Yanzi Jian: A Comparative Study of its Drama Version and its Novel Version

Yanzi Jian (The Swallow’s Message) was originally a drama, written by Ruan Dacheng 阮大鋮 (1587?-1646?), a famous dramatist and official of the Southern-Ming Court (1644-1645), whose political personality was strongly criticized by his contemporary scholars and officials from the Donglin 東林 and Fushe 複社 Societies. After its publication and ensuing popularity in the mid-17th century, Yanzi Jian, as one of the Late-Ming Period’s remarkable pieces of Caizi-jiaren, a Scholar-beauty drama, was revised and published as a novel. As a result, it became one of

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1 There was a debate on which came first: the drama version or the novel version. It is mentioned by a scholar called Meng Feng 夢鳳 in his colophon to the Luan-hong shi 暖紅室 edition of the drama Yanzi Jian that he once saw a version of Yanzi Jian in six juan and eighteen chapters. He said that this version has only a narrative tale, ping-hua 平話, but is without lyrics, qu-wen 曲文 or date. Meng Feng considered it an edition of the early-Ming, since the paper and the inked words of the book looked quite old. If what Meng said is true, the origin of Yanzi Jian would be the narrative tale rather than the drama. However, there is no evidence to support Meng Feng’s statement and the so-called ping-hua edition of Yanzi Jian has never surfaced. The edition of the novel that we use today was printed in the Qing period. See Hou Zhongyi’s 侯忠義 preface to the reprinted edition of Yanzi Jian, Wanhua zhuren 玩花主人, 1990, p. 1.

2 Zhang Tingyu 張廷玉, Ming Shi, 120:3651, 244:6333-34. A typical criticism of Ruan Dacheng can also be seen in the famous Early-Qing drama, Tao-hua Shan 桃花扇 by Kong Shangren 孔尚任.

3 In his work, Tao’an mengyi 陶庵夢憶 (Dreamily Remembering Tao’s hut), Zhang Dai 張岱, a Qing scholar, highly evaluated Yanzi Jian “excellent in its every chapter, every sentence, and even every word. (句句出色, 字字出色.)” See Zhang Dai 1996, ch. 8, p. 221. Also, Wu Mei 吳梅 has similar comments on it, see Wang Weimin ed. 1983, pp. 436-38.
Fig. 1 Yanzi jian cover page