

# The Tragic Origins of Hong Kong and Taiwan Literature in the 1950s and 1960s

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## Abstract:

By the 1950s and 1960s, literary works from the regions of Hong Kong and Taiwan began to broadly exhibit characteristics of sadness and melancholy. Moving beyond the constraints of previous research, which primarily focused on the biographical analysis of individual writers, this paper has expanded the investigation's scope. This includes a comprehensive analysis of social environment, personal emotions, writing techniques, literary assertions, and gender consciousness. It concludes that the tragic essence of Hong Kong and Taiwan's literary works is a complex and multifaceted, driven by multiple factors that cannot be singly examined. This discovery of the multifaceted core of tragedy in Hong Kong and Taiwanese literature introduces new methodologies for analyzing tragic literary works. It fills the gap in current research regarding the analysis of causes from multiple perspectives, providing a more diverse and compelling argument for the origins of tragedy in Hong Kong and Taiwanese literature. Offering different perspectives for studying the uniqueness of Hong Kong and Taiwanese literature, this work adds new views and a comprehensive research direction for the causes behind tragic works, thus broadening the scope for future research.

**Keywords:** Taiwanese Literature, Tragic Literature, Hong Kong Literature

## 1. Introduction

During the 1950s and 1960s, the development of literature in Hong Kong and Taiwan exhibited a pronounced tragic tone. This tragic essence was not limited to a single work or type of work. Still, it was broadly infused into the literary creations of the time, becoming a significant characteristic of the period's literature. The origins and causes of this tragedy have thus become an important subject of study for Hong Kong and Taiwan literature from the 1950s to the 1960s. During these decades, Hong Kong and Taiwan were experiencing a period of political upheaval and transformation. Under the rule of the British colonial government in Hong Kong and the Nationalist government in Taiwan, the socio-political environment was fraught with instability. This political climate had a profound impact on local cultural development, giving rise to a unique cultural phenomenon that included negative elements such as violence, pornography, and gambling. The negative aspects of Hong Kong and Taiwan's culture became increasingly pronounced. The complex social environment influenced the creativity of intellectuals, leading to literary works imbued with a sad tone, stemming from a critique of society, sympathy for the underprivileged, discontent with personal experiences, and astonishment at the changes in the

world. Some novels written by Hong Kong and Taiwanese authors during this period were marked by these somber emotional colors [1]. Compared to other periods of Hong Kong literature, the tragic expression of the 1950s and 1960s had unique characteristics. For instance, compared to the modernism and post-modernism seen in Hong Kong literature from the 1970s and 1980s onwards, the tragic expression of the 1950s and 1960s was more direct and profound. This may be related to the time's social background and historical conditions, as writers of that era were more inclined to use tragedy to reflect on social realities and express personal emotions. This report's study on "Tragedy in Hong Kong and Taiwan Literature" is based on this period's discussion, aiming to delve into the causes of the tragic tone in Hong Kong and Taiwan literature during this era.

Current research has extensively explored the personal experiences and emotions of writers from this period, identifying these as significant factors influencing the emotional tone of their works. Scholars have analyzed writers' backgrounds, educational histories, and emotional experiences. However, this approach is somewhat limited, as personal experiences, while influential, are subjective. The analysis has typically focused on a single author and one of their works, emphasizing the uniqueness of the

study subject too strongly to explain the widespread and dense emergence of tragic works in Hong Kong and Taiwan literature during the 1950s and 1960s. Additionally, a writer's personal experiences and emotions reflect the time's historical context and cultural atmosphere. Analyzing from a single perspective is not sufficiently comprehensive, as family background, emotional state, and writing techniques influence each other. Discussing them in isolation can lead to relatively shallow research outcomes. Therefore, this report will analyze the tragic nature of Hong Kong and Taiwan literature from the 1950s and 1960s from multiple perspectives, including social background, writing techniques, and reader factors. It will also select highly representative works for detailed analysis [2], aiming to fill the gap in a comprehensive analysis of the tragic causes in Hong Kong and Taiwan literature of the 1950s and 1960s.

## **2. Analysis of the Causes of „Tragic“ Literature**

### **2.1 Cultural and Social Background**

The murky atmosphere of Hong Kong and Taiwan's culture at the time: Political corruption and chaos, combined with the impact of Western culture, led to the prevalence of violence, pornography, and gambling in movies, music, and publications in the Hong Kong and Taiwan regions. These cultural products not only hurt the social atmosphere of the time but also distorted the value formation of the younger generation. On the other hand, with rapid economic development, the gap between the rich and the poor gradually widened, plunging many of the lower classes into poverty and hardship. This provided fertile ground for social injustice and immoral behavior. These factors directly affected writers' living environment and creative atmosphere in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Taking the writer Liu Yichang as an example, he was dissatisfied with the unfair treatment of the lower-class intellectuals in Hong Kong society. He thus reflected the harshness of the environment through the tragic fate of the protagonists in his novels "The Drunkard" and "Tête-bêche"[3].

### **2.2 The Influence of Chinese and Western Writing Techniques**

The Fusion of Eastern and Western Descriptive Techniques: Due to Hong Kong and Taiwan's geographical location and historical background, writers in these regions were largely influenced by Western writing techniques. They frequently utilized the stream of consciousness method in their novel creations, which allows for a vivid portrayal of characters' inner worlds through multiple narrative perspectives and interior monologues. This

technique is particularly suited to expressing complex psychological struggles filled with melancholy, anger, and anxiety and thus lends itself to tragic outcomes. Writers of the time were also influenced by realism, with realist literature aiming to reflect social life directly or indirectly. It emphasizes social inequality, the complexity of human nature, the hardships of life, and the underlying causes of these phenomena. The social environment of Hong Kong and Taiwan at the time provided fertile ground for the creation of realist works. Furthermore, many Hong Kong and Taiwan writers were influenced by "Dream of the Red Chamber," favoring tragic endings in their writing [4]. Liu Yichang's "The Drunkard" depicts the tragedy of an intellectual shaped by the social background and the stream of consciousness writing technique. A young man with personal goals and artistic talent must write bottom-line erotic and martial arts novels with no artistic value to make a living. Under pressure to pay rent, he reluctantly engages in demeaning arrangements with his landlady, and his scripts are plagiarized and claimed by unscrupulous theaters, eventually turning a non-drinker into an enslaved person to alcohol. The theater that claims the scripts, the dirty and unbearable living conditions, the scheming female landlord, and the publishing house that owes him royalties each reflect the social reality of Hong Kong at the time. The high cost of living, the wealth gap caused by financial inflation, and the mixed literary environment are all drawbacks of Hong Kong's environment since the 1950s. The author uses these factors as tools to drive the drunkard to desperation, clearly also venting personal grievances and sounding an alarm about the social environment after experiencing social injustice. The complex inner world of the drunkard is depicted through the stream of consciousness technique, as seen in the book: "The devil stole the lantern when the heart forgot to lock. Where there is silent congealment, the wise see the smile of tomorrow" [5]. This seemingly unrelated imagery reflects the protagonist's direct feelings when drunk because the stream of consciousness is inherently irregular. "A smile plus liquor equals a flower in bloom." Who would imagine that a smile plus liquor could turn into a flower? This is the hope and wondrous sight that the drunkard sees only when drunk, a temporary manifestation of consciousness. It is the drunkard's desire for noble art and the contradiction of writing erotic novels he is ashamed to pen for livelihood, which confines him to a life of drunken stupor for momentary relief. The constant conflict between passionate love and casual dalliances perpetuates the protagonist in turmoil. "The Drunkard" comprehensively showcases the protagonist's despair towards society, humanity, life, and even himself. Though dissatisfied with everything, he is powerless to resist, choosing to escape and numb his

understanding of the truth and awareness of the real world through drunkenness. However, after drunkenness comes sobriety, and the only way to eliminate conflict and pain is through death, thus leading to a tragic ending. Hence, the tragedy of “The Drunkard” is formed by combining social environment and writing techniques [6].

### 2.3 Unique Reflections on Women’s Perspectives

Gender Consciousness and Female Topics: In the literature of Hong Kong and Taiwan during the 1950s and 1960s, due to progressive ideas, some authors paid more attention to women’s identities and statuses, incorporating these discussions into their works. However, there were certain issues in their portrayal of female characters. Most female roles were confined to traditional family roles, depicting women’s oppression in traditional life as negative examples. Alternatively, they depicted women with special professions or backgrounds, using their tragic experiences and promiscuous pasts as objects of sympathy and pity rather than creating positive and active female images to enlighten society. Thus, depicting women during this period was predominantly tragic, highlighting the sad limitations of female themes at the time [7]. Pai Hsien-yung’s “Eternal Yin Xueyan” views societal tragedy from a woman’s perspective, contemplating the silence and melancholy after the fall of prosperity. This tragic work is influenced by the author’s literary stance and the topic of women. Pai Hsien-yung was greatly influenced by “Dream of the Red Chamber,” and thus, in terms of language, appearance, and theme, “Eternal Yin Xueyan” closely mirrors the tragic tones of “Dream of the Red Chamber.” Pai Hsien-yung has emphasized the importance of technique in dialogue within the novel. The vivid and lifelike language of dialogue enhances the sense of reality throughout the text. For instance, Yin Xueyan comforts Mrs. Song, saying, “Sister Song, ‘No one is blessed forever, nor a flower that blooms for a hundred days.’ Who can ensure a lifetime of glory and wealth?” [8]. This reveals reality and implies that even someone as beautiful and special as Yin Xueyan cannot stay young, bluntly stating that nothing in this world is eternal. Under natural laws, no one can avoid aging, but Yin Xueyan’s attitude towards the fading of her youthful years shows her wisdom in dealing with life and her charm. However, this ability ultimately cannot change her lonely fate. A woman’s social skills seem to be mere tools to please society, with everything turning to nothing as time passes. Ultimately, every man who crosses paths with Yin Xueyan ends up ruined, as if the previous splendor had never happened. Like a “femme fatale,” Yin Xueyan coldly observes these disasters unfold, waiting impassively for her beauty to fade with age. This mirrors

the conclusion of “Dream of the Red Chamber,” which states, “It’s as if, after all the birds have eaten and flown back to the forests, a vast expanse of pure, white land is left—so clean and pure.” The prosperity of the Jia family eventually becomes a dream, with only the eternal void of heaven and earth witnessing everything. Similarly, Yin Xueyan ends up calmly observing the suffering of the men around her, embodying the tragedy of fallen splendor, a critique of desire, and an indifference to worldly affairs. By assigning the roles of a dancer and a socialite to Yin Xueyan, the author expresses the tragedy of a unique female identity. Her unique identity leads to her unique fate. Yin Xueyan was not initially the cold-hearted figure she became; her social experiences transformed her from an ordinary woman to one without compassion. As a renowned socialite and a high-class dancer in the entertainment venues of Shanghai, known for her unparalleled charm, Yin Xueyan enjoys a high-status lifestyle despite her lower social status, adored and pursued by many. However, she remains intelligent and sober amidst these transient luxuries, fully aware of the fate awaiting a dancer: a life without love, only the pursuit of survival. Although she needs to survive, she refuses to give herself to someone like Wang Guisheng, a spoiled rich young man whose passionate love could sway any woman of the night. However, she knows he’s a flamboyant and impulsive man who won’t remain interested in her forever. This inevitability of tragedy, viewed from the perspective of a special woman, indicates that a dancer’s identity from the start dooms her to a tragic fate. Indeed, the author aims to showcase the difficulties and hardships of women in olden times through the life of a socialite. Still, such a focus on female topics is an inducement to the novel’s tragic development. Therefore, “Eternal Yin Xueyan” is a tragic work resulting from the author’s literary stance and the exploration of unique female topics [9].

### 2.4 Commercial Aspects

During the 1950s and 1960s, the rapid economic development in Hong Kong and Taiwan led to a surge in worldly desires, giving rise to a spiritual pursuit. The materialistic society left people feeling helpless and pessimistic about reality, placing more importance on contemplating human nature and the true pursuit of desires. Tragic works often resonate with readers, allowing for emotional catharsis. At the same time, the entertainment industries in Hong Kong and Taiwan, such as movies, theater, and magazines, were relatively developed. These industries often adapted and serialized literary works, making tragic stories more widely disseminated. High remuneration for manuscripts and widespread fame further motivated authors to explore this theme. In Qiong Yao’s “Green Green Grass by the

River,” the protagonist Qingqing is abandoned as a child and, even after being adopted, suffers abuse from her foster parents. Her foster mother is emotionally distant, and though her foster father showers her with love, he dies early due to illness, leaving Qingqing feeling lonely and helpless throughout her growth. In “Princess Pearl,” the love between Xiaoyanzi and the Fifth Prince is obstructed by royal power and palace rules, leading to a tragic ending where they cannot be together. In “The Plum Blossom Scar,” Bai Yinsong deeply loves the male protagonist, Haozhen, but cannot marry her beloved due to her low birth. Despite her efforts to fight for love and happiness, she ultimately cannot escape the chains of fate and is forced to leave her loved one. Qiong Yao’s works encompass tragic elements involving family conflicts, love struggles, fate’s cruelty, external pressures and obstacles, and character flaws. Undoubtedly, as a thoughtful and unique female writer, she critiques societal ills that hinder love through tragic narratives. However, themes like incestuous love, love triangles, family estrangements, and lovers turning against each other are highlights that attract readers in a repressive society, showcasing common love and ethical issues. The unique tragic perspective resonated with readers, and stimulating plots provided a sense of pleasure, making many readers unable to stop reading and boosting sales. During her time in Taiwan, Qiong Yao began her literary career. She started publishing works in high school, and at 16, she published the novel “Cloud Shadows” in the “Morning Light” magazine. She published over 200 stories and essays in various newspapers and magazines in high school, becoming a well-known high school writer. In 1963, Qiong Yao published her first novel, “Outside the Window,” with Crown Publishing in Taiwan, which became an instant success using her own experiences as material. This shows that she relied on manuscript fees as her primary livelihood, writing tragic narratives to attract readers as a way to make a living. Similarly, Jin Yong’s martial arts novel series, with storylines like Guo Jing and Huang Rong’s city defense, Xiao Longnu’s loss of innocence, and Qiao Feng being killed by his lover, also strongly appealed to readers. Both Jin Yong and Qiong Yao’s novels were bestsellers, indicating that market factors also contributed to the tragic nature of Hong Kong and Taiwan literature during this period [10].

In addition to the literary works mentioned above, “Taipei People” by Bai Xianyong, “The Rainy Season Will Not Come Again” and “Notes of a Scarecrow” by San Mao, “The Lost Golden Bell” by Nieh Hua-ling, and “The Season of Blooms” by Li Ang are all seminal or significantly influenced tragic works in the literature of Hong Kong and Taiwan. These works have been affected to varying

extents by personal emotions, writing backgrounds, narrative perspectives, and market factors, significantly contributing to exploring their origins and prompting critical reflection on societal norms.

### 3. Conclusion

To date, academic analysis of the tragic nature of literature from Hong Kong and Taiwan has been somewhat limited, typically falling into three categories: the narrowness of research perspectives, the neglect of historical and cultural backgrounds, and the lack of empirical studies. Research often focuses on works of high literary value, with scarce studies on best-selling authors like Qiong Yao, Jin Yong, and San Mao. The research perspective tends to concentrate on the personal emotional experiences of authors, combining the tragic aspects of a few writers’ lives, resulting in a lack of comprehensive and multidisciplinary approaches. The neglect of historical and cultural backgrounds frequently overlooks political and social contexts, missing an analysis of the realism inherent in the works, especially those drawing from contemporary societal issues.

This report, by analyzing classic literary works of the 1950s and 1960s from Hong Kong and Taiwan from multiple angles—social environment, writing techniques, gender consciousness, and reader market factors—summarizes the causes of the tragic nature of literature from these decades. Tragic literary works prompt readers to reflect on the moral dilemmas and human struggles amidst societal changes, urging a greater focus on social realities and contemplation on maintaining the integrity of human nature and emotions amidst rapid development. Moreover, the profound depiction of love and family relationships in these works provides rich material and inspiration for contemporary literary creation, emphasizing human desires and the exploration of self-awareness. These stories also reflect the social conditions of the time, serving as a cautionary tale. By filling the gap in multidimensional cause analysis in the current field, this approach offers a more diverse and convincing argument for the causes of tragedy in Hong Kong and Taiwan literature. It provides different perspectives for studying the uniqueness of Hong Kong and Taiwan literature, adds new insights and a comprehensive research direction to the field of causes behind tragic works, and broadens the scope for future research.

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