The Yuan dynasty dramatist Guan Hanqing wrote in the zaju format, a stylized form of theater usually in four acts. Scholars have likened his influence on Chinese theater to that of Shakespeare on Western theater.

Little is known about Guan Hanqing’s life. It has been said that he was born in Dadu (today’s Beijing), Qizhou of Hebei Province, or Jiezhuo of Shanxi Province. He was either a physician himself prior to becoming a dramatist or simply a member of a physician’s family.

One fact is certain: He was known as one of the four greatest dramatists of Yuanqu (melodious verse of Yuan), which is a generic name for Yuan Zaju (variety drama of Yuan), the national theatrical form of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). Yuan Zaju, or simply zaju, followed a rigid format. It had four, or occasionally five, acts and four roles in the cast, namely, dan (female), mo (male), jing (strong man or clown), and za (all other roles). Its performance involved singing, talking, and acting, but only the leading role could sing. Guan Hanqing authored sixty-seven zaju, eighteen of which have survived, including *Dou E yuan* (The Injustice Done to Dou E), *Jiu fengchen* (Saving a Prostitute), *Wang jiang ting* (River-Watching Pavilion), *Bai yue ting* (Moon-Worshipping Pavilion), *Lu Zhailang* (A Man of the Lu Studio), *Dan dao hui* (Meeting the Enemies Alone), and *Tiao feng yue* (Teasing an Unfaithful Lover).

*Dou E yuan*, also known as *Liuyue xue* (Snow of June), is the most famous of Guan Hanqing’s works. It is a tragedy about a young woman named Dou E, who is betrothed to the son of her father’s debtor but soon widowed. A hooligan named Zhang Lü’er covets Dou E’s beauty. When she rejects him he stealthily poisons the food that Dou E intends to feed her mother-in-law, but Zhang’s father accidentally eats it and dies. Zhang Lü’er then accuses Dou E of murdering his father. Taking Zhang’s bribe, the magistrate sentences Dou E to death. Dou E bewails her injustice, “Heaven, how can you misidentify the good from the bad? / Earth, how come you indiscriminate right and wrong?” (Guan, 1959). Before the execution, she asks that her blood drop not onto the ground, that snow fall to cover her body in midsummer, and that a three-year drought hit the magistrate’s county—all as a divine revelation of her innocence. Then her spirit appears before her father, who has become a high-ranking official after a successful civil examination financed by borrowed money. Eventually the father avenges Dou E by punishing Zhang Lü’er and the magistrate.

Guan Hanqing’s zaju dramas are celebrated for their well-planned, intriguing, and emotion-filled plots. The language is elegantly versed and yet full of the vernacular of his time, which made them easily understood by his audience. His characters are vivid, talking in dialogue appropriate to their respective roles.

Scholars have likened Guan Hanqing’s influence on the theatrical world in China to that of Shakespeare on Western drama. Many of his zaju have been adapted into Beijing Operas as well as Kunqu, a form of opera designated as a World Cultural Heritage masterpiece by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In 1958 the World Peace Council named Guan Hanqing one of the four greatest dramatists of Yuanqu.
From Snow in June

In this brief excerpt from Guan Hanqing’s most famous work, Dou E yuan, (also known as The Injustice Done to Tou Ngo, or by its English title Snow in June), the character Tou Ngo responds to the mockery of the prophecies she has foretold.

You say nothing is to be expected of the Lord of Heaven,
That there is no pity for the human heart.
You cannot know the Emperor of Heaven will fulfill people’s wishes.
A drought will come to the country because you officials have no care to see justice done,
And anyone who has a mind to speak is forced to hold his tongue.


Further Reading


Hanqing among the “famous men of world culture.” His dramas have been translated into many languages.

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