



Wilt L. Idema and Stephen H. West, *The Generals of the Yang Family: Four Early Plays*

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THE GENERALS OF THE YANG FAMILY is the first book-length study in English of an important story-cycle centering on the famous Yang family of generals who sought to save China from “barbarian” forces in the tenth and eleventh centuries. A staple in Chinese opera and folk performance past and present, the Yang family saga focuses on themes of patriotism, loyalty, jealousy, and betrayal. Operatic versions abound in spectacular performances of military acrobatics that have long delighted their audiences. Most amazing of all, the Yang family of generals included that most unusual sight in imperial China, women of martial valor who could worst male opponents in battle. It is surprising that this story-cycle, one of the most prolific and popular in the Chinese tradition, has been so little studied in the West.

English-language studies and translations have generally dealt with texts deriving from the later imperial period, particularly those associated with Beijing Opera of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this volume, however, the reader is able to appreciate the evolution of this major story-cycle in its earlier formative stage. This volume, by veteran scholars and translators Wilt L. Idema and Stephen H. West, comprises an introduction, translation of four *zaju* play scripts, and four appendixes dealing with background material.

The leading general of the Yangs, Yang Ye, is a historical figure who was known for his loyalty to the Song dynasty and his valor in fighting the non-Chinese Khitan. Apparently a favorite of the Song emperor, Yang Ye incurred the enmity of the commander-in-chief, Pan Mei. There is evidence that stories about the valor of Yang Ye were told in the storyteller stalls of Kaifeng in the early twelfth century. By the late thirteenth century tales emerged about how Yang Ye and his sons had been willing to sacrifice their own lives to save the Song emperor. Idema and West argue that operatic versions of the saga appeared only after 1330, possibly due to ethnic sensitivities during the reign of the Mongol-controlled Yuan dynasty (xxv–xxvi). The operas translated here date in their present form from the Ming period (1368–1644), which is also the time of the first appearance of long novelistic narratives about the Yang family generals. Over the centuries, the saga gained later embellishments as successive generations of the Yangs were added by storytellers and dramatists. Later elaborations are noted for their inclusion of women warriors and stories of magic and the supernatural (xxix). The operas were performed at the Ming court, where the derision of the “barbar-

ians” found favor with the ruling Chinese dynasty, which had come to power after the Mongol Yuan. However, women generals were not included in court performances and the demonization of the “barbarians” was less noticeable than in novelistic presentations.

A prominent feature of the translations is the adoption of particular conventions that allow the reader to gain insight into the musicality of the performance, transitions in speech and song registers, and the action on stage. Changes in font type (lower and upper capitals, italics) as well as indentation inform the reader that a particular section is intended to be sung or recited. Tune titles are given in uppercase and stage directions are indicated in italics. The use of uppercase type for acting roles reminds the reader that the actor played not the individual but a specific role type (for example, the male lead). Where the original script calls for reference to the Song emperor, the word “Sage” is given in bold type to replicate a parallel term of respect used in the original text. As explained in the introduction, many of these texts were in fact prepared for court performances and may well have been performed before the reigning emperor during the Ming and Qing periods.

The plays are presented here in accord with the chronological segments of the story-cycle rather than presumed date of origin of the extant text. This helps the English reader to understand the developing story line. The first play, “The Eighth Great Prince Opens a Proclamation and Saves a Loyal Vassal,” deals with the betrayal of leading general Yang Ye by the villainous Pan Renmei, a later version of the historical Pan Mei, who orders Yang and his sons to battle the Khitan on an inauspicious day. When Yang Ye and his troops are trapped in a steep ravine, Pan refuses to come to their aid and even uses his son, Yang Seven, as a shooting target. In a climactic scene, Yang Ye kills himself by knocking his head on a stele dedicated to a general from antiquity who had himself been defeated by nomadic “barbarians.” Subsequent scenes depict the machinations of Yang Six and others to extract a confession from Pan Renmei. With the approval of the Song court, he is then able to exact gory vengeance against Pan. The second play, “At Bright Sky Pagoda Meng Liang Steals the Bones,” deals with the ghost of Yang Ye, who appeals to his son, Yang Six, to put an end to the constant humiliation of his bones by the Khitan: “The barbarian troops have cremated my corpse and hung my bones on the peak of the Bright Sky Pagoda in Youzhou. Every day a group of one hundred common soldiers takes turns and shoots three arrows each at me. They call this the Hundred Arrows Meeting” (64). Subsequently, Yang Six manages to seize the bones, sets fire to the pagoda, and flees to Wutai monastery. Together with Meng Liang, he defeats the barbarian general and his forces. The bones of father and son are interred and appropriate rituals are carried out. The third play, “Xie Jinwu Underhandedly Tears Down Clear Breeze Mansion,” deals with another act of treachery by jealous rivals. Wang Qin is a Song military commander who is secretly engaged in espionage with the Khitan state. Jealous of the Yangs, he calls on his son-in-law, Xie Jinwu, to destroy Clear Breeze Mansion, a tower constructed by the Song emperors in honor of the Yang family. This act induces Yang Six to leave his guard post at Tile Bridge, an offense punishable by death. One of Yang’s lieutenants, Jiao Zan, then murders Xie Jinwu and his family. Yang’s own mother-in-law, who

happens to be related to the Song emperor, intervenes to save Yang Six and Jiao Zan from execution. With the fortuitous capture of a barbarian soldier, the traitorous duplicity of Wang Qin is exposed. The emperor calls for Wang's execution: "He will ride the wooden donkey and be slowly sliced into a mince—/This will demonstrate that the king's law is without partiality" (132).

In the final play, "Defeating the Heavenly Battle Array," we see Yang Six hiding in a cellar under the protection of the prefect of Ruzhou in the aftermath of the murder of Xie Jinwu. He sings of his past exploits and longs to serve the emperor again: "Capturing those caitiff invaders I burned their camps to ash and toppled drums" (149). When Han Yanshou invades the border region, Yang Six is brought back from exile. Act 1 of this play offers a comical depiction of the "barbarians": "My hair hangs down in two braids, a dog pelt coat" (141), but their leaders come across as highly Sinified. Chief commander, Han Yanshou, is well-versed in the strategies of the legendary Chinese figures, Yellow Lord and Lú Wang, and their Taoist master, Yan Dongbin, claims to be a master of the classic, *The Way and its Virtue*. Nonetheless, Yang Six is able to instantly identify the battle array adopted by the enemy as Eight Trigrams Encircling Heaven Array and to devise means to dispatch each of the trigrams one by one. Act 3 provides for a loud and boisterous spectacle designed to play to the audience. The appendices offer summaries of narrative treatments of the Yang family generals in Ming historical novels, a summary of a later play in *chuanqi* style featuring female Yang warriors, and analysis with translation of different treatments of the story of the theft of the bones of Yang Ye. The bibliography is extensive and includes key works in Chinese and English.

The plays are meticulously and vibrantly translated with detailed annotations and explanations. The lengthy introduction contextualizes each example within the appropriate textual and receptive tradition. The provision of stylistic conventions in the English text allows the reader to better appreciate the performative characteristics of these plays. The reader will readily recognize these as hallmark features of the series of translations by Idema and West of other key examples of Chinese traditional drama. *The Generals of the Yang Family*, with its strong focus on ethnic tension between Chinese and the barbarian "Other," will be enjoyed by undergraduates studying Chinese or world literature, while the detailed scholarly material will enlighten the postgraduate and specialist in Chinese theater. This is another important contribution by two seasoned scholars towards making the riches of the Chinese operatic tradition more accessible to a broader readership.

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