

The "Existence" of Human Seen Through Fan Yi: Research on the Tragic Theme of Thunderstorm from the Perspective of Existentialism

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ABSTRACT

Cao Yu consistently engaged in philosophical reflections on the existential predicament of humanity since its inception. Within *Thunderstorm*, he synthesised the social consciousness of China's post-May Fourth era with the redemptive philosophical traditions of Chinese literature, seeking amidst contradictions to uncover practical solutions or spiritual outlets for individuals like Fan Yi. This paper endeavours to explore Cao Yu's existential reflections on the existential predicament of the "human being" with "subjectivity", and his quest for salvation for the "human race" since the May Fourth Movement, through close textual analysis within an existentialist framework. By examining the character of Fan Yi—who embodies both Chinese and Western literary traditions and cultural dilemmas, and who most profoundly represents the essence of *Thunderstorm* and reveals Cao Yu's creative psyche—this study investigates the tragic themes of *Thunderstorm*. To explore Cao Yu's pan-philosophical contemplation of the existential predicament of the "subject-oriented human being" and his quest for the redemption of the "Fan Yi type" since the May Fourth Movement.

KEYWORDS

Thunderstorm; Fan Yi; Tragic theme; Existentialism

1 Introduction

Thunderstorm marks Cao Yu's debut play. In his preface, he explicitly states his intent to express "an inexpressible yearning for the many mysterious phenomena in the cosmos" and a dread of the "cruelty" inherent in heaven and earth.^[1] Undoubtedly, Cao Yu's original creative vision incorporated the fatalistic element characteristic of classical tragedy (specifically, ancient Greek tragedy of fate), namely a conception of destiny. Over the past century, debates surrounding Cao Yu's conception of fate have evolved from critiques of its incompatibility with realism to positive assessments of humanity's resistance against destiny. The tragic nature of *Thunderstorm* has been summarised by scholars: "Cao Yu integrated the spirit of classical tragedy, social consciousness, and realist techniques into a narrative of complex interpersonal relationships."^[2] Despite inherent contradictions, Cao Yu continually refined his work through nine revisions. Research since the new millennium categorised under *Thunderstorm*'s thematic study has explored its tragic nature and themes, Cao Yu's creative psychology (including his intentions) and ideological stance (including philosophical reflections). These studies reveal: originating from an examination of creative psychology, *Thunderstorm* possesses distinct classical tragic elements of fatalism and philosophical depth, functioning as a "Greek tragedy of fate rewritten"^[2] through the lens of realism; it crystallises Cao Yu's temperament and life experiences, "conveying a tragic view of existence imbued with compassion," and "truly seeking to depict humanity's helplessness and struggle within the cosmos, its passions and vitality." Its purpose is to "guide audiences towards reflection on human existence,"^[3] establishing it as a modern tragedy.

As a modern tragedy synthesising fatalistic and realist elements, *Thunderstorm* inevitably contains dramatic conflicts and spiritual contradictions characteristic of modernity. Viewed through an existentialist lens, Cao Yu's work reveals a broadly philosophical contemplation, with characters confronting existential dilemmas. In their 2004 paper "The Existing Human and the Existence of Human—A Study on the Idea of Existence in Cao Yu's Tragedies," Chen Jian and Jia Min, from the perspective of tragic aesthetics, pointed out: "Tragedy represents the highest form of existence. Within the relationship between existence and humanity, Greek tragedy predominantly highlights the heroism and fearlessness of its tragic figures, whereas Cao Yu more profoundly exposes the existential predicament of humanity, revealing its culpability and insignificance. Crucially, Cao Yu does not adopt the Western existentialist notions of nihilism and absurdity to utterly negate the meaning of human existence; instead, he yearns to establish an ideal world of existence characterised by love and faith."^[4] Similarly exploring Cao Yu's reflections on humanity's existential predicament and redemption through an existentialist lens, Xiao Qingguo's 2018 essay "The 'Human' Existential Dilemma and Self-Redemption: An Existentialist Examination of Cao Yu's Dramatic Works" notes through close textual analysis: "Cao Yu doggedly maintains an existential contemplation of 'humanity' within his dramas. While interpersonal conflicts constitute the external drama, the deeper internal conflict lies in the tension between existential free will and cultural anxiety."^[5] These two articles respectively explore Cao Yu's existential philosophy through the prisms of situational awareness of 'existence' and dramatic conflict. The latter defines the conflict as arising "between the free will of existence and cultural anxiety." The author contends that existentialism emphasises the anxiety of existence, the alienation of humanity within society, and the contradiction between humanity and an absurd world—qualities that should possess universal applicability. Yet the "cultural anxiety"

referenced here (primarily concerning ethical relations) remains ambiguous: The author does not specify this (though later referring to it as “rooted in traditional culture,” which may be understood as Chinese traditional culture). Consequently, the “dilemma” and “redemption” in the title become temporally and spatially constrained. Furthermore, in his early 20th-century essay “The Christian Spirit and the Original Sin Consciousness in Cao Yu’s Drama”, Song Jianhua posited that: “the consciousness of ‘original sin’ was one of the central themes in Cao Yu’s early dramatic works.” He argued that Cao Yu “repeatedly hinted at the philosophical truth” that only through repentance and correction of the fallacy of “self-righteousness” could human society become “filled with joy and happiness.”^[6] The author contends that the prologue and conclusion of *Thunderstorm* do not signify a penitential redemption through “correction of error”, the Christian church merely represents a reluctant return to warmth after confronting tragedy. If it were solely about suppressing the desires of original sin through Christian redemption, Cao Yu would have had no need for the complex creative psychology described earlier, nor would he have integrated so many social issues and contradictions, for Christian redemption offers a remarkably pure and direct path. Cao Yu’s numerous revisions and self-reflections on *Thunderstorm* reveal that, even setting aside the influence of contemporary criticism, his exploration of the play’s tragic nature and ideological concepts was inherently complex and iterative. This implies that while “the fundamental weakness of human nature that cannot be overcome” constitutes humanity’s “original sin” and the cause of tragedy, it is not humanity’s culpability. In other words, “original sin” pertains to primordial human nature rather than the subjective guilt of the human subject. Therefore, viewed through an existentialist lens and in light of the preceding analysis, this author contends that the characters in *Thunderstorm* confront an existential predicament: the society and culture they inhabit evoke a sense of the absurd. Class and ethical conflicts merely constitute external dramatic tensions, whereas the true internal conflict lies between the subjectivity of the individual and the objectification of others, and between humanity’s sinful desires and the quest for spiritual redemption. The former, through mutual interaction, manifests Sartre’s notion that “Hell is other people,” while the latter embodies the free choice and responsibility inherent in human existence.

Similarly examining Cao Yu’s dramas through an existentialist lens, Cui Yunwei and Wang Jin’s 2023 article “Research on Cao Yu’s Drama Themes from the Perspective of Existentialism — Centering on *Thunderstorm*, *Sunrise*, *The Wilderness*, and *Beijing People*” identifies “Fan Yi and Zhou Ping as characters who develop self-determination from the ‘fear’ of being thrown into existence”^[7]. Since the turn of the century, numerous commentators have highlighted Fan Yi’s singularity within *Thunderstorm*. Chen Sihe, in *Fifteen Lectures on Masterpieces of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature*, posits Fan Yi as the most pivotal character in *Thunderstorm*, possessing a “demonic quality” that renders her both complex and deeply moving. Qian Liqun, in *Between the Small and Large Stages: New Perspectives on Cao Yu’s Plays*, observes that “the extreme nature of Fan Yi’s character represents a conscious pursuit by Cao Yu.” In 2020, Lu Wei, in his essay *Re-examining Fan Yi: With a Discussion on How *Thunderstorm* Was Written*, defined Fan Yi as an irrational, amoral functional character—a aesthetic figure who allows her life to burn freely; In 2023, Song Muyuan’s “Ripples in the Well Amidst the *Thunderstorm*’s Turmoil: An Analysis of Fan Yi’s Character in *Thunderstorm*” emphasised Fan Yi’s significance, arguing her portrayal embodies the play’s thematic core and the playwright’s tragic vision. Overall, Fan Yi most embodies the “*Thunderstorm*” character within the play. She represents a fusion of Eastern and Western literary traditions: parallels exist in Western literature, bearing traits of Greek tragedy’s “desire” and “incest”, while also possessing characteristics of enlightenment-era and leftist-era Chinese women. It can be said Fan Yi is Cao Yu’s most functional character. Moreover, the “evil” and “passion” embodied by Fan Yi most vividly reflect Cao Yu’s “loathing” for the Doctrine of the Mean. She stands as the most palpable vessel of the “*thunderstorm*”, embodying a new existential realm Cao Yu yearned to attain. Hence, this paper analyses the tragic thematic core of *Thunderstorm* through the lens of Fan Yi.

In summary, this paper endeavours to build upon prior scholarship by adopting an existentialist lens. Through close textual analysis and integration with foundational existentialist theory, it examines Fan Yi—a character embodying both Eastern and Western literary traditions and cultural dilemmas, who epitomises *Thunderstorm* and most vividly reveals the “oppressive heat” and “serene stillness” within Cao Yu’s creative psyche, proposing new insights into the intrinsic dramatic conflicts within the tragedy’s thematic framework. It further explores Cao Yu’s pan-philosophical contemplation of the existential predicament of the “subject-oriented human being” and his quest for redemption for “Fan Yi type” individuals since the May Fourth Movement.

2 Fan Yi’s Uniqueness and Her Dilemma of “Existence”

In his preface to *Thunderstorm*, Cao Yu states: “Within the atmosphere of *Thunderstorm*, Zhou Fanyi appears most harmonious. Her life burns with an electric white heat, yet proves equally fleeting. Emotion, pent-up passion, and circumstance forge a brilliant spark; when the spark itself is extinguished, her vitality vanishes utterly. Hers is the most ‘*Thunderstorm-like*’ character, her life interwoven with the cruelest love and the most unbearable hatred...”^[8] This affirmation of Fan Yi’s centrality and irreplaceability in *Thunderstorm* stems from both thematic resonance and characterisation. The terms “emotion”, “oppressive heat”, and “circumstances” carry distinct weight: the first two point to the intricate emotional bonds among the play’s eight protagonists, with Fan Yi embodying the most extreme emotional intensity; The four-act drama unfolds predominantly within the Zhou Mansion, repeatedly described as stifling

and oppressively humid beneath the thunderclouds. Only the term ‘circumstances’ warrants deeper analysis in Fan Yi’s case. From her first appearance, Cao Yu portrays Fan Yi as a “resolute yet sinister woman”—a “delicate, melancholic, and perceptive” representative of the “traditional Chinese woman.” Yet, “she possesses a more primal wildness: in her heart, her courage, her fervent thoughts, and the sudden strength that surges during her inexplicable decisions^[9].” Chronologically within the play, Zhou Puyuan must have had another wife before marrying Fan Yi—the wealthy young lady he wed after Lu Shiping’s departure. Though Cao Yu leaves her fate unstated, readers’ imaginations likely converge: Fan Yi’s own existence for nearly a decade before her romance with Zhou Ping mirrored this reality, trapped within the extreme patriarchal confines of old China. For Fan Yi, the Zhou residence was a prison from which she could never escape; Zhou Puyuan was the painful “law” that bound her; traditional ethics were the chains of her despair: Fan Yi repeatedly describes the Zhou Mansion as suffused with “stifling air,” “ghostly vapours,” and “deathly stillness.” She never possessed the freedom to open a window. Judging from the prologue and epilogue, Fan Yi never left the Zhou residence throughout her life (whether due to fate or her own disposition); Throughout the play, Fan Yi and Zhou Puyuan, the mansion’s master, clash four times. Each confrontation stems from Zhou Puyuan’s coercive orders against Fan Yi’s will. The recurring “medicine” she must ingest underscores this oppression, as even Zhou Chong and Zhou Ping dare not defy their father’s commands—revealing the sheer intensity of patriarchal tyranny; Moreover, “ethics” became an inescapable shackle for Fan Yi, manifested in two ways: firstly, Zhou Puyuan’s coercion to make her drink the medicine and his branding her a “madwoman” stemmed from her knowledge of his abandonment of Lu Shiping and his illegitimate son Zhou Ping. He feared her exposure would tarnish his unethical deeds; Secondly, Fan Yi’s incestuous affair with Zhou Ping became the basis for the “haunting” rumours and the root cause of Zhou Ping’s abandonment of her, ultimately precipitating the tragedy. The predicament thus forged by these three factors undeniably reflects the constraints of traditional Chinese society and culture, yet transcends them. Patriarchal oppression has been a shared predicament across Eastern and Western cultures since antiquity, while ethical confusion remains a perennial theme in both literary traditions—exemplified by *Pride and Prejudice* and *A Doll’s House* in the West, and *Oedipus Rex* and *Desire Under the Elms* in the East. In terms of “circumstances,” Zhou Fanyi and Lu Shiping initially faced similar predicaments, yet their tragedies diverged. Fanyi’s anguish was markedly more intense than Shiping’s. Beyond fate and temperament, the author contends this stems from Fanyi’s heightened perceptiveness and acute awareness of her predicament. Zhou Puyuan once remarked to Zhou Ping: “Your birth mother always liked to keep the windows shut in summer^[10].” Here, “birth mother” unmistakably refers to Lu Shiping. It is well known that Fan’yi repeatedly requests that the windows be opened throughout the play, finding the heat stifling. This “stuffiness” and “heat” naturally signify more than mere weather; they embody the oppressive atmosphere and confined emotions. Fan Yi’s perception of oppression is markedly sharper than that of Lu Shiping and Lu Sifeng. She is acutely aware of her confinement within the Zhou Mansion and the “humiliation” she endures across two generations. It is palpable that Fan Yi grasps this socially and culturally forged predicament more acutely than any other character. Her anguish springs from this acute perception. Following her final private conversation with Zhou Ping in Act IV, Cao Yu writes: “Zhou Fan Yi (realising her fate): So, it’s over.^[11]” This is both fate and human nature. Fan Yi realises that losing Zhou Ping and remaining forever trapped in the Zhou residence is an inescapable trajectory of her destiny; Zhou Ping’s abandonment of her to pursue a “new force” that could “rescue him from the sea of conflict” is an unalterable instinct of human nature (Si Feng to Zhou Ping is no different from Zhou Ping to Fan Yi). This perception and awareness of an inescapable existential predicament is the root of Fan Yi’s profound and extreme anguish, leading her to choose “resolution”. It bears reiterating that the anguish and despair Fan Yi experiences here cannot be simplistically attributed to the social and cultural constraints of old China. Rather, it stems from the existential predicament forged by human society and innate human nature. The irresistible force of fate here functions more as an excuse, a desperate refuge when all avenues are closed.

3 Free Choice and Responsibility under Internal Conflicts

In his preface, Cao Yu noted that Fan Yi “exhibits numerous behavioural contradictions, yet none of these contradictions are anything but extreme. ‘Extremity’ and ‘contradiction’ form two natural undertones within the sultry atmosphere of *Thunderstorm*, and the plot’s adjustments largely hinge upon them.^[12]” From the perspective of dramatic conflict, class contradictions (between the Zhou and Lu families, Fan Yi and Shi Ping, Si Feng) and ethical conflicts are merely external dramatic tensions. The true internal conflict lies in the contradiction between the subjectivity of the individual and the objectification of others, and between human sinful desires and the redemption of the soul. This is vividly embodied in Fan Yi.

Existentialism asserts: “Existence precedes essence,” meaning “first there is the person, who encounters themselves, emerging into the world—only then does one define oneself^[13].” For Fan Yi, she is acutely aware that she is first and foremost herself, only subsequently a composite of her various social identities. In Act II, Fan Yi and Zhou Ping engage in a sharply confrontational exchange where Fan Yi declares: “I am not! I am not! Since I entrusted my life and honour to you, I have cared for nothing else. I am not his mother, no, no, nor am I Zhou Puyuan’s wife.^[14]” It must be noted that Fan Yi employs six negations here, not to emphasise her status as Zhou Ping’s lover, but to underscore her refusal to be confined by any identity. She is not Zhou Fan Yi as defined by others; she is only herself. Zhou Ping’s response, however,

is: "If you think you are not your father's wife, then I myself no longer acknowledge that I am my father's son" [14]—a single sentence that simultaneously erases the subjectivity of both individuals. Similarly, Zhou Puyuan declares: "My family is the most perfect, the most orderly family I know..."^[15] Indeed, what abounds most in *Thunderstorm* is the loss of individual agency through mutual objectification. All eight characters are trapped within this dynamic, embodying the notion that "hell is other people."

Fan Yi undoubtedly possesses the strongest sense of "resolute decision-making" among these eight characters. During her eighteen years as a member of the Zhou household, she dared to love Zhou Ping with unwavering resolve, even as Zhou Puyuan and Lu Gui had long suspected their affair. Unlike Zhou Ping's retreat and denial, Fan Yi showed no fear, declaring in Act II: "The sins born within the Zhou family—I have heard them, I have seen them, I have committed them... For what I have done, I take full responsibility."^[16] Here, Cao Yu's concept of original sin must be noted. Throughout the four-act tragedy of *Thunderstorm*, every character bears the sin of desire, where inner "evil" precedes the "sin" of action. This "self-righteous" fallacy aligns with Cao Yu's Christian-inspired notion of original sin^[6], yet the characters' paths to redemption diverge. Zhou Puyuan and Lu Shiping's redemption might be seen as Christ-like confessions within the church-hospital setting of the prologue and epilogue. Yet Fan Yi's case is distinct, for by then she had descended into genuine madness. A madwoman cannot confess to God, and given Fan Yi's extreme disposition, she was unlikely to repent sincerely. Thus, her redemption lies not in confessing sin, but in what she herself termed "taking responsibility". Fan Yi's inner "evil" is laid bare throughout all four acts. Cao Yu offers her no cover; he has Lu Shiping take Si Feng away, repeatedly persuades Zhou Ping, and even summons Zhou Chong to sow discord and calls Zhou Puyuan to obstruct him, employing every means to prevent Zhou Ping from leaving. In Act IV, upon Fan Yi's return to the Zhou household, Cao Yu describes her thus: "Her entire countenance was expressionless, save for her eyes, which burned with the mad fire of her heart, yet remained cold and ruthless. Love and hatred had consumed all traces of womanly grace; she seemed to despise everything, her mind churning only with calculations of vengeance."^[17] In truth, whether she succeeded in stopping Zhou Ping now seemed of little consequence to Fan Yi. Her greater desire was to destroy the happiness of Zhou Ping and Si Feng, essentially a sharp venting of the malevolence within her heart. Yet when she ultimately discerned an "even more wretched fate" awaiting Zhou Ping and Si Feng, her initial shock gave way to urgency—she was the first to cry out for Si Feng and urge Zhou Chong to intervene. This reveals Fan Yi consistently acted according to her own consciousness: she possessed an innate "sinfulness" and propelled the tragedy, yet she was not its originator. Cao Yu termed the true architect "fate".

One might say Fan Yi's extremism is a form of courage, a passion tinged with guilt, and above all an embodiment of her modernity. She dared to make a "decisive choice" in the face of despair, just as she told Zhou Ping: "I have no regrets. I have never regretted anything I have done,"^[18] Ultimately, her confinement to the second floor of the church hospital stands as the consequence of her actions. This resolve and its outcome bear a clear resemblance to Sartre's concept of "free choice" and "responsibility"^[13].

4 Cao Yu's Reflections on the "Existence" of Human

In Existentialism Is a Humanism, Sartre candidly states: "What is the core idea of existentialism? It is the absolute nature of free responsibility; through freely assuming responsibility, any person embodies not only a human type but also themselves—such responsibility remains comprehensible to anyone, in any era—and the relative influence on cultural patterns arising from this absolute responsibility."^[13] Naturally, Sartre's existentialist philosophy cannot be directly applied to Cao Yu's works. Yet the universal philosophical contemplation of human "existence" remains a shared intellectual pursuit transcending East and West, ancient and modern—a pursuit in which Cao Yu is no exception.

In his essay Preliminary Reflections on Future Creative Work, Cao Yu confessed: "I entangled some bizarre parent-child relationships, threading through them notions of fate gleaned from books. Thus, my passionate concern for humanity distorted reality, transforming a play that might have held some social significance into a script with regressive tendencies."^[19] This self-reflection undoubtedly carries a tendency towards self-deprecation, yet it also reveals the inner conflict within Cao Yu. His contemplation of the "existence" of "humanity" was complex and still in the process of exploration. If one accepts Sartre's notion of "responsibility", then one also accepts the social duties that humans bear as part of a collective – a characteristic feature of Sartre's theory. In *Thunderstorm*, Cao Yu simultaneously denounces Fan Yi's "wickedness" and extremism, along with the tragedy she precipitates, while attributing all to irresistible "natural laws". Yet he also extols Fan Yi for "daring to shatter every shackle, to wage a trapped beast's struggle. Though she still fell into the fire pit, her passion burning her heart to madness, is this not all the more worthy of pity and respect? Surely this commands greater admiration than the castrated chickens of men who timidly muddle through their days for the sake of mediocre existence."^[20] This reveals Cao Yu's own contradictions: while condemning Fan Yi's extreme "sin" and affirming societal moral constraints, he simultaneously pities women like her for enduring "social oppression", admires her courage and resolve, and even, as Professor Qian Liqun observes, finds in Fan Yi "a new realm of existence that Cao Yu himself yearned to attain."^[21]

This ambivalence in Cao Yu remains inextricably linked to his contemplation of human "existence". Just as the essence of life is inherently painful, the very nature of such contemplation is also painful. Thus, whether in the nine revisions of

Thunderstorm or the evolving themes across Cao Yu's works, one observes his perpetual struggle between realist portrayals of social consciousness and the presentation of tragic ideology. He sought to find a faint glimmer of redemption for his characters—not merely religious, but earthly. Indeed, viewing Thunderstorm through Fan Yi's perspective, I contend that Fan Yi may not necessarily propel the tragedy further, for the following reasons: Considering the generational cycle spanning the Zhou and Lu families, Zhou Chong (aged 17), Zhou Ping (aged 28), and Zhou Puyuan (aged 55) represent three distinct life stages within a single lineage. Judging by the influence of genetics and environment, Zhou Chong's "vague dreams" are highly unlikely to materialise, and Zhou Ping's promises to Si Feng are equally likely to be broken. The tragedy of Zhou Puyuan and Lu Shiping is highly likely to recur in Zhou Chong, Zhou Ping, and Lu Sifeng. Moreover, the latter three share a bloodline. Even without Fan Yi's intervention, this cycle of fate would almost certainly replay in an even more harrowing form. It is worth pondering: for Zhou Chong, is death truly more tragic than becoming a man like Zhou Puyuan? For Zhou Ping and Si Feng, would death be more sorrowful than the abandonment and remembrance that would follow? The author believes there is no definitive answer. Yet at the very least, Fan Yi did indeed break this generational cycle. While she precipitated four deaths, she also brought this cycle to an end. We cannot claim death is insufficiently sorrowful, yet it is not necessarily the most profound grief.

Cao Yu crafted an ancient, tranquil atmosphere with "Once upon a time" in both the prologue and epilogue^[22]. Combined with his preface statement that "it is intended to send theatregoers home bearing a quiet sorrow"^[23], we may interpret these sections as a gentle warming after confronting tragedy. Cao Yu, imbued with compassion, hopes readers may discern a thread of tranquillity amidst the suffocating weight of tragedy, thereby continuing their contemplation of human existence with greater breadth and serenity.

5 Conclusion

Cao Yu's enduring contemplation of humanity's existential predicament since time immemorial finds expression in Thunderstorm. Here, he synthesises the social consciousness shaped by China's modernisation since the May Fourth Movement with the redemptive philosophy inherent in literary tradition. Amidst contradictions, he yearns to uncover practical solutions or spiritual escape routes for the "human race". The outcome remains beyond our judgement, though further exploration may be found in works such as Sunrise, The Wilderness, and The Beijing Man. What remains certain is that Cao Yu's contemplation of human existence remains inextricably linked to the concrete, contemporary human condition. His compassionate spirit imbues his realist writing with a layer of existential redemptive thought.

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