

The Contradiction and Discussion Surrounding Xu Fuzuo's View on the Functions of Traditional Chinese Opera and Mao Jin's Compilation of Sixty Operas (Liushi Zhongqu)

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ABSTRACT

There are notable differences in the perspectives on the functions of traditional Chinese opera between Xu Fuzuo and Mao Jin. Xu Fuzuo opposed the notion of using opera as a vehicle for moral guidance and social atmosphere (fēnghuà, roughly "social norms and customs" or "ethos"), while Mao Jin emphasized its didactic role. Despite Xu Fuzuo's adherence to the principle of "authenticity" (běnsè) in his works, they inadvertently exhibited didactic functions, a phenomenon tied to the sociocultural milieu and prevailing trends in opera during the late Ming dynasty. By examining Xu Fuzuo's views on the functions of traditional Chinese opera and Mao Jin's editorial practice in compiling Sixty Operas (Liushi Zhongqu) through the lenses of Reception Aesthetics and Reader-Response Theory, we uncover significant disparities in their perceptions of the textual orientation, functional cognition, and modes of reception concerning traditional Chinese opera. Furthermore, these differences illuminate the tension between "literary appreciation" (ántóu, referring to the appreciation of a written text) and "stage performance" (chǎngshàng, referring to live theatrical presentation) within the late Ming dynasty's conceptualization of traditional Chinese opera.

KEYWORDS

Sixty operas (Liushi Zhongqu); Xu Fuzuo; Mao Jin; Reception aesthetics

1 The contradictions between Xu FuZuo's view on the functions of traditional Chinese opera and Mao Jin's editorial intentions

Academic research on Sixty Operas (Liushi Zhongqu) has primarily centered on its compilation and textual version studies, document research and collation, textual analysis, socio-cultural explorations, as well as its relevance in linguistic studies. Within the realm of compilation and version studies, scholars have predominantly focused on the compiler(s), compilation framework, principles, and comparative analyses of different editions. However, there has been limited exploration into the ideological contradictions arising between the compiler's views and those of the original playwrights.^[1] The compiler, Mao Jin, was an advocate of moral guidance and social ethos, championing feudal ethics and morality to enlighten the populace and uphold societal norms. In compiling Sixty Operas, he incorporated "social didactic functions" as one of his objectives. Conversely, Xu Fuzuo, in his work *Qu Lun* (On Opera), held a more radical stance, advocating for the "authentic essence" (běnsè) of traditional Chinese opera and opposing its use as a tool for moral instruction. This paper delves into this discourse, employing Reception Aesthetics and Reader-Response Theory as a theoretical framework to further elucidate and advance the exploration of the contradictions in the views on the functions of traditional Chinese opera between the compiler Mao Jin and the author Xu Fuzuo.

In his work *Qu Lun* (On Opera), Xu Fuzuo proposed the concept of "authentic essence and professional mastery" (běnsè dāngxíng), advocating for an aesthetic stance in traditional Chinese opera that leaned away from social didacticism.^[2] Wang Shizhen, in his critique of *The Pavilion of Adoring the Moon* (Baiyue Ting), articulated the "three shortcomings" of the play, particularly condemning its alleged lack of "romantic allure and moral edification."^[3] Xu Fuzuo countered this critique, arguing, "To cite 'lack of romantic allure and moral edification' as two shortcomings shows a misunderstanding. *The Pavilion of Adoring the Moon* is, in fact, replete with romantic charm, while moral edification ought to be the concern of Confucian moralists, not poets and literati. Furthermore, to criticize the play for failing to move the audience to tears by the end of the performance as a third shortcoming is to ignore the very purpose of song and drama, which is to accompany festive gatherings. If the criterion for excellence is solely the ability to induce tears, then would we also use *The Song of the Allium* (Xie Ge) and *The Dirge of the Graveyard* (Haoli) as drinking accompaniments?" Additionally, when Mei Yujin incorporated verses from the Buddhist scripture *Nirvana Sutra* (Niepan Jing) into his play *Jade Lotus Record* (Yuhe Ji), Xu Fuzuo remarked, "While it is true that the verses are from the *Nirvana Sutra*... does this

imply that 'Samyak-sambuddha' and other Buddhist terms are mere ingredients for drama? This style may captivate the uninitiated, but it ultimately corrupts the integrity of drama and should not be emulated."^[2] Given Buddhism's inherent didactic function of advocating for moral virtue and societal purification, Xu Fuzuo's opposition to the integration of Buddhist language into drama underscores his stance against the didactic function of drama.

In contrast, Mao Jin, in compiling *Sixty Operas*, prioritized the didactic function of drama as a key criterion for selection.^[4] Responding to political exigencies, economic developments, and prevailing socio-cultural trends, the didactic function of drama emerged as a prominent feature of Ming dynasty theatrical fashion, a trend that Mao Jin accurately grasped and embraced. In the preface to the first volume of *Sixty Operas*, titled *Yanju Shoutao Bianyu* (Preface to the First Collection of Plays), Mao Jin stated that the selected operas within *Sixty Operas* embodied didactic values such as "inculcating loyalty, nurturing filial piety, cultivating integrity, and upholding righteousness."^[1] The didactic function of drama in *Sixty Operas* extends beyond the first volume, which primarily focuses on moral and ethical edification. It permeates other genres, including romantic dramas, political dramas, and celestial-Daoist dramas, where concepts such as loyalty, filial piety, integrity, righteousness, good and evil, and the divine-supernatural exert a didactic influence on Ming dynasty society.^[5]

This brings us to the central contradictions: Mao Jin compiled *Sixty Operas* with a didactic intent, yet he included Xu Fuzuo's works *The Tale of the Red Pear Blossom* (*Hongli Ji*) and *The Record of Casting the Shuttle* (*Tousuo Ji*), both of which were penned by an author who opposed the didactic function of drama. This paradox gives rise to two questions: First, why did Mao Jin still incorporate Xu Fuzuo's dramas into *Sixty Operas* despite the latter's opposition to the didactic function of drama? Second, do Xu Fuzuo's works, in actuality, possess didactic functions, and if so, why?

2 The influence and didactic efficacy of xu fuzuo's legendary plays before and after mao jin's compilation, as well as the overall impact of sixty operas

Before the emergence of *Sixty Operas* (Liushi Zhongqu) and Xu Fuzuo's *chuanqi* (legendary) dramas, traditional Chinese opera already possessed a certain didactic function. Xu Fuzuo's *Hongli Ji* (*The Tale of the Red Pear Blossom*) was adapted from Zhang Shouqing's Yuan *zaju* (a form of Chinese drama) *Xie Jinlian's Poetry, Wine, and the Red Pear Blossom*, which had already wielded notable influence during the Yuan dynasty.^[6] The evolution from *Xie Jinlian's Poetry, Wine, and the Red Pear Blossom* to *Hongli Ji* traversed multiple versions. Shi Zizhang of the Yuan dynasty composed another *zaju* play, *Listening to the Zither in the Bamboo Grove* (*Zhuwu Tingqin*), inspired by the same tale, while someone else penned a *nanxi* (a form of southern Chinese drama) titled *Poetry, Wine, and the Red Pear Blossom*. In the Ming dynasty, Wang Yuanshou created *Lihua Ji* (*The Tale of the Pear Blossom*), which Xu Fuzuo later adapted into his *chuanqi* play *Hongli Ji*.^[7] It is evident that *Xie Jinlian's Poetry, Wine, and the Red Pear Blossom* exerted a profound and lasting influence on subsequent generations. The didactic function of traditional Chinese opera gradually crystallized during the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties. In the early Ming, Zhu Yuanzhang implemented a stringent cultural policy, advocating for the didactic role of opera creation. He once remarked, "Gao Ming's *Pipa Ji* (*The Lute*) is akin to rare delicacies from the mountains and seas, indispensable for the affluent and noble."^[8] Additionally, a series of laws and regulations enacted by the Ming court to tighten cultural control also fueled the "emotion-oriented" literary trend, which became an idealized spiritual pursuit among literati. *Xie Jinlian's Poetry, Wine, and the Red Pear Blossom* resonated with the literati's idealized spiritual connotation of "qing" (emotion or sentiment), thus garnering significant influence.^[9] However, under the cultural despotism and the ideological dominance of Neo-Confucianism (*Lixue*) during the early Ming, along with the guidance of cultural inertia, literati and audiences alike embraced didactic dramas, amplifying the influence of didacticism within the realm of traditional Chinese opera. This resulted in the didactic function of early Ming dynasty opera becoming overly rigid and narrow-minded.

Sixty Operas stood as the most widely circulated and influential anthology of traditional Chinese drama in its time. Comprising six successive sets, each containing ten plays, the fact that many of its printing plates became worn and illegible attests to its immense popularity during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Moreover, it has endured through the ages, preserved to the present day, with Zheng Zhenduo hailing it as "the most extensive and significant compilation of Ming dynasty *chuanqi* dramas in existence."^[10] Through diverse channels of dissemination—such as commercial printing and distribution by publishing houses, performances by local theatrical troupes, and the circulation of manuscript copies among literati—*Sixty Operas* permeated all strata of society. The breadth of its reach and influence suggests, to a significant extent, that the publication of *Sixty Operas* amplified the didactic impact of traditional Chinese drama.

3 An exploration of contradictions from the perspectives of reception aesthetics and reader-response theory

Reception aesthetics and reader-response Theory were initially proposed by Hans Robert Jauss of the Federal Republic of Germany. He posited that "the educational and recreational functions of a work are realized through the reader's engagement with it, and this process of realization is where the work acquires vitality and attains its final completion. Readers, in this context, are active participants and the driving force behind literary creation. The reception of literature is governed not only by the nature of the work itself but also by the reader. Reception Aesthetics categorizes literary reception into two forms: social reception and individual reception."^[11]

During the Ming dynasty, most dramatists were influenced by the Neo-Confucianism (Lixue) of the Song and Ming dynasties, shaping their unique aesthetic understandings of emotions, desires, and sexuality. Xu Fuzuo, in his works *The Tale of the Red Pear Blossom* (Hongli Ji) and *The Record of Casting the Shuttle* (Tousuo Ji), embodied his distinctive aesthetic interpretations, infusing his plays with the philosophy of "supreme emotions" (zhiqing). Here, "qing" (emotion) signifies the protagonists' inherent desires, as exemplified by Zhao Ruzhou's aria: "In life's grand desires, men and women share common ground. Even the most demure and virtuous maiden fears the passage of youth without a worthy companion, yearning to meet a gentleman of noble character." This unabashed expression of desire positions individual "qing" against the traditional societal "rites" (li). Xu Fuzuo believed that his emphasis on "qing" contradicted conventional didactic notions. When Mao Jin compiled the scripts for *Sixty Operas*, Xu Fuzuo was the author, and Mao Jin the reader. The didactic notions perceived by Mao Jin, the reader, in Xu Fuzuo's works encompassed concepts such as loyalty to the monarch and patriotism, chastity, and chivalry in *Hongli Ji*, as well as loyalty to the monarch and patriotism, and chastity in *Tousuo Ji*.^[12] Xu Fuzuo, though not entirely immune to the constraints of his era, inadvertently integrated traditional societal didactic concepts into his works. The didactic function of Ming chuanqi (legendary) dramas was objectively present, yet Mao Jin recognized the inclusion of non-typical didactic elements. The first collection compiled by Mao Jin focused on scripts concerning traditional moral edification, whereas Xu Fuzuo's works, incorporated into the fourth collection, served other didactic purposes.^[13] Xu Fuzuo's creations embodied non-traditional didactic functions that deviated from societal norms of his time. Consequently, his advocacy for drama free from didacticism clashed with Mao Jin's perception of didactic functions. During the late Ming dynasty, the requirements for didacticism in drama gradually relaxed, imbuing the didactic significance of drama with new connotations. These new connotations, aligned with Mao Jin's stance, included the pursuit of emotional desires and the philosophy of "supreme emotions," which emerged as a fresh dimension of didacticism.

Furthermore, although Xu Fuzuo's operatic creations were not quintessential political didactic dramas of the Ming dynasty, the debut of his *The Tale of the Red Pear Blossom* (Hongli Ji) had a profound psychological impact on the common populace. These operas, rather than propagating traditional moral edification, gradually fostered a new wave of didactic fervor through their interpretation of "qing" (emotion or sentiment), resonating deeply with the hearts and minds of the people. Following the publication of *Sixty Operas*, Mao Jin assumed the role of compiler, while the common people became readers. Within the framework of didactic consciousness constructed by Mao Jin's compilation, readers were influenced not only by this structural framework but also by the prevailing socio-cultural milieu. During the late Ming dynasty, as the feudal autocracy decayed and commodity economy flourished, societal mores gradually liberalized, and perceptions of sexuality and desire underwent significant transformations. Thinkers and literati such as Li Zhi, Yuan Hongdao, Tang Xianzu, and Feng Menglong spearheaded a movement against tradition and Confucian orthodoxy, denouncing asceticism and advocating for the affirmation of human nature and emotions. They argued that "the pursuit of wealth and beauty" was intrinsic to human nature and should not be artificially constrained, aligning with the philosophy of "supreme emotions" (zhiqing) as a new didactic dimension.^[14] The iterative reception activities by society and individuals led to the sedimentation of the "supreme emotions" philosophy as a novel didactic connotation, which in turn reciprocally influenced authors' literary creations.

With the advent of *Sixty Operas*, the didactic scope of traditional Chinese drama expanded. In the early Ming, numerous moral edification dramas emerged, primarily focusing on the realm of moral rectitude. Mao Jin, however, explicitly underscored the didactic purposes of drama, selecting scripts based on his personal values and balancing "qing" (emotion) and "li" (reason or rationale). These scripts were imbued with Mao Jin's intended didactic intentions, thereby broadening the didactic scope of *Sixty Operas*. Consequently, the didactic thoughts embedded in Xu Fuzuo's works were reinforced and propagated more explicitly through Mao Jin's curatorial efforts, which clarified and accentuated their didactic functions.

4 Conclusion

The new didactic ideologies and values in Xu Fuzuo's operatic works, which Mao Jin discerned and emphasized in Sixty Operas but of which Xu himself may not have been fully conscious, underscore Mao Jin's acute sensitivity to literary merit and his foresight into societal trends. Mao Jin's editorial ethos for Sixty Operas has exerted a profound and lasting influence on the compilation of subsequent operatic anthologies. He placed equal emphasis on the artistic value of works and their societal resonance and dissemination. Qian Qianyi, in his Epitaph for Master Mao Jin of Yinhu, lauded Mao Jin's editorial endeavors, stating, "He dedicated himself to the meticulous collation and dissemination of complete canonical and historical texts, ensuring that scholars could trace their origins and navigate their complexities. Additionally, he sought out lost classics and obscure texts, all to complement and reinforce orthodox learning." This praise highlights Mao Jin's role in rectifying the superficial and hollow academic trends of his time through his publishing efforts.^[15]

The symbiotic relationship between societal and readerly reception on one hand, and authorial and editorial endeavors on the other, epitomizes the timeless allure of literature as it traverses temporal and spatial boundaries. The exploration of the ideological tensions between Mao Jin, the compiler, and Xu Fuzuo, the author, offers pertinent insights for contemporary cultural practitioners. It underscores the importance of upholding the social responsibilities inherent in artistic creation while simultaneously fostering a pluralistic cultural landscape.

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