

# *Dramatic Characterization in Chinese Yuan Drama*

Suhua Wang

School of Translation Studies  
Shandong University (Weihai)  
Weihai, China  
sduwsh@126.com

**Abstract**—The Chinese Yuan drama is featured by the dramatic and humanoid figures created. The characters in Yuan drama are full of characteristics and vitality and burnish the value of Yuan drama. The dramatic characterization in Yuan drama is achieved within a role system featured by *Danben* and *Moben* script division. For each categorized role, a certain kind of opening lines are delivered, indicating the typified character. The characteristics of *dramatis personae* then are presented through dramatic arrangement of dramatic plots and dramatic events. In certain sense, the dramatic structure is for dramatic characterization, while the development of dramatic events and plots are to back up dramatic characterization.

**Keywords**—*Chinese Yuan drama; dramatic characterization, script division; dramatic plots*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Chinese drama takes its shape during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), which is ruled by the Mongolian authority, an ethnic minority in Chinese nationalities. Yuan dramatists established distinctive characters with strong personality that impress and appeal to the readers. In *The Golden Age of Chinese Drama: Yuan Tsa-chu*, Shih said, “The Yuan dramatist...created a number of dramatic figures that transcend the type and sparkle with life. ... The dramatists bring these characters to life in several ways: by allowing them to express their feelings through poetry, by adding particular and realistic details to conventional types, by playing upon perceptions grounded in popular tradition, and by skillfully presenting motivation and response.” Shih listed all these ways of dramatic characterization in Yuan drama playwriting. The Chinese Yuan drama is not only featured by the humanoid figures it created, but also is burnish for the value of itself through these characters.

## II. DRAMATIC CHARACTERIZATION IN DRAMAS

Actually, long before the plays are presented, the characters and images of *dramatis personae* have been established. In *The Theatre: An Introduction*, Brockett gives a definition of drama as such:

*Broadly speaking, a play (drama) is a representation of man in action.*

In his opinion, “man in action” firstly means visible human behaviors that are physical movements and actions, and furthermore, it also means mental motivations and inner emotions and sensations. “Man in action” means both physical

and mental activities. Brockett explained the process of the characterization of *dramatis personae* in dramas, theaters and plays, which is through a series of successive dramatic actions, or “man in action”, such as “feelings, thoughts, and deeds”, which distinct and define the nature of man. Chinese Yuan drama is a kind of stylized drama of human actions, in which the dramatic characterization is accomplished and the dramatic effectiveness is achieved, with a successive of dramatic elements, including performance, action and movement. In Chinese Yuan Drama, the dramatic characterization is dominated by conventions of the general patterns for playwriting. While at the same time, it decides the Yuan dramatists’ way of presenting Yuan play.

## III. ROLE SYSTEM: *DANBEN* AND *MOBEN* SCRIPTS

Dramatic characterization in Yuan drama, uniquely in theaters, is within a role system. Yuan drama is expressive in dramatic effects and created vivid characters because it gives priority to the dramatic characterization ahead of other dramatic elements in playwriting. The chief feature of Yuan dramatic playwriting is a role system with the division of male and female characters in dramatic scripts. In Yuan drama scripts, there are two script systems: *Danben* and *Moben*. In a *Danben* script, there is a female lead actor, who assumes the leading and singing role. While in a *Moben* script, there is a male lead actor, who takes the leading and singing role. The *Moben* and *Danben* is applied to an act or a whole play.

### A. *The Danben Script in The Injustice Done to Dou E*

The dramatic characterization in Chinese Yuan Drama, featured by this *Danben* and *Moben* script division system, is unique, as well as effective in achieving dramatic constructs and effects. In this way, the Yuan drama applies *Danben* and *Moben* scripts to concentrate on the acting and singing of the lead actor, which helps the dramatic characterization of the leading role in one act or one play, while the actions and songs of other performers are subordinate in the same act or the whole play. Such concentration on character solidified the dramatic characterization in Yuan drama. Guan Hanqing’s *The Injustice Done to Dou E* created the image of a tragic figure Dou E. The *Danben* script focuses the effort of dramatic characterization on the main character Dou E, who is also the main performer on stage. The script is a *Danben*, in which the female lead Dou E assumes the leading and singing part. Here, both the character and the leading singer is the same female character. In this way, Dou E’s inner feelings are thoroughly brought out and are fully explored. This dramatic

characterization establishes Dou E as a figure of tragic and humanoid nature.

#### B. *The Moben Script in Autumn in the Han Palace*

The *Moben* and *Danben* role system is applied to an act or a whole play, but it only decides the structure of performance rather than the story of the play. In some plays, the main character of the story and the main actor on stage is not the same person, or even not of the same gender. Ma Zhiyuan's *Autumn in the Han Palace* is such a drama with a female as main character while a male as main actor. In the drama, the main character is Wang Zhaojun, who is a concubine of Emperor Yuan of Han Dynasty, but is then ordered to married the leader of Xiongnu government, a subordinating state of the central government. The main dramatis personae Wang Zhaojun is a female character, but the main performer on stage is a male character, Emperor Yuan of Han, because the script is a *Moben* system, in which a male actor takes the leading and singing part. Therefore, although the story is about a female beauty, the drama is performed mainly by a male actor with his singing and acting on stage.

#### C. *The Danben and Moban Scripts in Each Act*

As mentioned above, the *Danben* and *Moben* script division is used in one play or one act. In some Yuan plays, either *Danben* or *Moben* script is applied to each act. That is to say, one play can apply both *Danben* and *Moben* scripts, using *Danben* in some acts while adopting *Moben* in other acts. Wang Shifu's work *Story of the Western Wing* is a love story, in which both female and male characters are taking a hold. Therefore, both *Danben* and *Moben* scripts are used in the play. The first act applies a *Danben* script, in which Ying-ying, the female role, accomplishes the singing role. While the second act adopts a *Moben* script, in which Hui-ming, a male role, conducts the performance and songs. Then the third act uses a *Danben* script, in which Hung-niang, another female role, performs the singing.

#### D. *The Danben and Moben Scripts and the Dramatic Characterization*

With the *Danben* and *Moben* script division system, the dramatic characterization is achieved in Yuan plays. This script division system opens the tradition and form for later Chinese theatres. In one way or another, this dramatic characterization is for a specific role or a specific actor, giving full play to presenting characters with great concentration and vitality. The division of play scripts *Danben* and *Moben* is based on dramatic role types, which features the dramatic characterization in Yuan drama.

### IV. TYPIFIED OPENING POEMS

The typical opening for dramatic characterization in Yuan plays follows a fixed or "stereotyped" form. For a categorized role, a certain kind of opening poems or a certain kind of same lines is delivered by the character, so as to indicating its role and typified character. This typified opening poem for categorized actors is another feature of the dramatic characterization in Chinese Yuan drama.

When the characters in Yuan drama come onto the stage, they usually sing or read a typified kind of poems. The poems are usually composed of four sentences, with seven Chinese characters in each sentence, or five Chinese characters in each sentence. The on-stage opening poems help the dramatic characterization, for they usually show the status, intention, character, or life of the character. With the form poem, the opening poems serve as a vivid, profound and philosophical expression of the identity, character, experience and mindset of various typified characters.

#### A. *The Opening Poems of Laodan*

Among the categorized roles, *Laodan* is the role of a senior female. *Laodan* starts on stage with an opening poem as such:

*A flower may bloom again,  
But youth never returns.  
Lasting wealth is no necessity,  
Rather happiness keeps one immoral.*

The role of *Laodan* sings such opening poem as the beginner of his lines in Yuan plays as in Guan Hangqing's *The Injustice Done to Don E*.

A similar poem appears in the opening scene and sung by the role of *Laodan* in Wang Shifu's *Story of the West Wing*, Shi Junbao's *Qiu Hu Tries to Seduce His Own Wife*, and Zheng Guangzu's *The Soul of Ch'ien-nu Leaves Her Body*.

*A flower may bloom again,  
But youth never returns.  
No need to say gold is pricey,  
But rather happiness is more worthy.*

With a comparison of the two poems, it is found that the contents and the format remain the same, with only slight changes in the third and fourth lines. Another similar poem is in Guan Hangqing's *Jade Mirror-Stand*, in which the opening open is as follows:

*A flower may bloom again,  
But youth never returns.  
No matter how many daughters, without a male heir,  
The family name will not be passed to next generation.*

In this third poem, the first two lines remain the same, while the last two lines changes in content. Still, the role of *Laodan* is clearly indicated from the poem.

#### B. *The Opening Poems of Laosheng*

Another categorized role is *Laosheng*, which is the role of a senior male. *Laosheng* appears onto the stage, reciting a poem of four lines at the very beginning of his performance.

*Gray hair and beard are invading,  
With aging heart and fading youth.  
Idling life sustained by pension,  
I cherish peace as thousands of gold.*

Such poem is the opening lines for the role of *Laosheng*, an older male character, in anonymous playwright's *The Quilt for Lovers*. Here is another opening poem for *Laosheng*:

*Comes the middle of the month, and the moon grows dim:*

*Comes middle age, and a man is good for nothing.  
Next generations have their way of life,  
Why even bother to plan for their future.*

It is the opening lines of *Laosheng* in Guan Hanqing's *Dream of Butterfly*. It appears at the beginning of the act and carries strong dramatic motif, which gives the description of the dramatic characterization in the play. Here is another example in *The Injustice Done to Don E*:

*I diagnose all diseases with cars,  
And prescribe as the Herbal dictates;  
But I cannot bring dead men back to life,  
And the live ones I treat often die.*

It is the opening lines of *Laosheng*, whose name in the play is Doctor Lu (literally, the good doctor Lu). From his lines, his profession, character and role are expressed. From the lines "But I cannot bring dead men back to life, / And the live ones I treat often die.", it is featured that his attitude toward the medical profession is not quite cold and indifferent. His medical skill is also ordinary and even incompetent, because he cannot cure heavy disease of the dying patient and often causes the death of normal disease. The *Laosheng* role of Doctor Lu also appears in several other Yuan plays. They usually come onto the stage with the similar opening poem. The name of Doctor Lu is a synonym of charlatan, an incompetent and unprofessional doctor.

The opening poems for each categorized character role are also called *Xiezi* or *Wedge*, which indicates the beginning of an act or fills the middle between acts. The poems contains certain dramatic motif coherent to the categorized role and alludes the dramatic characterization of the role.

## V. DRAMATIC PLOTS

Besides the concentration on dramatic characterization, the figures in Yuan drama are also presented through the dramatic arrangement of dramatic plots and dramatic events.

### A. Dramatic Plots around Dramatic Characterization in Playwriting

The Chinese playwright Li described the process of playwriting in his *Li Liweng on Drama*. He believes that that Yuan dramatists set scenes around characters in a way that merges the current scenes, the past scenes and the next scenes. On dramatic event cannot exist alone, but clinging upon proceedings, afterwards, flashbacks and developments. When constructing every individual scene in the whole plot, a playwright has the names of each character and the proceeding and afterward events in mind. Li gives a central position to the dramatic characterization in playwriting, which forms the basis for dramatic scenes and plots. To some extent, drama is an art of action and a portrait of characters. Yuan drama is of no exception. In order to achieve dramatic effectiveness, Yuan drama arranges structural dramatic plots around the characterization of dramatis personae and presents to the readers coherent dramatic plots and vivid dramatic characters.

The dramatic characterization is achieved through a series of dramatic plots. On the one hand, neither can dramatic work be created nor can dramatic characterization be accomplished

without dramatic plots, for plot is the primary and fundamental element of a drama. On the other hand, the plots and characterization is intertwined and composes a drama work. While the formation of plots is set around the role of characterization, the image of characters is set on the development of plots. When the plots and scenes are appreciated, the characteristics of dramatis personae is also accomplished, in which way the dramatic characterization and the creation of drama characters is achieved.

### B. The Plots in Hamlet and the Character Hamlet

If taking western classic drama as examples, in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, both the drama's title and the drama's plots are created in light of dramatic characterization. The plot goes as follows: in the beginning, Hamlet got a message about the death of his father in a dream from a ghost. He then tries to ascertain the ghost's words. Whether the ghost in the dream is telling the truth or the dream is just a dream, a nightmare. Then he takes certain actions to kill his father's murderer Claudius. In the end, Hamlet takes his revenge. From the perspective of dramatic plot, it seems that the play's plot is very simple and single-lined. However, from the perspective of dramatic characterization, it lays the charm of the drama.

In *Hamlet*, the human nature is daunted on the characterization of Hamlet, which makes the character humanoid and appealing. Hamlet is a man of courage but indecisive. His emotions are rich and develop in line with the plots. Shakespeare takes advantage of his playwriting skills in achieving dramatic characterization and arranges a sequence of actions, which effectively and gradually reveals Hamlet's indecisiveness, piece by piece, event by event, and act by act. Along with the dramatic plot moving on, the dramatic actions are accumulated to sustain the characters. In *The Essential Theatre*, Brockett summarized several ways through which a character is revealed, such as explanatory information in stage directions, the lines of characters, the behaviors of characters, and the conflicts in dramatic scenes. As in *Hamlet*, Yuan playwrights created dramatic plots around the focus on dramatic characterization, giving characters humanoid nature and making the dramatic characterization relates to spectators.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The dramatic characterization and the creation of Yuan plays could hardly free itself from boundary. Chinese Yuan drama takes a significant and splendid seat in Chinese literature hall. One reason is for its humanoid dramatic characterization. In *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, Lessing talked about the object of drama that is human. The individual character on stage is a reflection of every human. Readers find a self in the characters. In this end, the value and root of theater is to present human emotions and human life. In Yuan drama, *Danben* and *Moben* script division system is a structural way in characterization, based on which each categorized character is distinct with opening poems with philosophic indications to the plots that are arranged with a consideration of the dramatic characterization. The dramatic characterization is essential for Yuan drama and makes Yuan drama condensed, inclusive and appreciable.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Chung-wen Shih. *The Golden Age of Chinese Drama: Yuan Tsa-chu*. Princeton University Press, 2015.
- [2] Li Yu. *Li Liweng on Drama*. Hu Nan Ren Min Press, 1980. *In Chinese*
- [3] Gotthold E. Lessing. *Hamburg Dramaturgy* [Hamburterische Dramaturgie]. Translated by Helen Zimmern. London: Dover, 1962. 1769.
- [4] James I. Crump. *Chinese Theater in the Days of Kublai Khan*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1980.
- [5] James I. Crump, Jr. "The Conventions and Craft of Yüan Drama." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 91, no. 1, 1971, pp. 14–29.
- [6] Oscar G. Brockett. *The Theatre: An Introduction*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979.
- [7] Oscar G. Brockett, and Franklin J. Hildy. *History of the Theatre*. Pearson Education Limited, 2014.
- [8] Oscar G. Brockett, Robert J. Ball, John Fleming, and Andrew Carlson. *The Essential Theatre*. Cengage Learning, 2016.
- [9] Yang Xianyi, and Gladys Yang, trans. 1979. *Selected Plays of Guan Hanqing*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press. 2010.
- [10] Zang Maoxun. *Selected Yuan Plays*. Beijing: Zhong Hua Shu Ju, 1961. *In Chinese*
- [11] Zhu Minqi. *Literary Motifs in Traditional Chinese Drama*. The University of Arizona, PhD dissertation, 2010.