A Study of Wang Shifu and the Four Great Scholars of Yuan Drama

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Abstract: Wang Shifu and his Romance of the West Chamber have been highly valued and concerned since ancient times, but Wang Shifu had not been included in the "Four Great Scholars of Yuan Drama". There have been many controversies among the drama writers in Ming and Qing dynasties, and the reasons deserve further exploration. Nevertheless, Wang Shifu's position in the history of drama would not be questioned, nor would it prevent the Romance of the West Chamber from becoming classic. In this paper, by means of comparative study, the author combs the process of Wang Shifu becoming a classic in the context of the history of opera development, and the causes of the classicization of The Romance of the Western Chamber.

Keywords: Wang Shifu, Romance of the West Chamber, Four Great Scholars of Yuan Drama

1. Introduction

Wang Shifu’s Zaju Romance of the West Chamber in Yuan Dynasty had always been highly praised. In the early Ming Dynasty, Jia Zhongming 贾仲明 called it the "worldly top" 天下之魁 work, and Zhu Quan 朱权 Taihe Correct Pronunciation Music Text 《太和正音谱》 evaluated it as, a beautiful woman in the flowers ……The euphemism of the narrative was very sapid by scholars. Once there were great sentences, just like Yuhuan’s bathing in Huaqing or Lvzhu’s picking lotus in Luopu.

如花间美人……铺叙委婉,深得骚人之趣。极有佳句,若玉环之出浴华清,绿珠之采莲洛浦。1

Later, famous scholars such as Xu Wei 徐渭, Wang Shizhen 王世贞 and Tang Xianzu 汤显祖 praised and promoted the Romance of the Western Chamber. However, Wang Shifu, the author of Romance of the Western Chamber, was not one of the four great scholars of Yuan drama. This special and amusing phenomenon in literary history had been aroused many scholars’ attention and ponder over. In recent years, the study of Wang Shifu and his Romance of the West Chamber has become a hot topic in the field of drama research, such as Du Juan’s “The Adaptation and Inheritance of Beijing Opera The Story of the West Chamber” [1], Yang Xurong’s “A Research into Jizhi zhai Edition of Readjustment of the North Western Chamber” [2], Lv Mengyun’s “An Analysis of the Main Female Characters in The Story of the Western Chamber” [3], etc. The author also tried to explore reasons from the relevant literature.

2. Naissance of "Four Great Scholars of Yuan Drama" and Absence of Wang Shifu

The saying of "the four scholars of Yuan drama" originated from a passage in Zhongyuan Phonology 《中原音韵》 written by Zhou Deqing 周德清:

The prosperity of Yuefu, its preparation and difficulty were not at present. Its prosperity was that of the gentry and the singers. Their preparation turned to be a kind of new work made by the Guan, Zheng, Bai and Ma, which rhyme was in harmony with the sound of nature and words can be spoken in the world. Words were fluent and graceful, the rhyme promoted the tone. The description of loyalty and filial piety was supplementary to the world by loyal and filial piety during their narration. The difficulty lied in six words and three rhymes which named suddenly listening, a sound, and a shock.

were also.

Little by little, they believed that the repetition of their meanings and confusion would be worse play than this one, so they praised it as loudly as dogs. Among them, Shi Lianjun highly praised Zheng Guangzu, believing that he was the first person during them.

For "suddenly listening, a sound, and a shock" they didn't regard it as right. "Excellent high-level poets naturally had, here were insect carving skills." 誓圣国词家，高处自有，在此特其刺枝耳。For this reason, they believed that "the four scholars of Yuan Dynasty, Zheng, Ma, and Guan and Bai, were inferior to Wang Shifu." 元人以郑、马、关、白为四大家而不及王实甫，有以也。

Wang Shifu did not enter the "four great scholars of Yuan drama", a many of literati in Ming dynasty had doubts and objections, among which Wang Jide, a songsmith, was the most distinguished one. In his Melody, he wrote:

"The Story of Pipa was better in quality, of course. He Yuanlang thought that Romance of the West Chamber was full of rouge and gouache, and the Story of Pipa specialized in learning, but lacked the true qualities. Were there anyone who beyond its distinctive character? It's over."

5 Shen Defu 《曲艺丛谈》 , 5th year of Tianqi in Ming Dynasty; 6 Wang Jide 《顾曲杂言》 , 5th year of Tianqi in Ming Dynasty; 7 Wang Jide 《曲律》 , 5th year of Tianqi in Ming Dynasty, printed by Mao Yisui 明万历四十年香雪居刻本; 8 Wang Jide 《曲谱》 , 5th year of Tianqi in Ming Dynasty, printed by Mao Yisui 明万历四十年香雪居刻本; 9 Xu Fuzuo 徐复祚 《四友斋丛说》 , vol. 4, 11th year of Wanli in Ming Dynasty, Xiao Xue House 明万历四十一年小雪居刻本; 10 Xu Fuzuo 徐复祚 《四友斋丛说》 , Collection of Research in Ocean, Qing Dynasty, 《花当阁丛谈》 , vol. 7.
3. Reasons for Wang Shifu's Absence from "Four Great Scholars of Yuan Drama"

After disappearance of the Qing dynasty, controversy of the "four great scholars of Yuan drama" returned to original point in Wang Guowei's era. When he commented on the "four great scholars of Yuan drama" by Drama History in Song and Yuan Dynasties, he thought:

Since Ming dynasty, Yuan drama writers had been called Guan, Ma, Zheng and Bai. However, it was better to call Guan, Ma, Zheng and Bai whom were appropriate in terms of their age and attainments. Guan Hanqing was the first person in the Yuan Dynasty because of his dependence and self-made great poems, his language and songs were full of human feelings and the original character. Bai Renfu and Ma Dongli were magnificent, affectionate and limpid. Zheng Dehui was the first-class person with a clear, slender and last a long period turning to a fragrant and comfortable life.

元代曲家，自明以来，称关、马、郑、白。然以其年代极其造诣论之，宁称关、白、马、郑为妥也。关汉卿一空依傍，自铸伟词，而其言语曲尽人情，字字本色，故当为元人第一。白仁甫、马东篱，高华雄浑，情深文明。郑德辉清丽芊绵，自成馨逸，均不失为第一流。[13]

This is in line with the reality of political intervention in literature and art in the 20th century, and is also the final word. Despite controversy about the specific selection, because of Wang Guowei's tremendous influence, academic circles basically agree with the saying of "the four great scholars of Yuan drama". Guan, Bai, Ma and Zheng are still preferred textbooks for the history of literature and drama. However, just as Wang Guowei did not deny artistic achievements of Romance of the Western Chamber, the academic circles had always been seen as it differently, giving Wang Shifu the same important position as the "four great scholars". [8]

Although Wang Shifu is not one of the "four great scholars of Yuan drama", his Zaju of Romance of the Western Chamber has always been a hot topic in the study of drama, and there are plenty of related discussions. This, in fact, stimulated scholars to explore the reasons why Wang Shifu did not belong to the "four great scholars of Yuan drama". First of all, it is Prof. Zhang Renhe from Northeast Normal University, who corrected Wang Shifu's position. His book Discussion on Romance of the Western Chamber combed comments of the four greatest composers of dramas from Yuan Dynasty to Qing Dynasty. It is unfair to exclude Wang Shifu from the great scholars of Yuan drama and it is also not in line with the history of the development of Yuan drama. Other scholars have explored the specific reasons for Wang Shifu's absence, such as Han Detai's "Wang Shifu and Four Great Scholars in Yuan Drama", Yan Tingjun's "Discussion on Wang Shifu's Absent of Four Great Scholars in Yuan Drama" and Xu Shuai's "Reasons for Speculation on Wang Shifu's Absent of Four Great Scholars in Yuan Drama". [17] Their conclusions are generally consistent, and there are two main reasons for more discussion: the discount of five books and twenty-one performances of Romance of the West Chamber, which has a special system; controversy between the authors of Romance of the West Chamber, Wang Shifu and Guan Hanqing, with existence of copyright problems.

As the case stands, controversy over the author's rights of Romance of the West Chamber began in the Ming Dynasty, which was far from the time when Zhou Deqing first proposed "the four great scholars of Yuan drama" in the Yuan Dynasty, and was not enough to participate in this discussion. What attracts people's attention is non-standard Zaju system. Undoubtedly, Romance of the West Chamber has own characteristics of "ancient Chuanqi". Its tortuous stories and interlocking plots made it a long novel with a length of up to five books and twenty-one performances, which was quite different from the standard length of a four-fold Zaju. So many people in Ming and Qing dynasties regarded it as a "Chuanqi", which illustrated the fact that Anthology of Yuan Drama 《元曲选》 did not include Romance of the West Chamber, but the anthology of Sixty Kinds of Songs 《六十种曲》 as a legendary anthology included it. Especially, Romance of the West Chamber does not conform to the general practice of Yuan Zaju in the music system, which is suspected of "breaking styles".
Every singer in Yuan drama was limited to one person, if Mo or Dan, then she spoke aside and cannot sing. If singing, it was limited to the introduction; if singing in the four-fold, it is not the Mo but Mo…… This is also true. Otherwise, there are exceptions…… Dan is not enough for embellishment to break the example of Yuan drama, but there were still special cases. Only the fourth fold of the first, fourth and fifth performances in Romance of the Western Chamber were sung by two persons.

元剧每折唱者，止限一人，若末若旦；他色则有白无唱。若唱，则限于楔子中；至四折中之唱者，则非末若旦不可……此一定例也。然亦有出于例外者……盖旦以供点缀之用，不足破元剧之例也。唯《西厢记》第一、第四、第五折之第四折，皆以二人唱。18

Therefore, Romance of the West Chamber is more similar to the southern drama and even the Chuanqi system.

However, this cannot be regarded as the real reason why Wang Shifu failed to enter the "four great scholars of Yuan drama". Zhou Deqing's comments did not show that Wang Shifu was not important in Yuan dynasty. Actually, Romance of the West Chamber was an excellent drama in the Yuan dynasty. What really makes Wang Shifu wander in and out of the "Four great scholars" is the difference in concepts of drama theorists in Ming dynasty. [9] He Liangjun objected to Wang Shifu out of his recognition in his own literary works and who believed that the brilliant literary words in Romance of the Western Chamber, were not stylistic appeal of Yuan drama. The attention and evaluation of Wang Shifu’s Romance of the West Chamber becomes a carrier, providing a case for the theoretical cognition of dramatists. As a result, not only did Wang Shifu once become a member of the "four great scholars", but he also achieved classical status of Zaju Romance of the West Chamber and became the "ancestor of northern tune" and "forbear of drama and text", for example, Liu Tingji's Miscellaneous remarks of Zai Garden:

From ancient times to now, every Ci-writer had taken the Story of Pipa as Zu, and Romance of the West Chamber as Zong, and there were no others who have gone up to the same level.

4. Conclusion

In a word, Wang Shifu was absent in the "four great scholars of Yuan drama", which did not mean that he was excluded from Yuan drama. The attention and evaluation of Wang Shifu's Romance of the West Chamber by the Dramas critics in past dynasties are evident. In Ming and Qing dynasties, Tang Xianzu’s Peony Pavilion《牡丹亭》 and Cao Xueqin’s《红楼梦》 A Dream of Red Mansions《红楼梦》 were obviously influenced by Romance of the West Chamber. There are no less than a hundred kinds of engraved scripts in Ming and Qing Dynasties, which were the best-selling drama scripts at present. Romance of the West Chamber had also been translated into many languages and spread abroad, and its outstanding achievements in Dramas creation had also produced great repercussions abroad. In all these ways, Wang Shifu’s Romance of the West Chamber is indeed the "worldly top".

References


18 Fu Dixiu 伏涤修; Fu Mengmeng 伏蒙蒙: Materials Collection on Romance of the West Chamber《西厢记资料汇编》, Mountain Huang Book House 黄山书社, 2012, last of two volumes, p. 562.


