MUSIC AND DRAMATIC LYRICISM
IN HONG SHENG’S PALACE OF ETERNAL LIFE

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The poetic nature of Chinese drama points to a direction of exploration that is infrequently pursued by critics: that the poetic and dramatic elements of poetic drama can be explicated not only as two separate qualities but more importantly as elements of an integrated aesthetic response. Both in the performance and in the appreciation of opera, we find that the poetic and the dramatic enhance and elevate each other. However, a survey of Chinese dramatic criticism shows that many critical works are studies of either character and theme or poetic qualities. Rarely are these two kinds of study integrated into a poetics which, by articulating the contribution of constituent elements, explains the full effect of drama.

Although prose and poetry were the main literary genres in the early Qing, chuanqi 傳奇 drama, a composite art of lyricism, narrativity and dramaticism, became a major entertainment most popular among the literati. While most famous playwrights such as Wu Weiye 吳偉業 (1609–1672), Hong Sheng 洪昇 (1645–1704) and Kong Shangren 孔尚任 (1648–1718) were leading poets of their times, it is noteworthy that they chose to engage in cross-generic writing and to combine poetry and music in drama. The fictional, lyrical and representational characteristics of Chinese drama provided an appropriate strategy of “playfulness” or “entertainment” for early Qing literati to express conflicting emotions concerning the collapse of the Ming and the subsequent conquest of the Chinese world by the Manchu Qing dynasty. While traditionally regarded as a “lesser way” (xiaodao 小道) or “trivial skill” (moji 末技), Chinese drama turned out to be a self-liberated space for these frustrated literati to linger in. It seems that if only they entered this “artistic space” with music and dance, their stress and suffering could be greatly relieved.

This essay takes music, lyricism and cross-generic writing as points of convergence to explore how early Qing literati employed drama as
a kind of intimate vehicle for retaining public and private memories, thus expressing their sentiments about dynastic changeover. To explain the interaction of “music,” “dramatic lyricism” and “cross-generic writing,” I will focus on Hong Sheng’s play Changsheng dian (The Palace of Eternal Life).\(^1\) I will analyze how the author employs music in the play and how his distinct treatments of music and poetry highlight the composite art of lyricism, narrativity and dramaticism of chuanqi drama. The issues addressed are: How did the poet Hong Sheng realize his ideal lyricism through his dramatic work? How did drama come to be employed as a public medium for early Qing literati to convey private sentiments? How did recurrent thematic melodies create boundary-crossing imagination? How did music performance within the play function as a vehicle to recollect cultural memory and what was its metatheatrical effect? What self-referential significance can we find in Hong Sheng’s portrayal of the music masters?

**Hong Sheng: The Poet As Dramatist**

Among the masterpieces of Chinese drama, Hong Sheng’s romance *The Palace of Eternal Life* (hereafter *TPEL*) is one of the most famous. It is a chuanqi play which takes as its theme the love story of Emperor Ming Huang of the Tang Dynasty (685–762, r. 712–756, r. title Xuanzong 玄宗) and his favorite consort Lady Yang Yuhuan (楊玉環; Consort Yang). By the end of the Ming dynasty, there were already twenty-one plays dealing with this popular love story. The popularity of *TPEL* and its great influence on drama of the period are due to the fact that in his play Hong Sheng surpassed all previous works on the same theme, both in his artistic treatment of the subject and in his poetic technique. In fact, as a culmination of a

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\(^1\) The English translation used in this paper is Hong Sheng, *The Palace of Eternal Youth*, trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1955), hereafter cited as *TPEY*. While this translation is somewhat prosaic, it is, on the whole, accurate and lucid. I therefore generally follow it, though I occasionally propose revised or alternate renditions of certain passages. The Chinese text used is Hong Sheng, *Changsheng dian* (Beijing: Wenxue guji kanxingshe, 1955) which includes Wu Shufu’s 吳舒鳧 commentaries, hereafter cited as *CSD*. I have also consulted the edition annotated by Tseng Yong-yih 曾永義 (Taipei: Guojia chubanshe, 1988), who not only offers detailed footnotes for the play, but also discusses the arrangement of music in terms of the development of the dramatic plot. See also Hong Sheng, *Changsheng dian*, ed. Xu Shuofang 徐朔方 (Beijing: Remin wenxue chubanshe, 1988).