



COMMENT ON “PHILOSOPHICAL SPIRIT IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE DRAMA”

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COMMENT ON “PHILOSOPHICAL SPIRIT IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE DRAMA”

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In the introduction, Liu (2024) provides a concise overview of the history of Chinese drama. It is mentioned that, since the Yuan Dynasty, Chinese drama entered a golden age, with the plots becoming increasingly complex and the performance duration noticeably extended. This development more effectively and profoundly reflected that time’s social life. Liu’s (2024) entirety primarily focuses on the drama works from the Yuan Dynasty and the period thereafter, forming the basis for further research.

It is worth noting that the Yuan Dynasty is considered a period of decline for Confucian culture, and the prevailing societal trends profoundly influenced that time’s dramatic works.

During the Yuan Dynasty, Confucian culture held a low status in society. Scholars of Confucianism believed that the Yuan society had lost the ethical and moral norms, becoming exceptionally dark. Consequently, many playwrights’ works during this period reflected a strong Confucian revival, contributing to the prosperity of drama. In the early stages of the Mongol Empire, the Mongols, in their triumphant posture, disdained Confucian culture and promoted their own traditional culture. This led to a significant impact of Mongolian nomadic culture on the Confucian culture in the Central Plains, causing the Confucian-dominated culture of the Central Plains to lose its social dominance. This cultural shift

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resulted in a sense of loss and sorrow among the literati and common people of the Central Plains. Xie Bailiang pointed out:

The Yuan-Mongol Empire, at least in terms of spiritual beliefs and cultural psychology, inflicted deep trauma on the Han-dominated Chinese nation, creating a tragic outcome. This tragic conflict caused by foreign oppression manifested in the highly developed cultural phenomenon of Yuan drama and directly sparked the wildfire of peasant uprisings (Xie, 1993, p. 128).

Confucian culture inherently affirmed Central Plains culture and rejected foreign cultures, as foreign cultures did not emphasize ritual and righteousness. The rejection of barbarian cultures in Confucianism led to a strong psychological opposition between the Central Plains and barbarian nations. In his work “Lectures on the Spring and Autumn Annals,” Lu Jiuyuan stated,

The sage values China and disdains the Yi and Di [barbarians], not out of personal bias toward China. China possesses the balanced essence of heaven and earth, the foundation of ritual and righteousness. Valuing China is not about favoring China but about valuing rituals and etiquette. (Wang; Xu, 2006, p. 77).

This cultural rejection of barbarians contributed to a deep-seated psychological opposition between the Central Plains and barbarian nations.

During the Yuan Dynasty, the rulers disregarded Confucian culture in the Central Plains, instead promoting nomadic culture. They implemented harsh policies of ethnic oppression, categorizing non-Mongol ethnic groups, based on the time of their conquest, into different classes, such as Semu people, Han people and Southerners. Mongols were placed at the top, forming the ruling class, while other ethnic groups were predominantly in a subordinate and enslaved position. Furthermore, the Yuan Dynasty took an extremely negative stance towards the longstanding imperial examination system in the Central Plains. At times, they even temporarily abolished the imperial examinations. Although the imperial examinations were later reinstated, they were conducted with a clear bias favoring certain ethnicities, resulting in highly unfair examination practices. The various policies, implemented by the rulers of the Yuan Dynasty, created a situation where scholars and students deeply influenced by Confucian thought, possessing a strong sense of worldly ideals, found themselves needing a viable path. Consequently, they chose to channel their observations of various social scenes into their writings, using play after play to criticize the society’s political darkness and express their deep-seated frustration and dissatisfaction.

Wang Guowei, when discussing the prosperity of Yuan drama, mentioned, “Since the Tang and Song dynasties, the scholar’s mastery of subjects has been a gradual process, and once abandoned, their talents have nowhere to be applied except in poetry and music”.

(Wang, 2018, p. 86). The art of Zaju became a tool for scholars to express their sentiments and, with the broader population's support, it could flourish. The dramatic works mentioned by Liu (2024), such as "The Injustice to Dou E", "The Orphan of the Zhao", "Tale of the Pipa", etc., can be seen from a different perspective as the bitter fruits of Confucian culture being neglected.

At the end of the Yuan Dynasty and the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, Zaju entered a period of decline, and classical theatrical works also experienced a downturn. The reasons for this decline were multifaceted. From the perspective related to Confucian culture, it was because Confucian culture gained attention from the rulers at the end of the Yuan Dynasty. In the second year of the Yanyou era, Emperor Renzong reinstated the imperial examination system that had been abolished for decades. This move allowed the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism to regain its dominant social influence and become the official ideology. The reinstatement of the imperial examination system and the establishment of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism significantly altered the scholars' fate. With official recognition from the dynasty and a clear path to official positions, many scholars shifted their focus from their earlier connections with the lower classes. They no longer sought to understand the lower classes' sufferings deeply or continued acting as their representatives. Instead, they consciously aligned themselves with the rulers, upholding the upper class's interests. After Zhu Yuanzhang overthrew the Yuan-Mongol dynasty, the Han people regained control of the Central Plains. The Ming Dynasty strengthened central authority through various measures, maintaining the social dominance of late Yuan Neo-Confucianism in terms of ideology. The reinforcement of the imperial examination system greatly enhanced control over societal thoughts. This control was reflected in literary and artistic expressions, with strict regulation of theatrical arts and an emphasis on the didactic function of literary and artistic works.

During the Ming Dynasty, the dominance of Neo-Confucian thought led to the emergence of a plethora of ethical plays promoting filial piety and virtuous wives. These plays served as footnotes to feudal ethical standards. Playwrights of the Ming Dynasty were consciously inclined towards the purpose of moral education. During the Ming dynasty, drama critics, drawing on Confucian poetic and educational perspectives, considered it a literary style similar to poetry capable of reflecting societal realities and transforming society. The Qing Dynasty continued the dramatic patterns of the Ming Dynasty, taking them even further. While drama did not strictly belong to the realm of orthodox literature, it was consistently influenced by orthodox literary consciousness. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the entertainment aspect of drama was consciously downplayed, while its educational function was emphasized. Drama, deeply rooted in the grassroots and intricately connected with the common people, found an indelible link. The masses more readily accepted the promotion of ethical values through drama. Compared to the dry moralizing found in poetry and prose,

the art form of drama, with its inherent advantages, presented a more engaging and accessible way to propagate ethical values.

While various cultural elements influenced classical drama, the impact of Confucian culture on it is undoubtedly the most profound. Examining the existing dramatic works and ancient commentaries, it becomes evident that classical drama bears a strong imprint of the Confucian principle of “harmonious beauty.” This profoundly reflects the ancient Chinese people’s aesthetic expectations towards classical drama. Due to these aesthetic expectations, classical drama exhibits distinct characteristics imbued with profound Confucian cultural hues. Firstly, Confucian ethics encompass society’s various aspects, leading to diverse themes in dramatic works, including military affairs, diplomacy, warfare and love. At the same time, they often draw from historical events. Secondly, adhering to the principle of harmonious beauty, emotional expressions in dramatic works generally convey a sense of “controlled sorrow.” Additionally, in terms of structure, there is a preference for harmony, as exemplified by the ‘grand reconciliation’ pattern mentioned by Liu (2024). Lastly, the delineation of character images often presents a clear line between good and evil, leading to typified characterizations. These characteristics represent the national features of classical Chinese drama.

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