Excursions to Xanadu: Criticisms of Yüan *Tsa-chü* *

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Traditionally, the criticism of Yüan *tsa-chü* (元雜劇) in China has been characterized by two strong tendencies. One is to view these plays not primarily as drama but as poetry; the other is to treat them as literature of protest. The two tendencies are not mutually exclusive, and may be manifested in the same critic. In addition to these indigenous schools, there has been, more recently, vigorous critical attention sprouting from foreign soils. What follows is a critical survey, in chronological order, of the three types of criticisms.

The "Poetic" School

Critics of the first kind are preoccupied with the poetic quality of *tsa-chü*. Their interest lies in the arias of a play, for which they have laid down meticulous rules both descriptive *and* prescriptive. They have consigned the dramatic and theatrical elements of *tsa-chü* to oblivion when in fact those elements account for much–if not all–of the genre's success and popularity as theater of the time.

The major critical work to come from a contemporary of Yüan playwrights themselves says literally nothing about *tsa-chü* as drama: Chou Te-ch'ing's (周德淸) *Chung-yüan yin-yün* (中原音韻, Rhymes of the Central Plain, 1324)[1] concerns itself entirely with poetics and prosody. The book's professed aim is to promote correct diction and

*This article is based on a section of the first chapter of the writer's doctoral thesis, "Judgement Deferred: An Intra-genre Criticism of Yüan Drama," The University of Michigan, 1977.

elevated style.[2] It achieves just that. The pamphlet "Ch'ang lun" (唱論, On Singing),[3] by an anonymous Yüan writer who chose to style himself Yen-nan Chih-an (燕南芝庵), remains the only extant Yüan document on the art of singing in a *tsa-chü* performance. As such, however, it is disappointing because it does not deal so much with singing as with the various rhyming systems. It is another "poet's primer": the title is misleading. And from what we can ascertain today, his statements on the thematic implication of the modal arrangement of music can only be accepted with a grain of salt.[4]

The dramatic aspects of *tsa-chü* continued to be neglected by the Ming critics, who apparently inherited their predecessors' predilection for its poetry. *T'ai-ho cheng-yin p'u* (太和正音譜, Formularies of Supreme Harmony, 1398),[5] by Chu Ch'üan (朱權), that talented prince-turned-playwright-critic, is an important contribution to the study of *tsa-chü,* being the first to assess the achievement of Yüan masters. But the main thrust of the book again resides in Chu's meticulous—and sometimes embarrassingly frivolous—effort to provide "correct" prosodic formulae for most of the established song sets, complete with injunctions on the determination of tones. The importance of poetry (which is often equated with music) is blown so out of proportion that the dramatic side of *tsa-chü* has received far less attention than its due. Small wonder that Kuan Han-ch'ing, recognized nowadays as one of the greatest playwrights that China has ever produced, is hardly Chu Ch'üan's favorite. When he includes Kuan in his list of "talented song writers, past and present," Chu feels compelled to apologize, as if for his poor taste:

> To judge from [Kuan's] language, he has the potential to be good but also can be bad.* Indeed, it is only because the *tsa-chü* genre started with the man that he is [here] ranked so high.[6]

Consequently Chu's work is of value to the student of drama primarily on two accounts: one, that it is the first to classify *tsa-chü* into twelve categories, even though it must be conceded at once that the classification is by no means satisfactory, being quite arbitrary and without elaboration

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*Or, " . . . his talent is a borderline case between the upper [superior] and the lower [inferior]."

or illustration; secondly, it contains notes, however sketchy, on a dozen or so *tsa-chü* terms. One wishes of course that Chu had done a more thorough job, if only in those two areas.

Wang Chi-te's (王驥德) *Ch'ü lü* (曲律),[7] published in 1624, is probably the most extensive and informative work on the art of *tsa-chü* to have come from a Ming scholar-critic. The scope of the forty sections, divided unevenly into four chapters, ranges from general discussions on the origin of *ch'ü* to the more specific, such as the vice of using "incorrect" words. But again its emphasis is on the musical and poetic components, and the work remains largely what its title indicates: Rules for Arias. From time to time throughout the book, however, Wang does bring up topics of dramatic import (for instance, the function and significance of comic interlude [*ch'a-k'o*, 插科]), thus kindling vague hopes in the reader who is keen on drama. But the hopeful read on only to be frustrated, for even in these few instances a skimpy treatment is about all Wang cares to furnish.[8]

Another Ming work worthy of mention is Shen Te-fu's (沈德符) *Ku-ch'ü tsa-yen* (顧曲雜言, Miscellaneous Remarks on *Tsa-chü*, 1618).[9] Brief but influential, it offers views not merely on musical/poetic aspects, but on instruments and dancing as well. This makes it a more balanced critical work than either Chu Ch'üan's *T'ai-ho cheng-yin p'u* or Wang Chi-te's *Ch'ü lü*; but as criticism of drama (which indeed it does not claim to be), it leaves a great deal to be desired.

Besides being indifferent critics of drama, some Ming scholars are also notorious spawners of incorrect information. Even Wang and Shen are no exceptions. It was Shen, for instance, who first suggested that the composition of dramatic verse was required in Yüan Dynasty civil service examinations.[10] Preposterous as the theory was, it nevertheless gained great currency among later Chinese literati. The best evidence is the case of Tsang Mao-hsün: the eminent compiler of *Yüan-chü hsüan* (元曲選, *YCH* [An Anthology of Yüan Drama]) subscribes to Shen's theory in one of his prefaces to the anthology.[11] Wang Chi-te, on his part, advanced another theory cut from whole cloth. He declared that the arias and prose dialogue in the same Yüan play were done by different hands:

> The arias in Yüan drama are all excellent as lyric, but the dialogue is generally rustic and obscene and does not sound [as though it comes from]

literati. This is because in those days the dialogue was first set up by the musicians of the drama school and then the designated poets composed the arias, [a practice] called "filling in the lyrics." What the musicians had written, the literati would not deign to correct. Hence the plot [of Yüan drama] is often against the law of nature, and the diction largely incomprehensible.[12]

Both Shen's and Wang's views have long since been relegated to their proper place—pastures filled with chimeras and laughing stock created by the more daring and wishful critics. But one must not lose sight of their serious implications. In advancing their theories, Shen and Wang extolled arias over prose dialogue, and poet-playwright over mere musician or player. It is not totally inconceivable that the misrepresentation of historical facts was deliberate on the part of Chinese scholars in whom the love for poetry was sovereign. The cases of Shen and Wang largely reflect the literati's concern and predilection for poetry—even when faced with a genre plainly intended for the theater. Their concern and predilection are in turn manifested in their criticism. It is certainly no coincidence that most Chinese critics used the term *ch'ü* (曲 , aria or song) for *tsa-chü* when the more comprehensive and exact term *hsi-ch'ü* (drama *and* song, or dramatic song) existed. True, it may be argued that *ch'ü*, in its broader sense, denotes *both* drama *and* song, but the content of the critical works cited above more than indicates that the narrower sense was adopted by critics of the day. The ambiguous use of the term seems to have been intentional: one is tempted to see in it a conspiracy of Chinese literati to turn a dramatic form into yet another poetic medium.[13]

So Chinese drama criticism continued to be marked by the conspicuous absence of a sensible and balanced critic—until Li Yü (李漁) came on stage. A prolific writer, Li was the author of sixteen plays in the *ch'uan-ch'i* (傳奇) style, most of which were met with enthusiastic response.[14] But his greatest contribution to Chinese theater lies in the monumental work on dramaturgy contained in *Hsien-ch'ing ou-chi* (閑情偶記, Occasional Notes at Leisure, 1671),[15] a five-volume tome. A listing of its contents should serve to make plain how he parted company with his predecessors in his conception of the drama as an art form:

Part I: Playwriting

Chapter 1: Structure
2: Language (Arias–Lyric)
3: Music and Rhyming
4: Dialogue

Part II: Staging

Chapter 1: Selecting a play
2: Revising and adapting a play
Appendices: Two demonstrations
3: Practical guide: music
4: Practical guide: dialogue

It is by no means a perfect work. At times the author contradicts himself, and much too often he is not precise where he should be. Yet for all his faults, Li Yü was the first Chinese critic of drama to assign "poetic language" its proper place instead of overglorifying it.[16] He is a balanced critic and should be reckoned with as such.

An avid theater man, however, Li was understandably preoccupied with the dramatic form prevalent in his own times. Hence his criticism in the work just mentioned applies primarily to *ch'uan-ch'i.* Only occasionally are Yüan playwrights mentioned ("Yüan playwrights also read extensively, yet their plays are free from bookishness,"[17] or "Yüan playwrights erred in this respect [i.e., using vulgar language too often], a shortcoming stemming from their over-reaction against the artificial and elaborate style . . . ,"[18] etc.). Even in these brief notices it is not always clear which group of Yüan dramatists he was referring to; more often than not, the context indicates that they were not *tsa-chü* writers at all. In other words, while Li's *Hsien-ch'ing ou-chi* is a milestone in the history of Chinese dramatic criticism, it serves very little to further our understanding of the Yüan *tsa-chü* drama; in all probability, he knew–and cared–less about it than we do.

Thus, for nearly three centuries since the publication of Wang Chi-te's *Ch'ü lü,* there had been no significant work on Yüan drama. The modern revival of interest in classical Chinese drama has generally been ascribed to the efforts of Wang Kuo-wei (王國維, 1877-1927). The publication

of his *Hsi-ch'ü k'ao-yüan* (戲曲考源, An Investigation in the Origins of Drama, 1909) and *T'ang-Sung ta-ch'ü k'ao* (唐宋大曲考, Studies in the *ta-ch'ü* of T'ang and Sung Dynasties, 1909) caught the immediate attention of scholars of the time.[19] But it is his *Sung-Yüan hsi-ch'ü k'ao* (宋元戲曲考, Studies in the Dramas of Sung and Yüan), published in 1912,[20] that laid the foundation for modern scholarship in the field.[21] Wang Kuo-wei himself claims in his preface to the book:

> The study of [Chinese drama] was initiated by me, and my contribution to it is largely contained in this volume. Not that the likes of me are superior to the ancients in talent and energy, but the ancients simply never took up the job.[22]

Although we have seen that Wang Kuo-wei is not actually the first in history to pay attention to classical Chinese drama, there are still some grains of truth in his gentle arrogance. Wang brought to the field an approach far more scholarly and systematic than his predecessors. He endeavored to account for the origins of drama (not merely *tsa-chü* but *yüan-pen* [院本] and *nan-hsi* [南戲] as well), tracing them all the way back to ancient times. He pieced together available evidence to reconstruct the milieu of the art form and compiled a bibliography of Yüan plays and biographies of Yüan playwrights. In a chapter on structure, Wang presents us with brief descriptions of the conventions of *tsa-chü*. In another, on style, he tries to explain the genre's tremendous success in terms of its language.

It is in this latter area that Wang gives himself away: he, too, belongs to the "literary" or "poetic" school which, as we have noticed, has a long tradition. Sizing up the achievements of Yüan drama, Wang Kuo-wei observes:

> Yüan *tsa-chü* was a unique universe, and yet the Yüan people were not aware of this . . . . For three hundred years, most scholars and literati have chosen to neglect Yüan dramas and would not see [read] them. [But] those who did see them were all fascinated.[23]

In his considered opinion, "the best part of *tsa-chü* lies not in its ideas or structure, but in its style, or the *wen-chang* (文章)," and the "*mise en scène* [of *tsa-chü*] is inferior, needless to say."[24] He sees the success of

tsa-chü's style in turn depending heavily on a deft use of language. The use of *ch'en-tzu* (襯字) or "padding words" and a reliance on colloquialism are chiefly responsible for the straightforwardness and effectiveness that are the hallmarks of the style of Yüan drama. "A new language," Wang declares, "was freely employed in a new genre."[25] These observations are generally quite correct, but the few examples Wang furnishes in support of his thesis (on *tsa-chü*'s excellent style) are all taken from the arias. Given his topic, discussions of prose dialogue are conspicuously lacking. His captious comment that the *mise en scène* of Yüan drama is inferior is particularly unjustified. For the time being, it is important to see Wang's critical stance as it is—essentially the same as his Yüan and Ming peers. Despite his feeble attempt to "raise" Yüan *tsa-chü* to an equal footing with Greek drama as drama,[26] Wang's enthusiasm for the genre differs from his predecessors only in degree, not in kind.

The major figures in *tsa-chü* criticism from Yüan times down to the turn of the twentieth century share a predilection for the poetic qualities in a dramatic art form, and do not hesitate to show it. Since long traditions, like old habits, die hard, it is only to be expected that this "poetic fallacy" is still stubbornly with us. The fact is underscored when no less a great contemporary scholar of Yüan drama than Professor Cheng Ch'ien (鄭騫) openly professes his prejudice:

> . . . I have a biased view: I consider the cream, the literary merit, of Yüan *tsa-chü* lie chiefly in its arias . . . .[27]

By identifying that cream with "literary merit," he has confessed to his neglect of *tsa-chü* as drama. In all fairness, however, it must also be pointed out that even in his approach to the poetry of the genre Cheng Ch'ien has demonstrated that he is a more rigorous critic than the others in the same school. His various contributions[28] to the field have inspired many a *tsa-chü* student of this generation.

The "Socialist" Cult

Another notable critical position tends to treat Yüan dramas, particularly those dealing with lawsuits (the so-called *kung-àn* [公案]

plays), as manifestations of social protest. It is also one with a respectably long history, dating back to as early as mid-Ming Dynasty. The oft quoted—or misquoted—passage is a section on "Yüan *ch'ü*" (元曲, Yüan lyrics and/or drama) found in Hu Shih's (胡侍) notebook called *Chen-chu ch'uan* (眞珠船, The Pearl Boat, 1548).[29] There, Hu cites a number of collections of Yüan lyrics and some individual Yüan dramas (which he terms "*ch'uan-ch'i,*" after the fashion of his day), and commends them as being "gently flowing and well-rounded in tone, grand and heroic in spirit" (音調悠圓, 氣魄宏壯). The masters of the preceding dynasty had obviously created artifacts with which "the works of later generations simply cannot stand comparison." The reason, he reasons, is this:

> For the top ministries in the central government, the chief offices in local governments, and posts of any prominence were in those days all filled by their own countrymen [i.e., the Mongols]. In most cases, people of the central regions [the Chinese] sank to the bottom and served as subordinates, unable to realize their ambitions.[30]

To substantiate his observation, Hu goes on to enumerate a few cases of compromised talents, contending that "there were many others who had to settle for clerical jobs and did not acquire the least degree of distinction in their lifetimes." As a result, according to Hu, these people

> applied their useful talent to such trivia as sounds and songs [theater], simply to give vent to their feelings of unhappiness and melancholy: they were truly people who cried out for not getting their fair share.[31]

In other words, drama (and, for that matter, dramatic lyric) flourished in Yüan times precisely because the contemporary men of letters were denied the rosy road to officialdom and, ultimately, political fame, with which their fate had traditionally been associated and interwoven. For this lack of a "nobler pursuit," they had to condescend and turn to the theatrical world.

The view was uncritically shared by another Ming writer, Li K'ai-hsien (李開先, 1501-1568). In his *Hsien-chü chi* (閒居集, Collected Works from a Leisurely Life),[32] Li quotes the above words of Hu Shih and further asserts flatly that "this explains the rise of Yüan drama as well as the fall of the Yüan regime"[33] A casual, objective statement of fact was

thus elaborated into a critical axiom: "Political discrimination gives birth to new literary genres."

But, with what degree of accuracy does it account for the advent of *tsa-chü*? How much does such a formula, neat as it is, reveal of Yüan drama? And how *useful* is it as a critical concept? A lot of doubts have to be removed before one can subscribe to such a theory. Indeed, the whole matter of the sudden and "dramatic" blossoming of Yüan *tsa-chü* is much too complicated to be disposed of in a simple phrase. To be sure, literati of the time played their part, contributing to the furtherance, popularity, and perhaps respectibility of *tsa-chü* both as a literary genre and as a performing art. Their effort is easily recognizable and readily acknowledged. However, to attribute the birth and bloom of *tsa-chü* on the theatrical as well as literary scene solely to the anguish and discontent of the elite is sheer oversimplification. One needs—if only to do justice to the complexity and importance of the problem—to delve into such areas as the relationship between *tsa-chü* and its precursors (of which there are many), to consider the economic condition of the late-Sung and Yüan periods as well as the rise of the urban bourgeoisie as a formidable social class.[34] In short, it is an issue of fine complexity. But since it need not be resolved here, suffice it to say that the formula reached by Li K'ai-hsien is too simplistic to be usable.

Even so, the formula has more recently been pushed further along the line first surveyed by the Ming critics. Primarily in the hands of "Marxist" critics in Mainland China, the formula has taken on a socialistic dimension. Because Yüan playwrights were malcontents, so goes the reasoning, they consequently injected severe social criticism—implicit or explicit—into all they wrote. The result: there must be much of that inevitable revolutionary trait—the theme of class struggle—in most Yüan dramas.

Hsieh Wan-ying (謝婉瑩), in an article published in 1927,[35] displayed an inclination toward such a theory. She divided Yüan plays into two categories according to content and style: the peaceful (because resigned) and the radical (or militant). The targets of the latter were "the darkness of political system of the reign" and "the inequity of wealth in the society"; and these plays "deserve to be called literature of blood and tears."[36] Hsieh even went so far as to suggest that, to Yüan playwrights, "words were vehicles of revolution."[37]

An important figure among the somewhat later exponents of the socialistic viewpoint is Cheng Chen-to (鄭振鐸). Accounting for the popularity of courtroom plays, he writes:

> The courtroom plays were created, not merely to give the audience a delight in the story, nor merely to provide it with a sensational piece of news: they were in fact serious expositions of the injustice and darkness of the contemporary society.
> When the common folk watched the courtroom plays, they were seeking not just pleasure from a story, but also some gratification—the vision of justice and lawfulness on the stage! In the darkest era governed by a minority group, they contented themselves the way a man might enjoy a good meal vicariously passing by a butcher shop.[38]

Within the context of the *kung-an* category, Cheng's observation is at least understandable, if not justified; after all, justice is certainly an unmistakable theme in plays in that division. By being selective and cautious in the application of the theory, Cheng probed the problem in a way becoming his scholarship. But the sense of injustice is not necessarily part of a sense of class: more likely, in fact, it is highly personal.

If Cheng shows restraint and judiciousness in applying the Marxist-socialist formula, his colleagues have taken greater liberties. Chu Tung-jun (朱東潤), for example, carefully documented his article on Yüan drama and its times[39] in a professed attempt to evaluate the accomplishment of Yüan playwrights in terms of the social relevance exhibited in their works. He charges that modern readers tend to disregard "the permeating pain and cries [discernable] between the lines in *tsa-chü*."[40] To him, even the lighter moments in some of the plays, when sparks of mirth and joviality burst out, are mere illusions. For, he maintains,

> what we see in Yüan *tsa-chü* are the blood and tears of a conquered people. Some of these men suffered so much that they became numb and insensitive; from numbness and insensitivity came decadence; from decadence came hedonism. But although epicureans they became, there were, in the eyes of mirth, glittering tears of sadness. Besides, some of them were [full of] cries under pain—a form of deliverance in utter hopelessness.[41]

A majority of the examples Chu furnishes in support of his argument are from plays of the courtroom category, but he seems to earnestly believe that the highly conventional Yüan dramas are literature of protest: a

marvelous case of the incompatibility of Marxism and common sense.

The phrase "literature of protest," along with such variants as "people's literature" and "literature of revolution," caught on with many a critic in the fifties and sixties. It is not surprising, then, to find that in a collection of essays devoted to dramatic criticism,[42] all five articles on Kuan Han-ch'ing sound one and the same note—the unbending will of the Yüan playwright to fight out the class-struggle, and the revolutionary import of his plays. That these critics favor the courtroom plays over the other types seems only natural. While all other categories of drama fit their formula even less well, in those it is at least easier for them to find what they are determined to find. Talking about the Judge Pao plays, for instance, a Marxian critic has this to say:

> These Judge Pao plays did not cover up the realities of the contemporary society. The powerful and influential in the *tsa-chü* were the feudal lords of the upper stratum, who truly enjoyed privilege. The exposé of their sinful deeds and the attack on the sordid politics of the time are the most valuable achievement of the Judge Pao plays of Yüan Dynasty.[43]

But to make generalizations on "the most valuable achievement" of the whole Yüan repertory takes far more research than these critics have demonstrated, and certainly far better judgement than they have exhibited.

Granted that these studies, to a certain degree, have their merit, there are a couple of points that need to be made clear at this juncture. First, it is one thing to relate the rise of *tsa-chü* to the political predicament suffered by the literati; it is quite another to read into their works stronger-than-usual sentiments of disenchantment tantamount to advocacy of revolution. While the former approach has been proved to be patently naive from the viewpoint of literary evolution, the latter verges on misrepresentation of historical facts. Modern scholarship indicates that the Yüan reign under the Mongols has probably been painted blacker than it actually was, and the hardship people were subjected to was probably less, and more localized, than some of these critics would like to believe.[44] Take, for instance, one of the much-condemned institutions, usury. It has been time and again charged that usury, known as *yang-kao-li* (羊羔利 , the sheep bears a lamb's worth of profit), with an annual interest rate as high as 100 percent, was one of the arch-evils created by the incompetence of an alien ruler, and that it was responsible for many a tragic event

depicted so heart-rendingly in Yüan drama. The oft cited example is the play *Injustice to Tou Ngo*: Tou T'ien-chang sells his child Tou Ngo to Granny Ts'ai because he cannot pay back his debt which doubled in the span of one year; the quack doctor attempts the life of Granny Ts'ai because *he* cannot pay back *his* debt; etc. *Quod Erat Demonstrandum*: Had it not been for the vice of usury, Tou Ngo would not have been inflicted with all the cruelties and injustice that she experienced so excruciatingly in the play.

In fact, however, this kind of usury was not a long-standing evil. It was practiced temporarily at the beginning of the Yüan era—and then in the black market only. To be fair to the Mongol rulers, it should further be pointed out that Emperor Shih-tsu (世祖, r. 1260-1294) even initiated a kind of government loan called *wo-t'o ch'ien* (斡脫錢 , *ortaq* money), with an annual interest rate at 18 percent. Although this was in effect probably only under the reigns of Emperors Shih-tsu and Ch'eng tsung (成宗, r. 1295-1307), it does show that the image of Mongol rulers totally and constantly insensitive to the needs of the ruled may have been exaggerated.[45]

Historical inaccuracy aside, the socialistic criticism, as criticism, suffers from an even more serious drawback. Ever so avid in their pursuit of socio-political content, critics of this school frequently read into Yüan plays their own political beliefs; quite often they see what is not there, and are blind to what is. Such enthusiasm for doctrine has resulted in not a few studies that scrutinize the "thematic" aspects of *tsa-chü* to the exclusion of other important aesthetic ingredients—especially when the latter do not work in favor of their thesis. Plays purported to have been meant as relentless attacks on the ruling class have over the years been well-received by socialist critics—sometimes regardless of clear deficiency in structure, language, or character manipulation. For instance, such a mediocre play as *Lu Chai-lang* (魯齋郎) has been proclaimed "one of the very best among the Yüan dramas."[46] To be sure, thematic study as an approach to literature is not only legitimate but indispensible. Yet it is hardly the only criterion by which such complex art form as *tsa-chu* should be judged. This is especially the case when the very validity of the critic's assumption is called into question. Taken alone, thematic study is no more a reliable approach to Yüan drama than Yüan drama was a true mirror of the dark and despotic rule of its time, as some people are

wont to believe.[47] Failing to account for the artistry of *tsa-chü*, Marxian critics reveal their own incompetence; their strained and crabbed doctrinaire interpretation does the dramas injustice.

Some Modern Trends

The third type of *tsa-chü* criticism is more or less a modern and "foreign" phenomenon, for it represents efforts undertaken predominantly by Japanese and American scholars since the turn of the century. Drawing on the findings of modern Chinese scholars (notably Wang Kuo-wei and, more recently, Cheng Ch'ien), they nevertheless have come up with some refreshingly new and daring interpretations in which there is no lack of insight. A marvelous feat they have performed is turning the odds against them to their advantage. Neither cultural nor geographical separation seems a crippling factor but an enabling one in their achievement: there is a healthy "aesthetic distance" between this group of critics and Yüan drama. Their respect for the poetic language has not blinded them to the tremendous vitality and interest of prose dialogue; their sympathy toward Yüan playwrights has not tempted them to reduce *tsa-chü* to a simplistic Marxist formula. When most Chinese scholars are plagued by traditions and caught in the perennial dilemma of either following the "literary" school or joining the socialist cult (or both), these foreign critics come closer to seeing *tsa-chü* as it is: a dramatic form in which conventions, structure, and manipulation of characters play as important roles as, say, language, singing, or dancing. Indeed, it is with these critics that the dramatic aspects of Yüan *tsa-chü* begin to receive scholarly attention.

Among the Japanese sinologists, Aoki Masaru (青木正兒) is without doubt the towering giant whose greatest contribution has lain in the area of classical Chinese drama. In his *Gennin zatsugeki josetsu* (元人雜劇序說, Introductory Remarks on Yüan *Tsa-chü*, 1929),[48] Aoki voices his dissatisfaction with the "poetic" critics and offers, as an antidote, critiques on the dramatic construction of the plays he considers "representative" of Yüan *tsa-chü*. The book looks less awesome today than when it was first published. Its discussions of various plays and playwrights often end up being little more than synopses. However, the distinction Aoki makes between *wen-ts'ai* (文采, elaborate style) and *pen-se* (本色, unadorned

style) may still serve as a point of departure for more serious investigation of the style of Yüan drama.[49]

Yoshikawa Kōjirō's (吉川幸次郎) *Gen zatsugeki kenkyū* (元雜劇研究, Studies in Yüan Drama), produced in 1948,[50] is an insightful work, both well-conceived and well-executed. In the first half, on "background," Yoshikawa speculates on the intended audience of *tsa-chü* and the education of the play-wrights. This sheds considerable light on how Yüan drama came about. But it is the second part that contributes more to our understanding of *tsa-chü* as dramatic literature. There he concentrates on structure and language. Concerning the former, he comes to the conclusion that, in spite of the formal and musical elements working against it, Yüan playwrights somehow managed to give their works a kind of plausibility and verisimilitude. On language, his attention is drawn equally to arias and dialogue; and he goes further than Wang Kuo-wei, on whose works he draws for much of his theorizing, to demonstrate some of their features as they contrast with other genres.

A younger scholar, Iwaki Kudeo (岩城秀夫) has interests even more varied and leans toward the theatrical aspect. The second part of his *Chūgoku gikyoku engeki kenkyū* (中國戲曲演劇研究, Studies on the Chinese Drama)[51] includes, among other things, articles on the characterization of Judge Pao in the courtroom plays, concepts concerning the structure of *tsa-chü*, the Ming palace and performances, and the function of Wu (吳) dialect in southern drama.

In the United States, Professor J. I. Crump has contributed more to the field than anyone else. Besides being a felicitous translater, he has in many an article noted the conventions of *tsa-chü* and speculated on their implications; he has attempted to define the use of language as it relates to the "drama" of the play; and he has expounded some of the more important concepts in *tsa-chü* criticism.[52] In his forthcoming book, *Chinese Theater in the Days of Kublai Khan,* he delves into the vast raw material of the extant play scripts and attempts to reconstruct the Yüan theater for us. Among other significant contributions, Dale Johnson's work on prosody,[53] which owes its inspiration to that master of Yüan-drama, Cheng Ch'ien, is a labor which has greatly relieved the burden of later scholars. George Hayden has established the sub-genre of courtroom plays and outlined their structural features.[54] Chung-wen Shih's *The Golden Age of Chinese Drama: Yüan Tsa-chü*[55] may perhaps be faulted for being

too general, yet it rightly treats the genre as drama or at least dramatic literature.

Chinese scholars' efforts in the same direction should not go unnoticed. Since the turn of the century, increased contacts with foreign literatures have alerted some Chinese critics to take a second look at their own classical drama. The result is varied. Wang Kuo-wei, whom we have noted above, argues that, not only are there tragedies among Yüan *tsa-chü* but the "most tragic" of them, like *Injustice to Tou Ngo* and *The Orphan of Chao* (*Chao-shih ku-erh*, 趙氏孤兒), "do not look bad at all even when placed among the greatest of world tragedies."[56] Ch'ien Chung-shu (錢鍾書) on the contrary contends that "whatever value our old [Yüan] drama may have as stage performances or as poetry, they cannot as dramas hold their own with great Western dramas."[57] While Wang shows no convincing evidence to support his claim, Ch'ien errs in imposing on Chinese drama alien standards. It is one thing to say that China has yet to produce great dramas *in the Western tradition*; it is quite another to conclude that there is no great classical Chinese drama. If Aristotle had laid down any rules for dramatic composition, they would have been concocted in accordance to *his* concept of drama, as he understood it at the time. To judge Western dramas of other periods (e.g., the Elizabethan) by Aristotelian criteria would be unfair; to judge the classical drama of China by them is as unjust as faulting Western drama because it lacks complex poetic meter and modal organization.

In contrast, Professor James J. Y. Liu has demonstrated how knowledge of foreign literatures may be used to illuminate one's own native literature. I refer particularly to his essay "Elizabethan and Yüan,"[58] in which some important conventions of the two theaters are the focus of comparison. Since the comparative method implies seeing things in different lights instead of taking them as islands unto themselves, it is especially helpful when the significance and implication of things being compared have, through long habit, gone undetected or unchallenged. On the other hand, however, the brevity of Professor Liu's comparison seems also to alert us to the futility of purely "comparative" method by which the classical Chinese drama would be discussed in the same breath, as it were, with the Western theater. The observation of the superficial resemblances or differences in form does not enhance our understanding of the theaters so compared very much.

Most recently, Chinese scholars in Taiwan have shown renewed interest in the field. A number of essays under the series title of "Modern Views on Yüan *Tsa-chü*" have since December 1975 been published in the *Chung-wai Literary Monthly* (中外文學, *Chung-wai wen-hsüeh*).[59] They have uniformly treated the *tsa-chü* as dramatic literature, a healthy break with the traditional approaches. Some of them, however, suffer from relying too heavily on Western dramatic theories (which fit the requirements of an illusionist theater) and overlooking the *tsa-chü* convention. It is ironic that these critics should have just freed themselves from one form of literary tyranny to embrace the enthrallment of another. But as long as the fervor for the genre is kept up, there is no doubt that their efforts will bear fruit and make a significant contribution to the study of Yüan drama.

Conclusion

The history of *tsa-chü* criticism, of which the above is but a sketch, painfully shows that critics and scholars of Yüan *tsa-chü* have been, in an alarmingly real sense, all strangers in Xanadu. Common sense suggests that a scholar undertake his endeavors with an open mind, treat the texts as the things they claim to be (i.e., drama scripts), and listen with discrimination to what they have to say about themselves. But the history of *tsa-chü* criticism warns us once again (if we needed it) to be cautious of "common sense" and alert to the aesthetic, historical, and ideological biases that tend to make some criticism both uncommon and not very sensible.

Notes *

*Two abbreviations are used in the notes:
KTHC for *Chung-kuo ku-tien hsi-ch'ü lun-chu chi-ch'eng* (中國古典戲曲論著集成). 10 vols. Peking: Chung-kuo hsi-chü ch'u-pan-she, 1959.
YMC for *Yüan-Ming-Ch'ing hsi-ch'ü lun-wen chi* (元明清戲曲論文集), 3 vols. Peking: Jen-min wen-hsüeh ch'u-pan she, 1959.

1. In *KTHC*, I, pp. 167-285.
2. I refer to its subtitle: "*Cheng-yü chih pen, pien-ya chih tuan*" (正語之本，變雅之端). *KTHC*, I, p. 183.
3. In *KTHC*, I, pp. 153-166.
4. *KTHC*, I, pp. 160-161. Chung-wen Shih, however, believes that "the overall effect created by a certain music mode in one act can still be significant" despite occasional "inconsistency between the music and words in certain scenes." See her *Injustice to Tou O (Tou O yüan), a study and translation* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 30.
5. In *KTHC*, III, pp. 1-231.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 16. Cf. also Aoki Masaru's comments in *Gennin zatsugeki josetsu,* Chinese trans. by Sui Shu-sen (隋樹森), revised and augmented by Hsü T'iao-fu (徐調孚) (Hong Kong: chien-wen shu-chü, 1959), p. 62.
7. In *KTHC*, IV, pp. 43-191,
8. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
9. In *KTHC*, IV, pp. 193-228.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
11. See his second preface to *YCH*. For a discussion of this theory, see J. I. Crump, "Giants in the Earth: Yüan Drama as seen by Ming Critics," *Tamkang Review,* V-2 (October 1974), 43-44, 45.
12. *KTHC*, IV, p. 148.
13. On the other hand, the well-attested Chinese delight in poetry may explain in part the dominance of lyricism in classical Chinese drama.
14. In his own words: "Usually it turned out that I had barely finished a play when the producer would grab it away. Sometimes the second half of the script was not yet written when the first half was already mounted on stage."–*KTHC*, VII, p. 58.
15. In *KTHC*, VII, pp. 1-114.
16. Whether he was a successful or even faithful practitioner of his own theory is of course an entirely different matter.
17. *KTHC*, VII, p. 22.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
19. In Wang Kuo-wei, *Wang Kuo-wei hsi-ch'ü lun-wen-chi* (王國維戲曲論文集) (Peking: Chung-kuo hsi-chü ch'u-pan-she, 1959), pp. 199-226 and pp. 149-197, respectively.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 1-148.
21. This, along with *Ch'ü lu* (曲錄), formed the basis for serious research of Yüan drama in the early years of the Republic. Cf. Cheng Chen-to (鄭振鐸), *Chung-kuo wen-hsüeh yen-chiu* (中國文學研究), 3 vols. (Peking: Tso-chia, 1957), II, p. 631.
22. Wang Kuo-wei, p. 3.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
27. "Tsang Mao-hsün kai-ting Yüan tsa-chü p'ing yi" (臧懋循改訂元雜劇評議), *Wen-shih-che hsüeh-pao* (文史哲學報) (National Taiwan University), X (1961), 12.

28. Among his works bearing on Yüan drama are: "Yüan-jen tsa-chü te chieh-kou" (元人雜劇的結構), *Ta-lu tsa-chih* (大陸雜誌), II-12 (June 1951); *Ts'ung shih tao ch'ü* (從詩到曲) (Taipei: K'o-hsüeh, 1961); *Chiao-ting Yüan-k'an tsa-chü san-shih chung* (校訂元刊雜劇三十種) (Taipei: Shih-chieh, 1962); "Yüan-Ming ch'ao-k'e Yüan-jen tsa-chü chiu-chung t'i-yao" (元明鈔刻元人雜劇九種提要), *Tsing-hua Journal of Chinese Studies,* N.S., VII-2 (1969), 145-155; *Pei-ch'ü hsin-p'u* (北曲新譜) (Taipei: Yi-wen, 1973); and the article cited in the preceding note.

29. In *Kuan-chung ts'ung-shu* (關中叢書) (Shansi: Shansi t'ung-chih-kuan, 1934-36), *chüan* 4.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. In *Li K'ai-hsien chi* (李開先集) (3 vols.), ed., Lu Kung (路工) (Peking: Tso-chia, 1957), vol. 1.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 298.

34. Cf. Stephen H. West, "Mongol Influence on the Development of Northern Drama," an unpublished paper presented to the ACLS Conference on the Impact of Mongol Rule on Chinese Civilization, Maine, July 1976.

35. "Yüan-tai te hsi-chü" (元代的戲劇), *Yen-ching hsüeh-pao* (燕京學報), I (June 1927), 15-51.

36. *Ibid.*, 32.

37. The Chinese reads, 借文字做革命事業 . *Ibid.*, 28.

38. *Chung-kuo wen-hsüeh yen-chiu,* pp. 516-517.

39. "Yüan tsa-chü chi ch'i shih-tai" (元雜劇及其時代), Parts I and II, *Kuo-wen yüeh-k'an* (國文月刊), 77 (March 1949), 12-18; 78 (April 1949), 12-18.

40. *Ibid.*, Part II, 18.

41. *Ibid.*, Part I, 15.

42. *YMC,* II.

43. Hsü Shuo-fang (徐朔方), *Hsi-ch'ü tsa-chi* (戲曲雜記) (Shanghai: Ku-tien wen-hsüeh, 1956), p. 27.

44. Paul H. Ch'en, for example, believes that the Yüan laws show more leniency than the statutes of many other dynasties in China. See his "Chinese Legal Tradition in the Yüan Period," an unpublished paper presented to the ACLS Conference on the Impact of Mongol Rule on Chinese Civilization, Maine, July 1976.

45. See Li Tze-fen (李則芬), "Meng-ku yang-kao-erh-li yü Yüan-ch'u wo-t'o-ch'ien chih yen-chiu" (蒙古羊羔兒利與元初斡脫錢之研究), Parts I and II, *Tung-fang tsa-chih* (東方雜誌), 7:9 (March 1974), 29-33; 7:10 (April 1974), 44-47.

46. Wang Chi-ssu (王季思), "T'an Kuan Han-ch'ing te Lu Chai-lang tsa-chü" (談關漢卿的魯齋郎雜劇), in *YMC,* II, p. 131. It is worth noticing that in an earlier article Wang criticized the ending of the play for being as weak as "a spent arrow." See his "Kuan Han-ch'ing he t'a-te tsa-chü (關漢卿和他的雜劇) in *Ku-tien wen-hsüeh yen-chiu hui-k'an* (古典文學研究彙刊) (Shanghai: Ku-tien wen-hsüen, 1955),p. 143.

47. For example: "I do not consider it an exaggeration to state that Yüan drama is a mirror of the Chinese society in Yüan times. In Yüan drama, we can see the complete picture of people's life of the time."—Sung Han-yao (宋漢濯) "Yüan-chü te hsien-shih chu-yi ching-shen" (元劇的現實主義精神), in *YMC,* II,

p. 3.

48. Sui Shu-sen's translation. (For full citation, see Note No. 6 above.)
49. See Note No. 11 above.
50. Chinese translation by Cheng Ch'ing-mao (鄭清茂) (Taipei: Yi-wen, 1960).
51. Tokyo: Sobunsha, 1972.
52. His published translations of Yüan drama are: *Li K'uei Carries Thorns,* in Cyril Birch (ed.), *Anthology of Chinese Literature: from Early Times to the Fourteenth Century* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), pp. 393-421; *Rain on the Hsiao-hsiang,* in *Renditions,* No. 4 (Spring 1975), 49-70. *The Mo-ho-lo Doll* is appended to a forthcoming book, *Chinese Theater in the Days of Kublai Khan.* His critical works include: "The Elements of Yüan Opera," *The Journal of Asian Studies,* XVII-3 (May 1958), 417-434; "*Yüan-pen,* Yuan Drama's Rowdy Ancestor," *Literature East and West,* XIV-4 (1970), 473-490; "The Conventions and Craft of Yüan Drama," *Journal of the American Oriental Society,* 91-1 (Jan.-Mar. 1971), 14-29; "Spoken Verse in Yüan Drama," *Tamkang Review,* IV-1 (April 1973); "Giants in the Earth: Yüan Drama as seen by Ming Critics," *Tamkang Review,* V-2 (October 1974), 33-62.
53. "The Prosody of Yüan Drama," *T'oung Pao,* LVI: 1-3 (1970), 96-146.
54. "The Courtroom Plays of the Yüan and Early Ming Periods," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies,* 34 (1974), 192-220.
55. Princeton and Guildford, Surrey: Princeton University Press, 1976.
56. Wang Kuo-wei, p. 106.
57. "Tragedy in Old Chinese Drama," *T'ien Hsia Monthly,* I (1935), 37-46.
58. London: China Society, 1955.
59. Published by National Taiwan University.