

# Crossing the Margins: Performance of Social Class in Traditional Chinese Drama

## A Case Study of Yuan *Zaju* Drama\*

### 逾越边界： 论中国古代戏曲突破社会阶层的展演表现 ——以元杂剧为例

Francesco PAPANI <sup>1</sup>

School of International Letters and Cultures, Arizona State University, the United States  
fpapani@asu.edu

**Abstract** This paper focuses on the performance of two marginal voices in 14<sup>th</sup>-century *zaju* drama to investigate the potential that the performance texts hold in the renegotiation of social marginality. By means of theatrical performances in commercial urban stages, characters such as sing-song girls and maids that are tied to social marginality are given agency and a voice to express their feelings. Precisely because of its malleability, marginality serves as a locus for discussing the imagery of conventional social class dynamics. The two plays that I will analyze feature protagonists from the lowest social echelons: a maid, Swallow, and a sing-song girl, Orchid. Swallow and Orchid's employment of romance as a means for social class advancement allows for a reassessment of mainstream discourses over the clash between the marginal and the peripheral. Moreover, their performance as female leads in the play further questions traditional views on marginality and exclusion.

**Key Words** Social Class, Marginality, Gender, *Zaju*, Performance, Romance

## Introduction

This paper focuses on the characterization of two marginal voices in 14<sup>th</sup>-century *zaju* drama to investigate how performance texts renegotiate gender and social class marginality. As an analytical lens that allows for the expression of marginal voices such as a sing-song girl and a maid, performance discusses social class dynamics and social class advancement. In addressing the question of whether the two female protagonists of the plays can escape their status of social marginality, I will employ the term marginality as a locus that precisely for its malleability, allows for a discussion of power dynamics in social class divisions. By social marginality, I refer to the marginalization of characters such as a maid and a sing-song girl due to their belonging to the lowest

---

Received: 18<sup>th</sup> May, 2023

Author: <sup>1</sup> Francesco Papani (赵永正), born in Florence, Italy, is a PhD candidate and a teaching assistant in the East Asian Languages and Civilizations program at Arizona State University.

\* I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Ling Xiaoqiao 凌筱婧, for her feedback and help.

echelons of the social ladder. These characters attempt to escape their low social status through the reversal of conventional dynamics that would see them permanently tied to their marginality.

An essential component for my analysis is the tight link between gender and social class that runs through the plot developments of the two plays. In the plays, the performance of gender is substantiated in the role type of the female lead (*zhengdan* 正旦), which gives voice to a maid and a sing-song girl. The two female characters, Swallow and Orchid, share a similar social status of exclusion and oppression. Both of them fall into the world of romance and vie throughout the whole play to accomplish a marriage union. The two plays call into question traditional beliefs about romance, gender, and social roles. Theory on gender and its boundaries in *zaju* has largely focused on the gender-bending of the performers and the prominence of female-led theater troupes. Li Siu Leung's study of gender in the performing arts precisely calls into question the validity of a strict gender division in the performance world. Li's study of cross-dressing in Chinese opera emphasizes the radical impossibility of a stable and consistent representation of gender.<sup>1</sup> Thus a strict gender distinction does not unequivocally apply to the depiction of characters in the plays. As for the discussion on the representation of female characters on the stage, I will employ Dorothy Ko's theorization of womanhood, a concept that is based on the dual components of gender and social class. As Ko argues, the construction of womanhood in literature hinges on the principles of gender and class.<sup>2</sup> According to Ko, while all women share the former, the latter is what creates differentiations. The performance of this tension questions the marginality of the two characters. Since they are female leads, Swallow and Orchid present their perspective and disbelief toward romance and marriage while at the same time attempting to accomplish a social class advancement. My analysis will devote special attention to the employment of romance as a means for attaining an entitlement to overcome social class barriers.

The other element that contributes to the re-discussion of marginality ties to the performance of *zaju* texts and its urban stages of Yuan dynasty commercial theater. In *zaju*, only the male or female lead is allowed to sing the arias, while the other characters are only given some spoken prose. In the two plays, the protagonists, Swallow and Orchid feature as female leads, thereby acquiring agency through a performance

<sup>1</sup> Li Siu Leung, *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 152.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth Century China* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press), 293.

convention. In his treatise on female performers during the Yuan, the scholar-bureaucrat, Hu Zhiyu 胡祇遹 (1227-1295), remarks on the versatility of female performers while embodying male roles such as Daoist priests, Buddhist monks, soldiers, and officials.<sup>1</sup> As for stages and their conventions, recent performance theory on performance spaces has drawn attention to the importance that physical space exerts over performance and the performance of emotions. Ling Hon Lam's notion of the spatiality of emotion in pre-modern Chinese theater, as well as SanSan Kwan's theorization of physical movement in contemporary Chinese urban spaces foreground a mutual performance space for the audience and the performers where the physicality of emotion is shared. Lam's study has argued for a redefinition of the early modern Chinese performance space in favor of a dreamscape, a space where emotions become spatial and are not inscribed in an interior space of mind.<sup>2</sup> The exteriority and physicality of emotions, therefore, create a space that the audience and the performers partake. As for Kwan's study, according to her, in performances such as concert dances, the space in which bodies are located, though somehow predictable, is not only hardly neutral but it also reshapes that space itself.<sup>3</sup> Thus, from a written script that merely contains the speech of the female lead and the stage directions, performance emerges through the spatiality of actions and emotions of the protagonists on the stage.

## **Zaju and its Conventions**

The texts under discussion come from the *zaju* 杂剧 (variety shows) repertoire and are contained in the earliest collection of *zaju* plays, the *Thirty Yuan Zaju Plays* (Yuan kan zaju sanshi zhong 元刊杂剧三十种, ca. 1350), an anonymous assortment of scripts. *Zaju* was a form of commercial urban theater that developed in the entertainment quarters of cities such as Kaifeng during the Song and grew in popularity up until the end of the Yuan dynasty. As a form that blended music, sung poetry, and spoken prose, *zaju* pivoted around one main character, the male or female lead, who sang all the arias in the usual four-act division. The studies of Liao Ben 廖奔 and Che Wenmin 车文明 about stages and performance venues from the Song dynasty onwards supply invaluable information about the space in which audiences and performers moved around. Most importantly, both scholars coincide in tracing back the first stages for commercial entertainment, the so-called *goulan* 勾栏 (lit.: hooked fences), to Song

<sup>1</sup> Chang Wenbo, "Playing Roles: Literati, Playwrights, and Female Performers in Yuan Theater" (PhD dissertation, Arizona State University, 2019), 28-29.

<sup>2</sup> Ling Hon Lam, *The Spatiality of Emotion in Early China: From Dreamscapes to Theatricality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 117.

<sup>3</sup> SanSan Kwan, *Kinesthetic City: Dance and Movement in Chinese Urban Spaces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3-11.

dynasty urban centers emphasizing the marketization of entertainment places in capitals such as Kaifeng and Dadu (present-day Beijing).<sup>1</sup> According to Liao Ben, in Yuan dynasty stages, either in performance venues such as entertainment quarters and teahouses or temples, the audience would gather around three sides of the elevated stage.<sup>2</sup> As for the position of the audience, the lack of a clear demarcation between the space of the performers and the space of the audience enhances the contribution that spectators themselves exert over the performance since it allows spectators to move around as the actors and actresses do on the stage. I interpret the performance of the two characters, Swallow and Orchid, on the stage as a necessary device for the crossing of marginality in the two plays. The space that this theoretical framework devises connects the written play scripts with the onstage performance. In my paper, I will delve into this aspect with specific reference to how the perspective and the emotions of the two female leads re-shape the conventional social narrative. In *A Crafty Wench*, Swallow's own performance of emotions allows her to adapt to the different situations she is facing while craftily steering each circumstance to her own advantage. In *Purple Clouds*, the power of performance goes even further as it manages to debunk the social reality of the time. The young man from a rich and noble family, Ling Chunma, opts for a life as a performer in the entertainment quarters together with Orchid thereby forsaking his path toward scholarly success. Both plays, therefore, redefine social roles in their own terms.

## The Plays

As mentioned above, both plays are *zaju* scripts from the *Thirty Plays*. In *A Crafty Wench Maneuvers her Way into Romance* (*Zha nizi tiao fengyue* 诈妮子调风月, attributed to Guan Hanqing 关汉卿 ca. 1235-ca. 1300, hereafter *A Crafty Wench*), the protagonist, Swallow, works as a maid in a noble Jurchen household. The powerful young nobleman Junior Chiliarch promises her marriage, but little does Swallow know that he is betrothed to another noble lady, Oriole. At the end of the play, however, Swallow persuades the lady of the household to let her become Junior Chiliarch's second wife. As for *Romance in the Courtyard of Purple Clouds* (*Fengyue ziyun ting* 风月紫云亭, attributed to Shi Junbao 石君宝 ca. 1191-ca. 1276, hereafter *Purple Clouds*), the play features a sing-song girl, Orchid, who attempts to escape the brothel she is being kept in. Orchid would like to marry the young Ling Chunma, who is being

<sup>1</sup> Liao Ben 廖奔, *Zhongguo gudai juchang shi* 中国古代剧场史 (Henan: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1997), 55; Che Wenmin 车文明, *Ershi shiji xiqu wenwu de faxian yu quxue yanjiu* 20 世纪戏曲文物的发现与曲学研究 (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2001), 74.

<sup>2</sup> Liao Ben, *Zhongguo gudai juchang shi*, 21-22.

kept captive by his father since he wants him to become an official. After that Ling Chunma has escaped, the two lovers get married, and Ling Chunma starts his career as a performer. The story of Ling Chunma and Orchid also appears in a southern drama (*xiwen 戏文*) play, *A Young Boy from a Noble Household Opt for The Wrong Career* (Huanmen zidi cuo lishen 宦门子弟错立身), thereby pointing to a shared repertoire that is not limited to a form of theater or a geographical area. Likewise, a *xiwen* play, now lost, with the same title as *A Crafty Wench* appears in Yuan registers of dramatic scripts. The common repertoire for *zaju* and *xiwen* in terms of plots of plays shows the popularity of these forms of theater in areas not limited to their place of origin. While different in style, the two dramatic traditions cater to the public in the commercial theater of large urban centers.

Swallow and Orchid's characterizations, as well as Ling Chunma's life choice for the performance world allow for a reassessment of conventional mainstream discourses regarding the opposition between the marginal and the central. Through the examination of the two female characters, my paper poses the question of the extent to which social marginality is renegotiable in performance literature. Both Swallow and Orchid belong to the lowest echelons of society since in the case of the crafty maid, she is not only relegated to serving the household, but she also lacks the social security that marriage could bring her. As for Orchid, while she also lacks the security of marriage, she is further oppressed by the cash-driven madam of the brothel she is forced to work for. Throughout the plays, however, the two protagonists act as chief agents of the events, thereby sidelining the other characters.

## Romance, Performance, and Emotions: The Negotiation of Social Mobility

In the following sections, I will analyze how the two characters, Swallow and Orchid, carry out a re-negotiation of social marginality through their romantic affairs with Junior Chiliarch and Ling Chunma, respectively. Though in different ways, the maid and the sing-song girl attain a social advancement as a result of their expertise in maneuvering romance. My employment of the term social class harks back to Dorothy Ko's theorization of social class in pre-modern Chinese culture. Ko's re-definition of social class in terms of differences in the "access to wealth, political power, cultural capital, and subjective perceptions"<sup>1</sup> ties to the more complex relationships that modern ideas about social classes fail to correctly describe.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 6.

## Orchid in Purple Clouds

*Purple Clouds* is one of those plays that depict a relationship between the madam of the brothel and the sing-song girl. Both figures come from the lowest echelons of the social ladder and access to wealth is the main economic divide that creates a social class differentiation in the above-mentioned sense. Difference in access to wealth causes the sing-song girl to serve as an instrument for the wealth and survival of the madam. Orchid's revelation of the business transactions with her customers bespeaks the marketization of romance that she is intended to reject as well as her being relegated to the lowest echelon merely due to access to wealth and not cultural capital.

[FEMALE LEAD *sings*:]

### Para coda (*Zhuanwei*)

After customers have had ten sexual unions with someone like me,  
 They are struck with an illness that leaves them dull-witted.  
 There are bows and sunken pits in our house to ensnare them,  
 Even if you have a “seven-step talent,”<sup>1</sup> you’ll get nowhere without money,  
 And though you are an expert in the six arts,<sup>2</sup> don’t try to sell us on your  
 intelligence.

Alas! Why do even these rich playboys  
 Have so many difficulties in carrying out transactions with us?  
 No matter the amount of money you carry on horse, you will be razed to the ground,  
 Since we are here in a bustling market,  
 There is a steelyard especially placed to weigh,  
 Just to make it so that your one plate of silver corresponds to one portion of  
 romance.

*Exit.*<sup>3</sup>

〔赚尾〕

郎君每我行有十遍雨云期，除是害九伯风魔病。俺家里七八下里窝弓陷坑，  
 你便有七步才无钱也不许行，六艺全便休卖聪明。哎！为甚您这五陵人把  
 俺这等嘿交易难成？你便是四付马上驼来也索两平。俺这里别是个三街市  
 井，另置下二连等秤，恰好交您一分钱买一分情。（下）<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A reference to the episode when Cao Pi 曹丕 (187-226) asked his brother, Cao Zhi 曹植 (192-232), to compose a poem within the time he took him to make seven steps. Otherwise, he would have died. Cao Zhi succeeded, and the “seven-step” turned into a *topos* for unparalleled talent.

<sup>2</sup> The six arts of rites, namely, music, archery, charioteering, reading and writing, and arithmetic.

<sup>3</sup> Translation adapted from Wilt Idema and Stephen H. West (trans.) *Feng yue ziyun ting: Wind and Moon in the Courtyard of Purple Clouds*, in *Chinese Theater 1100-1450: A Sourcebook* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1982), 263-264.

<sup>4</sup> Xu Qinjun 徐沁君 (ed.), *Xinjiao Yuan kan zaju sanshi zhong* 新校元刊杂剧三十种 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 333.

The aria above exemplifies the commodification of sex that Orchid is both subjected to and an unwilling contributor to. On the one hand, the sing-song girl reaffirms her savoir-faire in romantic affairs while on the other she lays out the cash-driven and profit-making environment she is forced to work in. Orchid compares the brothel to a bustling market where customers, regardless of their intellectual ability, are bound to get pillaged of their fortune. Not unlike the madam that she despises, Orchid is exemplary of a world of marketized favors. In contrast to the madam, however, Orchid herself is also liable to serve as a commodity thereby being relegated to the above-mentioned social class definition. Orchid and the madam belong to the bottom of the social ladder in terms of cultural capital and subjective perceptions. They are, however, diversified on account of economic capital. In Orchid's case, her labor has become her only access to economic capital thereby causing her to be further tied to social marginality.

Orchid's only way to escape this sort of social marginality is to take advantage of her romantic entanglements as well as Ling Chunma's willingness to eke out a living from performance. Her romance with the young man from a rich household entitles her to a social advancement thereby making her escape social marginality. At the same time though, Ling Chunma's favor for a career as a performer rather than the official career problematizes the idea of social marginality as the excerpt below shows:

[FEMALE LEAD sings:]

**To the tune of *Zhu ma ting***

Because of me, he held up his studies,

Our lives are entwined to the point that we travel together, holding hands, with our hearts unbroken.

He's mastered singing and narrating all keys and modes,

Moreover, the place where we receive favor is our home (the theater).

Just because of our love destiny as unbreakable as a lotus-root thread ten thousand chi long.<sup>1</sup>

He completely missed the third month of peach blossom waves at Yumen.<sup>2</sup>

If I were not true to him, I would have in vain made his heart set,

All along this has been on us.<sup>3</sup>

〔驻马听〕

<sup>1</sup> One *chi* roughly equals 0.333 metres.

<sup>2</sup> According to legend, at Yumen 玄门, Longmen between Shaanxi and Shanxi a shoal of fish counter current went up the river and transformed into a dragon. The term is, therefore, a reference for great success.

<sup>3</sup> Translation adapted from Idema and West (trans.) *Feng yue ziyun ting: Wind and Moon in the Courtyard of Purple Clouds*, 175.

他为我堕落文章，生缠得携手同行不断肠；直这般学成说唱，更则便受恩深处便为乡。则为这情缘千尺藕丝长，误尽禹门三月桃花浪。我若是不正当，枉了他那呆心肠，一向在咱身上。<sup>1</sup>

As the aria shows, Orchid's remarks on her unbreakable union with Ling Chunma center around the essential function that romance holds in fostering this love bond. Because of Orchid, the young and noble Ling Chunma has jettisoned his career as a scholar-official for the sake of joining the theater world and keeping his relationship with her. It is evident from this aria that romance and performance have challenged the foundations for a strict social class division since they have cracked pre-established social differentiations. In the play, a sing-song girl becomes the first wife of a wealthy man thereby emphasizing the validity and the power of true romantic feelings in breaking the chains of social class. Ling Chunma, a nobleman from a rich family who will inherit one of the highest posts in the Jurchen hierarchy, forsakes his career to not only join a theater troupe but also to marry a sing-song girl. His actions, therefore, belittle the seemingly unchallenged notion that wealth and scholarly success are the most sought-after pursuits in life.

*Purple Clouds* problematizes social class by means of two tensions. As for the first one, Orchid as a sing-song girl attempts to fulfill her passion through her romance with Ling Chunma. This initially unsuccessful bid causes her to fall out with the madam thereby making her feel even more trapped in the brothel. The second tension inheres in Ling Chunma joining the social marginalization of performers on the stage because of his love for Orchid. Regardless of his bright future ahead should he opt for the pursuit of an official career, Ling Chunma prefers, out of his personal choice, to become a performer. Thus, both Orchid and Ling Chunma carry out a re-negotiation of social marginality where what is deemed marginal such as the lifestyle of performers, is not marginal anymore. Ling Chunma sees the pleasure quarters and the theater troupes as more relevant to him than the scholarly life while Orchid achieves her goal of eventually escaping the brothel. In other words, *Purple Clouds* re-discusses social roles and social reality through romance and performance as it challenges the totality of the social class division and the scholar-official career. Similarly, *A Crafty Wench* also redefines social roles in its own terms through romance and the performance of emotions. As I will show in the next section, Swallow overcomes social barriers through her display of different emotions and her adaptability to distinct circumstances.

<sup>1</sup> Xu Qinjun (ed.), *Xinjiao Yuan kan zaju sanshi zhong*, 353.

## Swallow in *A Crafty Wench*

Contrary to the double-edged tension in *Purple Clouds*, *A Crafty Wench* mainly focuses on one single struggle for the abandonment of social marginality. While in Orchid's case, the male lover has romantic feelings for Orchid and is only tied to her, in *A Crafty Wench*, the male protagonist Junior Chiliarch is betrothed to another lady from a wealthy household, Oriole. In the first few arias, the maid opens with a speech against romantic entanglements foreseeing the risks that they pose. Swallow's consent to engage in sexual intercourse with Junior Chiliarch comes after his promise to marry her and let her abandon her life as a maid in the first act:

### Coda

Now you lift the curtains up for me,  
 And now you turn around to check on me,  
 I can't help but warm up to you.  
 Set the date when we shall lie side by side on the pillow,  
 Don't make me seek after you every night to clutch the rain and transport the  
 clouds!<sup>1</sup>  
 After this spring,  
 If you could get me out of this humble dress with the apron,<sup>2</sup>  
 That'd be half of the winnowing fans of dice all turning up in a single color!<sup>3</sup>  
 I am in others' words, one who has recognized the treasure with my eyes,  
 You'd better not just be talking and fail your words!  
 [SWALLOW speaks:] You have promised me the hair clasp,<sup>4</sup> the robe,<sup>5</sup> and a  
 silk handkerchief.  
 [SWALLOW sings:]  
 I am waiting to become the young wife of the hereditary Chiliarch.  
 (Exit)  
 [ 赚 熬 ]

<sup>1</sup> A common trope for sexual intercourse.

<sup>2</sup> An apron that designates serving someone as a servant. See, “The wife sulkily took off her brocade gown, put on an apron, and went to the kitchen,” 太太忍气吞声，脱了锦缎衣服，系上围裙，走到厨下, Wu Jingzi 吴敬梓 (1701-1754), Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (trans.), *The Scholars* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1964), 372. Chinese text from Wu Jingzi 吴敬梓, *Rulin waishi* 儒林外史 (Taipei: Guiguan tushu youxian gongsi, 1994), 276.

<sup>3</sup> A gambling game in which gamblers throw the dice and win if the dice show the same color. A very difficult strike and therefore a very difficult situation to come by.

<sup>4</sup> A head ornament used for women's hair buns.

<sup>5</sup> A robe. See: “The upper outer garment is called *tuanshan*. It's blackish-purple or black and damson, it has a straight neck, left lapel, and seams in the interior. It is double-pleated on both sides. It touches the ground in the front and it trails on the ground by around one *chi* (0.333 metres).” 上衣谓之团衫, 用黑紫或皂及绀, 直领, 左衽, 披缝, 两傍复为双襟积, 前拂地, 后曳地尺余. *Tuo Tuo* 脱脱(Toktohan, 1313-1355) compiled, *Jinshi* 金史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 43. 985.

忽地却掀帘，兜地回头问，不由我心儿里便亲。你把那并枕睡的日头儿  
再定论，休交我逐宵价握雨携云。过今春，先交我不系腰裙，便是半  
簸箕头钱扑个复纯。交人道眼里有珍，你可休言而无言。（带云）许  
下我包髻、团衫、细手巾！（唱）专等你世袭千户的小夫人！（下）<sup>1</sup>

This last aria from act one is exemplary of Swallow's attempts to employ romance for her own advantage. As she states in the passage, the security of marriage with Junior Chiliarch is bound to let her attain a social advancement that will remove her from her position of marginality. Swallow, still uncertain about Junior Chiliarch's trustworthiness, begs him not to fail her on his promise precisely because her life as a maid would keep her segregated to the household as a servant. Even more so, Swallow feels the entitlement to be Junior Chiliarch's wife because she has abandoned her integrity and commitment to herself not to get entangled with men. As the text shows, Swallow's goal goes even further than the conventional re-negotiation of power relations since she creates her own social narrative out of her own desires. Her sexual and romantic desires become a valid narrative within the themes of the plot.

Since Junior Chiliarch's social position requires him to marry a woman of his social status, the young man casts aside the one-night romance maid. Thus, Swallow's entitlement to marry the noble Junior Chiliarch cannot merely stand on the power of romantic entanglements. Swallow's maneuvering of romance requires an additional layer of craftiness. In the play, the validity of romance as an opportunity to become Junior Chiliarch's wife is paired with the re-negotiation of the expected power relations between a maid and her master. As a character that performs being torn between caution and longing, silence and garrulosity, gentleness and fury, Swallow acts as an artful mastermind. Swallow's craftiness in the employment of romance adds up to her intention to appear in the eyes of the lady of the house as a marginalized and cast-aside character with no future ahead. Even though, like Orchid, Swallow employs romance to her own advantage, sexual intimacy does not bring her closer to the achievement of her goal. Swallow needs to employ all her tricks to cling to her entitlement to marry Junior Chiliarch. The maid, therefore, undergoes a series of emotional states that result in a clash with the lady of the house and in the final agreement for Swallow to become the second wife:

(After speaking.<sup>2</sup> FEMALE LEAD, kneeling down,<sup>3</sup> sings.)

<sup>1</sup> Xu Qinjun (ed.), *Xinjiao Yuan kan zaju sanshi zhong*, 95.

<sup>2</sup> This is probably the lady of the house who asks Swallow if she wants to be the second wife.

<sup>3</sup> In this sequence, Swallow is probably defending herself from accusation of discrediting Oriole and Junior Chiliarch.

**To the tune of *Yan'er luo***

When I was attending to him in that study,  
He promised me I would have been his second wife.  
A person with a human body and a human face,  
From a human's tongue in human words.

**To the tune of *De sheng ling***

Now this has all fallen through,  
I am not cast with rock and my head is not moulded with iron,  
My body cannot endure this kind of hardship;  
I am just completely helpless and my heart is in unbearable pain!

(THE LADY OF THE HOUSE *speaks.*)

[SWALLOW *sings:* ]

My body is completely paralyzed,  
That I cannot support myself at all;  
My heart pounds and strikes my chest,  
This makes me like a misfit on both hands.

**To the tune of *A gu ling***

Filling up goblets with fine wine,  
It is within my lot to just be a maid.  
I thank the minister and the lady of the house for elevating me,  
How dare I possibly be a second or a third?  
You, my husband,  
If I could dance with you face to face,  
Then it will be like my path toward glory.

(夫人云了) (正旦跪唱)

〔雁儿落〕燕燕那书房中伏侍处，许第二个夫人做。他须是人身人面皮，人口人言语！

〔得胜令〕到如今总是彻梢虚！燕燕不是石头镌、铁头做！交我死临侵身无措，错支刺心受苦！(夫人云) (正旦唱) 瘫中着身躯，交我两下里难停住；气夯破胸脯，交燕燕两下里没是处。

〔阿古令〕满盏内盈盈缘醣，子合当作婢为奴。谢相公夫人抬举，怎敢做三妻两妇？子得和丈夫、一处、对舞，便是燕燕花生满路。<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Xu Qinjun (ed.), *Xinjiao Yuan kan zaju sanshi zhong*, 117-118.

This excerpt corresponds to the last arias of the final act when after Swallow's defense of her right to marry Junior Chiliarch, the lady of the house agrees to let her be his second wife. Swallow clings to the enactment of strong emotions for the sake of persuading the assembled company that she is true to her feelings and that she is a victim of an insincere man. Swallow's swift switch from painstaking sadness to extreme joy in the last two arias once again shows how the performance of emotions has won her the union with Junior Chiliarch. Her apparent gentleness and faked modesty in the last aria contrast with her fierce attitude and her crafty schemes to destroy the match between Junior Chiliarch and Oriole. Swallow's control of her emotions in front of the other characters is the other driving force, in addition to romance, that empowers her toward a re-definition of social reality. Just like Orchid in *Purple Clouds*, Swallow realizes the importance of romantic entanglements in opening up a path for the abandonment of social marginality. Orchid's efforts, however, are to be paired with those of her lover, Ling Chunma, who escapes his own social reality to enter that one of the sing-song girls. Swallow, on the contrary, out of fear of losing everything, resorts to her adaptability to different situations and people for her own advancement.

### **Crossing the Boundary of Class: The Cases of Swallow and Orchid**

*A Crafty Wench* and *Purple Clouds* feature two main characters that, through their interaction break social class conventions. A maid, a sing-song girl, and two young playboys from noble households face each other in romantic twists that propel the crossing of social class boundaries. The transformation of Swallow in *A Crafty Wench* becomes manifest through changes in her feelings and social status. In the very beginning, Swallow states that she sees romance as a danger for a woman like her, but as soon as she meets Junior Chiliarch, she realizes that she can get rid of her maid apron through marriage. Since the play pivots around the maid, it is through her own characterization that the audience sees Swallow's shift from being a maid to being the second wife of a rich Jurchen official. In the case of *Purple Clouds*, the attainment of social class advancement is also viable through marriage with a rich and powerful official. Orchid manages to escape her social marginality as she leaves the brothel she is entrapped in and accomplishes a romantic union. As for the male characters in the two plays, since they do not feature as lead characters, little appears from the lines of the plays as the performance integrated the script. Nevertheless, their acting as secondary characters in the *zaju* texts exhibits their secondary relevance compared to the two female leads. In both cases, the male characters, Junior Chiliarch and Ling

Chunma, are not endowed with the same agency as the female leads, rather, they are witnesses to the events that unfold in response to the actions of the female leads.

### Female Agency and the Stage

Female agency is the main thread that links these two Yuan *zaju* plays since it brings together the gender tension and social class struggle of the two protagonists. As Patricia Sieber mentions in her discussion of two other plays featuring female leads, namely *The Injustice to Dou E* 窦娥冤 and *The Pavilion for Praying to the Moon* 拜月亭, the spiritedness and agency of the two female leads presupposes a social breadth, a novelty, and a versatility in performance.<sup>1</sup> In *A Crafty Wench* and *Purple Clouds*, the two female leads as well embody a wide spectrum of feelings and are nuanced characters at the real center of the performance. Their agency is not limited to a re-discussion of conventional gender and power relations, but it also stretches into the awareness of being the main agent that controls the unfolding of the events. In spite of the many similarities between Orchid, Swallow, and other *zaju* characters in terms of plot, characterization, and social class struggle, the two female protagonists enhance the repertoire of the female lead. As a sing-song girl, Orchid carries out a critique of the commodification of her own body. Orchid, therefore, mainly targets her self-demeaning life as a sing-song girl as the main motivation for action. In the case of Swallow, while she also expresses her dissatisfaction toward her life as a maid, she mainly takes aim at her loneliness in the social world thereby adding an additional reason for her marriage pursuit.

The dramatic character is the essence of the performance itself and the substance of the script. It, therefore, brings to life the plot and the emotions that emerge from the script on the actual stage site. As mentioned above, since emotion is spatial, the shared space between the audience and the performers provided the most suitable site for the transmission of feelings from the perspective of the performers. The type of staged scene that I am suggesting is, therefore, a space that not only lacks divisions but also situates the audience as co-creators of the same theatrical illusion. The inner world of the two female leads, Swallow and Orchid, emerges as a result of their performance and the cooperation of the audience in devising a social dimension and contributing to the same theatrical illusion. Swallow and Orchid's characterizations are based on the flexibility and malleability that the actual on-stage performance requires. Furthermore, the themes of the plays, social class and gender tension, cater to a wealthy urban middle-

<sup>1</sup> Patricia Sieber, “*The Pavilion for Praying to the Moon* and *The Injustice to Dou E*: The Innovation of the Female Lead,” in *How to Read Chinese Drama: A Guided Anthology*, edited by Patricia Sieber and Regina Llamas (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 78-100.

class audience, who attends theater for the sake of entertainment. Urban commercial theater reached its apex in the Yuan dynasty as a result of the creation of a wealthy class of consumers in a proto-capitalistic environment. Social class struggles that question strict boundaries like the ones presented in the plays, therefore, tie to the context of *zaju* performance.

## Conclusion

The re-negotiation of social marginality through performance in *zaju* texts unfolds through the entanglement of multiple elements that are not defined by traditional social class and gender divisions. Undeniably, both Orchid in *Purple Clouds* and Swallow in *A Crafty Wench* obtain a voice through the performance convention of the female lead. While this aspect inevitably enhances the pivotal role that these two female characters hold in the actual performance, the crossing of conventional borders cannot be merely bound to a stage convention. Irrespective of the leading role these female performers have in the performance of plays on urban stages, the male-controlled script production and consumption of these performances exert a profound impact on the agency of female performers and the portrayal of female characters. My interpretation of the crossing of social marginality, therefore, pivots around the characterization and the performance of the actions and emotions of the two leading figures: a maid and a sing-song girl. In both cases, the employment of romance as a way to cross social marginality features as an important means for the two protagonists to break off the shackles of social class divisions defined by access to wealth. In the case of Orchid, her romance with Ling Chunma, as well as Ling Chunma's rejection of an official career in favor of the world of performance, reshapes traditional ideas about social mobility. This play questions the stability of the social reality of the time since the young man from a rich family opts for a life as a performer. In the case of Swallow in *A Crafty Wench*, it is her own expertise in romantic affairs and her own adaptability to different circumstances that allows her to attain a social status advancement. Through her performance of various emotions, the maid steers the final scene to her own advantage.

Like any other form of literature and art, performance literature is inevitably bound to social structures that see mainstream agents exert tight control over it. Nevertheless, because of its spatiality and liveliness, performance provides characters with a stage to share their emotional and social states with the audience. Unlike modern and contemporary conformations of theaters, the urban stages of early modern Chinese cities devise a space where the audience is also part of the performance. Moreover, a

wealthy yet not necessarily educated middle class also partake of an entertainment form that is not limited to secluded literary circles. The two dramatic scripts in this paper enact a refutation of power and love relations by persuading the audience that the idea of social class is not as stable as one might think. Thus, conventional elements in the scripts, such as the final marriage union and the portrayal of boisterous female characters do not hamper the re-discussion of social marginality that the plays carry out. The commercial theater of urban stages in teahouses and entertainment quarters reflects the adaptability and flexibility that the notion of marginal contains. The idea of margins connects to the lack of a clearly defined gender division and the collapse of conventional social and power relations. In theater, the performance itself is inseparable from the characterization of the protagonists since their performance is tied to the actual spatiality of the performance site. Thus, though in a fictional space, the crossing of social marginality through its questioning of social class conventions situates performance literature at the center of the negotiation of pre-established categories.

## References

Chang, W. (2019). Playing Roles: Literati, Playwrights, and Female Performers in Yuan Theater. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Arizona State University. <https://keep.lib.asu.edu/items/157352>

Che, W. 车文明. (2001). *Ershi shiji xiqu wenwu de faxian yu quxue yanjiu* 20 世纪戏曲文物的发现与曲学研究. Wenhua yishu chubanshe 文化艺术出版社.

Idema, W. & West, S. (1982). Feng yue ziyun ting: Wind and Moon in the Courtyard of Purple Clouds. In idem. (Ed.), *Chinese Theater 1100-1450: A Sourcebook*. Franz Steiner.

Lam, L. (2018). *The Spatiality of Emotion in Early China: From Dreamscapes to Theatricality*. Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/lam-18794>

Li, S. (2003). *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera*. Hong Kong University Press.

Liao, B. 廖奔. (1997). *Zhongguo gudai juchang shi* 中国古代剧场史. Zhongzhou guji chubanshe 中州古籍出版社.

Ko, D. (1994). *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*. Stanford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503622401>

Kwan, S. (2012). *Kinesthetic City: Dance and Movement in Chinese Urban Spaces*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199921515.001.0001>

Sieber, P. & Llamas, R. (2022). *How to Read Chinese Drama: A Guided Anthology* (Ed.). Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/sieb18648>

Toktghan 脱脱(1314-1355). (1975). *Jinshi* 金史 (Comp.). Zhonghua shuju 中华书局.

Wu, J. 吴敬梓 (1701-1754). (1994). *Rulin waishi* 儒林外史. Guiguan tushu youxian gongsi 桂冠图书有限公司.

Wu, J. 吴敬梓 (1701-1754). (1964). *The Scholars*. (Yang, H. & Yang, G. Trans.). Foreign Language Press.

Xu, Q. 徐沁君. (1980). *Xin jiao Yuan kan zaju sanshi zhong* 新校元刊杂剧三十种 (Comp.). Zhonghua shuju 中华书局.

[Editors: Rui ZHOU, Fanghao CHEN]