My Opinion on Traditionalism in Modern
Chuanqi Zaju

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Abstract: There existed a creative tendency called traditionalism during the development of modern chuanqi (poetic dramas of the Ming and Qing dynasties) zaju (poetic drama set to music, flourishing in the Yuan dynasty, usually consisting of four acts called zhe, with one character having the singing role in each zhe). This tendency, which was obviously observed in its theme, artistic structure, literary style, etc., showed its adherence as well as adequate modification to tradition. Its ideology, artistic quality and style were characterized by complexity, variety and profundity. The traditionalism in modern chuanqi originated from the unique drama, literature and culture of modern China, and it also made significant contribution to the development of drama. This

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When the modern Chinese culture was trended by breaking through tradition and renovation, chuanqi, after many years of development and almost at the end of its course, showed the same trend to much extent. Modern chuanqi was featured by reflecting political situation, swimming with the tide, breaking through tradition and customs in its ideological theme, artistic structure, literary style, language and stagecraft, etc. We may say that these features represented a leading trend in the development and changes of modern chuanqi, and to a great extent embodied the epochal characteristics of modern Chinese drama and literature, which fully demonstrated by modern Chinese dramas, which were once praised by Zheng Zhenduo as “vehement, indignant, masterpieces of national literature and monument of political drama,” “extremely valuable for encouraging national spirit.”

Meanwhile, another important trend existed in the development of modern chuanqi, which was mainly manifested by some chuanqi writers, who were nostalgic about the past glory, adhered to fixed tradition, estranged from the tide and dominant culture in ethic concept, political ideology, life attitude and artistic pursuit. They neither advocated, nor liked or even opposed to renovation. Therefore, their works displayed a series of corresponding features and unique significance and value. I name this phenomenon as the traditionalism

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in modern chuanqi, and will do some preliminary discussion on it in this article.

In ideology, traditionalism in modern chuanqi was mainly displayed in two aspects: One was its rejection and opposition to social reform, political upheaval and cultural changes. A series of big political events and fundamental ideological renovation occurred in modern China; many dramatists and writers had their own ideological and psychological reaction to these sudden events and changes, hence the diversity and richness in the subjects and content of modern chuanqi. The traditionalism in modern chuanqi had a very unique and rich expression in these aspects and inspired careful pondering. Some dramatists opposed to the Taiping Rebellion. Chuanqi such as Catastrophe in the Year of Red Goat by Zhu Shaoyi, Regret for Jinling by Fucha Xianke, Yiyun Rock by Xu Shanchang, Double Pretty Shadows by Yang Enshou all regarded the Taiping Rebellion as a catastrophe and depicted various misery and horror in wars and unrests. The dramatists had a clear and firm standing against act of violence such as the Taiping Rebellion. Chen Xuezhen’s Double Flag Notes and Shengfe Stele were both chuanqi scathingly denouncing Taiping Rebellion and Nian Rebellion. Some dramatists opposed to Wuxu Reform and Xinhai Revolution. Zaju such as the Frowning Landlord and The Heavenly Music by Yuan Zuguang employed satires and banters to reflect the disadvantages and harmful trends appeared in Wuxu Reform, and thus basically denied the Reform. Chuanqi such as Fanchuan Dream by Hu Weiyuan, Hanjiang Tears and Jinling Tears by Jiang Jixiang all reflected the social unrest, misery and sufferings of people, and took a conservative political attitude towards violent revolution. Some dramatists opposed to sexual equality, free love, and marital autonomy. Chuanqi such as Notes of Falling Mat, Double Tear Stele by Wu Mei, Free Flower zaju by Chen Xiaoqiu all depicted women walking out of family were cheated in their pursuit of love and marital freedom. Their works reflected problems arising from women’s pursuit of self-emancipation and marital autonomy and drew a conclusion that freedom led to sin and harm. This type of
chuanqi reflected the important events and epochal themes in modern China’s political reform and social changes by specific portray of historical events. They obviously manifested dramatists’ political attitude, ideology and cultural psychology and had an epochal significance and extensive representation.

The other was its recollection and nostalgia of traditional ethics, social order, and concept of value and ideal of life. In modern China, when traditional ethic system was facing collapse and order of human relations and society required urgent rebuilding, a lot of profound content in traditional Chinese culture such as ethic system, concept of value, social order, ideal of life were suffering unprecedented strong lashes. This new situation was an ordeal for dramatists and writers nurtured in traditional culture. Modern traditionalism chuanqi dramatists had unique and profound experience in this aspect. They expressed unprecedented perplex and solitude and brought up pressing and heavy questions on ethics, value and life. Waiting-for-husband Stone by Yuan Zuguang praised Japanese woman AIKO who kept watching in hope that her army-enlisted husband could return and finally turned into a waiting-for-husband stone; Cutting Thigh Three Times commended daughter and daughter-in-law, who scrupulously abided by filial piety and cut their thigh to cure their seriously-ill father and father-in-law, while ridiculed the second daughter-in-law, who though received modern education, did not show filial obedience. In this way, it criticized the degenerating manners and morals of the time. A Beloved Couple zaju by Cai Ying showed sympathy for Sun Sanniang, who resolutely committed suicide following her husband’s death. Yuyuan Chuanqi by Liu Xianrong was even a more typical example. The dramatist expressed his creative theme at the beginning: “In my remaining years, I have no requests for the world. Besides cultivating flowers, I occasionally wrote several dramas. They all abide by the principles of loyalty, piety, chastity and righteousness and nobody on the earth shall cross the line. I am also ridiculing the worldliness by these dramas.”² There were four pieces in this drama and was enti-
tled “Showing Loyalty,” “Encouraging Filial Piety,” “Manifesting Chastity” and “Exhibiting Righteousness” respectively, which clearly indicated his praise and advocate for the four principles; in addition, his resolution to enrage “all the people in the world” and “ridicule the worldliness” was firm and evident. Differentiate Man and Beast chuanqi by Wang Jilie was another clear example. Preface to Differentiate Man and Beast by Tang Wenzhi stated the theme of the drama as: “what a tragedy that people are experiencing endless catastrophes! Is Jun Jiu’s Renshoujian taking pain to retrieve these calamities?” Postscript by Li Tingyan also appraised the drama as “it aimed to rectify the hearts of the public and save the time from difficulty. It had far-reaching significance and made contribution to improvement of social manners and morals.” In the first act the Original Man, it was written: “[qingjiangyin] People should pursue truth in life and penetrate the mysterious relations between heaven and man. Creatures always have instinct for survival. Killing is against the will of Heaven. People are advised to read this book and thoroughly reform themselves.” The eighth act the Great Harmony quoted Sakyamuni’s words and wished “all people in the world, whether good or evil, are integrated into universal harmony. There is no distinction of nationality or religious estrangement. People enjoy the Great Harmony. The world belongs to public and war never happens again.” Wang Jilie wrote this drama definitely not for playing with words, but indeed for saving the manners and

morals from degeneration. It set eyes on international situation and really gave much attention to the matter. This type of works focused on portray of the situation and fate of traditional Chinese ethics, concept of value, social order in the unique cultural background of modern China. Though they were not aimed at specific people or event, they were of more extensive and profound significance. The depth of thought, cultural attitude and individual characteristics of traditionalism in modern chuanqi were displayed centrally and profoundly in these works.

The traditionalism in modern chuanqi, viewed from ideological characteristics and value preferences, whether its rejection and opposition to social reform, political unrest, cultural change or its nostalgia and recollection of traditional ethics, social order, concept of value and ideal of life, all expressed concerns about some basic problems such as the cultural reform, ethic rebuilding and value transference in modern China. Meanwhile, it took a standing of estrangement or even opposition to modern Chinese drama and literature trended with criticizing tradition, learning from the West, bold reform and hankering after renovation. But from the depth of ideology, the two aspects actually had much in common and were interrelated in ideological logics and historical facts. It revealed the worry and confusion of the traditional psychology of literati and concept of value when faced with powerful lashes, and reflected the deep concerns and sentimental attachment to traditional culture and the profound anxiety about the new cultural trend and destiny.

Viewed from the angle of artistic structure, creative forms and style characteristics, traditionalism in modern chuanqi was even more complicated, often displaying features of constant changing and contradiction. In summary, the following two situations best reflected the trend of traditionalism in artistic structure, creative form and style characteristics of modern chuanqi: One was the conscious and painstaking adherence to creative concept, mode of structure, form and standard of traditional drama. Strictly speaking, the formation process of creative system, style and standard of chuanqi
was a process of change and assimilation at the same time. But either chuanqi or zaju, after the development of three dynasties (the Yuan, Ming and Qing), has formed some basic structural habits, style and standards, which have actually been the prerequisites for the existence and continuance of chuanqi. A very obvious historical fact about drama was, in late Qianlong of the Qing dynasty, especially after the Opium War, the artistic structure, style and standard of chuanqi faced unprecedented shock and entered a period trended by breaking through tradition and reform, and the traditional elements of chuanqi obviously faded and withered away. In this situation, chuanqi dramatists with traditionalism inclination consciously shoul-
dered the task of maintaining the traditional creative habit, structure, style and standard, making the last effort to save and revive chuanqi on its way to decline. This conscious effort was evident in some works, such as Wu Mei’s emphasis on stage and music effect and her adamant adherence to tunes. Lu Qian, who had long been fond of beiju, tried to abide by the chuanqi standard in creating the Heroic Phoenix of Chu. He clearly pointed out: “I am confident it strictly abides by the melody, unlike some dramatists who discarded the old form and neglected the tunes.” He then added: “the Heroic Phoenix of Chu all uses nanqu.”6 His effort in adhering to tunes at the period when chuanqi was declining was especially precious. And the special emphasis on the difference of nanqu and beiju also expressed his intention. In Three Sufferings to Make Dramas the scholarly dramatist Gu Sui abided by the traditional creative standard of the Yuan dynasty with four acts, one prologue and one character having the singing role. This was somewhat adopted by other scholarly dramatists in their creation of chuanqi. The Gorgeous Dress by Xu Zhiheng partially had the feature of playing with words, but the basic artistic inclination and structure were traditional. Wu Mei

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revised Love and Hatred between Zhu and Liang Zaju by Chang Renxia. It adopted four acts and paid special attention and worked hard to abide by the standard and style of the zaju of Yuan dynasty. These dramatists positively abided by the creative tradition of chuanqi in their creation. They rendered relentless efforts in hope that they could advocate and protect the structure, form, standard and style of chuanqi. Their efforts, though difficult to curb or reverse the trend that the tradition of chuanqi was quickly broken through and profoundly changed, was of special significance and even had a tint of tragedy for the declining and fading chuanqi. The essence of the effort was not trying to restore the old tradition or returning to the inappropriate retrogresses, but was forcefully continuing the value of chuanqi’s existence with deep love in artistic form, creative style and standard.

Another situation was the unconscious breakthrough or forced change of traditional drama in creative concepts, structure and standard. In modern China, it was a common phenomenon that the structure, standard and styles of chuanqi were even more frequently and profoundly broken through. It was an important manifest of chuanqi’s revival, as well as a basic reason for its quick decline or even extinction. Modern traditionalism dramatists in the history of chuanqi showed very complicated mood when faced with old standard and styles, though they created a variety of works. One striking situation was in the literary atmosphere of that time, due to the special need of creative content and intention, some traditionalism dramatists either unconsciously or unwillingly, changed the traditional habit and literary standard, so that their works broke through and reformed tradition. The Weeping Cuckoo of Shu, Hepu Pearl and Tianfei Temple by Lin Shu, who was very unsatisfied with both the New Culture Movement and writings in the vernacular, all had acts between twelve to twenty, which was already a change of chuanqi standard; moreover, female role did not appear until the ninth act in Tianfei Temple, which did not conform to traditional standard so that later generations often regarded his chuanqi as having no female
roles. Wu Mei, who was conservative and negative to reform and artistic renovation, used a lot of jiagu he did not rate high in Wind Tunnel Mountain, which was actually a change to his past creation. Lu Hong, though clearly supported the distinction between nanqu and beiagu, and adherence to standards of chuanqi and zaju, adopted one-act short drama in Five Ways of Drinking Rainbow completely different with the standards of zaju of the Yuan dynasty. Gu Sui, who set same great store by standard and traditional habits of zaju, though inherited the standard of that of the Yuan dynasty in Three Sufferings to Make Dramas changed this habit in two other kinds of zaju, which was an important breakthrough to zaju standard of the Yuan dynasty. He intentionally changed the ordinary standard and structure of zaju for creativity in A Gluttonous xiucai. Just as he self-stated: “It can be said that I wrote this drama out of laziness. It did not consist of four acts, did not have a reunion or result, but rather was left unsettled. In this way, I am trying to be creative.”

Another of his zaju A Spring Travel Note- Climbing Mountains and Viewing Seas due to long story and complicated plot, was difficult to fully express with four acts and one prologue, so eight acts and two prologues were employed, which doubled the length of zaju of the Yuan dynasty. We can see from many historical facts that some traditionalism dramatists (sometimes) were changing tradition unconsciously, while some (sometimes) were changing tradition unwillingly. The former was mainly of a positive adjustment of dramatists based on their understanding when traditional habits and literary standard were faced with questions and challenges, while the later reflected the dramatists’ unwilling and passive response due to the special situation and requirements inside and outside of the drama itself. From the reform and breakthrough, we can not only see that modern chuanqi dramatists with traditionalism inclination made adjustment and renovation to tradition, realized the characteristics of the era and individu-

ality of traditionalism they adhered to, but also realized though traditionalism dramatists are basically characterized by abiding by old standard and habit, on the other hand, they have something in common with the major trend of modern Chinese cultural development in ideology and creative practice. We may also realize that breaking through and developing tradition had become a far-reaching and important trend of modern Chinese drama and literature.

Viewed from creative concepts and literary styles, in the history of chuanqi’s development, either the traditionalism dramatists’ painstaking adherence to traditional creative concept, structure and standard or their unconscious or unwilling breakthrough and change reflected directly or indirectly an important historical fact that in modern China, with the vicissitudes of history and culture and full reform of drama and literature, after long period of silence since the late Qianlong Period of the Qing dynasty, chuanqi had an opportunity for vigorous advance and achieved high prosperity. Breaking through tradition and trying reform mainly characterized the prosperity and development, viewed from artistic form and creative style. Compared with the past, the form, standard and style of chuanqi had almost gone to collapse. In this situation, some dramatists’ concerns and adherence to chuanqi’s standard and styles was actually bearing the heavy task of continuing the lifeline of chuanqi. The effort, though difficult to save the declining traditional drama, was necessary, inevitable and must be shouldered by someone. The historical experience of drama’s development indicated that breakthrough and reform to tradition was important and necessary, and this was the same with the inheritance and protection of tradition. For the survival and development of modern chuanqi, it was not the more it was erased and cast away, the better.

From the above discussion we can see the general picture and basic characteristics of traditionalism in modern chuanqi. Combining the development process and experience in the history of modern Chinese drama, literature and culture, studying the traditionalism in modern chuanqi, we can also draw the following conclusion:
First, traditionalism in modern chuanqi was a very interesting phenomenon in the history of drama and was fully reflected by many dramatists’ creative concept and cultural psychology as well as by the themes, structures and styles of their works. It represented a very important aspect in the history and development of modern chuanqi. The forms of expression of traditionalism in modern chuanqi were not unitary, flat-faced or fixed, but rather diversified, complicated, changeable and integrated with the time. The traditionalism in modern chuanqi was not only the product of a unique living environment of modern Chinese drama, literature and culture faced with various problems, but also an inevitable consequence in the course of chuanqi’s own development. Some of its important characterization such as ideological pursuit, cultural psychology, orientation of value and nostalgia showed depth of thought and features of the time, and had strong cultural symbolism in some aspects.

Second, the identities of the most representative dramatists of traditionalism in modern chuanqi history were distinctively unique. Most of them were scholarly dramatists who had a deep feeling towards Chinese cultural tradition. It needs to be specially emphasized that some dramatists not only had solid foundation and accomplishment of Chinese culture, but also had deep understanding and mastery of western drama, literature and culture. The formation and development of traditionalism in cultural attitude and dramatist concept had a solid foundation of Chinese culture as well as elements of western culture. It was based not only on the deep understanding of the historical development and modern plight of chuanqi, but also on the meditation on the destiny and future of modern Chinese drama, literature and culture. We might call these dramatists with cultural symbolism traditionalists or partial traditionalists, and study it carefully as a dramatic, literary and cultural phenomenon.

Third, in surface, traditionalism dramatists in modern chuanqi had much difference with other dramatists especially those with clear anti-tradition inclination. But in depth, such as in cultural con-
cepts and creative psychology, either traditionalism or anti-traditionalism actually re-identified and re-adjusted the tradition in the new background of drama, literature and culture. Both had made sincere efforts for the development of drama. It seemed that they were contradicting each other, but actually they embodied the same ideology and expressed the same cultural concerns and were deeply consistent and relevant with each other. Their cultural attitude and creative styles were different or even opposite, but both made great contribution to the prosperity and development of modern chuanqi. For the existence and continuance of modern chuanqi, it needed to reform and break through as well as keep and continue tradition. They were actually trying to answer an extremely difficult problem in dramatic and cultural history from different angles and different ways.

Fourth, the traditionalism in modern chuanqi had different forms of expression and epochal significance at different periods. Its emergence and development were accompanied by the vicissitude of Chinese cultural tradition and the emergence of modern new cultural forms, and therefore had deep and complicated cultural relations with drama, literature and history. The traditionalism in modern chuanqi in one aspect reflected the modern destiny of Chinese dramatic, literary and cultural tradition. It appeared in the Years of Daoguang or Xianfeng, developed from the Years of Tongzhi to Guanxu, prospered in the early years of the Republic of China and culminated in the middle and late Republic of China. The emergence and development of traditionalism in modern chuanqi was actually a process of traditional Chinese culture experiencing great challenge and unprecedented difficulty. This phenomenon not only existed in modern chuanqi, but also was reflected in other literary forms of modern Chinese literature to various extents. It was even reflected in the course of modern Chinese cultural development. Therefore, the significance and value of traditionalism in modern chuanqi was not only of history of drama and literature, but also of history of culture and ideology.