

## **Chinese Drama: A Reflection of Contemporary Realities**

**Doris, Paschal-Mbakwe**

Department of English Language and Literature

Nnamdi Azikiwe University

Awka, Nigeria.

Phone: +2348032788838

Email: dn.paschal@unizik.edu.ng

### **Abstract**

Chinese drama, which is deeply rooted in the nation's cultural heritage, has evolved over time, from classical to modern. This article explores how four notable Chinese influential playwrights - Guan Hanqing, Tang Xianzu, Kong Shangren, and Cao Yu - utilized drama to comment on the social, cultural, and political realities of their respective eras. Their works have significantly shaped the genre. These playwrights, spanning dynasties and modern era, include pioneers such as Guan Hanqing of the Yuan Dynasty, whose classical masterpieces created the groundwork for Chinese theatre, and Cao Yu, whose modernist approaches transformed 20th-century Chinese drama. The exploration delves into their distinct contributions, thematic preoccupations, and stylistic innovations, hence the researcher did a critical analysis of the playwrights' factors in the development of Chinese drama using primary and secondary sources of data collection. It is in this regards that this study is guided by the theory of New Historicism, which is the study of literature that investigates social and historical issues, complex ethical issues, encourages empathy and understanding. However, the paper discovers the socio-political contexts in which these playwrights produced their works, highlighting how Chinese drama has served as both an artistic and political tool throughout history. However, the paper also provides insight into how these writers have shaped Chinese drama. The study promotes the rich and diverse tradition of Chinese drama, which has long served as a mirror to the nation's soul, reflecting the complexities, struggles, and aspirations of its people.

**Keywords: Dynasties, Modernist, Exploration, Thematic, Innovations.**

## Introduction

The birth year of the Chinese drama is unknown. Dates are variously suggested and disagreed upon and enclose a period of more than twenty-five centuries. Chinese drama is one of the most ancient and distinguished theatrical traditions in the world, with a history stretching back over a thousand years. It includes forms such as *Zaju* (variety shows), *Kunqu* (opera), and modern spoken drama (*huaju*), reflecting the evolution of Chinese society, politics, and aesthetics. Early Chinese theater was often associated with religious and court performances, but over time, it became a medium for addressing social issues and expressing intellectual and emotional concerns. The development of Chinese drama can be traced through several key eras. In the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), the playwright Guan Hanqing is renowned for his works that depicted the struggles of ordinary people against corrupt officials. The Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911)

dynasties also produced several important dramatists, such as Tang Xianzu, whose play *The Peony Pavilion* is still celebrated for its poetic beauty and deep emotional resonance.

In the 20th century, playwrights like Cao Yu brought a more modern sensibility to Chinese drama, incorporating Western influences and addressing contemporary social and political issues. His masterpiece *Thunderstorm* is regarded as a cornerstone of modern Chinese theater. As the genre continues to evolve in the 21st century, Chinese dramatists remain deeply engaged with the cultural, social, and political landscape, making it a rich area for literary exploration.

This researcher will explore the theoretical anchor of this paper, the contributions of these notable dramatists, discussing their unique styles, major works,

and the lasting impact they have had on Chinese drama.

### **New Historicism as Theoretical Anchor**

The researcher critically examines the playwrights Guan Hanqing, Tang Xianzu, Kong Shangren, and Cao Yu's immeasurable contributions that factor in the development of the world literature (Chinese drama). Drama is a cultural based phenomenon through stage performance and storytelling, it is in this regards that the theory is guided by the theory of New Historicism. The literary theory of New Historicism which Greenblatt, Stephen propounded is developed in the late 1970s in response to perceived excesses of New Criticism, which tended to ignore the importance of historical context of a work of art. It is therefore the theory that connects literary works to the social and historical currents of their time. Then theory assumes that we cannot know (study and understand) the text separate from their historical context of a work of art.

The theory suggests that literature must be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and the critic. It insists that all interpretations are subjectively filtered through one's own set of historically conditioned viewpoints. History is an intersection of discourses that establish a dominant ideology. The real center of enquiry is not the text but the history. The play is an example of many types of discourse that reveal history. Consequently, it can be said that New Historicism investigates the life of the playwright, social rules found within the play, the manner in which the play reveals historical situations and the way in which other historical texts can help us understand the play.

### **Guan Hanqing: Social Justice in the Yuan Dynasty**

Guan Hanqing's *The Injustice to Dou E* (Snow in Midsummer), written during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), is a scathing

critique of social injustice and corruption. The play tells the story of Dou E, a woman wrongly accused and executed for a crime she did not commit. Guan's work highlights the dark underbelly of Mongol rule, where social hierarchy and corruption reigned supreme.

Guan Hanqing, often referred to as the "Father of Chinese Drama," is one of the most celebrated playwrights of the Yuan dynasty about 700 years ago. His classic work, *The Injustice to Dou E*, has been translated into a number of languages and achieved world-wide fame. Guan Hanqing was talented and versatile. He was good at writing poems, playing chess, and was a musical expert. He could play Xiao and Quin well and was a very experienced dancer. He used to work in the medical department for the royal family, but became disillusioned with medicine. He then turned his attention to writing plays, and displayed a great enthusiasm for it. There was a drama form,

called Zaju, that was popular at the time. It reflected the reality of the society and received warm welcome by the people. Guan's plays did not aspire to entertain nobles but articulate the bitterness of the common people. This was a tragic point in history as courts were busy dealing with endless fights and riots. Guan Hanqing quit his job and wrote about the common life in his plays. His accomplishment in folk language brought his work close to people's daily lives. Despite the low status of the actors, Guan Hanqing got along well with folk artists and acted on stage himself. He described his character in a play as "a sound copper bean which can't be steamed or scabbled." In other words, his works reflected the spirit of a fighter. The characters in the plays were upright, courageous and rebellious. *The Injustice to Dou E* was his masterpiece.

### ***The Injustice to Dou E***

*Dou E Yuan*, commonly translated as *The Injustice to Dou E*, is the masterpiece of

Guan Hanqing, a playwright during the Yuan Dynasty (A.D. 1271-1368). The full Chinese title of the play is *Gan Tiang Dong Di Dou E Yuan*, which translates to *The Injustice to Dou E that touched Heaven and Earth*. This story was about Dou E, a young woman from Chuzhou, who was wrongly convicted of crimes by a corrupt court official and sentenced to death. *Dou E Yuan* was a traditional Chinese drama staged in about 86 Chinese operas. Today, the phrase “snowing in June” is still widely used among Chinese speakers as a metaphor for the miscarriage of justice.

Dou E lost her mother when she was a child. Her father, Dou Tianzhang, was a poor scholar. In order to raise money for his journey to the capital to sit for the imperial examination, he was forced to borrow 5 gold pieces from a widow, Cai Po. After one year, the debt of the 5 gold pieces escalated to 10. Dou Tianzhang could not repay the debt and was forced to sell his daughter to the Cai

family as a child bride. After she grew up, she married into the Cai family. Her husband died two years after their marriage, leaving her and her mother-in-law behind to depend on each other. One day, she and her mother-in-law were bullied by an unscrupulous physician and, by coincidence, were saved by the hooligan Zhang Lu'er and his father. Zhang offered to “protect” them and moved into their house against their will. Zhang tried to force Dou E to marry him, but she refused.

Cai Po fell ill one day, and Dou E prepared soup for her mother-in-law. Zhang Lu'er plotted to murder Cai Po by putting poison in the soup so that when the mother-in-law died, he could force her to marry him. However, Cai Po vomited and did not drink the soup. Zhang's father unknowingly drank the soup instead and died from poisoning. Zhang then framed Dou E for murdering his father. She was arrested and brought before the governor, whom Zhang bribed. She was subject to cruel tortures to force her to

confess to the crime. The kind-hearted Dou E did not want her mother-in-law to be implicated, so she admitted to the murder and was sentenced to death by beheading.

In the sixth lunar month (midsummer), she was brought to the execution ground. Before the execution, she wanted a white chain to be hung on the flagpole. She swore that if she was innocent and after she died, her blood would not drip onto the ground but instead splash onto the white chain on the flagpole. This would be followed by heavy snowfall in midsummer, and three feet of snow would cover her body. Chuzhou also experienced a drought for three years. After the knife fell, not even a drop of blood spilled on the ground, but instead splashed onto the white chain on the flagpole. Dark clouds covered the sky, and there was snowfall followed by drought in Chuzhou for three years.

Years later, Dou E's father, Dou Tianzhang, became a government official

after passing his imperial examination. He was assigned to Chuzhou to check on the situation. On his arrival at Chuzhou, he found that there had not been a drop of rain in the past three years, and he suspected there must be some case of grievances. One night, while he was going through Dou E's case, her soul appeared before her father. She told his father about her grievances. Dou Tianzhang ordered a reinvestigation of the case, and the truth finally came to light. She was posthumously proclaimed innocent. Zhang Lu'er was given the death penalty, and the governor was dismissed from his post. Chinese people still remember Dou E's story after hundreds of years. They admire the traditional drama, which reveals the important moral concept of good and evil, grievances and oath.

### **Ming Dynasty:Tang Xianzu: Love and Mortality in the Ming Dynasty**

Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion* penned during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), explores themes of love, mortality,

and social class. The play follows the story of Du Liniang, a young woman who falls in love with a scholar, Liu Mengmei. Tang's masterpiece reflects the cultural revival of the Ming era, where Confucianism and social hierarchy were deeply ingrained.

The playwright Tang Xianzu, virtually unknown outside of China, is the country's most popular dramatist, famous above all for the *Four Dreams*—four works originally adapted to be performed as traditional Chinese operas (known as *kunqu*). If they are their country's respective greatest playwrights, Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu share more than status: both wrote during the same period, and died in 1616. One can see why excited comparisons between the two have prospered for so long. Tang Xianzu was born in 1550 in Linchuan, now known as Fuzhou, in the Jiangxi province. He initially joined the civil service after passing China's famous government examinations: the provincial

exam at the age of 21, and the imperial one at 34. Despite leading a successful career as a minor official, he retired in 1598 to devote himself to writing. His reputation in China is that of a very straight, honest figure—one strictly against the bureaucratic corruption so typical of the time—and it is said he left government employment because his coworkers didn't like him for it

Although he was also a poet, novelist, astronomer, fortune teller, and geographer Tang is known predominantly for four plays, banded together under the name *The Four Dreams of Linchuan*. The individual plays are: *Zi chai ji* (*The Purple Hairpin*), *Nan ke ji* (*A Dream Under a Southern Bough*), *Handan Meng* (*Dream of Handan*), and, most famous of all, the *Mu Dan Ting* (*The Peony Pavilion*).

### ***The Peony Pavilion***

*The Peony Pavilion* is considered masterpiece. Over 55 scenes it explores the

passions of young Du Liniang, daughter of Du Bao, the governor of Nan'an. After dreaming of a young scholar she meets in a peony pavilion, Du Liniang suddenly falls ill. Before dying, she leaves a self-portrait of herself and a poem with her maid, with orders to hide these under a stone by the plum tree at Taihu Lake. Three years later, a scholar named Liu Mengmei dreams of Du Liniang. In his dream, he and Du Liniang fall madly in love. It is the strength of this love that helps Liu Mengmei to revive Du Liniang from the grave. After confronting Du Liniang's father, the couple marry and live a long and happy life.

The distinctive aspect of *The Peony Pavilion* is Du Liniang's life and death. The fact that a female heroine in a society dominated by moral obligations and a strict hierarchical order can pursue and accomplish her true love – defying even death – is no small matter. Echoing Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* with its theme of forbidden and

endangered love, instead Tang's play does not end in tragedy but with a message of hope that celebrates true love over death and the constraints imposed by society.

### **Kong Shangren: Legacy of Chinese Opera, Politics and Loyalty in the Qing Dynasty**

Kong Shangren's *The Peach Blossom Fan*, written during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), examines the complexities of politics, loyalty, and cultural identity. The play revolves around the tumultuous reign of Emperor Wu Zetian and the loyalist Hou Fangyu. Kong's work critiques the Manchu rule and cultural suppression of the Qing era.

A descendant of Confucius, he was born in Qufu, Shandong province and had a distinguished career as a scholar-official. He was also one of the outstanding playwrights of the Qing dynasties, his fame resting largely on his authorship of *The Peach Blossom Fan* (1699), a historical drama based on events which occurred around the



time of the collapse of the Southern Ming. He retired from office shortly after the play appeared and concentrated on writing poetry.

### ***The Peach Blossom Fan***

A tale of battling armies, political intrigue, star-crossed romance, and historical cataclysm, *The Peach Blossom Fan* is one of the masterpieces of Chinese literature, a vast dramatic composition that combines the range and depth of a great novel with the swift intensity of film.

In the mid-1640s, famine sweeps through China. The Ming dynasty, almost 300 years old, lurches to a bloody end. Peking falls to the Manchus, the emperor hangs himself, and Ming loyalists take refuge in the southern capital of Nanking. Two valiant generals seek to defend the city, but nothing can overcome the corruption, decadence, and factionalism of the court in exile. The newly installed emperor cares for nothing but

theater, leaving practical matters to the insidious Ma Shih-ying. Ma's crony Juan Tach'eng is as unscrupulous an operator as he is sophisticated a poet. He diverts resources from the starving troops in order to stage a spectacular production of his latest play. History, however, has little time for make-believe, though the earnest members of the Revival Club, centered on the handsome young scholar Hou Fang-yü and his lover Fragrant Princess, struggle to discover a happy ending.

### **Cao Yu: Modern Era and the Transformation of Chinese Drama, Family and Social Change in Republican China**

Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* and *Sunrise*, written during the Republican era (1912-1949), delve into the intricacies of family relationships and social change. These plays reflect the modernization, urbanization, and social upheaval that characterized early 20th-century China.

Cao Yu was a renowned Chinese playwright often regarded as China's most important of the twentieth century. Some call him "the Shakespeare of China". His most well-known works are *Thunderstorm* (1933), *Sunrise* (1936), and *Peking Man* (1940). It is largely through the efforts of Cao Yu that modern Chinese "spoken theater" took root in twentieth century Chinese literature.

Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* is a classic and undoubtedly one of the most popular Chinese dramatic works. The plot of *Thunderstorm* centers on one family's psychological and physical destruction as a result of incest, as perpetrated at the hands of its morally depraved and corrupt patriarch, Zhou Puyuan. The complex relationships between family members and conflicts between social classes make this a gripping and occasionally suffocating play. In *Sunrise*, it revolves around Chen Bailu and Fang Dasheng, regarding Chen's living room and Baohe Xiachu, a third class brothel as its arenas to

vividly reveal people from all walks of life before the audience and unveil the nature of the system of feudal exploitation characterized by "harming the weak and serving the strong". In artistic creation, the author tried to present the real society life by adopting the cross-sectional description. Therefore, *Sunrise* has the documentary features, and everything in it is like things in real life instead of those in a "play".

### **Conclusion**

In recent decades, Chinese drama has continued to evolve, with contemporary playwrights exploring new themes and forms. The contributions of notable writers in Chinese drama writers have helped shape the genre's growth and ensure its continuous relevance in both Chinese and worldwide contexts. From the classical works of Guan Hanqing and Tang Xianzu to the modern innovations of Cao Yu and Gao Xingjian, Chinese play has changed over the ages without losing its distinct cultural identity.

The works of these Chinese playwrights demonstrate the power of Chinese drama to reflect and critique contemporary realities. Through their plays, these playwrights offer insights into the human experience, revealing the complexities and challenges faced by individuals and society. Their contributions to Chinese literature continue to resonate, providing a window into the nation's past, present, and future.

Chinese drama has also gained a global audience through translations, adaptations, and performances in various countries. The universal themes and artistic innovation found in Chinese drama have made it a significant part of world literature and performing arts, influencing theater practices beyond China. As Chinese drama evolves to reflect contemporary realities, the legacy of these influential playwrights serves as a testament to the enduring power of the genre.

### Works Cited

- Barbatsis, Gretchen. "Narrative Theory" in *Handbook of Visual Communication*, Kenneth Louis Smith, Sandra Moriarty, Gretchen Barbatsis, Keith Kenny. LEA Mahwah, 2005.
- Cao, Yu. *Thunderstorm*. Foreign Languages Press, 1986
- Denton, Kirk. *The Columbia Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*. Columbia University Press, 2016.
- Fisher, Walter. "Narration has a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument". *Communication Monograph*. Vol. 51, No. 1-22.1984.
- Gotric, Kacke. *Apidan Theatre of Modern Drama*. Goteborg: Graphic Systems AB, 1984.
- Guan Hanqing. *The Columbia Encyclopedia*. Columbia University Press, 2016.
- The Injustice to Dou E: A Sourcebook*. Columbia University Press, 2013.

Kong Shangren. *The Peach Blossom Fan*.

Translated by Chen Shih-hsiang and

Harold Acton, 2005.

Idema, Wilt. *The Dramatic Oeuvre of Tang*

*Xianzu*. Brill, 2015.

Laughlin, Charles. *Chinese Reportage: The*

*Aesthetics of Historical Experience*. Duke

University Press, 2002.

Tang, Xianzu. *The Peony Pavilion*. Indiana

University Press, 1980.

Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, 2008.

Wilson, Edwin and Goldfarb, Alvin. *Theatre:*

*The Lively Arts*. Trump Waldman Graphics,

1991.