



COMMENT ON “PHILOSOPHICAL SPIRIT IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE DRAMA”


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Most of the drama cases, analyzed and discussed by Liu (2024), belong to the category of Yuan Zaju, aligning with Mr. Wang Guowei’s assertion: “When it comes to real drama, we have to start with Yuan Zaju”. (Wang, 2018, p. 6). The birth of Yuan Zaju marks a significant milestone in the golden age of Chinese drama. Its content, themes, artistic forms and performance skills all attest to the maturity of Chinese drama. Its remarkable achievements have consistently garnered international attention and hold a historical status in Chinese literary history, alongside Tang poetry and Song lyrics, praised as one of the three wonders of ancient Chinese literature. However, why did only Yuan Zaju flourish when the Mongols entered the Central Plains? This has long been a question of great interest to drama researchers.

Ethnic integration profoundly shaped history, influencing people’s thoughts and ideas. Against this backdrop, Yuan Zaju gradually gained popularity and flourished. In the 13th century, the Mongolian people, originally nomads in northern China, rose swiftly. Genghis Khan unified the north steppe tribes in 1206, forming the Mongolian Empire. By 1271, the empire was renamed the Great Yuan. By 1279, the Southern Song Dynasty fell, ending divisions since the late Tang Dynasty and the Five Dynasties. This unified the country and established the largest territorial dynasty in Chinese history.

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Friedrich Engels once pointed out that “every conquest by a relatively barbaric nation hindered economic development and destroyed productivity.” Originally nomadic and living in the wilderness for generations, the Mongolian people were adept at warfare and plundering, and sustained a hunting lifestyle. They lacked a developed economy and written language, and their ethical and ruling concepts were primitive. After unifying the northern and southern deserts in the early 13th century, they transitioned into a slave society. Under these warrior conquerors’ rule, who relied on bows and horses, China’s agricultural economy, social development, and ethics suffered severe setbacks. Nevertheless, the multiple ethnic groups’ coexistence and integration also led to the merging and collision of cultural ideas, gradually giving rise to new artistic concepts and intellectual systems.

The cultural and ideological clashes, during ethnic integration, simultaneously impacted the advanced Central Plains farming culture and the relatively undeveloped grassland culture. According to the book *Trajectory of Chinese Cultural Development*

[...] the Yuan Dynasty faced severe political challenges, particularly when the more civilized Han people were conquered by nomads at a lower stage of social development, leading to unprecedented challenges to traditional beliefs. The great pain of national destruction and family loss caused deep depression among the Han people, the deepest since the Han Dynasty. However, the Yuan Dynasty also brought new vitality. The bold Mongolian cavalry, the grassland nomads, swept south and infused energy into the society that had stagnated since the Han and Tang Dynasties. Consequently, the ideology and culture of society experienced a multifaceted integration of nomadic and agricultural civilizations, northern and southern cultures, and elite and popular cultures (Feng and Yang, 2000, p. 262).

Karl Marx said, “Barbaric conquerors are always conquered by the higher civilization of the peoples they conquer” (An, 2010, p. 52). History has repeatedly shown that backward civilizations are assimilated by advanced ones, not the other way around. As the ruling ethnic group, the Mongols began a process of sinicization upon entering the Central Plains. During the Yuan period, two important cultural systems emerged: traditional Confucianism and the new ruling ethnic group.

Under the influence of traditional Confucianism, the literature and art in the Yuan emphasized the educational function of ethics. Dramatists aimed to promote ethical education, sharing a mission and a strong sense of historical responsibility with those who sought to preserve traditional culture. Although Yuan Zaju introduced some new elements, it remained fundamentally centered on Confucian ethics and morality. Liu (2024) highlighted the values of loyalty, filial piety, ritual and righteousness in this article. Under Mongol rule, some dramatists have strong senses of moral consciousness and social responsibility like “clarifying the truth and saving the world”. They tried to explain and promote traditional ethical ideas via Zaju. This cultural medium, appreciated by both the refined and the common

people, aimed to "purify customs." Their efforts cultivated fertile ground for the continuation and renewal of traditional Chinese morality.

Clarifying the truth and saving the world have always been the goal of traditional Chinese literati. For ancient people, Dao represented a social and cultural order based on fundamental human values. Confucius first proposed that scholars should aspire to Daoism. His disciple Zeng Zi elaborated, saying

To be worthy of the honor of scholars, one should be broadminded and unflinching, since his responsibilities are challenging and his course is long. Is it not a demanding task to take as one's responsibility to realize true virtue, which only death can stop? Is it not a long course? (Zhang, 2019, p. 24)

This original interpretation of Dao profoundly impacted later Chinese literati. Yuan Dynasty dramatists felt a deep responsibility to uphold traditional ethics and morality. Although often relegated to lower positions by the times, their literati characteristics and commitment to Daoism remained unchangeable. The greater the threat and challenge from foreign cultures, the more determined they were to defend and promote their own. This strong social responsibility was both the motivation and destination of their creations. They ensured that national culture and its ethical spirit were preserved through their works, even under the strong influence of foreign civilizations. Compared to Daoist-influenced hermits, who retreated to the mountains and forests to avoid world affairs, Confucian scholars, influenced by Confucianism, exhibited a stronger sense of social responsibility.

In summary, during the Yuan dynasty, when traditional moral civilization was severely damaged and nearly fractured, promoting the ethical spirit had extraordinary social, political and cultural significance. This was crucial for preserving the Han nation's virtues developed over thousands of years. The promotion and inheritance of Confucian tradition made great contributions. The prosperity of Yuan drama was closely tied to dramatists' ideals of preserving and reconstructing Confucian values through their works. Meanwhile, ethnic minorities were gradually assimilated under the influence of Confucianism and Yuan Zaju. As their thoughts eventually returned to Confucian traditions, Zaju began to show signs of decline.

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