknowable forces of fate. His kind of heroism, in choosing to sacrifice himself for the public good, for the salvation of his people, is one that, as a reviewer of an earlier version of the adaptation put it in 2008 (when China was still trying to recover from the devastating Sichuan Earthquake, while readying itself for the glory of the Summer Olympics in Beijing), can be used as a shiny example to teach the public servants (officials) what to do when facing such calamities:

Edi as a heroic tragic figure embodies this noble philosophy and sentiment: being a public servant means self-sacrifice instead of self-preservation at all costs. The value of a hero’s life, in essence, is eternally marked with tragedy. It is exactly for this reason that the dual-honor of ‘greatness’ (weida) and ‘immortality’ belongs to him or her!

Theatre artists of Zhejiang Jingju Company maintained the same ‘hero tragedy’ approach when they expanded this adaptation of the Greek classic into a full 120-minute production. This full production debuted in Hangzhou in 2010 and then traveled to various places in the world, including Cyprus in 2011 for the Fifteenth International Festival of Ancient Greek Drama there. Sophocles, or Aristotle, for that matter, may not recognize Edi as a tragic hero as they envisioned. Similarly, some scholars of drama and literature may still find Wangzhe Edi falling short of the ‘ideal’ of an ‘authentic’ tragedy as understood in the Western dramatic tradition. Authentic or not, tragic hero or hero tragedy, Wangzhe Edi succeeds in delivering its full promise and bringing Zhejiang Jingju Company both fame and fortune. More significantly, the cultures that have engendered Oedipus the King and Wangzhe Edi have both profited from the dialogic tensions reverberating between the hypo- and hypertexts, to borrow from Gérard Genette again, and are both enriched in no small measure.

Acknowledgements

We are deeply indebted to the two anonymous reviewers who provided extensive and in-depth comments and suggestions for revision which have helped shape our article as it is. We are also profoundly grateful to William Huizhu Sun, professor at Shanghai Theatre Academy, and Weng Guosheng, director of Zhejiang Jingju Company, the two theatre artists we interviewed, for generously sharing their reflections and published articles on the jingju adaptation of Oedipus the King under discussion in this article. Finally, we’d like to express our heartfelt gratitude to the editor of the journal, for her valuable suggestions on how to strengthen our analysis from the angle of Western theories of tragedy.

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