

An Analysis of Chen Bailu's Self-Destruction in Sunrise from the Perspective of Psychoanalysis

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Abstract. In the development of Chinese drama in the 20th century, Cao Yu's *Sunrise* depicted the dark society of the 1930s, witnessing the process of Chen Bailu, who was both clear-headed and compassionate, sinking into the quagmire and heading for self-destruction. It has become a classic work with its profound social criticism and complex portrayal of character psychology. This article explores from the perspective of psychoanalysis and finds that first of all, Chen Bailu's decline was dominated by the principle of happiness of the "ego". However, she could never escape the judgment of the superego. The passing of the pure era and the self-indulgence and decadence kept her constantly being judged by her inner morality. The failure to redeem the little things only intensified her own pain. The consumption of her spirit, the weariness brought by life, and the experience of nothingness made Chen Bailu's death instinct explode. Through self-destruction, she achieved ultimate liberation from her own painful existence. The oppression of cultural traditions under social predicaments also contributed to the formation of Chen Bailu's spiritual predicament. Multiple psychological factors eventually led to her destruction. Studying Chen Bailu's self-destruction in *Sunrise* from the perspective of psychoanalysis can offer a new approach to exploring the complexity of Chen Bailu's personal image, provide a new case for delving into the study of dramatic characters from a psychoanalytic Angle, and offer a new entry point for understanding the social reality of the 1920s and 1930s.

Keywords: *Sunrise*, Chen Bailu, Psychoanalysis, Self-destruction

1. Introduction

Sunrise is a play created by Cao Yu, a modern Chinese playwright. Centered on Chen Bailu, it depicts the dark society of the 1930s when there was a surplus and a shortage of resources. As the main character, Chen Bailu has no house of her own and leads a life full of a sense of wandering. At the same time, she has an ambiguous identity. Although she is bewitched and adored by others, she relies on others and has no social status of her own. In such a dissipated and indulgent life, Chen Bailu eventually heads towards self-destruction. When the academic community studies the destruction of this figure, it often regards it as a tragedy, or focuses on the influence of capitalist thought and philosophy, or pays attention to the liberation path of women and social exploitation, or views it as the awakening of a kind of life in the face of the decline of reality, such as Wu Ge's "Withering" or "Resurrection": Chen Bailu's Hesitation between Life and Death: A Contemporary

Stage Interpretation of the Structure and Theme of Sunrise, Zhou Lei's Modern Chinese Male Writers' Imagination of "Nala's Departure": Re-reading The Matter of Life, The Scud and Sunrise, Zhang Liming's Female Subject Consciousness and Its Subjectivity Deficiency: An Interpretation of the Tragic Fates of Women in Cao Yu's Four Great Plays, etc [1-3]. However, there are very few in-depth analyses from a psychological perspective on the process and underlying reasons of Chen Bailu's self-destruction.

Therefore, in order to gain a deeper understanding of Chen Bailu's psychological mechanism and her self-destructive behavior, it is necessary to introduce the classic theory from the perspective of psychology - psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic theory was founded by the Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud. Through continuous development, it has extended to multiple fields such as literature and philosophy. In the 1920s and 1930s, through translation, introduction and commentary, it had a certain influence in China. And this influence was subtle and was reflected in many of Cao Yu's dramatic characters such as Fan Yi and Grandma Gu Ba. Chen Bailu's self-destruction can also be explored from a psychoanalytic perspective. Her self-destruction is not merely the accumulation of simple factors, but rather a choice made by the character in her wavering and struggling. The mutual game among the id, the ego, and the superego eventually leads her down a path of death. It is precisely because of the complex positioning of the character's identity and her depressed psychology that Chen Bailu's self-destruction has a unique tension. This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of Chen Bailu's self-destruction by introducing psychoanalytic theory, and to broaden the interpretive space for the social conditions at that time, the living space and the image of women.

2. The indulgence of the id-individual paralysis under the principle of happiness

In his late theories from 1914, especially from 1920 to 1939, Freud revised and supplemented psychoanalysis, which included the establishment of the theory of personality structure. The personality structure is composed of the id, the ego and the superego. The id is located deep in the subconscious and avoids suffering while seeking pleasure, pursuing happiness and satisfaction, and acting in accordance with the principle of pleasure. Freud believed that "pleasure is consistent with the reduction of excitement [4]." The experience of happiness is manifested as a decrease in excitement and the elimination of psychological tension. The principle of happiness governs human mental activities, just as Freud mentioned, "... The process of psychological events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle.... The process of these psychological events occurring must be caused by some unpleasant state of tension. The development direction of this process is to achieve the ultimate goal of eliminating this tense state, that is, to avoid unpleasantness or produce pleasant results [4]." The principle of happiness makes the id strive for happiness and avoid the occurrence of unhappiness. Chen Bailu's pursuit of the principle of happiness mainly manifests in two aspects: indulging in material pleasures and being accustomed to relying on others. As a result, he led to self-destruction. Although there are numerous causes for these two aspects, this article focuses on the psychological aspect mentioned earlier for analysis.

First of all, from becoming a courtesan and leading a decadent life to her eventual death, Chen Bailu could never escape her own indulgence in material pleasures, and this indulgence was precisely the embodiment of her true self's pursuit of the principle of happiness. Fang Dasheng once questioned Chen Bailu why she was so close to Zhang George. Chen Bailu said, "How much money does he have in his pocket [5]?", "If you have money, you can naturally know me [5]." She sacrificed herself to get the "rights" she deserved. The text describes Chen Bailu's past life: "Finally, like the bird accustomed to the golden cage in the fable, it has lost the ability and interest to circle freely in the forest and returned to its own ugly circle of life [5]." Of course, she was not willing to

live like this. She was very proud and was afraid that others would hurt her self-esteem. But she could only wait, waiting for the day when luck would knock on her door and she would unexpectedly receive a fortune [5]. "Chen Bailu's pursuit and reliance on material life, on the one hand, is to maintain a decent life and protect her self-respect, and on the other hand, it stems from her own weakness. Only by maintaining her current life and constantly pursuing material pleasures can she eliminate the unpleasant state. Even though Chen Bailu has a clear understanding in her heart, for the sake of the joy at this moment, one has no choice but to become a courtesan with no dignity or personality.

Apart from material pleasures, Chen Bailu's habit of relying on others also doomed her to an end of destruction. Relying on oneself to pursue light is a path that goes against the principle of self-happiness. In response to Fang dasheng 's proposal, Chen Bailu was straightforward: "I ask if you can keep me alive... Don't you understand that I want someone to support me? I want to be comfortable. Don't you understand? I need to take a bus when I go out, wear nice clothes for social engagements, play and dance. Don't you understand [5]?" Chen Bailu had a side that challenged the feudal ethical concepts and the awakening of the feudal family order, but she always needed others to support her and placed her hopes on them. Apart from selling her youth to survive, Chen Bailu would not and did not want to learn any other skills to make a living. Fang Dasheng once advised her, but she refused to change the current situation. She just sighed, "But what do you want me to do [5]?" For her own brief happiness, Chen Bailu sacrificed her right to make independent choices, and self-destruction was also inevitable.

3. The tearing apart of the superego- the failure of moral judgment and redemption

This part will be elaborated in the following ways. First, the author will analyze the concept of the "superself" and how it is constructed. Then the author will analyze the manifestation of Chen Bailu's moral judgment by the "superself". Next the author will analyze the connection between the role of the "superself" in redemption and the role of psychological projection, as well as the further judgment of the "superself" after the failure of redemption.

In The Ego and the Id, Freud formally proposed the concept of the "superego", which developed from the ego and, together with the id and the ego, became the three major components of the personality structure. Freud believed: "The superego is the representative of all moral limitations and the subject of the impulse to pursue perfection or the noblest action of human life [6]." The superego is directly influenced by parents, or teachers who exert influence on behalf of parents, or social paradigms.

Chen Bailu's actions have always been subject to moral judgment, and this judgment is closely related to the superego. First of all, in terms of Chen Bailu's background, she came from a "scholarly family", was a "top student of Aihua Girls' School", and was called a "naive girl" by Fang Dasheng. She was an intellectual with a relatively high level of education. Although she had some progressive ideas, she was always influenced by the traditional moral values of society, just as Chen Bailu always missed the days when she was once called "Zhu Jun". When Cao Yu talked about Chen Bailu, he believed: "When Chen Bailu died, she was young and beautiful. With this' capital 'in that society, she could still survive. So she wasn't driven to death by debt. She was trapped in extreme contradiction and couldn't extricate herself [7]."When she died, she was conscious and could have lived on, but she could not escape the moral judgment within her heart. The superego was always influenced by this, and she seemed to have fallen into what the world regarded as "depravity", but she was never content with it. She kept belittling herself in her heart: "Crazy. Right! This is the crazy

life I lead every day [5]." "I have been selling to this place all my life [5]." This judgment of the superego keeps her in a state of constant contradiction and inevitably leads to her death.

The failure to redeem the little thing made the superego's judgment on Chen Bailu even more severe. In Sunrise, the era that belonged to "Zhu Jun" has long gone for Chen Bailu. However, she still sometimes shows a "spoiled and happy" childishness and once asks Fang Dasheng, "I once had such a period. Was I a child [5]?", which can reveal her deep nostalgia for the past. But for her, the self of that time has become the past. The appearance of "Little thing" gave Chen Bailu new hope, as Qian Liqun mentioned: "her rescue of 'little thing' was not merely out of humanitarian sympathy (that is, the so-called conscience still exists), but for her lost childhood... The pursuit has a distinct nature of self-struggle [8]." She projects her past self onto the "little thing", attempting to save her past self by saving her. Part of this psychological defense mechanism of "projection" is to deal with the strict supervision from the "superego". During the process of saving the little thing, Chen Bailu had rekindled hope several times. After deceiving Hei San, she muttered to herself: "It was the first time I did such a satisfying thing [5]". However, in the end, Little Thing still couldn't escape the tragic fate. The failure and disillusionment of redemption further subject Chen Bailu to the judgment of the superego. The fate that she had never escaped was also hard for "Little Thing" to escape. The tearing apart of the superego made her life wither even more.

4. The instinct for death- the ultimate choice of self-destruction

In Freud's view, the "instinct to live" and the "instinct to die" are the two most fundamental instincts in the human process. The instinct of life represents the creative, constructive and enterprising vitality in human life. Besides being manifested in the form of desires for food and sex, it mainly takes the form of love and desire. The instinct of death symbolizes the self-destructive, aggressive and destructive driving force in human life. The manifestation of the instinct for death can be either the outward release of energy or the inward release, such as self-punishment, self-harm, suicide, self-destruction and other forms. Chen Bailu was not always on the path of self-destruction. This was a choice made by the outburst of the instinct for death after experiencing the vicissitudes of life.

At the beginning of Sunrise, one can see the manifestation of the death instinct, which is inseparable from Chen Bailu's early emotional experiences. She was once married to a poet, but their child died and the poet left. She still loved the poet, but knew that there was no illusory love in the world, only a life as real as iron. So she returned to the ugly life. The traumatic experience of emotions frustrates the instinct for love. The instinct for life and the instinct for death coexist from the same root. The frustration of the instinct for love belongs to the frustration of the instinct for life, so it often leads to or accelerates the manifestation of the instinct for death.

In his article What is the Essence of Chen Bailu's Tragedy, Chen Gongmin proposed that Fang Dasheng's sudden appearance was like a spark, burning the flame buried deep in Chen Bailu's heart [9]. The author believes this is very reasonable. After Fang Dasheng's appearance, Chen Bailu's psychology changed, and she no longer kept moving towards self-destruction. The innocent side of "Zhu Jun" would occasionally show up - after helping the little thing deceive Hei San, Chen Bailu saw the sun run to the window and shouted, "Look, the clouds are all over the sky, and the sky is full of light - hey." Listen. Sparrow! Spring has come. Oh! I like the sun, I like spring, I like being young, and I like myself. Oh, I like it [5]!" Chen Bailu's life was once brimming with vitality. Just as Cao Yu emphasized when rehearsing Sunrise at the National Drama Academy in Nanjing, when talking about Chen Bailu's performance, "To play Chen Bailu, one should not only show that she is a courtesan who moves around in the bustling world, but also let people see that she still has the purity, sincerity and youthful vigor towards life that she once had [10]."

But it was precisely the appearance of the spark that enabled Chen Bailu to "awaken from a state of mental paralysis. She was not a golden canary with wings but an eagle with broken wings, 'not wanting to die but having to die' [9]". This awakening made Chen Bailu realize her own tragedy. In the life of paralysis, she ultimately chose self-destruction, and her death instinct was unleashed. Zhu Jun's side kept reviving. "She saw all of this life! A degenerate life [9]! "The once decadent life was nothing but a kind of nothingness. The clearer she became about her situation, the deeper the sorrow in her heart grew. Eventually, the death instinct erupted, and she had no choice but to head towards the end of self-destruction.

5. The oppression of cultural traditions- the spiritual dilemma in the face of social predicaments

As previously mentioned, the superego is an extremely moral part of the personality structure, emphasizing an ideal sense of good and evil, and is influenced by parents, teachers, and social role models. However, the prototype of the superego is not the parents but their superego, because when parents educate their children, they also follow their superego. "Therefore, the superego embodies cultural traditions, traditional values, and social concepts [11]."

As a new woman influenced by the May Fourth Movement, Chen Bailu has repeatedly encountered obstacles in her pursuit of her own liberation and independence, which makes her feel exhausted. On the one hand, since the May Fourth Movement, the social call for women's liberation and economic independence has called on her to be proactive and change her life. On the other hand, the traditional social concepts that discipline women have been imperceptibly rooted in cultural traditions. The alternation of old and new ideas imposed a double oppression on Chen Bailu, which fueled the judgment of the superego and accelerated the process of Chen Bailu's self-destruction. Focusing on the situation of women, this issue has always been a hot topic of discussion throughout history. At that time, there were debates such as the "New Virtuous Wife and Good Mother Doctrine", the "feminist faction", and the "social faction". The liberation of women cannot be separated from and reflects the dark social reality. However, the cultural traditions, social concepts and traditional values that Chen Bailu was exposed to were exactly the opposite of social reality. As a result, the superego formed by them oppressed Chen Bailu, who was in and integrated into real life. *Sunrise* centers on Chen Bailu's luxurious lounge and third-class brothels, revealing the distorted state of the semi-colonial and semi-feudal society in the 1930s. It presents the decadent life of the upper class and the turbulent social picture of the lower class to the world, conveying the message that the edifice is about to collapse. As a highly artistic and generalized figure, Jin Ba never made an appearance, yet he triggered all kinds of evil and caused tragedies. He manipulated the society in *Sunrise* and was the embodiment of the dark system. Moreover, Jin Ba reflected the characteristics of the reactionary rulers at that time. The four major family ruling groups represented by Chiang Kai-shek, through oligarchic rule and monopolistic capital, plunged the entire nation into suffering. There are plenty of Jin Ba, big ones, small ones, neither too big nor too small. Sometimes they look like bedbugs in this place [5]." Jin Ba and the social system he represents are everywhere. The monetary system has plunged social relations into cold monetary transactions and ruthless interests. Money and greed touch every nerve of people. The freedom of the prostitution system allows Jin Ba to vent his sexual desires on the immature little thing by virtue of his power. Chen Bailu will also surrender to Pan Yueting. This kind of free and widespread prostitution infringes upon women's rights and interests, and they can never obtain true freedom, always bending over for money. Under the dual oppression of international capital and feudal forces, the preservation of old morality and the trend of new ideas have also put women in a dilemma.

6. Conclusion

The exploration of Chen Bailu's self-destruction from the perspective of psychoanalysis provides a unique viewpoint for understanding Chen Bailu's complex character image, and also reflects the predicament of Chinese intellectual women in the 1930s - although they had an awakening under the influence of Enlightenment thought, they were trapped in a profound contradiction between spiritual independence and material dependence in a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. Chen Bailu's tragedy is not only a condemnation of the money-oriented and morally corrupt society, but also reflects the spiritual crisis of the society at that time. Meanwhile, analyzing Chen Bailu's image from the perspective of psychoanalysis provides a richer and more diverse interpretive space for the image of women since the May Fourth Movement.

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