

The Many Shapes of Medieval Chinese Plays: How Texts Are Transformed to Meet the Needs of Actors, Spectators, Censors, and Readers

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When Voltaire's *L'Orphelin de la Chine* (1755) is mentioned nowadays in general histories of Western theater, it is not because of its eminent literary qualities, even though, like practically everything by Voltaire, the play is written with wit and flair. It is rather mentioned for its influence on one particular aspect of performance: costume. *L'Orphelin de la Chine* was in its own day an extremely popular play that was performed, in French and in translation, all over Europe by actors and actresses in "authentic costume." Until well into the eighteenth century, actors in tragedy performed all plays in a limited set of costumes, but in *L'Orphelin de la Chine* they tried to dress as Chinese—to the best of their knowledge. As with every change in performance practice, this daring innovation had its detractors at the time. One Dutch observer noted that the heavily perspiring performers of the Dutch version of Voltaire's tragedy in their oriental draperies looked more like "Armenian merchants" than anything Chinese (Hartnoll 1968:158-59, Worp 1908:268).

As is well known, Voltaire's *L'Orphelin de la Chine* was only one of the many eighteenth-century adaptations of the first Chinese play to be translated into a Western language, Ji Junxiang's (紀君祥) *Zhaoshi gu'er* (趙氏孤兒; *The Orphan of the House of Zhao*).¹ We know little about Ji Junxiang, except that he must have been active in the last quarter of the thirteenth century. Most likely he was a playwright working for the burgeoning commercial theater of the big cities of the time—to begin with, Dadu (modern day Peking), the capital of the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1260-

¹ For general surveys of the history of Chinese drama and theater, see Dolby 1976, Mackerras 1983 and 1990, and Idema 2001.

1368.).² The specific genre of Chinese theater that was practiced by Ji Junxiang and his Northern colleagues is called *zaju* (雜劇; Shih 1976, Idema 1988). Because *zaju* plays are relatively short (modern editions usually divide them into four acts), can deal with any conceivable subject, and usually end on a happy note, in the past I have used the term “comedy” as my translation of the term *zaju*. However, it should immediately be stressed that traditional Chinese theater did not know the genre distinction between “tragedy” and “comedy” that is so central in the tradition of Western drama—and perhaps even more in writings on drama. These terms have only become common in China in the twentieth century, giving rise to heated debates about whether or not traditional China produced “tragedies,” and, if it did not produce “tragedies” that adhere to all the formal Western rules, whether we can identify “tragedies with Chinese characteristics,” which many critics believe to be possible (*Zhongguo* 1983, Xie 1993). Actually, since the early years of the twentieth century, Ji Junxiang’s *The Orphan of the House of Zhao* is listed as one China’s first Chinese tragedies, not in the least (one surmises) because its eighteenth-century French translator Joseph de Prémare had called it a “tragédie chinoise.”³

In traditional China dramatic genres were not distinguished on the basis of the social status of characters or the nature of the plot, but on the basis of the type of music used for the songs and the general background music. This can be done because all forms of traditional Chinese drama are a form of ballad-opera: they all include arias that are composed to a limited number of melodies. Plays that share one specific repertoire of melodies (and related musical conventions) form one genre. *Zaju* or comedy employs “northern music” for its arias; moreover, all arias in an individual play are assigned to a single actor or actress (Johnson 1980). The male lead or female lead as a rule plays the same role throughout the play, giving the genre a highly asymmetrical character since only one of the parties (the single singing role) in the central love affair or dramatic conflict is given much

² The theater is just one of the many aspects of contemporary culture that is ignored by Marco Polo in his description of Dadu. For a translation and study of the written materials relating to Chinese theater and performance of this period, see Idema and West 1982. A detailed study of the visual and archeological materials relating to the theater and performance is provided by Liao 1989 and 1996.

³ The first Chinese scholar to use the term *Zhaoshi gu'er a beiju* (悲劇; “sad play,” the Chinese neologism created to translate the notion of tragedy) was Wang Guowei in his seminal *Song Yuan xiqu kao* (*An Inquiry into the Drama of the Song and Yuan Dynasties*) of 1912.

more space to express his or her opinions and feelings at length. Occasionally the male or female lead will play more than one role. Most likely, such plays are not the victim of clumsy plotting (as was long assumed by modern critics); they may well have been written, as has been suggested by Kim Moonkyong (1991), with a specific actor or actress in mind as a vehicle for a virtuoso display of versatility in performance. In the case of *The Orphan of the House of Zhao*, for instance, the male lead is expected to play not only the now eighteen-year-old Orphan in the fourth act, but also, in the preceding acts, three other characters (his young princely father, a veteran general, and a retired elderly statesman), who all submit themselves to execution or commit suicide so that the Orphan may survive and, once grown up, take revenge on the man who killed all 300 members of the house of Zhao.

The readers of Prémare's translation did not have to wonder about the puzzling arrangement of having a single actor perform these different roles in the subsequent acts of the play, as Prémare on purpose had omitted all the songs from his translation. As a result, his European readers encountered a play fully written in prose. Actually, they were not the intended readers of the play at all, as the translation had been made by Prémare, a Jesuit serving at the court in Peking and a fine linguist, to provide the learned Parisian scholar Étienne Fourmont with an extensive example of modern spoken Chinese in translation to help him in his study of the Chinese language.⁴ To find such an example, Prémare had turned to the most popular drama anthology at the time, the *Yuanqu xuan* (元曲選; *Anthology of Yuan Dynasty Drama*), a collection of 100 *zaju* plays edited and published by Zang Maoxun (藏懋循) in 1616-17. From this voluminous compilation he had chosen the only five-act play in that collection, which also happened to have the most extensive prose dialogues (with the result that the play made perfect sense without the arias). It was only when this aid to language learning was printed in 1734, without Prémare's knowledge, in Du Halde's *Déscription de la Chine*, that it was greeted enthusiastically as a first authentic example of Chinese drama and eagerly mined by a host of now mostly forgotten playwrights and composers of opera libretti in the heyday of *chinoiserie* (Liu 1953).⁵ Prémare's version, which reproduces only the prose dialogues and omits the arias, is, however, the very counter-image of

⁴ On the relation of these two men, see Lundbaek 1991.

⁵ The first complete translation of *The Orphan of the House of Zhao* was provided in Julien 1834.

the earliest preserved Chinese edition of the play. This printing of *The Orphan of the House of Zhao* dates roughly from the first half of the fourteenth century, and only includes the arias; it has no prose dialogues or stage directions whatsoever (to the extent that it is not even specified that the arias are assigned to four different characters). Prémare's source text in the *Anthology of Yuan Dynasty Drama* of 300 years later did of course include arias, prose dialogues, and stage directions, but as soon as one compares the two editions it is clear that the later edition is not simply a fleshed-out version of the earlier text. In the later edition, a complete fifth act has been added and, while the sequence of the melodies of the arias is still recognizably the same, the text of almost every aria is extensively rewritten. As a result, the two editions of *The Orphan of the House of Zhao* are quite different in plot, characterization, and meaning—we are not dealing here with minute details that delight the philologist but may be of little relevance to the student of performance. Something drastic has happened to the text between its first appearance in print and the moment it acquired its canonical version in the *Anthology of Yuan Dynasty Drama*.

It is possible to retrace some of the stages in the development of the texts of Yuan drama. Such a study makes clear that some of the changes are due to the varying ideological constraints to which *zaju* was submitted as it moved from the urban commercial theater of the Yuan dynasty, to the court stage of the early Ming dynasty, and from there to the studio of the late Ming literati. Some of the changes are a reflection of changing performance practices over the centuries. However, many of the differences between the various preserved texts of Yuan drama are due to the specific purposes for which the texts were prepared and to the different relations of these versions to performance (Idema 1996, West 1998).

For the Eyes of the Audience

When we look into the various relations of dramatic texts to performance, we first of all have to remind ourselves of the fact that actors and actresses do not need a text in order to put on a performance. Even when the performance is based on a text in some way or another, the text is invisible in the actual performance (modern-day puppet-performers in Fujian dutifully turn over the pages of the manuscripts of their plays during their performance, but they do not look at the text because they know their play by heart and improvise at will). Many cultures, including China, know many forms of dramatic performance that do not have written-out texts and in

which the text is created in each performance over and over again by the actors concerned.

So who needs a text? Here it becomes interesting to return to the earliest known edition of *The Orphan of the House of Zhao*, which consists only of the texts of the arias. As a script for a performance, this edition of the text is clearly not usable. It is only the existence of the later version of the play that allows us to reconstruct to some extent the narrative in the earlier version. In cases of Yuan dynasty printings of Yuan-era plays where no later version of the text is available, it is often quite difficult or even impossible to reconstruct the details of the plot. Most scholars in the field would agree that the text most likely was printed not for the benefit of actors, but for the benefit of those members of the play-going audience who might have difficulty in following the words of the arias. The likelihood of this hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that most of the Yuan-time printings of Yuan *zaju* are not from Dadu in the north, but from Hangzhou in the south. Hangzhou (Marco Polo's Quinsai) was a major city, as it had been the capital of the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1278) and served as the regional center for the administration of the southern provinces upon their conquest by the Mongols. As a result, the city had a sizable population of northerners, but for many of their friends and hangers-on the northern dialect in which *zaju* was performed must have been a second language. Dadu itself must have had a large immigrant population from all over China. Many playgoers there who may have had no difficulty in following the dialogue may have had more trouble in following the lyrics of the arias. In other words, playgoers may have a greater need for a text than the performers, and what they need may not be a script for performance, but just a "hearing aid" for the difficult passages, such as is provided in modern theaters during opera performances by projection. Moreover, the number of playgoers may have made the printing of the songs economically feasible.⁶

For the Eyes of the Lead Performer

Now where would an enterprising publisher find the complete text of the songs for any given play? Here the most convenient source would be the role text of the male or female lead. Of the 30 Yuan-era printings of Yuan

⁶ These editions of the text of all the arias from a single play should be distinguished from the songbooks that included individual arias and the arias from single scenes and probably were intended for professional and amateurs who wanted to be able to sing highlights and hits.

zaju, five consist solely of the arias, whereas the remaining 25 present us with more or less complete role texts of the male or female lead. These editions contain minimal stage directions for the other performers and cue lines, together with more detailed stage directions for the male or female lead, basic prose dialogue, and the songs. The fact that we are dealing with texts that derive from role texts is indicated by the form of the stage directions, which often address the needs of a single actor: “wait until so-and-so has finished doing (or saying) this-or-that, and then . . .” That these texts were also printed for the benefit of the listening playgoers is suggested by the fact that in many plays the space allotted for prose dialogue and stage directions quickly decreases from act to act.

The Yuan-era editions of Yuan drama as a rule have been considered defective texts because they were measured against a fully written-out text that provides complete stage directions, prose dialogue, and songs as the author was supposed to have written them. It is, however, very doubtful whether Yuan-dynasty playwrights ever wrote such scripts—at least, no such fully written-out script of a *zaju* from the Yuan dynasty has been preserved as a Yuan-era printing or manuscript. It is more likely that the playwrights, meeting the demand for a constant supply of new plays and working for highly professional but largely illiterate professionals, limited themselves to providing a basic outline of the plot to all concerned and to writing out a more detailed role text for the lead performer. After all, prose dialogue can easily be improvised, but song lyrics that have to meet the metrical demands of a great variety of tunes are less easily made up on the spot.

As scripts for the lead performer, these role texts could be extremely detailed, providing not only the full texts of the songs, but also extremely precise stage directions. For instance, in the Yuan-era printing of *Baiyueting* (拜月亭; *The Pavilion of Praying to the Moon*) by Guan Hanqing, the female lead is repeatedly instructed to enact contradictory emotions. However, even in the most complete role texts, the playwrights felt no need to repeat themselves or to write out known information. In *The Pavilion of Praying to the Moon*, the female lead is often told to “explain what happened before” or to “explain the plot.” From this one may conclude that the playwright assumed that actors and actresses could fittingly improvise their own prose dialogues and that he felt no need to prescribe their spoken lines (Idema 1994). Here it may be useful to point out that Chinese opera companies were traditionally organized as stock companies: actors and actresses were trained from an early age to perform a specific character-type and therefore would know how to play their role; all they needed to know to

put on a new play was what was specifically new. The role of the playwright at this stage in the development of Chinese drama was not necessarily to create new plays, but rather to contribute to their creation in a limited and circumscribed way. To what extent the printed versions of more or less complete role texts reflect the text as it left the hands of the author and to what extent they incorporated later changes by other hands we cannot say; all we know is that the majority of Yuan dynasty printings of Yuan plays most likely were produced at a considerable remove in time and space from the presumed moment and location of the original composition (West 1998:243-48). It is as if the earliest editions of Shakespeare's plays included only the sections in blank verse and were printed in Paris for the benefit of the expatriate court of Charles II.

For the Eyes of Friends

The earliest preserved *zaju* editions that provide a more or less complete text of their play date only from the first half of the fifteenth century. These are not editions of earlier plays but editions that had been written recently by authors of the early Ming dynasty (1368-1644).⁷ The stimulus to provide more or less completely written out texts may well have been provided by the example of the texts of contemporary southern plays (*xiwen*, 戲文) in which all characters were assigned arias, and where it therefore may have made more sense for the playwright to include all new songs in a single script.⁸ But even while Zhu Youdun (朱有燉), the

⁷ The only exception would appear to have been Wang Shifu's *Xixiang ji* (*Story of the Western Wing*; 1991). Wang Shifu's play was remarkable for consisting of five single *zaju*. A fragment of a printed edition of the early Ming has been preserved. This edition follows the conventions of the early Ming editions in providing full stage directions as well as full dialogues; it also included illustrations (Wang 1991:11-19).

⁸ The genre of *xiwen* originated in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in eastern China south of the Yangzi river. However, the earliest texts that have been preserved are three plays that were part of the many *zaju* and *xiwen* included in the *Yongle dadian* (*The Great Compendium of the Yongle Reign*), a huge compendium compiled at court in the early years of the fifteenth century and completed in 1409. The *Yongle dadian* was never printed, and now only a limited number of the thousands of volumes of the original manuscript (or its copies) survive. One of these surviving happens to be the final volume of the section devoted to *xiwen*. Since no volume containing *zaju* survives, we do not know to what extent the texts of *zaju* included in *Yongle dadian* may have been different from the Yuan printings.

Exemplary Prince of Zhou and a prolific playwright, had all of his plays printed with the proud legend *quanbin* (全賓; “with complete prose dialogues”) following the title, he did not live up to his claim: his prose dialogues at times are rudimentary at best, actors are often instructed to repeat prior information or to *yunyun* (云云; “improvise”), and no texts are provided for well-known stage routines (Idema 1985). As long as any pair of clowns worth their salt knows how to do the skit of the battling quacks, there is no need to write out the full text and the stage directions—“perform here the skit of the battling quacks” will suffice, unless the playwright wants to come up with his own and wittier version (Idema 1984). In the case of Zhu Youdun, we know that some of his plays were intended for a single performance, and in this case it is conceivable that he had the text printed to serve as a souvenir for those present at the performance.

For the Eyes of the Court Censor

By the early Ming dynasty (1368-1644) *zaju* had been adopted as court theater. Many of the early Ming emperors were extremely unpleasant characters, and no one at court wanted to be held responsible for provoking their displeasure. It is under these circumstances that we find the first fully written-out texts. It seems safe to assume that these texts were prepared for the eyes of the court censors, who inspected each text carefully before it was performed for His Majesty (Komatsu 2001). There were some explicit taboos that had to be observed (for instance, no emperor could be performed onstage), but it is clear that the rewritings went much farther than the explicit rules required: elements of social criticism were very much toned down, and the authority of the state was very much stressed (Komatsu 1991; also see Idema 1990a and 1990b). In the case of *The Orphan of Zhao*, for instance, the nature of the revenge of the Orphan is changed from an act of private vengeance against the man who killed his father to a state-ordered execution of a criminal. However, what should perhaps interest us even more at this moment is that now, for the first time in the development of the text of individual plays, the full text is written out, not only of the songs but also of the prose dialogues, including all extensive repetitions and all lame jokes. It is clear that the censors were most concerned about the words of the play, as the stage directions are often left quite rudimentary and rarely show the same degree of detail one may sometimes encounter in Yuan-era printings of presumably complete role texts or in the early Ming *zaju* of Zhu Youdun, who liked to detail his special effects in his stage directions (Idema

1990c). If the censors felt that the body language of the actors was beyond their control, their attempt to control the actors and actresses' words and lines was only the more insistent.

A sizable number of late sixteenth-century and early-seventeenth century manuscript copies of these palace scripts have been preserved, both of Yuan plays that survived in the Ming palace repertoire and of plays that were composed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is not clear when exactly the originals of these manuscripts were prepared, but it seems a safe suggestion that most of them date from the middle of the fifteenth century to the middle of the sixteenth century. By the end of the sixteenth century *zaju* had basically disappeared from the stage, as it had lost the battle for the favor of the audience, both outside and inside the imperial palace, to the various forms of southern drama. Actually, *zaju* might well have disappeared from the stage without leaving any trace in literary history, if it had not been for the efforts of a few aficionados and the publishing boom of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Up to the end of the sixteenth century, printed editions of *zaju* had been very rare indeed. However, late sixteenth-century Jiangnan witnessed a period of explosive economic growth that also benefited the publishing industry. Meeting the suddenly emerging and apparently insatiable demand for light reading and entertainment literature, publishers started to print plays and novels in ever larger numbers and increasingly beautiful editions. The publishers, with only very rare exceptions, initially limited themselves to printing the texts as they found them in the palace manuscripts, even though some of them tried to enhance the attractiveness of their publications by the insertion of woodblock illustrations. Such illustrations would depict scenes from the story of the play, not highpoints of the performance of the play; while in some cases their artistic value may be considerable, their value for the history of performance, unfortunately, is negligible.

For the Eyes of Sophisticated Readers

These late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century collective editions of Yuan dynasty *zaju*, however, were soon to be eclipsed completely by Zang Maoxun's *Anthology of Yuan Dynasty Drama*, a collection of 100 plays, printed in two installments of 50 plays each in 1616 and 1617. The texts in this collection as a rule were based, directly or indirectly, on the

palace manuscripts.⁹ It is easy to see why this collection almost immediately replaced the earlier anthologies (to the extent they were only rediscovered in the twentieth century): the more than 200 woodblock illustrations in *Anthology of Yuan Dynasty Drama* are of superior workmanship in design and execution, and the printing of the text was of the finest quality. To this very day, the *Anthology of Yuan Dynasty Drama* is used by many scholars inside and outside China as the basic collection for the study of Yuan-dynasty *zaju* as literature and theater. However, the texts as presented are not only far removed from performance in the Yuan dynasty itself, having already passed through various revisions, but also from the performance practice at the Ming imperial court. The deeply ingrained preference for this collection therefore deserves a more profound explanation than the fine qualities of the original edition of *Anthology of Yuan Dynasty Drama* as an example of seventeenth-century print culture. This explanation has to be sought, I believe, in the nature of Zang Maoxun's editorial strategy, as it was he who transformed the plays from scripts for performance (or rather scripts for the imperial censor) into enjoyable literary texts for sophisticated gentlemen.

In order to be readable as literature, the texts of plays first of all had to be assigned to authors in accordance with the traditional Chinese concept of literature, where texts were first of all read as an expression of the feelings and character of the author. Relying upon catalogues of plays from earlier times, Zang Maoxun made a valiant effort to provide as many plays as possible with a named author, irrespective of the changes to which the text might have been subjected in the intervening centuries. As a next step, Zang Maoxun heavily edited the texts at his disposal to transform them from scripts for actors to respectable writings for gentlemen. This process started at the very innocent level of correcting wrong spellings, faulty allusions, and imperfect parallelisms. However, Zang progressed from there to extensive "improvements" of dialogues and arias, together with a tightening-up of the plot. While claiming to reconstruct the Yuan-era originals, Zang Maoxun was very much under the influence of the dramatic conventions of his own

⁹ Some scholars argue that Zang Maoxun did have access to earlier editions and used them in his compilation (Xu 1985:11-24). Li Kaixian, a sixteenth-century bibliophile and a pioneer publisher of Yuan-dynasty *zaju*, may well have based at least some of the plays he had printed on Yuan-dynasty printings. In the single case where we can directly compare his version of a play with a Yuan-dynasty printing, all the arias have been preserved, and the sparse dialogue would appear to have been derived by the editors from a meticulous reading of the arias. Li Kaixian very much intended his editions for reading. His editions were often reprinted by later editors around 1600.

time. Southern plays as a rule ended in a grand reunion scene, and Zang set out to turn his Yuan *zaju* into well-made plays as well. This meant that quite often he not only had to tighten up the plot, but also change it. While he often cut extensive passages, both dialogues and arias, from the first three acts, he just as often considerably expanded the final fourth act, adding dialogue and arias of his own design. As a result, the tone and meaning of the play may be changed in many subtle and less subtle ways. For instance, whereas the scripts adopted for use at the imperial court had drastically cut passages of outspoken criticism of social abuses, Zang Maoxun often would insert social criticism of his own, directed of course against abuses of his own time. As a result of his many changes, Zang Maoxun's *zaju* editions were highly readable closet-dramas, which in their style and ideology reflected the aesthetic and philosophical concerns of the early seventeenth-century sophisticated Jiangnan elite, of which Zang himself was a representative (West 1991).

In the Eyes of Modern Scholars

Zang Maoxun successfully transformed the Ming dynasty imperial court versions of Yuan dynasty *zaju* into a minor genre of Chinese literature. The status of this genre was further enhanced when, at the beginning of the twentieth century, modernizing Chinese scholars instituted the field of Chinese literary history. Under the influence of the Western veneration of epic and drama and in the belief that novels and plays could play a major role in modernizing the nation, they assigned a major role to drama and fiction in modern Chinese literature and in traditional Chinese literature as well. But when they did so, the only forms of drama that were included in the new canon were those that already for centuries had been part of the reading culture of the literati, such as *zaju* of the Yuan dynasty as edited by Zang Maoxun. This enhancement of the status of Yuan dynasty *zaju* was facilitated by the fact that plays from *Anthology of Yuan Dynasty Drama*, beginning with *The Orphan of the House of Zhao*, had been translated into Western languages from the eighteenth century onward and had exerted a considerable influence on European theater. The fact that *The Orphan of the House of Zhao* had been introduced to the Western world as a tragedy further enhanced the status of this individual play in the modern master narrative of the history of traditional Chinese literature. This master narrative, however, had no place for the scripts of traditional Chinese theater as it was actually performed in the early years of the twentieth century. Most modern intellectuals of the time looked with deepest disdain upon the

actually performed and widely popular forms of traditional drama, such as Peking opera, and hoped to replace it as quickly as possible with Western-style drama—in Chinese called *huaju* (“spoken drama”)—to set it off from the Chinese tradition of musical drama.

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