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From the Controversy of Merit and Fault to a Coordinate in the Drama History: A Review of *A Study of Yuanquxuan and Zang Maoxun from the Perspective of Drama History*

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Abstract: Guan Xian's *A Study of Yuanquxuan and Zang Maoxun from the Perspective of Drama History* (2024) examines Zang Maoxun's *Yuanquxuan*, analyzing the drama thought of Zang and the significance and value of *Yuanquxuan* in the Chinese drama history through two dimensions: the editorial features and the stage directions within its plays. The core of this book is to extricate *Yuanquxuan* from the traditional debate over its merits and faults and to re-examine it by placing it back within the historical context of the development of drama in the Ming Dynasty. This research not only paves an entirely new path for the research on *Yuanquxuan* as a classic text, but also provides methodological inspiration for understanding the historical development of Chinese drama.

Keywords: *Yuanquxuan*; Zang Maoxun; *A Study of Yuanquxuan and Zang Maoxun from the Perspective of Drama History*; stage direction

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题目: 从功过之争到戏剧史坐标——评管弦的《戏剧史视野下的〈元曲选〉与臧懋循》

摘要: 管弦所著《戏剧史视域下的〈元曲选〉与臧懋循研究》(2024)一书,以臧懋

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循编纂的《元曲选》为考察对象，分别从编选特色与剧内舞台指示两个维度，深入剖析了臧懋循的戏剧思想，以及《元曲选》在中国戏剧史上的意义与价值。该书将《元曲选》从传统的功过是非争论中解脱出来，并将其重新置于明代戏剧发展的历史脉络中加以审视。这一研究不仅为《元曲选》这部经典文本的探讨开辟了全新的路径，亦为理解中国戏剧的历史演进提供了方法论层面的启示。

关键词：《元曲选》；臧懋循；《戏剧史视野下的〈元曲选〉与臧懋循》；舞台指示

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Departing from the traditional debate over the merits and demerits of Zang Maoxun's editing of *Yuanquxuan*, this book shifts the focus and situates *Yuanquxuan* within the broader context of Chinese drama history. Although *Yuanquxuan* represents a continuation of the artistic achievements of Yuan *zaju* (a form of Chinese drama popular in the Yuan Dynasty), it is related to the performance conventions of Ming dynasty drama and should be regarded as a coordinate on the coordinate system of Ming drama history. In fact, the scripts and stage performances contemporaneous with Yuan *zaju* complement each other and serve as mutual references. The performances of the late Ming period form the counterpart in this relationship of mutual reference and complementarity, which postdate the actual era of Yuan *zaju*. The roughness or imperfection in the scripts we see today does not necessarily reflect the actual standard at that time, owing to the act of reading having occurred posterior to the scripts. Considerable uncertainty remains regarding what the original scripts written by Yuan *zaju* playwrights actually looked like. Associate Professor Guan Xian argues that focusing on the value of the origins is limited; instead, the significance of *Yuanquxuan* in the history of Chinese drama remains open to investigation.

The book is structured into six chapters, framed by an introduction and a conclusion. Chapter 1 provides a comprehensive literature review and introduces the key issues of *Yuanquxuan*. Chapter 2 explores the drama thought of Zang Maoxun and the editing idea of *Yuanquxuan*, as well as the spread of Yuan *zaju* in the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty. Chapter 3 introduces the selection features of Yuan *zaju* and its significance in Chinese drama history, and analyzes two issues in the editing of *Yuanquxuan*. Chapter 4 provides a detailed analysis of entrance and exit directions in Yuan *zaju*. Chapter 5 explores conventionalized segments and language in *Yuanquxuan*. Chapter 6 introduces the action directions and the literary tendency in the textual details of *Yuanquxuan*.

The work has a clear structure, detailed historical materials, and rigorous logic, mainly presenting two key issues. It emphasizes the compilation background and editorial features through the exploration of Zang Maoxun and the historical context of the specific era. Meanwhile, it adopts an approach of textual analysis, systematically tracing the entrance and exit directions, conventionalized segments, and action directions in *Yuanquxuan* through comparison between *Yuanquxuan* and other selected or complete collections of Yuan *zaju*.

1. Investigating the Origins: The Compilation Background of *Yuanquxuan*

Chapter One, “*Yuanquxuan* and Its Related Research” introduces the basic information about *Yuanquxuan*, offers the author’s opinions on several issues that have been the focus of debate. It synthesizes various sources to systematically examine the influences that led to the creation of *Yuanquxuan*, and traces the scholarship on *Yuanquxuan* and its significance in drama history since the Ming and Qing dynasties. As Zhu Hengfu (2018) noted, Yuan *zaju* refers to northern *zaju* because its vocal tunes are primarily based on northern melodies (90). Guan Xian clarifies the definition of *Yuanqu* at the beginning. The term *Yuanqu* generally refers to both *sanqu* (non-dramatic songs) and *juqu* (dramatic verse) of the Yuan Dynasty. In contemporary understanding, all *xiaoling* (short lyrics), *santao* (song suites), northern *zaju*, and southern *xiwen* that were created and popular during the Yuan Dynasty belong to the category of *Yuanqu*. For ancient scholars, however, the usage of *Yuanqu* was flexible; it could refer to non-dramatic songs, dramatic verse, or serve as a comprehensive category encompassing both. Zang Maoxun titled his collection *Yuanquxuan*; however, it includes neither *sanqu* nor southern *xiwen*, which indicates that he was conscious of his selection as being focused on *zaju*.

Guan Xian argues that *Yuanquxuan* has provided a widely embraced reading text for Yuan *zaju*, served as an influential research resource for studies, and acted as a force in the spread of Yuan *zaju* texts domestically and overseas. Through Guan Xian’s literature review of *Yuanquxuan*, it becomes evident that from the Ming-Qing period to modern times, scholars’ research on *Yuanquxuan* and Zang Maoxun has undergone a continuous evolution. The progression has moved from one-sided criticism of the alterations in *Yuanquxuan* for losing the original essence of Yuan *zaju*, to a more objective view of the changes occurring during the transmission of Yuan *zaju* texts, and further to examining *Yuanquxuan* and Zang Maoxun’s revisions from the perspectives of communication studies and philological research.

Chapter Two, “The Compilation Background of *Yuanquxuan*,” introduces the fundamental characteristics of Zang Maoxun’s dramatic thought and his opinion of drama as a genre different from other art forms, as expressed in his prefaces and other writings. Zang Maoxun argues that play writing should not be detached from stage performance, and that thought the author intended to convey should be expressed through the communication between the audience and the performance on stage. Therefore, Guan Xian concludes that four features of *Yuanquxuan* reflect Zang’s personal artistic temperament and dramatic philosophy, including its broad selection of playwrights and works, the motif diversity of its contents, the literary value of the scripts, and the attention to stage performances (126). Guan Xian’s research is not limited to the text itself but combines the exploration of Zang and his attitude to Yuan *zaju*, and the historical context of the Ming Dynasty. This strengthens the argument of Guan Xian’s study and provides new methodological insights for the study of *Yuanquxuan*.

2. Examining the Compilation: The Editorial Features of *Yuanquxuan*

Yuanquxuan is composed of two main parts: which includes two prefaces written by Zang Maoxun, accompanied by seven *qulun* (essays on dramatic theory), and the scripts of Yuan *zaju*. Chapter three first

examines the function of prefaces and *qulun* in *Yuanquxuan*. It aims to enhance the situation of *xiqu* (plays and songs) compared with poetry and essays at that time through emphasizing “Yuanyi qu qu shi” (the official selection based on *sanqu* writing in the Yuan Dynasty). The second function is to provide the theoretical support for his revisions. Secondly, the arguments of the selected *qulun* manifest Zang Maoxun’s characteristics and his commercial awareness. Zang Maoxun became a bookseller and publisher after being dismissed because of his behavior that was unacceptable to the society of his time. Chen Zhiyong demonstrates that the compilation of *Yuanquxuan* was propelled by two intertwined imperatives: economic necessity and the pursuit of lasting fame (58). Following Zang’s dismissal from officialdom in the Wanli reign (1585), he found himself in dire financial straits, compelled to make a living by writing. The compilation of *Yuanquxuan* represented a commercial venture to secure economic subsistence through the flourishing late Ming book market.

Furthermore, this chapter organizes the selected playwrights and works, and compares *Yuanquxuan* with other selections of Yuan *zaju*. It argues that *Yuanquxuan* not only surpasses other selections in the number of scripts, but also adopts more inclusive criteria for scripts selection. It presents a collection with emphases rather than listing plays. *Yuanquxuan* includes courtroom dramas, heroic legends, and familial problem plays, which rarely covered in other contemporary anthologies. Zang Maoxun’s selection contains works written by celebrated playwrights such as Guan Hanqing, Ma Zhiyuan, Zheng Guangzu, and Bai Pu, alongside scripts by anonymous authors. This expands the scope of Yuan *zaju* available for readers’ appreciation to a certain extent.

Guan Xian’s exploration is not limited to the editorial features of *Yuanquxuan*; she continues to point out problems in the process, which makes her study more persuasive and logical. The problems are why some *zaju* of the Ming dynasty are selected in *Yuanquxuan* and whether the compilation follows a specific order. Guan Xian argues that the selection of Ming *zaju* is intentional, and represents Zang Maoxun’s obscuring of the issue of the play’s chronology for commercial purposes as a bookseller. Moreover, the reverence for past masters and the celebration of their own time may have blurred the Yuan-Ming distinction for other mid-to-late Ming editors. As for the editorial order, there is no precise explanation in past studies. Guan Xian examines that Zang Maoxun refrained from explicit evaluation, reflecting his concern for commercial viability, rather than arranging by author, theme, chronology, or literary merit. This is perhaps a reason why *Yuanquxuan* was able to achieve widespread circulation and establish itself as a standard edition for later generations.

3. Analyzing Stage Directions: The Cues of Yuan *zaju* in *Yuanquxuan*

It is generally believed that the entrance and exit directions in Yuan *zaju* serve neither a narrative nor a lyrical function, which are considered simple, immediate cues to signal a character’s entrance or exit. In fact, these stage directions constitute an indispensable part of the Yuan *zaju* scripts.

In Yuan *zaju*, the entrances and exits of characters indicate the division of scenes. The well-known structure of Yuan *zaju* is “one zhe (act) per play, with a xiezi (prologue) inserted”. In terms of plot

development, the zhe delineates the progression of the narrative, yet it is not strictly bound by time or place. Each zhe may consist of one scene or several scenes. Therefore, playwrights arrange the scene order and manage the development of the plot by designing the entrance and exit directions of characters. Furthermore, entrance and exit directions often incorporate additional instructions about action or statement, which pertain to specific performance conventions and embody the most fundamental techniques of acting and directing. By comparing various collections of Yuan *zaju*, Guan Xian finds that the stage directions for entrances and exits in *Yuanquxuan* are precise and detailed. Zang Maoxun enhanced the precision of momentary stage actions in *Yuanquxuan* through the standardized usage of diverse entrance and exit directions in his revisions to deepen readers' understanding of the action of entrance and exit.

Through the analysis in Chapter Four, Guan Xian contends that Zang Maoxun's standardization and systematization of entrance and exit directions represent a deliberate design of the stage arrangements in Yuan *zaju* at the level of literary language. This process involved both the preservation of material from the source texts and adjustments to the patterns of stage directions informed by Zang's own understanding.

As Jiao Juyin noted, "chengshi" (theatrical conventions) constitute the distinctive symbol differentiating *xiqu* (traditional Chinese opera) from other art forms. Within the overall system of artistic methods in *xiqu*, there exists plenty of conventional units. By selecting certain units suitable for expressing the content of a specific play and interweaving them in combination, the form is therefore constructed (252). The Yuan *zaju* included in *Yuanquxuan* reflect conventionalized language and the conventionalized performance constructed from it, with some of these elements continuing to be used in *xiqu* to this day. Chapter Five first analyzes the form and features of several conventional segments, including the convention of meeting after mutual announcement, the signal convention of secret meetings between lovers, the convention of verifying identity by vocal pitch, the convention of the letter of divorce, and the convention of the inn servant tricking customers. Secondly, it reveals that there is some conventional language in the selected scripts in *Yuanquxuan*.

Through the analysis of Chapter Five, Guan Xian reveals that "chengshi" manifests across all aspects of the *xiqu* system, including stage performance, music and vocal styles, role types, and script structure. Many conventionalized episodes and formulaic phrases function not as fixed textual units but represent methods of stage performance and modes of script structure. Zang Maoxun's *Yuanquxuan* provided readers with scripts for textual reading, and attended to the stage-worthiness of Yuan *zaju*, which holds significance for theatrical performance.

Chapter Six shifts focus to stage directions and other related elements, in view of the extensive discussions by previous scholars on the adaptations and significance of *Yuanquxuan* in terms of its lyrics and dialogue. In terms of stage directions within the scripts, *Yuanquxuan* places emphasis on the description of action scenes while reducing its reliance on actual performance, thereby enhancing the capacity of literary language to evoke imagination. Guan Xian observes that Zang Maoxun crafted the scenes and stage effects of his revision by organizing literary language in his unique way, deprived of

much performance practice from the Yuan dynasty to draw upon. Zang's designs, in this sense, reflect his personal conception of Yuan *zaju* as an art form, and express the artistic sophistication of mid-to-late Ming drama to some extent.

4. Conclusion

Guan Xian offers a comprehensive re-evaluation of Zang Maoxun's *YuanquXuan* and its pivotal role in the transmission and transformation of Yuan *zaju* during the late Ming dynasty. Departing from traditional scholarship that often laments the loss of the original form of Yuan *zaju*, Guan Xian frames Zang's editorial work as dynamic intervention and adjustment shaped by the cultural, theatrical, and commercial currents of his time.

The study begins by contextualizing the decline of Yuan *zaju* performances in the late Ming, which shifted the primary mode of transmission to printed anthologies. *Yuanquxuan* emerged not as the record of a fading art form, but the reconstruction in its historical context. Zang Maoxun, positioned as both a literary scholar and a bookseller, approached his task with two concepts: the literary scholar's commitment to literary aesthetics and the commercial intention of the businessman. The dual identity allowed him to produce *Yuanquxuan* that was both a monument to literary excellence and a commercially successful product. While Guan Xian's drama history perspective relocates *Yuanquxuan* from textual criticism to a broader historical narrative, the scope of this perspective warrants further examination. The conceptualization of drama history in this book is based in the textual practices and Ming writers' re-imagination of Yuan *zaju*. However, drama history also contains the following factors: performance traditions, oral transmission, and the agency of performers. The study touches upon yet cannot fully reconstruct because of the limit of Ming performance records. Consequently, the drama-history framework adopted here is a history of textual reception and editorial intervention, and its argument may be less compelling.

Guan Xian highlights Zang Maoxun's radical expansion of the critical lens through which Yuan *zaju* was evaluated. Unlike earlier editors who favored famous works by renowned playwrights, Zang Maoxun broadened the scope to include unknown authors and diverse genres, such as detective plays, heroic legends, and family plays. Guan Xian argues that the inclusivity reveals a more nuanced understanding of Yuan *zaju*'s rich motifs of social life, encompassing not just romantic and supernatural tales but also stories of everyday people, legal cases, and familial conflicts.

The core of the concluding part is Zang Maoxun's meticulous revision of stage directions, entrance and exit directions, and conventions within the scripts. Zang Maoxun re-imagined these elements from a literary perspective, while earlier editions prioritized the practical needs of performance. He standardized and enhanced the descriptive quality of stage directions, transforming them from functional notes into narrative tools that allowed readers to visualize the character's actions. Guan Xian contends that this was an effort to bridge the gap between the stage and the script, making Yuan *zaju* accessible as a literary work independent of stage performance. Zang's revisions also refined "chengshi," stripping away repetitions while preserving their dramatic function to enhance the texts' internal logic and readability. Guan Xian's

emphasis on Zang Maoxun's literary and editorial innovations invites a related question: to what extent do these textual refinements actually illuminate Ming stage practice? There remains a gap between the literary stage that *Yuanquxuan* constructs and the living stage of its time. Future study might investigate whether *Yuanquxuan*'s cues reflect actual stage conventions or represent Zang's idealized vision of what Yuan *zaju* ought to look like on stage.

This editorial transformation aligns with what some scholars have termed the “dramaturgical foundation” (juxue) of Zang Maoxun's work. As He Cui argued, Zang departed from the prevailing qu-centered paradigm and restructured Yuan *zaju* according to principles of role typology, plot coherence, and stage arrangement (148). It lays the groundwork for a drama-centered theory of Chinese opera. Ultimately, Guan Xian positions *Yuanquxuan* as a landmark in the history of Chinese drama. Zang's work reflected a broader shift of theatrical aesthetics in the Ming dynasty from a focus on *qu* to *zaju*. Zang anticipated modern conceptions of theatre as a multifaceted art form by emphasizing the nature of drama, including the integration of verse, dialogue, stagecraft, and narrative. Guan Xian asserts that Zang's editorial genius lies in his ability to adapt Yuan *zaju* to the standards of his era, ensuring its influence for generations. Therefore, *Yuanquxuan* stands as a testament to artistic adaptation and cultural transmission and communication.

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