

The Historical Reception of *The Injustice to Dou E* by Comparing Two Versions and Different Stage Designs of the Play Across Time

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Abstract: The paper takes a look at a popular, fictional Chinese story, *The Injustice to Dou E*, and how the original story has been altered by authors from different periods to highlight the particular social inequities of their time. The theme of the book, inhumanity and barbarity against the innocent Dou E, remains the same in all the versions, however, some alterations are made to showcase the specific depravity of humankind from the author's generation. For example, the Guan Hanqing's version of Dou E, majorly focuses on the aspect of inequality, where the poor are regularly oppressed by the elite. Whereas Cowhig's version brings to light a more serious issue overlooked by the government of China in the name of profit. Cowhig exposes the vile realities by showing how Dou E's soul can never attain peace, not only because of the injustice she faced, but also because there was nothing left in her body to bury; her organs were missing! This is a direct jibe at the Chinese authorities who have been complicit in harvesting and selling the organs of people for a high value in the international markets. Lastly, I have offered my personal version of the story, by changing some of the play's settings and story sequences. This, I believe, will help to convey to the audiences what I make of the story and my personal experiences of inequality, specifically against vulnerable women.

1. Introduction to the Plot and Versions of Dou E Yuan

The original story of *Dou E Yuan*, also known as *Snowfall in Midsummer*, is a Zaju style play written by Guan Hanqing in the early Yuan Dynasty. The Yuan Dynasty, governed by minority ethnic groups, promoted dances and plays for entertainment over the Imperial Examination. Guan Hanqing's plays incorporate strong social issues and expose corruption in the corridors of power as well as turbulence in society. The story of Dou E Yuan is a perfect case in point. It shows how the dissolute Yuan governors accept favours from the wealthy, disregard dharma, and treat life as if it was a piece of straw [1].

In *Snowfall in Midsummer*, Dou Tianzhang is a poor scholar whose wife passes away, leaving behind a young daughter, Dou E (also called as Dou yi), in his care. To survive the chaotic world, he is compelled to borrow money from a widow, Woman Cai. However, he had to give his daughter to Cai PoPo as a child bride for her son to pay his debt and get the money he needed for traveling to take the Imperial Examination. However, Dou E's bad luck follows her into her adult life. As soon as they are married, Cai's son dies. Cai and Dou E live an ordinary life of collecting debts. However, when Cai goes to collect debt from a doctor in the town, the doctor tries to strangle her. She is saved by an old man and his son, Donkey Zhang. The two men decide that in return, the older one will take Cai, and the younger one would marry Dou E. If Cai refuses to obey, they would strangle her like the doctor did. Cai submits to the two men, but Dou E refuses to remarry because she claims that it would be unfaithful to her deceased husband. To force Dou E to marry him, Donkey Zhang purchases poison from the doctor and attempts to murder Cai, but accidentally kills his own father. Donkey Zhang forces Dou E to make a choice: marry him or get accused of murder in front of the Perfect. Insisting on remaining faithful to her marriage, Dou E chooses the latter. She does not submit to cruel torture by the Perfect and refuses any complicity in the crime. Knowing that her resolve is unbreakable, the Perfect hits Dou E, where it hurts the most: he threatens to put

Woman Cai through the same tortures as her. Dou E would endure any level of suffering, but would never let her mother-in-law come in harm's way. So she confesses to the crime she has not committed, only to save Cai.

On the day of the execution, she asks the executor to choose a secluded spot so that her mother-in-law doesn't come to know that she is the criminal being executed. Before her beheading, she makes a strange request. She asks a white cloth to be hung above her head. Minutes before the execution, she asserts that her innocence will be proven by three happenings: not a single drop of blood will fall onto the ground, but fly upwards to the white cloth; There will be snowfall and her corpse will be shrouded in snow; and for the next three years a drought will plague the province. After her death, all her prophecies come true. Dou Tianzhang, her father, returns as an Imperial Censor and defends his daughter's innocence, thereby avenging her death and bringing peace to her soul.

An adaptation of the play is written by Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, a modern playwright who was born in the US and has experienced diverse cultures. She is familiar with Chinese Buddhism and Taoist beliefs, which aided her in researching the context of her play. She chose to set her adaptation in contemporary China because of the social issues she observes there.

The adaptation begins with a prologue, introducing Dou Yi's background, and hinting to the audience that something occurred to her when Master Zhang followed Dou Yi off. The story then jumps three years forward when the whole population had to abandon the town due to a drought that had lasted three years [2]. More characters, with complex relationships, are introduced in Cowhig's play; different connections between seemingly unrelated figures are revealed as the story develops. Reception focuses on how the audience receives and interprets the play.

Both versions of Dou E Yuan reflect social issues corresponding to the era that each was written in; Guan Hanqing wants to bring the audiences' attention to corruption in the government, while Cowhig starts her research in the organ industry and pulls in several issues the modern society is hotly debating over. In the two versions, Guan Hanqing and Cowhig use different means of characterizations and plot structures, staging, and the use of ghosts, to express the focal point of social issues that they want the audience to reflect on.

2. Comparing between the Original Version and the Adaptation by Frances Ya Chu Chowling

The contrasting plot structures of the different versions highlight the social issues that the authors intend to concentrate on portraying. The original text, Dou E Yuan, was written by Guan Hanqing. His play specifically focuses on revealing the unfair treatment of the lower classes, and how the poorest have no power of speech [3]. This is aptly emphasized by showing how the Perfect, after receiving benefits from the criminal, forced Dou E to accept responsibility of a crime she did not commit. In order to leave a deep impression of such societal problems on the audiences, Guan Hanqing's play has a very simple and short structure. Following the traditional structure of Zaju, the play is composed of a wedge and four acts. The wedge consists of two brief monologues, given by Cai PoPo and Dou TianZhang, to establish the setting of the story. Each act following advances the story in a fast pace, but vividly characterizes the figures, especially Dou E who is wronged by an unscrupulous official. In act three, Dou E asked for the executor to bring her to the execution ground on a different route so that her mother-in-law would not know that Dou E was the one being executed [4].

In contrast to Guan Hanqing's focus on revealing the commonly seen corruption among officers in his era, Frances Ya Chu Cowhig expands her modern version by incorporating several social issues into the play. Her play touches upon not only injustice against the poor, rural people but also rape, homosexual, and organ trafficking. According to Cowhig, in the past fifty years in China, the bodies of executed prisoners have often been harvested for their organs, which find their way into the living bodies of wealthy people all over the world [5]. She did research into the organ industry, and revealed the cruel truth in her adaptation of the play: the soul of Dou Yi could not be buried or rest in peace not only because she was wronged, but also because there was nothing to bury: all parts of her body were sold. Incorporating these different issues expanded the originally fast-paced

play into a more complex and deeply developed story, with more characters included and a more picturable setting of a town suffering from a long drought. Cowhig's adaptation also differs from the original play by first introducing a mystery, then fast forwarding to three years later and gradually peeling off layers of causes leading to and effects resulting from the mystery [6]. The reason behind this interesting plot structure is that Cowhig "took inspiration from the ghost films she loves... chose to use a suspense/mystery story structure." The story draws the attention of the audience by beginning with a mystery, successfully incorporating social issues that the author wants the audience to reflect upon throughout the play, and ending with the truth behind that mystery to leave a deep impression of the injustice done to Dou Yi.

3. Modern Stage Adaptations

While the traditional makeup and costumes of actors are more exaggerated to portray the traits of each character, the modern adaptation uses simpler costumes and is more focused on the mood of the entire stage by using different lighting and stagings. In the Kun style *Snowfall in Midsummer*, the play follows Zaju traditions and many monologues are sung instead of spoken. The characters also wear makeup to emphasize their traits. For example, Dou E's face is hidden behind thick layers of white powder, showing her pale face resulting from her sufferings throughout her whole life. Her makeup also effectively deepens the facial expressions of the actor. Ancient Chinese traditions value rules on clothing corresponding to social status very much, compared with modern freedom of dressing, so the costumes of characters in the traditional style of play differ in color and patterns to show status. Dou E's father appears in act four as an Imperial Censor, therefore his cloth has patterns sewed with golden strings to emphasize his importance to the imperial crown.

Different stagings of the same adaptation can also differ. One stage scene from the London Royal Shakespeare Company's production of the play depicts the two ghosts of the story, Dou Yi and Rocket, in the same frame as living characters, located at Rocket's funeral. The ghosts and Tianyun's sight guides the audience to the three characters in the middle, whom the camera is focused on. The ghosts' blurriness suggests that they are distant from the front stage where a conversation occurs between the other characters. It is also hard to see the ghosts' facial expressions since there is no strong light focused on them. The position of the two characters above others also makes them more identifiable as ghosts, who usually float around in the public impression. The pure whiteness of their costumes also portrays them as dead figures. The overall subdued blue lighting passes an overall sad mood over the entire stage, which better emphasizes the funeral setting. The Chinese characters in the background, reading "give my heart back," can inform a minority of the audience of what had occurred in the play.

The Oregon Shakespeare Theatre's production photo of the play portrays the ending of the play where justice had been brought to Dou Yi. Ox-head, Horse-face, and Dou Yi stand behind the stage, guiding the audiences' attention, using sight, to the two characters kneeling before the sprouting hope of the cursed town. In contrast to The London Royal Shakespeare Company's, Dou Yi's costume in this version of the play is red, another symbolic color of wronged female ghosts returning for revenge. The only stage light is casted on Tianyun, Fei Fei, and the plant, showing the significance of the plant. The lighting also separates the dead, hell-creatures from the living by placing them in the shadows. The cool atmosphere makes the scene mysterious which is used commonly when characters from legends are portrayed.

4. Conclusion

Different adaptations have used different ingredients: plot, costumes, makeup, etc. to serve the audience a slightly unique dish that varies from the previous one, yet retains the original taste. Therefore, changes can be successfully incorporated to shape the reception of the story, while ensuring that its true meaning is not lost. Each adaptation differs from the other in some respect. From making substantial tweaks to the plot to introducing supernatural characters and by even placing strong emphasis on specific outward details, the authors of different adaptations have

skillfully brought to the audience's attention issues that they felt needed immediate acknowledgment. For example, Cowhig's version uses mystery as an important narrative technique, hence differing from the original one. The makeup and costumes in the more contemporary plays is simpler and less gaudy. It rather focuses more on the use of different lighting and staging when it comes to storytelling. This is in stark contrast to the traditional ones which used heavy makeup to portray traits of each character.

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