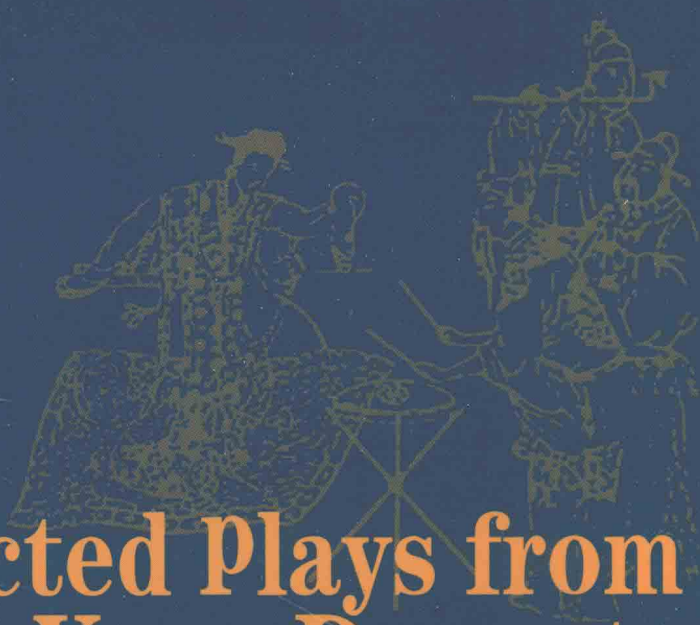


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Selected Plays from the Yuan Dynasty



Translated by
Zhang Guangqian



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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Preface

Social progress lies in exchanges, as does the development of cultures as well as personal friendships. It has been proven through world historical practice that the achievement of cultural prosperity and social progress in the 21st century depends on mutual understanding and exchange.

Thanks to the rapid development of transport and communications, mutual exchanges are becoming increasingly frequent day by day, but at the same time new problems have emerged under new circumstances.

Human culture can be divided into two levels. The surface level, or “living culture,” which involves all aspects of survival such as eating, drinking and clothing, has been universally propagated. Through fusion, integration and imitation of each other, living culture has played the role of deepening friendship and enhancing mutual understanding among different peoples.

The deeper second level of human culture we also need to pay attention to is known as “conceptual culture,” exchanges which have also been carried out, but still far from sufficiently. Although also formed over a long period of time through rich historical accumulated development, conceptual culture evolves from the original national traditions, so its nature is more concealed and more profound. Yet, it also allows for concise abstract ways of thinking, more accurate ways of expression and more systematic written records, and can be constantly accumulated, readjusted and improved. Conceptual culture manifests itself through the literature,

history, philosophy and arts of a people or a region—aspects nowadays belonging to the field of “humanities”—and becomes the spiritual wealth enjoyed by all human beings. To gain a better understanding of a people or a country, in particular one with long-standing and rich cultural traditions, one needs to better understand and respect its conceptual culture.

It takes time to advance from understanding a culture to respecting it, as with the process of moving from respect to appreciation. Chinese culture has experienced three peaks in its history of exchange: The first occurred during the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), when the Silk Road connected China with Western Europe, bringing with it the first great leap in Chinese culture, and thus this period in history came to be known as the “prosperous age of the Han Dynasty.” The second apex came during the Tang Dynasty (618-907), when the “Maritime Silk Route” was opened up as a supplementary trade route, which in turn expanded the scope and content of interaction, upgrading the level of exchange from living culture to conceptual culture, and promoting the prosperity of the Tang Dynasty through cultural exchanges with South Asia and neighboring countries in the east. The third exchange peak began from the beginning of the 19th century to the present, becoming the greatest in scale and the longest in duration.

Cultural exchanges during the 19th century began as unidirectional, with China in a passive position, or we could say that China had been “forced into” exchanges. Nevertheless, during these foreign contacts, China also began to open its eyes to a much larger world, encountering the characteristics and values of many other cultures. Since the beginning of the 20th century, China has begun undertaking equal and bidirectional exchanges with the outside world. We came to realize that Chinese culture has its own strong points and weaknesses, as do foreign cultures, and only by learning from others’ strengths to offset our own weaknesses is it possible to make even more contributions to China, the entire world, and humankind in general.

The purpose of publishing this series is to introduce Chinese culture to the outside world, and to help readers abroad to gain a truer under-

standing of China. The Chinese people are always ready to unreservedly offer the riches of Chinese culture to the world, so that greater spiritual wealth can be shared with all peoples across the world. Since we have also enriched ourselves by drawing nourishment from the world, we should reciprocate by sharing our own spiritual wealth.

The aspects of culture that can represent a people or a country in the truest sense are conceptual culture, especially the representative works in the fields of literature, history and philosophy. Most works included in this series belong to these categories. In the past over 100 years, translations of world-famous works can be found in many different versions in various languages. However, as for the traditional culture of a country, the older the nation is, the more difficult it becomes for us to properly compile and annotate it. Therefore, despite being a single translation version, this series, having been translated mostly by native Chinese, would generally minimize the limitations in Chinese cultural understanding that translators from other cultural backgrounds might have. We sincerely hope that this series will prove helpful to international scholars in their exchange studies.

Ren Jiyu

March 2008

An Introduction to the Yuan Plays

Anyone interested in Chinese literature knows that the Tang Dynasty (618-907) is acclaimed for its poetry, the Song Dynasty (960-1279) for its *ci*, poems of irregular line length, and the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) for its drama known as *zaju*. Although the roots of drama in China can be traced to much earlier sources, the Yuan Dynasty is the period when it matured and flourished, and became the most representative literary genre of an era.

A *zaju* is usually composed of four acts, with or without a short scene called “the wedge,” which is most often placed at the very beginning of the play to introduce the background, or between acts as a transition.

Different from the Shakespearean theater, in which the actors mainly speak their parts, in traditional Chinese plays it is the songs that are highlighted, and a salient feature of *zaju* is that the singing is done by the leading character alone. The other characters only play speaking parts, though that does not rule out an occasional song, e.g., the judge’s song at the end of Act III in *The Bubbles Bear Witness*. Consequently, the lead may need to fill more than one role in a play, as *zhenq mo* (male lead) assumes both the role of Wang Wenying and that of the celestial lieutenant in *The*

Bubbles Bear Witness, both Shanshoma and Jinzhuma in *The Tiger Badge*, and both Liu Tianrui and his adult son Anzhu in *The Missing Deed*.

The songs are composed according to musical tunes, which have a set pattern of lines, line length, tone and rhyming, and the tunes are further organized into mode suites. Each suite uses one rhyme only, and each act uses a different mode suite. In other words, a play is composed of four suites of songs. The playwright may choose any number of tunes from the suite's repertoire, and have them arranged in a conventionalized sequence.

Most tunes originated from *ci* or from popular songs. As time went on, the tune titles, which are placed in square brackets, became mere indications of the tune pattern and were gradually divorced from its content. However, they may still indicate the emotional sensation they once carried. The suite used in Act II of *The Tiger Badge* is a telling example of how name and content can match.

Although we say the tunes have a set pattern of line length, which means the number of words in each line is fixed (Chinese words are monosyllabic), it is a phenomenon of *zaju* to break the rule and incorporate into its lines a large number of non-metric words. Sometimes the number of these additional words may even double that prescribed by the pattern. This latitude is especially apparent if compared to plays of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

The unique rhyme throughout the act, which may comprise over a hundred lines of verse, together with the free insertion of non-metric words, increases the difficulties in translation. Blank verse is therefore opted for over an attempt to re-present the verse in its original rhyme scheme, and non-metric words are not meticulously marked out. Where possible, the iambic pentameter is generally adopted for lines that have six words or more, metric or non-metric.

What is most admirable about the speech parts in *zaju* is that

the language used is the vernacular of the day and appropriate to the social register of the speaker. This point is particularly apparent when compared with the more polished and refined language of Ming Dynasty plays. Of course, style varies from playwright to playwright and theme to theme. The language of *Love at River Bend*, for instance, is more elegant than the others in this selection.

One reason for the vernacular style is that the playwrights of the Yuan Dynasty had a much lower social status than those of the Ming Dynasty, and lived closer to the ordinary people they put on the stage. The Mongol rulers did not trust the Han people or their learning. Social advancement by way of the imperial examination ladder was a thing of the past, as was the “aura of sanctity” surrounding Confucian scholars. Writing plays had become a way to make a living, as is reflected in the mushrooming of “writing societies.” That is probably why we find so many plays by anonymous writers, and even with those that are credited to an author, very little is known about the person. In the Ming Dynasty, however, plays were written by the more or less leisured literati, often officials themselves, as a kind of amateur literary fulfillment.

As the songs of the play took center stage and speech parts became secondary, the dialogues and monologues in the earliest extant scenarios from the Yuan Dynasty are often missing, or sketchy at best. The preservation of the majority of *zaju* as we can read them today should be credited to a great Ming Dynasty drama critic and editor named Zang Maoxun (1550-1620), alias Zang Jinshu, for his *Yuanqu Xuan* (*Selected Yuan Plays*), which consists of one hundred plays. Although later scholars criticize him for over-editing, it is thanks to his collecting and editing, which could have meant polishing and supplying the missing spoken parts to the text, that the plays have passed down to us from generation to generation, and it is the best collection ever for anyone who wants to study Yuan Dynasty drama.

Another speculation on the near absence of spoken parts is that actors and actresses at that time might not have been acting from a fully written script. In addition to what they learned orally from their masters, they might have taken it for granted to improvise on the spot, and there were plenty of stock expressions for them to pick up and use. Such examples are rife in the eight selected plays.

Two types of play were not considered for this translation. One category is the history plays, plays that center on historical figures or events and are thus laden with historical references; the other includes those about supernatural beings and their miracles.

This selection focuses on what can be classified as social plays. It is hoped that the plays will not only offer readers a glimpse of what China's theatrical world was like more than seven centuries ago, but will also shed light on some of China's fundamental values in order to gain a deeper understanding of China's present.

To avoid redundant efforts while so many plays remain untranslated, or are less known to the English-speaking world, works that already have popular translations in English are not taken into consideration this time, for example, plays by Guan Hanqing, which the Foreign Languages Press in Beijing have published and reprinted many times in a collection entitled *Selected Plays of Guan Hanqing* (1958), translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang.

The eight plays in this selection are all translated from Zhonghua Book Company's 1989 edition of Zang's *Selected Yuan Plays*, with reference to *Selected Yuan Plays – Collated and Annotated*, published by Hebei Education Press in 1994 under the general editorship of Wang Xueqi.

When reading these plays, readers may need to use their imagination to recreate in their minds' eye the spatial and temporal dimensions on the ancient stage. One must bear in mind that the Chinese stage was almost

bare. An actor “goes in” could mean that he mimes the act of crossing a threshold or pushing open the door of a house that exists only in the mutual understanding of the actors and audience.

Another weakness of reading the script rather than watching the performance is that what appears to be continuous speech in the printed text might actually contain an unmarked pause or acting in between. Take for instance the dialogue at the beginning of Act I in *The Eastside Neighbor*.

LIU: You keep an eye out for him, and tell us as soon as you see him coming. For the moment we don't want any tea.

ATTENDANT: All right. Master Zhao's coming.

The script seems to suggest that the attendant is rather erratic, but what may actually happen onstage is that the attendant would wait a moment, perhaps pretending to be cleaning tables, before he looks up and makes the announcement: “Master Zhao's coming.” As this occasion is likely to create confusion, an ellipsis mark is inserted into the translation. Less ambiguous pauses are not individually specified.

Careful readers may notice an unusually high frequency of semicolons in the verse, for parallelism is typical of Chinese poems. Each line is often an image in itself, and there is seldom an explicit conjunction to link them. The semicolon therefore could indicate a parallel structure (mostly couplets), a cause-and-effect relationship, or other kinds of logical relationships.

In this translation, the layout intends to convey the difference between the songs, the spoken parts and the intoned poems in the original text. The songs are indented 0.75 cm from the left in separate lines, while the spoken parts are indented 0.25 cm and in continuous lines. The intoned poems, which usually accompany a character on and off stage, are put in italics and indented 0.5 cm.

An introduction is written for every play, consisting mainly of a synopsis of the story and explanations on the cultural background. It would be most rewarding if readers find them helpful and the plays enjoyable.

Z.G.Q.

Contents

An Introduction to the Yuan Plays	ix
Anonymous	
The Bubbles Bear Witness (朱砂担)	1
Qin Jianfu	
The Eastside Neighbor (东堂老)	43
Li Zhifu	
The Tiger Badge (虎头牌)	95
Anonymous	
The Quilt with Mandarin Ducks (鸳鸯被)	137
Wu Hanchen	
A Late-Born Son (老生儿)	179
Shi Junbao	
Love at River Bend (曲江池)	225
Anonymous	
The Missing Deed (合同文字)	263
Shi Junbao	
Qiu Hu Attempts to Seduce His Wife (秋胡戏妻)	303

The Bubbles Bear Witness

Anonymous

INTRODUCTION

As a prelude to the play, a fortuneteller predicts that a life-threatening disaster will befall Wang Wenyong, a small businessman, and that the only way to avert it is to stay far away from home for no less than a hundred days. Wenyong therefore decides to go south on a business trip.

Act I tells us that he has done some successful trading at Nanchang, the capital city of present-day Jiangxi Province. It can be inferred that he has invested his profit in cinnabar ores, as Chenzhou in neighboring Hunan Province had the best cinnabar mines in China. Cinnabar was an essential ingredient in alchemy and in producing longevity pills.

His unease about the precious goods he is carrying causes a nightmare, in which he sees himself murdered. The next day, as it turns out, his heavy load catches the eye of Bai Zheng, a hooligan nicknamed Iron Flagpole. Wenyong, however, makes a clever escape by getting the tough man drunk.

In Act II, Wenyong is caught up again by Iron Flagpole at an inn called the Black Stone. He slips away while Bai Zheng is sound asleep, but their paths unfortunately cross once again at a Taoist temple to a celestial lieutenant, where he is killed by Bai Zheng in the presence of the divine being. As it happens to be raining and rainwater dripping from the eaves is striking up bubbles in the small puddles below, Wenyong calls on the bubbles to bear witness to the murder.

After killing Wenyong and seizing his wares, Bai Zheng thinks further of taking possession of Wenyong's family property and even his wife. He pretends to be Wenyong's business partner and comes to his home, pushes Wenyong's father into the well and becomes master of the house. The second half of Act III follows the soul of Wenyong's father to the netherworld. There he is faced with a muddle-headed judge. By chance, it happens to be time for the celestial lieutenant to come to review cases.

In Act IV, with the help of the celestial lieutenant Wenyong gets his revenge, and brings the play to the conclusion that good is rewarded with good, evil with evil.

Setting aside the superstitious belief in predestined fortune, the play reveals to us the difficult life of a small businessman about seven centuries ago. Besides the physical strain of carrying his wares over mountains and