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## SOME REMARKS ON THE ORIGIN OF THE NAN-HSI PLAYS

The *nan-hsi* plays or the southern plays constitute one of the earliest and least explored forms of Chinese drama. It is considered to have originated probably at the beginning of the 13th century in the towns of Wenchou and Yungchia, not far away from Wulin, the capital of the Southern Sung dynasty, where it also flourished half a century later, in the closing years of the dynasty. These presumptions suggest that the rise of the *nan-hsi* plays in the south preceded by at least half a century the formation of the famous *Yüan tsa-chü* in the north of China, which were for a very long time considered to have been the earliest specimens of Chinese drama. The early *nan-hsi* also fundamentally differ from the *ch'uan-ch'i*, the southern dramas composed by the dramatists of the Ming era.

How did it happen that so little had been known about the *nan-hsi* plays as compared with the northern operas? I believe the main reason for it to be the different degree of preservation of the texts of the dramatic plays. As we know, almost two hundred complete northern plays, the *pei-ch'ü tsa-chü* have been preserved to our times, while the early *nan-hsi* were known only from some scores of separate arias selected by Chinese scholars for their collections of old songs and airs. It was only after the discovery made by Yeh Kung-cho, who in the 1920's bought at a London's antiquarian an odd chapter of the *Yung-lo ta-tien* encyclopedia, that complete early *nan-hsi* plays became again accessible for the scholars making research work in the history of Chinese drama. The recovered chapter 13991 of the *Yung-lo ta-tien* contains three early southern plays. According to the original sequence in the chapter, the first play is the *Hsiao Sun-tu*, i.e. "Little Sun the butcher," the second one is the *Chang Hsieh chuang-yüan*, "Chang Hsieh, the Laureate of Imperial Examinations," and the last one is the *Huan-men tzu-ti tso-li-shen*, "Young Master goes astray." The three plays are not of the same length. The longest of them is the drama about Chang Hsieh, as it occupies 41 pages, and the shortest is the last in succession, about a young man falling in love



with an actress and marrying her. It takes up only 6 pages. The *Siao Sun-tu* play occupies 13 pages. Being the earliest southern plays extant today, they are not claimed to have originated in the same period. The *Chang Hsieh chuang-yüan* is considered to be the oldest of them, dating from the closing years of the Southern Sung dynasty while the other two are ascribed to the period of the Yüan dynasty.

The early *nan-hsi* plays were almost forgotten in the Ming era. The Ming scholars, with very few exceptions, took little interest in the southern dramas of the Sung and Yüan times, considering them to be of low artistic value. This led to a situation in the Ch'ing times that nobody even knew the terms *nan-hsi* or *hsi-wen*. The history of the southern style of Chinese dramaturgy beginning with the *P'i-p'a-chi* and four other plays composed at the turn of the 14th century. In modern times Wang Kuo-wei was the first scholar who revived the study of the early southern plays. In the following years only a few scholars who were working on Chinese dramaturgy mentioned the existence and significance of the earliest southern plays in Chinese dramaturgy for the reason that the texts of the plays had been extant in a few copies in China until 1960, when they were reprinted together with other recovered chapters of the *Yung-lo ta-tien*. Therefore the problem to some extent could only be explored by Chinese scholars, such as Cheng Chen-to, Ch'ien Nan-yang, Chou I-pai and a few others. In Western sinological literature, the *nan-hsi* plays are mentioned only in very few studies, as for instance in I. Gaida's book, *Hsi-ch'ü. The Chinese Traditional Theatre* (Moscow 1971), or by M. Doleželova and J. Crump in their introduction to the translation of the *Liu Chih-yüan chu-kung-tiao* ("Ballad of the Hidden Dragon," Oxford 1971).

Before passing on to the main subject of this paper the above preliminary information should be supplemented with at least an enumeration of the terms used for the early forms of the Chinese southern drama. The most widely used term was the *hsi-wen* (literally: 'play-text'). The extended form of the above term, the *nan-ch'ü hsi-wen* was also quite often applied. *Nan-hsi* was another term very often used to denote the early southern plays. It was considered by some scholars to be a contraction of the afore-mentioned *nan-ch'ü hsi-wen* (by dropping the second syllables of the two words). Two other terms for the early southern plays, the *Yung-chia tsa-chü* and the *Wen-chou tsa-chü* were connected with the names of two commercial centres of Southern China, Yung-chia and Wen-chou. One more term should also be mentioned here, the *ch'uan-ch'i*. As a matter of fact, it was used for the southern plays as well as for the northern ones. It was also applied for the later southern dramas of the Ming era.

The first Chinese scholar who endeavoured to do some serious research in the field of the early southern dramaturgy was Wang Kuo-wei.



At the beginning of the chapter on southern plays in his *Sung-Yüan hsi-ch'ü k'ao*, he already voices an opinion, that

there is no doubt that the *nan-hsi* plays originated in the Sung time, but it cannot be as yet investigated when they developed into their present form. As far as we know, in the Yüan times, there already existed this type of *nan-hsi* plays, and it is likely enough that they were even older than the *Yüan tsa-chü* [northern plays].

Wang Kuo-wei based his supposition on the comparison of the melodies found in the southern and northern plays and on finding out that the former comprised more tunes cognate with the T'ang and Sung poetry than the latter ones. He ascertained that out of 543 melodies used in the southern plays, almost a half, i.e. 260 melodies were related to the old songs, and as concerns the arias in the northern plays, only one third of them could be traced down to the old tunes of former epochs. He also found the arrangement of tunes in the respective dramatic forms to testify to the earlier origin of the southern dramaturgy, and concluded that the plays had originated by gradual agglomeration of old melodies and that they were by no means an off-hand composition.

After having examined all the materials and references available in his times—the *Yung-lo ta-tien* chapter with *nan-hsi* plays was not discovered at that time—Wang Kuo-wei is quite definite in his statement, that “it has not yet been finally decided, when the *nan-hsi* plays came into being.” Then he calls upon some Ming-time authors, fixing the origin of the plays just after the Hsüan-ho (1119—1126) era in the region of Wenchou. Wang agrees, that in fact, the *nan-hsi* plays must have originated in that region, but he positively opposes the suggestion of their having been known at the beginning of the 12th century. According to other sources, quoted by Wang Kuo-wei, the *hsi-wen* plays are said to have been in full bloom during the reign of emperor Tu-tsung (1265—1275) of the Southern Sung dynasty. This date, however, does not suggest any exact information concerning the time of the origin of the plays.

Wang Kuo-wei's opinions on the rise of the southern Chinese drama can be itemized in the following statements:

1. The southern plays are earlier than the northern ones.
2. The southern plays originated in the region of Wenchou, Yungchia and Hangchou.
3. The plays had gained great popularity towards the end of the Southern Sung dynasty (1270—1279), but they could not have come into life as early as the beginning of the 12th century.
4. The earliest southern plays, known to Wang Kuo-wei from fragments included in Ming-time collections, bore titles similar to those of the Sung and Yüan-time *tsa-chü* plays and the Chin-time *yüan-pen* texts for performances, but they differed from those of the Ming-time *ch'uan-ch'i* dramas.



5. Wang Kuo-wei was not able to tell anything about the form and content of the early southern plays as well as of their origin, except that quite a long time must have elapsed before the old songs had agglomerated and could form fixed sets of tunes for dramatic performances.

Chronologically, the next Chinese scholar, who greatly contributed to our knowledge of Chinese popular literature and dramaturgy is Cheng Chen-to. In his *Ch'a-t'u-pen chung-kuo wen-hsüeh shih* ("The Illustrated History of Chinese Literature"), first published in 1932, he sets an original theory about the Chinese dramaturgy and theatrical art having been borrowed from India. He points to some analogies between the Indian and Chinese dramaturgy, and to the sea routes, linking the ports of Southern China with the Indian trade centres, as arguments for such southern Chinese port-towns like Wenchou to be the cradle of Chinese dramaturgy. Besides, Cheng Chen-to sets no more or less exact time of the import of Indian theatre to China.

Two other Chinese scholars, Chou I-pai and Ch'ien Nan-yang continued and developed the conception of the native origin of southern Chinese drama set by Wang Kuo-wei.

Both the scholars quote three kinds of sources, to assert the date when the Chinese southern drama could have originated. As it happens, every one of these sources places the rise of the drama in a different period.

A Ming-time scholar, Chu Yün-ming in his collection of essays the *Wei-t'an* ("The Trifling Chats") gives the following information concerning the time when the southern plays originated:

The southern plays (*nan-hsi*) appeared after the era Hsüan-ho (1119—1126), at the time when the capital was removed to the south. The plays were called the *Wen-chou tsa-chü*. I saw the old records of them. At that time there was a Chao Hung-fu, who got on the list of successful candidates in the Imperial Palace. He recorded some titles of those plays, like the *Chao Chen-nü* and *Ts'ai Erh-lang*, but they were not very numerous.

Another passage comes from the most important study of the early southern plays, the *Nan-tz'u hsü-lu*, written by a Ming-time scholar, Hsü Wei. As regards the origin of the southern plays, the following remark can be found in his treatise:

The southern plays (*nan-hsi*) appeared during the reign of Kuang-tsung (1190—1194) of the Sung dynasty. The plays about Chao Chen-nü or Wang K'uei composed by people from Yungchia actually inaugurated this theatrical form... Some people maintain that the plays were already widely known and popular during the Hsüan-ho (1119—1126) era, and their further development followed the removal of the capital to the south. They were called the *Yungchia tsa-chü* or the *ku-ling sheng-sou* ("the skilful tunes"). Their arias were the *tz'u* poetry of the Sung period supplemented with the rustic folk-songs. They were not arranged according to modes, hence the educated men very rarely gave any attention to them.



The third passage comes from Liu I-ch'ing's *Ch'ien-t'ang i-shih* ("The Transmitted Events of the Ch'ien-t'ang Region"):

Chia Ssu-tao was very frivolous and unconventional in his youth. After having become a minister of state (1258) he often in disguise walked along the streets, sometimes drank wine at the actors' inns. Between the years *mou-ch'en* (1268) and *chi-ssu* (1269) the southern play about Wang Huan (*Wang Huan hsi-wen*) was very popular in the capital.

Three different dates (1120—1190—1260) can be set for the time when the southern plays were performed, with the difference of about one and a half century between the earliest and the latest. As the plays mentioned in all these three passages have not been preserved, there is no way of knowing, which of them actually were representative of the early *nan-hsi* plays (including singing, dialogue and acting) and which were only short sketches played by two, three or even one actor.

In Chou I-pai's opinion, expressed in his *Chung-kuo hsi-chü shih* ("The History of Chinese Theatre"), the plays which are said to have been "widely known and popular during the Hsüan-ho era" were not the real *Wen-chou tsa-chü* and rather resembled the performance of the *Mu-lien chiu-mu* ("Mu-lien saves his mother") mystery play mentioned in the *Tung-ching meng-hua-lu*, a description of K'aifeng, the capital of the Northern Sung dynasty. But still the rise of the *nan-hsi* must have been somehow connected with the transfer of the *tsa-chü* primitive performances from the north to the south of the country. Emperor Kuang-tsung reigned for almost five years at the close of the 12th century. Chou I-pai assumes that at that time the *Wen-chou tsa-chü* was only a kind of primitive folk performances, which although they had already acquired the dramatic form, on the whole, could have escaped notice by the general public. This could be due to the vicinity of Hangchow, where it gradually penetrated, and there had won wide-spread recognition and popularity. The opinion of its great development and popularity just after the removal of the capital to the south of the country is believed by Chou I-pai to be a grave exaggeration. Thus, he places the rise of the southern Chinese dramaturgy in the first half of the 13th century.

Further, Chou I-pai is engaged in tracing the sources of the constituents of those southern plays. He maintains that there must have existed a close relation between the early northern *tsa-chü* performances and the *Wen-chou tsa-chü* in the ways of performing epic plots on the stage (a dialogue form instead of a monologue recitation). The Northern Sung *tsa-chü* performances must have also directly influenced the structure of the dramatic plot. The only significant difference consisted in the elements of singing and dancing, having become an immanent element of the southern plays. These two elements were missing from the early northern plays, unless they might have been considered insignificant and thus



omitted in the descriptions of those performances. As an evidence for this opinion Chou I-pai points to the *kuan-pen tsa-chü* plays listed in the *Wu-lin chiu-shih* and the names of tunes attached to some of them. Therefore those *kuan-pen tsa-chü* performances are considered by him to be the immediate predecessors of the southern *nan-hsi* plays.

All the singing and reciting forms, like the *ch'ang-chuan*, the *chu-kung-tiao* ballads and even the *tz'u* song-poems are considered to have been a later accretion in the *Wen-chou tsa-chü*. The original statement by Hsü Wei in his *Nan-tz'u hsü-lu* that "the arias [of the *Wen-chou tsa-chü*] were based on the *tz'u* poetry of the Sung period and were supplemented with the rustic folk-songs," should be, according to Chou I-pai, internally transposed, i.e. that the arias were based on folk-songs and were supplemented with the *tz'u* poems of the Sung time.

Another statement in Hsü Wei's treatise, which says that

when the *Yung-chia tsa-chü* appeared, they consisted of short songs from village alleys and they were not sung according to modes and their rhythm was very slack. In the plays they only sang the tunes habitually chanted by village girls in the country markets...

is interpreted by Chou I-pai as the evidence that the *Wen-chou tsa-chü* originally embodied only country folk-songs and the Sung-time *tz'u* song-poems were a later accretion.

Another eminent Chinese scholar, Ch'ien Nan-yang, whose studies concern almost exclusively the southern Chinese dramaturgy, places the rise of the *nan-hsi* earlier than either Wang Kuo-wei or Chou I-pai, and fixes it approximately at the beginning of the 12th century. As concerns the elements, which caused the emergence of the southern plays, Ch'ien Nan-yang closely follows Wang Kuo-wei's opinion, based partly on Hsü Wei's statement, that the arias in the southern plays were "the Sung-time *tz'u* song-poems supplemented with the rustic folk-songs." He supports his opinion with the results of Wang Kuo-wei's statistical accounts of the types of songs in the northern and southern dramas as well as with the development of the *chu-kung-tiao* medley, which in the early compositions during the Northern Sung period did not observe the differentiation into the northern and southern types of tunes. The purposeful limitation to the southern arias had first been introduced in the early southern plays, and only later spread onto other literary forms. This fact is corroborated by the short prologue to the play *Chang Hsieh chuang-yüan* which is composed in the form of *chu-kung-tiao* and made up exclusively of southern arias.

Ch'ien Nan-yang maintains that the song basis for the early southern dramas rested upon the Sung-time *tz'u* song-poems which originally were not differentiated into the northern and southern types. It was only later—the exact time is not given—that the supplementation of the *tz'u* melodies with the southern folk tunes made some of those *tz'u* songs



considered to belong to the southern type and some others to the northern type. In this respect, Ch'ien Nan-yang represents the opposite opinion to that expressed by Chou I-pai and considers the *tz'u* poetry to be the groundwork of the southern theatrical arias, only later supplemented with the local folk-songs.

To sum up the Chinese theories on the time of origin and the sources of the early southern plays, our own opinion will be briefly presented. While reading through the above mentioned studies, some assumptions raised by Chinese scholars looked more, and some other less convincing. The general tenet, supported by the reading of the three earliest dramatic compositions preserved in the *Yung-lo ta-tien*, is that the southern drama, the *nan-hsi*, must have actually come to life sometime at the beginning of the 12th century and that it was based primarily on local folk-songs and earlier forms of primitive performances, including short sketches, ballad-singing, story-telling and other popular recitations and vocal presentations.

Some interesting conclusions on the origin of the *nan-hsi* plays can be drawn from the analysis of the structure of the plot of the early southern plays. The structure of the dramatic event and the arrangement of the episodes into a developed dramatic action, in case a set of events is presented in a plot, are important elements in the structure of a dramatic piece. Following prof. Skwareczyńska's, a Polish eminent scientist in the field of literary research, opinion, which I am going to quote below on the differences between the epic and the dramatic forms of the plot, determined by the structure of the hero, I have found some distinctive traits in the *nan-hsi* in this respect, making them quite different from famous Yüan *tsa-chü* operas.

Prof. Skwareczyńska wrote:

We know that the epic and the drama are very much alike, both being founded on the construction of the plot. But there exist specific differences between the typical epic plot and the typical plot of drama. Undoubtedly, they both represent a growing sequence of events, framed by the beginning and the end. The events determine the fates of the heroes and are linked with each other not only as a succession of events but also with internal cause-effect ties. But for a typically epic plot the majority of events happening externally, outside the hero, and from the outside somehow shaping his fate, will be satisfactory, while the typical dramatic plot employs the majority of events determined by the hero's volition, and thus qualifying his deeds. Moreover, the typical epic plot may present the evolution of events in a straight line, in an ever changing stream of facts, internally connected and following one another. The dramatic plot presents the development of basic events resulting from a struggle, a clash of two antagonistic forces. For the epic it is enough to speak about the development of events, for the drama it is necessary to speak about the development resulting from a struggle.

In respect to the above differentiation between the epic and the dramatic construction of the plot, the Yüan-time northern plays, the *pei-ch'ü*



*tsa-chü* seem to represent the ingenious construction of a dramatic plot with an exposition, development, climax, peripety and dénouement. The four-act structure of these plays could have consolidated such an arrangement of the dramatic action. In the preserved *nan-hsi* plays the action is constructed as a stream of events, with no clear-cut conflicts, no apparent climaxes. The structure of the plot resembles a reportage reviewing a set of successive events. This is also evidenced by the irregularity concerning the length of the southern plays, what we mentioned before. The longest of the three plays, preserved in the *Yung-lo ta-tien* is almost ten times longer than the shortest one. This also shows that the early south-Chinese dramatists inherited much from the story-tellers' art as concerns the plot construction. Also the relative importance of the singing parts in the northern dramaturgy and their unimportance in the southern forms of Chinese drama make us believe that the former was much more indebted to the singing forms of entertainment, like the singing of the *chu-kung-tiao* ballads, while the origin of the latter was more closely related with the performances of the street story-tellers.

The above remarks are only fragmentary observations on the possible sources of origin of the early southern Chinese dramaturgy and it is to be hoped that further investigation in this field will reveal new facts to make our knowledge about this important stage in the development of Chinese drama and theatre more thorough and complete.

## KILKA UWAG NA TEMAT GENEZY SZTUK NAN-HSI

### STRESZCZENIE

W liczącej około trzydziestu stuleci literaturze chińskiej epickiej, a zwłaszcza dramatyczne gatunki literackie pojawiły się stosunkowo późno. Początki dramaturgii chińskiej, zaświadczone tekstami utworów dramatycznych, przypadają na pierwszą połowę XIII w.

Odrębne formy literatury dramatycznej pojawiły się niemal jednocześnie w Chinach północnych i południowych. Do niedawna dramaty w stylu północnym uchodziły za wcześniejsze, a najbardziej płodny z północnochińskich dramaturgów, Kuan Han-k'ing, autor ponad 65 sztuk, uważany był za ojca dramaturgii chińskiej.

Ostatnie badania jednakże, oparte zwłaszcza na analizie tekstów zachowanych sztuk we wczesnym stylu południowym, zwanych *nan-hsi* (dosł. 'południowe sztuki'), wskazują na ich wcześniejsze powstanie i znaczną odmienną formą i tematyczną od dramatów w stylu północnym.

Badacze chińscy upatrywali powstanie *nan-hsi* w starochińskich dworskich występach śpiewaczych i tanecznych bądź przypisywali je wpływowi dramaturgii indyjskiej.

Analiza wątków dramatycznych trzech wczesnych *nan-hsi* wykazuje ponad wszelką wątpliwość ich typowo epicki charakter i w konsekwencji łączy pojawienie się dramatu w Chinach ze sztuką ulicznych i jarmarcznych opowiadaczy-recytatorów.