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KUNJU, CHINESE CLASSICAL THEATER AND ITS REVIVAL IN SOCIAL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

LUO Qin

(Selected chapters from the doctoral dissertation)

PART ONE

KUNJU, CHINESE CLASSICAL THEATER ON THE CULTURAL STAGE

CHAPTER III Kunju Theater

When kunju reached its heyday, it became very much the prerogative of the connoisseur and intellectual. Kunju had developed into a highly literary form; the texts of its plays were in classical language, for many poets and scholars wrote this theater. Its plays grew to enormous

lengths, and its musical style and singing were both characterized by much elaborate ornamentation and bravura. In kunju, however, there was not only music, but also literature, drama, dance, stage convention, song, and speech, all interrelated and therefore dependent on each other. It was a synthesis of all these. Probably, no single word in English adequately describes such a unique dramatic art form. It is the combination of these elements that becomes the vehicle of expression for the aesthetic aim, the principal theme, the structure of the play, the role system, the manner of performance, and conventional features, and that also sets the standards by which the audience comes to appreciate the essence of this art of theater. One American theatrical scholar, A. C. Scott, concluded that kunju theater contained within it so much that was great in Chinese dramatic tradition and the essence of this was retained in the theaters that succeeded it and on which it had a lasting influence (1958, p. 4).

Aesthetic aim

In the performance of kunju, the stage is conceived as a platform on which the performers display their performing skills including the primary of singing, speech, dance – acting, and combat. These skills are exhibited within the theatrical context, in which each performer portrays a given dramatic character. But the display of these skills is not the ultimate aesthetic aim. If a performer concentrates solely on the display of the skills themselves,

his performance will be criticized as expressionless because he does not make an effort to pursue the aesthetic aim of performance. The ability to display these four skills is a basic technical requirement for performers, but the skills are not ends in themselves. The performing skill only serves as medium for the aesthetic aim: to imitate but not recreate reality by employing highly artistic methods. Therefore, a successful performance plays a story derived from reality but meanwhile tells the audience the story is not reality; a highly – skilled performer portrays a figure drawn from reality but at the same time shows the audience that the person is not a real person. An actor or actress is required to express strongly the emotion of a character but is not allowed to involve himself (or herself) personally in the emotion of the performance. All elements in kunju serve this aesthetic aim.

The theme of tragedy versus romanticism

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the literati never considered writing plays for a living. Rather, participating in writing and performing kunju both served the purposes of self – entertainment, self – edification, and self – expression. They avoided allowing their artistic creations to be commercialized. Through their writings, they sought to express their ideas about people, society, and the nation. Therefore, most kunju works contain serious, significant themes and contents which represent high levels of thought and spirit. Some plays deal with the topics of

love, social morals, and the harmony of the family. Other plays explore governmental corruption, social problems, and the nation's crises. There are a variety of subjects, but a major theme permeating the play is the one of tragedy versus romanticism.

Aesthetically speaking, literati generally sought for a balance between tragic sentiment and ideal intention in which feeling and reason contradict each other. The contradiction creates tension. When the tragic emotion reaches its highest point of tension, romanticism will interfere and resolve the emotion. Then, the tragedy disappears and instead, an ideal ending occurs. Smiles accompany tears. The theme of tragedy resolved by romanticism integrates pleasure, anger, sadness, and happiness.

Psychologically speaking, the Chinese people did not like tragic plays, because there were so many tragedies in their lives and in Chinese history. However, playwrights balanced the contradiction between the tragedy and romanticism on the stage where the emotional conflict of tragedy was always diluted by the happy ending. Hence, romanticism defeated tragedy. The audience psychological and sentimental wounds were healed in this kind of artistic activity.

The well known kunju play, *Mudan ting* [The Peony Pavilion], by Tang Xianzu, demonstrates the contradiction of tragedy versus romanticism. The story line is as follows:

The heroine of the play is Du Liniang, the beautiful daughter of a high – ranking official. After having had a love

affair with a handsome young scholar in her dream, she pines away and draws a self – portrait before her death. Compassionate and sympathetic, Judge Hu of the underworld frees her soul and has her body preserved. She soon begins to have nocturnal trysts with Liu Mengmei, a young scholar, who has discovered and admired her self – portrait. Then, at her ardent pleas, he exhumes her body and brings her back to real life. They marry and travel to the capital, where he takes the civil service examinations.

Due to the Tartar invasion, the disclosure of the result is postponed indefinitely. In sheer poverty, Mengmei visits his father – in – law seeking help, merely to be thrashed as a fraud. He is rescued in the nick of time because the invaders are defeated and he is selected as the top graduate. Du, however, can neither believe in the resurrection of his daughter nor forgive her for her self – contracted marriage. Only imperial intervention makes reconciliation and family reunion possible.

(John Hu: 1983, p.74)

In this play, the major female character died from love but came back to life because of love. The story is fantastic and odd, but the sentimental and the romanticism combine to produce a situation in which pleasure contains sadness and a tragic event ends happily through the unexpected device of imperial intervention. Chinese audiences love the smile combined with tears.

Many kunju plays express this theme. Some are well – known such as *The Peony Pavilion* mentioned above. Others are not as well known but most of them focus on the same subject. The play *Bayi ji* [*The Eight Righteous Men*] was derived from the old nanxi play, *Zhaoshi guer ji* [*The Orphan of Zhao*]. The story tells of a hero, grown into manhood, who avenges the wrongs that his family suffered when he was a child. The ending comes with the hero happily reunited with his parents. Another play *Fenxiang ji* [*The Story of Incense Burning*], an adapted version based on the pre – existed play, narrates a sad story of the ungrateful Wang Kui and his wife Guiying, who had committed suicide. However, in this kunju version of the story, there is a happy ending because of the intervention of the supernatural power.

The Qing literatures, Hong Sheng (1645 – 1704), one of the most important playwrights in the history of kunju theater, wrote eleven plays. The one surviving example (well – known and still popularly performed today) is called *Changsheng dian* [*The Palace of Eternal Youth*], written in 1688. This is considered as one of finest kunju plays. This play is based on a well – known love story about the famous Emperor Minghuang (713 – 756) of the Tang dynasty (618 – 907) and his love for his favorite concubine, Yang Guifei. The content of the play is derived from several well – known poems, especially Bai Juyi’s Tang shi poem *Changhen ge* [*The Song of Regretting Forever*]. The storyline is that when a rebellion breaks out, the emperor flees the court. The rebellious troops

compel the emperor to order his favorite concubine to commit suicide. The concubine is obedient and follows the order. At this moment, the tragedy that the emperor's favorite concubine has committed suicide on the emperor's own order is most intense. Interestingly enough, the play does not end at this point, but ends happily when the emperor and his lover are reunited on the moon. Again, the "audiences smile with their tears," tragedy is vanished, and romanticism is satisfied.

The structure of kunju plays

Kunju emerged primarily as a theatrical form but is also an important form of literature. One term applied to kunju theater (*antou ji* in Chinese) literally meaning "desk drama." The term "desk drama" distinguished kunju plays from plays designed only for the stage. Most kunju works are well-written, highly structured, and meant to be read as representatives of the great achievements of classical literature, although they were also stage plays. Many of them are considered to be world class dramatic works, such as Gao Ming's *Pipa ji* [The Lute Song] (written in the mid 14th c.), Tang Xianzu's *Mudan ting* [The Peony Pavilion] (1598), Hong Sheng's *Changsheng dian* [The Palace of Eternal Youth] (1688), and Kong Shangren's *Taohua shan* [The Peach Blossom Fan] (1699) (Hu: 1983, pp. 62 - 82). Therefore, many kunju works were constructed with both literary and theatrical values in mind.

Kunju plays have a rigid structure. The structure consists of

four elements: subject, accompaniment, interruption, completion. These four elements are not separable and are logically related elements of a whole. Most kunju plays are constructed this way. In this structure, the “subject” is a principal male character who is accompanied by a female character, and this latter, secondary character serves as a foil to the principal. Their romantic relationship is inevitably interrupted by a particular event that causes these two characters to be separated. The final “completion” functions to reunite these two persons and provide the play with a happy ending. This structure expresses the theatrical theme of tragedy resolved by romanticism discussed earlier, and satisfies the aesthetic aim of the performance.

The play *Pipa ji* [The Lute Song] represents the typical structure of “subject, accompaniment, interruption, and completion.” The play originally was a “nanxi” (southern theater), written by Gao Ming (1301 – 1370). The play is considered to be one of the greatest dramatic works ever written and even today it is still popular on kunju stage. The story line of the play is about Cai Boxie, a historical scholar, who had been presented as an ungrateful son in earlier popular songs and literature.

Gao’s play begins when Cai is living happily with his parents and his newly wedded wife, Zhao Wuniang (Fifth Maiden). When the time for the civil examination approaches, his father forces him to take it, despite Cai’s reservation that once far away from home he may not be able to serve his parents in any crisis. He comes out top

graduate, and Prime Minister Niu immediately seeks his hand for daughter. Cai declines and offers to resign, but he is overruled by imperial order on both counts. Famine and the bitter feeling of betrayal soon bring death to his parents. Zhao buries them and sets out for the capital to find her husband. With Prime Minister Niu, the couple spends three years mourning beside the elders' grave. At the end of the mourning period, Prime Minister Niu personally brings the royal degree which praises the filial piety of the younger generation and rewards them with court position and honors. (John Hu: 1983, pp. 64 – 5)

There is a serious and tragic tone underlying most of the action in the play, but it has a happy ending. This example is one of thousands of similar plays on the same subject. The principal male character is the core of the play. No matter how many characters a play has, the plot must begin with the principal character who represents the subject. Li Yu, a theatrical theorist of the Qing dynasty, said:

The play *The Lute Song* is greatly centered on Cao Boxie [the principal male character] himself only, and that the play *The West Wing* is largely focused on Zhang Junrui [the principal male character]. (quoted in Luo: 1991, p. 28, trans. by Luo Qin).

Li's statement expresses the key point about kunju theatrical