

A Study on the Dramatic Function of Supporting Characters Under the Perspective of Sentimental Noumenon

Taking Yang Miaozen in *The Peony Pavilion* as an Example

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ABSTRACT

In *The Peony Pavilion*, Tang Xianzu utters the idealistic cry that "The living may die, the dead may quicken." This Kunqu Opera revolves around the legendary love story of a couple in turbulent times. Compared to the narrative structure of the story *The Resurrection of Du Li-Niang*, Tang Xianzu adds a subplot involving Li Quan and Yang Miaozen, who attack the Huaiyang region of the Southern Song Dynasty, forming a mirror image contrast with the main characters. This article combines historical facts and analyzes the dramatic function of Yang Miaozen from the perspectives of narratology, semiotic functionalism, and stage performance, providing theoretical supplements for the study of Tang Xianzu.

Keywords: Sentimental noumenon, Supporting role, *The Peony Pavilion*, Yang Miaozen, Clown, Narratology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tang Xianzu(汤显祖) *The Peony Pavilion*(《牡丹亭》) centers on the romantic entanglements between Du Li-niang(杜丽娘) and Liu Mengmei(柳梦梅), conveying the authors profound concept of sentimental noumenon. Beyond the timeless love between Du and Liu, this Kunqu Opera also features a couple that cannot be overlooked: Li Quan(李全) and Yang Miaozen(杨妙真).

Compared to the story of *The Resurrection of Du Li-Niang*(《杜丽娘慕色还魂记》), *The Peony Pavilion* adds a subplot where the rebel couple Li Quan and Yang Miaozen attack the Southern Song Dynasty(南宋). This subplot not only enriches and deepens the narrative of the main characters but also reflects the authors concern for the nations fate and his deep longing for the homeland. The main plot and subplot intertwine, blending personal love and hate with the grand joys and sorrows of national rise and fall. This article primarily focuses on the analysis of the supporting character Yang Miaozen in the opera.

2. A DISCUSSION ON THE CHARACTER IMAGE OF YANG MIAOZEN AS A SUPPORTING ROLE IN *THE PEONY PAVILION*

When people watch films or literary works, they often have a preconceived notion of the protagonists supremacy, an almost instinctive and almost one-sided partial psychological phenomenon — When we watch action movies, the heroic and dazzling protagonist often crashes into cars, knocks over vendors fruits, and frightens elderly passers-by while completing very hard tasks... However, the audiences first reaction is not to morally condemn the protagonists recklessness but to feel an indescribable excitement. This kind of excitement stems from, on the one hand, the aesthetic tension created by dramatic techniques, on the other hand, the unconscious conformity of the audience themselves. Clearly, in the realm of drama, the narrative perspective dominates, and it is almost impossible for characters to have equal status among themselves.

However, this does not mean that supporting characters and secondary plots are merely ornaments; they are also structural elements with independent aesthetic value. Therefore, professional audiences or critics should consciously treat the dramatic focal points and so-called "green leaves" equally. When appreciating the text, starting from insignificant details or secondary storylines, this method not only helps to broaden the high-dimensional perspective of the dramatic context and gain a comprehensive view but also allows for the discovery of hidden clues that reveal the true meanings which not directly stated by the author. This article uses the perspective of the rebel army led by Li Quan and Yang Miaozen in the Kunqu Opera *The Peony Pavilion* as a starting point, try to offering a supplementary analysis of the works dramatic structure from a path distinct from conventional Ming and Qing dynasty opera studies.

In the narrative structure of *The Peony Pavilion*, Tang Xianzu added a subplot involving Li Quan and Yang Miaozen, a couple who attacked the Huaiyang(淮扬) region of the Song Dynasty, compared to the story-teller's script *The Resurrection of Du Li-Niang*. This track of thought for composition is primarily based on historical facts, with the Du Bao's(杜宝) family being entirely fictional. The plot involving Jin Emperor Wanyan Liang(完颜亮) and his reorganized Yang Miaozen's rebel army is largely based on historical facts. Although this subplot is brief, it is crucial to the overall narrative, reflecting the authors deep concern for the national destiny.

The Peony Pavilion consists has fifty-five acts(折), four of which are directly related to the story of Yang Miaozen: *The Barbarian Spy*(《虏谍》), *The Huaiyang Alarm*(《淮警》), *The Brigands' Plot*(《寇间》), *Breaking the Siege*(《折寇》). In Act 19, *The She-Bandit*(《北贼》), Yang Miaozen makes her entrance in a heroic manner: "A hundred battles stir the heart of heroes bold, blood stains the Yan Zhi Mountain like rouge so cold. A lance sheds petals in the falling breeze, dots of pear blossoms dance with glee.(百战惹雌雄, 血映燕支重。一枝枪洒落花风, 点点梨花弄)." In the main storyline, Du Li-niang is portrayed as follows: "The oriole trills as if to speak, beholding spring so fair and meek.(From "Admonishing the Daughter" 《训女》)... Her dress of brightest green so fine, with jewels bright her hair divine.(From "The Dream Encounter" 《惊梦》)" Du Li-niang is depicted as a delicate and graceful woman, emphasizing her

beauty and gentleness, which aligns with the norms of the handsome scholars and beauties plays of the ancient time. In the play, Du Li-niang embodies the ideal of "The living may die, the dead may quicken(生可以死, 死可以生)", a character who embodies the value of emotion ontology. The contrast between her gentle appearance and her bold actions creates the most intense emotional tension in the entire play.

As it were, Yang Miaozen and Du Li-niang form a mirror reflection in the structural functionalism of the plot. At the beginning of *The She-Bandit*, Li Quan seeks advice from Yang: "I am brave but lack of strategic measures. I admire my wife Lady Yang, who can wield a pear blossom spear and is invincible against ten thousand men... Even the soldiers fear her. Indeed, as the saying goes: A bold wife alone dominates like a snake swallowing an elephant, a sea-pirate becomes a king like a fish turning into a dragon(山妻独霸蛇吞象, 海贼封王鱼变龙)." Clearly, Yang Miaozen's authority in the army far surpasses that of Li Quan. Whether based on historical facts or artistic conventions, the role of female generals is very rare. In *The Peony Pavilion*, Li Quan is brave but lack of strategy, while General Yang is both wise and brave, this contrast adds a "personality puzzle" to the classic narrative pattern between with the main characters of the play. The 45th act, *The Brigands' Plot*(《寇间》), and the 47th act *The Siege and Release*(《围释》) are connected, telling the story of the rebels besieging Huai'an(淮安) for a long time without success. They happen to encounter Chen Zui-liang(陈最良), who is heading to Huai'an to find Du Bao, and captured him. At this point, General Yang comes up with another plan, making Chen Zui-liang bring false news that Du Bao's wife and maids were killed, to make them lose faith in the battle. If the previous text only highlighted the outstanding appearance and temperament of this female general, then here it more vividly reveals her ruthlessness, which highlighting the independent subjectivity of a female character. The rude and crude Jin Dynasty(金朝) envoy comes to the camp to spy on military affairs and make a show of authority. She repeatedly asked Yang Miaozen to sing and wield the spear as company, but Yang remained calm and accepted all these impolite requests. This character trait adds a rational and political dimension to the play, elevating the traditional love story convention to a higher level. In the end, Chen Zui-Liang brought back Du Bao's letter of surrender. After weighing the pros and cons, Yang Miaozen verbally agreed

to submit to the Song Dynasty, but in reality, she did not align with either side and instead went into hiding as a bandit. We can see that Yang Miaozen made another correct judgment at the end: it was not that difficult to be a Gold-Seeking King or the Gold-Seeking Queen(讨金王和讨金娘娘), but that the Song Dynasty could not sincerely reconcile with the rebels. Yang Miaozen saw through Du Bao's scheme and, after carefully assessing the situation and the strength of all parties, resolutely decided to withdraw from the conflict to protect herself. In this way, what appears to be a play about handsome scholars and beauties(才子佳人戏) is underpinned by a layer of political intrigue, with Yang Miaozen's storyline serving as the narrative "momentum regulator" of the entire play.

If Du Li-niang represents the embodiment of Tang Xianzu's "challenging reason with emotion" philosophy, she still cannot escape the stereotypical image of women in traditional literature — Despite her bold defiance of patriarchal authority for love, she remains a delicate and vulnerable figure, a typical subject of male gaze; in contrast, Yang Miaozen breaks the traditional mold of woman — Born in turbulent times, under the circumstances where the barbarian tribes invaded from the south, the Northern Song Dynasty collapsed, and the Southern Song Dynasty merely sought peace in the JiangZuo(江左) region, she inherited her brother's Red Robe Army(红袄军). She is both wise and brave in battle, an outstanding warrior; as a partner, the relationship between Yang and Li is no less steady than that of Du and Liu. If Yang and Li were the main characters, *The Peony Pavilion* may become a grand martial arts and political drama akin to *The Return of the Condor Heroes*.

3. AN OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORICAL FIGURE YANG MIAOZEN

Li Quan and Yang Miaozen are historical figures. The main historical records about Yang Miaozen can be found in the *Song History*(《宋史》), Volume 476- 477, *The Biography of Li Quan*(《李全传》), the *Yuan History: Biography of Li Tan*(《元史·李壇传》), Zhou Mi's *The Gossip of Qi-Dong*(周密《齐东野语》), Volume 9, *Biography of Li Quan*, and the *Jin History*(《金史》). However, These several historical records vary and lack details regarding Yang Miying's birth and death dates, as well as her achievements and deeds.

Yang Miaozen, from Yidu (益都) which present-day Qingzhou(青州), Shandong, was born around 1195. She was skilled in riding and archery, and her invention of the pear blossom spear was unmatched in the world. According to *The Gossip of Qi-Dong*(《齐东野语》) Volume 9, *Li Quan*: "(Yang An'er 杨安儿) had a sister named Little Sister(小姐姐), or some say she was his daughter, later known as Auntie(姑姑)."¹ At the end of the Jin Dynasty, when the country was in great turmoil, Yang Miaozen and her brother Yang An'er rose up in Shandong to organize troops against the Jin. The rebel army, dressed in red jackets, was known as the Red Robe Army(红袄军). Later, Yang An'er was drowned by the Jin spy boatman Qu Cheng(舟人曲成), and Yang Miaozen took over her brothers position, leading the army against the Jin. Around 1216, Yang Miaozen led her troops to occupy Mount Moxi(磨旗山) in Juzhou(莒州), Shandong (now Maqi Mountain in southeastern Ju'nan County, 今莒南县东南的马耆山) and established a base. Another peasant uprising troops led by Li Quan also passed through here. According to the *Song History* Volume 476, *Biography of Li Quan*: "An'er's fourth sister was cunning and fierce, skilled in riding and archery. Li Quan gathered the defeated soldiers and appointed her as their leader, calling her Auntie. She commanded more than ten thousand people, plundering to Mount Moxi(磨旗山). Li Quan joined with her forces, and Yang Miaozen was connected to him, and she married him." After that, Li Quan led the troops, and Yang Miaozen assisted, becoming the most influential rebel army at the end of the Song Dynasty. Regarding the issue of Yang Miaozen's title, Professor Jiang Xidong(姜锡东) from the School of History at Hebei University pointed out in an article: "Why is it no longer called Yang Siniangzi(杨四娘子) or Little Sister? Mr.Wang Ting(王颀) believes that the term Gugu(姑姑) in military calls originates from Yang You's title."² Yang You(杨友), The son of Yang An'er's cousin, is referred to as Gugu. The term Gugu has Taoist connotation and is commonly used to honor women of high moral standing and respect. "During her southern move to settle in Chuzhou(楚州), Yang Gugu largely left behind her life of hardship and military campaigns, focusing on supporting her husband, raising children, managing the camp, and serving as a spiritual

1. Zhou Mi: *The Gossip of Qi-Dong*, Volume 9, *Biography of Li Quan*, Zhonghua Book Company, 1983 edition, page 158.

2. Jiang Xidong: On the Title, Birth and Death Years and Provincial Position of Yang Miaozen, *Dongyue Essays*, Vol. 34, No.8, 2013, p. 81.

leader, which provided her with ample leisure time to engage with Taoist priests and the Taoist faith.”³ In 1231, Li Quan died outside Yangzhou(扬州) City — “After 1231, Yang was known as Yang Miaozen, likely because she had officially joined the Quanzhen Sect(全真教) and adopted the Taoist name Miaozen.”⁴

According to Volume 477 of the *History of Song*, in the *Biography of Li Quan*, it is recorded: “In May of the fourth year of Shaoding(绍定), Yang Miaozen told Zheng Yande(郑衍德) and others — ‘I have mastered the pear blossom spear for twenty years, no one in the world could match me. Now that the situation has changed, relying on old methods is no longer viable. Those who have not surrendered should remember that I am still here. If you kill me and then surrender, you will surely can not bear. If they do not want to catch me, who would accept your surrender? Now I wish to retire to Lianshui(涟水), and you should inform the royal court that you originally intended to catch me to surrender but I found out, and I have already driven you across the Huai River. By this cause, can you surrender now?’ The group replied, Yes.” After Li Quan was killed by the Song army in 1231, Yang Miaozen, seeing that the situation was hopeless, sent her subordinates to disperse and returned to Lianshui(涟水), Shandong. The historical community has differing views on Yang Miaozen's whereabouts after Li Quan's death. “In May 1231, after being forced to retreat from Huai'an under the fierce attack of the Southern Song army, Yang Miaozen took refuge in Lianshui (now Jiangsu Province) and Haizhou(海州) (now part of Lianyungang City, Jiangsu Province), and sought refuge with the Mongols. At this time, Yang Miaozen had not yet been appointed as a Provincial Governor(行省) by the Mongols.”⁵ Around 1233, Yang Miaozen traveled north to pay homage to Mongol Ogedei Khan(窝阔台汗) and was appointed the Shandong Huainan Provincial Administration(山东淮南尚书省事). “Later, Yang Xingxian submitted a resignation application to the Mongol court but was not approved... Her reasons for resigning were her age, her fear of being unable to handle the job and causing delays, and her concern about to avoid ridicule from others for ruling as a woman. Yelu Chucai(耶律楚材) wrote back, urging her not to forget the favor of the Mongols and to expedite her work, prepared to

avenge the death of her husband in the Southern Song Dynasty, her resign was refused.”⁶ “Yang Miaozen left office and Li Tan(李璫) succeeded her as the governor of the province (Shandong Huainan and other provinces) in 1252.”⁷

In addition, *The Song History: Biography of Li Quan* records an incident where Yang Miaozen used a stratagem to turn the tide against her enemies: “In the second month of the third year of Baoqing(宝庆), Yang sent a messenger to Xia Quan(夏全), saying: ‘Are you not submit to the authority of Shandong? The fox dies, and the rabbit weeps; if the Li family is destroyed, how can the Xia family alone survive? I hope you will consider this.’ Xia Quan agreed. Yang dressed up in fine clothes to welcome him and accompanied him on a tour of the camp, saying: ‘People say that my third brother has died. How can I, a woman, stand on my own? I am now your wife, and all the jade, silk, weapons, and granaries belong to you. Please take them, and there is nothing more to say.’ Xia Quan was moved and set up a feast, drinking heartily, and then went to bed as if he were at home.” In the third year of Jin Zhengda(金正大三年), Li Quan was besieged by Mongol forces for a long time in Qingzhou(青州), and rumors spread that he had died. Liu Zhuo(刘瑛) wanted to take advantage of the situation to eliminate Yang Miaozen's troops stationed in Chuzhou(楚州), so he ordered Xia Quan to go to besiege and destroy them. Yang Miaozen used a stratagem to invite Xia Quan into the city and treated him well, turning his enemy into a friend. After defeating Liu Zhuo, Xia Quan led his troops back to the Jin Kingdom. On the way, Yang Miaozen refused to accept him, causing his troops to launch a plundering attack in Xuyi(盱眙). However, they were blocked by Zhang Hui(张惠) and Fan Chengjin(范成进) and were unable to enter. Later, Xia Quan retreated to the Jin Kingdom, and the Jin people accepted him. This is the origin of the idiom the “fox mourns the rabbits death(兔死狐悲)”. From this incident, we can see that Yang Miaozen was not only exceptionally strategic but also emotionally steadfast. When her husband was trapped and his fate uncertain, she remained steadfast in her position, striving to secure favorable conditions for the battle. This shows that Tang Xianzu's portrayal of Yang Miaozen in *The Peony Pavilion* largely aligns with historical facts.

3. Ibid., p. 82.

4. Ibid., p. 82.

5. Ibid., p. 84.

6. Ibid., p. 84.

7. Ibid., p. 85.

In terms of the emotional structure of the characters, Yang Miaozen in *The Peony Pavilion* forbids Li Quan from forcibly occupying women, which seems to emphasize their commitment to monogamy and their unwavering loyalty. However, historical records show that Li Quan's wife in history was not limited to Yang Miaozen alone. The relationship between these two characters has a certain historical and complex nature. The dramatic structure of *The Peony Pavilion* creatively adapts this aspect, emphasizing the play's romanticism. Historically, the actions of Li Quan and Yang Miaozen span almost the entire late Southern Song Dynasty. Whatever their loyalty or betrayal reflect the human choices driven by interests in the turbulent times, providing rich materials for future artistic creation.

4. THE INFLUENCE OF YANG MIAOZEN ON THE FUNCTION OF DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

Tang Xianzu introduced a subplot about the Song Dynastys resistance against the Jin in the plot. This subplot serves not only to provide a historical background but also significantly alters the story, adding new elements to the later part of the narrative based on the story-teller's script. This makes the love between Du Li-niang and Liu Mengmei more challenging, creating a "rhapsody" in narrative logic and an "elastic modulus" in temporal and spatial relationships.

In the plot, Yang Miaozen's rebellion, instigated by Wanyan Liang(完颜亮), led to Du Bao's promotion: "The Jin invaders are looking south; Nan an Prefect Du Bao is promoted to Pacification Commissioner and stationed in Huaiyang." (From "Lament for the Lost Youth" 《悼殇》) Du Bao had to take up his post immediately after his daughters death, which led to the legendary story emerged: Liu Mengmei, on his way to the capital for the imperial examination, stayed at an empty mansion for lodging. Eventually, he discovered the portrait of Du Li-niang and became deeply infatuated with the ghostly figure. As it were, the first invasion by the rebels provided the opportunity for Du and Liu to meet for the first time. Moreover, the story setting of Du Bao and his wife, who rushed to take up the new positions without waiting for their daughter's body to be properly buried, which raises questions about human nature and the value of love for all beings. Thus, the play elevates its theme to a historical and philosophical level. Furthermore, in the story of Du

Li-niang's resurrection, the rebel's harassment again interferes with the reunion of Du and Liu: the rebel's chaos caused Du Bao and his wife to be separated, and Du Bao was deceived by Yang Miaozen, mistakenly believing that his wife had died a tragic death, leading to a state of flurry. When he reunited with his daughter, he thought he had encountered a ghost. On the other hand, Liu Mengmei was arrested and interrogated after being accused of excavating the young ladys tomb, causing the relationships among the characters to become chaotic. After this, Du Li-niang finally met the emperor and revealed the truth, Du and Liu finally met, and their relationship further warmed up. Tang Xianzu embedded the historical figures into the fictional love legend of Du Li-niang, forming a "double line of reality and fiction" structure, and the character clues in the play present a "topological structure".

In addition to serving the main narrative thread, the subplot of Yang Miaozen and Li Quan provides a verifiable historical context for the entire play. Great literary works often carry profound meanings, reflecting the deeper aspects of their times and history—the common human dilemmas and rethinking. Outstanding literary works are typically grand narratives with broad historical backgrounds, involving wars and the depths of human nature. From this perspective, Tang Xianzu's revisions to his dialogue novel clearly reflect his social responsibility and political aspirations. The mid-Ming Dynasty was a chaotic era, marked by the suffering of the people and the incompetence bureaucracy. He was frequently demoted for his frank advice, with deep-seated frustrations that were hard to express. Despite his setbacks, Tang Xianzu did not succumb to pessimism or retreat from the world. After resigning from his post and returning to his hometown, he completed *The Peony Pavilion*, *A Dream of Nanke*(《南柯记》), and *A Dream of Handan*(《邯郸记》). The former focuses on emotion ontology, while the latter two explore the deeper "dreams". In fact, Tang Xianzu's emotion stems from his dreams. Only the spring with dreams appears full of tenderness. But if the dreams cease to exist, then emotions naturally meaningless. Tang Xianzu's dream is a daydream, where he spent the first half of his life concerned about the world, and the second half of his life as if viewing things with painful eyes—life is bitter, but the pain does not stop him from opening his eyes and gazing intently. During the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty, the society was volatile, With the invasion of

barbarians frequently and the increasingly serious problem of bandits, the people's livelihoods deteriorated. Using historical references to reflect contemporary issues is a common literary technique. Tang Xianzu set the story of *The Peony Pavilion* in the early Southern Song Dynasty to introduce elements of war and political intrigue. Through the narrative of Li Quan, Tang Xianzu subtly criticizes the courts ineffective efforts in suppressing bandits. Additionally, through the character of Yang Miaozen, he highlights the importance of womens power. This subplot elevates *The Peony Pavilion* from a personal love story to a broader social critique.

5. THE DRAMATIC IMPLICATION OF YANG MIAOZHEN'S PERFORMANCE IN THE ROLE OF "CHOU"

"Chou(丑)" is one of the five role types in Chinese opera, known as "Sheng, Dan, Jing, Mo, Chou(生旦净末丑)", typically used to play humorous and comedic roles. According to Western dramatic theory, the broad definition of a Clown embodies the aesthetic qualities of humor, teasing, and laughter. However, the aesthetic principles of the Chou role in Chinese opera are more complex. Tang Xianzu's decision to cast Yang Miaozen as a clown in *The Peony Pavilion* is particularly significant.

First, it is important to clarify that the roles in Chinese opera are characterized by a set of strictly self-disciplined technical norms, which should be distinctly different from the genre roles on Western stages, as their aesthetic principles are vastly different. Western genre roles are categorized based on the "content" of a characters identity, whereas Chinese opera role types(行当) are a set of standardized performance norms that follow a "role paradigm centralism", rather than a "content value centrism". For instance, the role of "Chou" can embody various identities and values, ranging from upright heroes to cunning villains.

What artistic value does the portrayal of Yang Miaozen as a Chou bring? According to the theory of character arcs in western literary studies — Every prominent character should be accompanied by a clown. Is Yang Miaozen portrayed as a foil or contrast to someone else? First, Yang Miaozen is a female general, and her commanding presence does not fit the typical supporting role setting. In her marriage to Li Quan, she is the stronger one,

making it even less likely that she would be the supporting character for her husband.

Tang Xianzu's decision to cast Yang Miaozen as a role of Chou serves two main purposes: first, in *The Peony Pavilion*, a play where female characters are central to the narrative, Yang Miaozen's role is structurally aligned with Du Li-niangs family. Both the love story between Du and Liu, and Du Bao's promotion due to the rebels southern advance is narrated through a pattern where women lead and men follow. Thus, Yang's character serves as a foil to Du Li-niang, rather than directly representing Li Quan. Second, from a stage performance perspective, since Du Li-niang and her maid Chunxiang(春香) are already Dan(旦) roles, casting Yang Miaozen as a Dan would disrupt the constructure balance in the play. Third, from a textual perspective, Yang Miaozen's rebellion against the Jin Dynasty and her return to the Southern Song is portrayed as evil from the protagonists perspective. Therefore, it is best to use the artistic technique of portraying characters as both good and evil to depict this unjust "Figure 1".



Figure 1 The Youth version of *The Peony Pavilion*, photo from the Internet.

Compared to the other four role types, the Chou in Chinese opera has a relatively distant relationship with the entire stage. When the Chou appears, the audience can't help but feel a sense of relief, as the narrative line is intentionally interrupted, which aligns better with the psychological rhythm of aesthetic viewing. As the only female Chou in *The Peony Pavilion*, Yang Miaozen is not exactly ugly. Does she have elements of humor and laughter? Indeed, her

appearance in the army is very imposing, full of authority and her patient demeanor in dealing with the Jin Dynasty envoy are naturally humorous, yet she also exudes a solemn quality. Logically, a wandering and destitute heroine should not exhibit too much laughter and joy. The author might have arranged for General Yang to be a Chou for additional reasons beyond the two mentioned earlier: Tang Xianzu, despite being repeatedly demoted and having a wandering life, always cared about the world, and *The Peony Pavilion* is his embodiment of his sentiments and ideals. If Du Li-niang's character is a direct reflection of individual emotions, then Yang Miaozen's story more closely aligns with the grand themes of the authors' thoughts on family and country.

In terms of performance routines, female Chou, also called Chou Dan (丑旦), sometimes wear heavy makeup with rouge on their faces, or they may have a mole at the corner of their mouth or two special marks between their eyebrows. In short, they are clearly distinct from traditional Dan roles, but not as comical and exaggerated as male Chou. In the Chinese opera system, the connotation of clown transcends the literal meaning of ugly in everyday life... From my practical experience, the performance and routines of Chou must be clean and beautiful; it's better to perform less rather than to be chaotic... The movements of Chou are all small, with a subtle style, which must contrast with the Jing role. The Jing role should be charming, while the Chou should convey a sense of beauty."⁸

Tang Xianzu cast Li Quan as a Jing role and Yang Miao as a Chou role in *The Peony Pavilion*. Is this setup conventional? In the four acts where Li Quan and Yang Miaozen appear, Yang stands out more, while Li Quan is often at a loss. While it is common to portray male generals as Hualian (花脸, another name of Jing), it is also reasonable to cast Li Quan as a Chou and Yang Miao as a Dan.

Clearly, the Chou in Chinese opera does not have to be ugly. The concept of Chou as a performance role is a little bit abstract; it is neither the ugly be contrary to beautiful nor the repulsive in a moral sense. For instance, in the character Yang Miaozen, the ugly aspect is almost imperceptible, and her "ugliness" is more like a sketch, a silhouette of a certain artistic trait. If Yang Miaozen were performed to be a Dan, the wild and unrestrained nature of the female fighter might be diminished,

and the complexity of her emotional layers would be less evident. Some scholars believe that: "The most comforting thing for the Chou is that a few roles originally played by Old Dan have been performed by the Chou with better results, earning high praise from the audience. As a result, Old Dan has become hesitant to sing, and the role has become the Chou's forte."⁹ This shows that the emotional expression of female leads is more straightforward, while the emotional layers of Chou are more subtle and complex.

Unlike male Chou, female Chou roles are less ugly in appearance, retaining some female traits. The long-standing gender division of labor has led to several byproducts, such as — the relatively distant relationship between women and humor, with most classic screen clowns being male. Therefore, female Chou roles face a more challenging task, as they must skillfully blend their female identity with traditional clown concepts to offer a unique experience to the audience.

It is worth noting that in *The Siege Lifted* (《團釋》), the Jin Dynasty envoy is portrayed by an old female character, and the attendant responsible for translating to Yang Miaozen is a Tie Dan (貼旦). Why did Tang Xianzu choose to portray this foreign envoy as a woman? There is no reliable material to explain this, so it can be interpreted as Tang Xianzu depicting a scene where a female soldier from a minority ethnic group harasses Yang Miaozen.

Furthermore, in Act 23, *The Judgment of the Underworld* (《冥判》), a "homo" scene appears where Du Li-niang waits for the judge to sentence her fate in the underworld, with four male convicts ahead of her. The judge examines a man named Li Hou (李猴) who has a fondness for men: "(Jing) Call Li Hou. (Wai) ¹⁰The ghost convict has some sins, to be a gay. (Jing) It is true. Even in hell, he still lingers with this little man." Because he has a fondness for men, the judge punishes him to be a bee in his next life: "(Jing) You are the one who fond of men, Li Hou, you must be a bee, dragging a needle in the dung heap. (Wai) Oh, Who do you want me to sting?" Li Hou, unwilling to accept the punishment, has no choice but to leave in a huff:

9. Liu Ci: Role of Chou, Chapter "The Relationship between Chou and Lao Dan", Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House, 2013, p. 21.

10. "Wai (外)" character name usually refers to "Wai Mo (外末)" or "Wai Jiao (外脚)", which belongs to a branch of the "Sheng" system. "Wai" generally plays older and higher-status male supporting characters, such as officials, fathers, elders, etc.

8. 8 Yin Xiaogang: The Aesthetic Value of Peking Opera Clown, Drama Shadow Monthly, January 2023, p. 90.

"(Wai) I don't want to be a bee. I'm going to sting you vicious judge! (Jing) You deserve to be beaten! (Wai) My poor little life! (Jing) Enough. Let's go with the wind, hurry up and go. (Jing fuming) (Four people fly down in various ways)" This scene is a humorous and slightly lewd joke, where Tang Xianzu makes an unoffensive joke about gay people without moral condemnation. It is evident that the script of *The Peony Pavilion* mentions the phenomenon of homosexuality more than once, suggesting that Tang Xianzu paid attention to the social phenomenon of homosexuality, which is directly related to the feeling noumenon. Perhaps it can be inferred that Yang Miaozen and Li Hou are also involved in this issue. The supporting characters collectively constitute the functional dimension of the emotionalism value system of the play.

6. CONCLUSION

In the opening of *The Peony Pavilion*, Tang Xianzu introduces the groundbreaking concept of sentimental noumenon, emphasizing that the emotion in the characters should not be confined to ordinary romantic relationships. The love between Du and Liu transcends life and death, while Li and Yang's passion is marked by their wandering through turbulent times. Even the minor characters like Shi Daogu(石道姑), who merely go through the motions, show a spirit of breaking free from feudal norms. Tang Xianzu, with his keen insight and sharp observations, captures these humanistic aspects of society. The seemingly light touches on supporting roles in this Kunqu opera are humorous and thought-provoking, making the audience laugh out loud. These emotionally charged scenes were highly progressive for their time and set a standard for future theatrical works.

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