Φιλοσοφια
Volume 27, 1: 2026

THE ARTISTIC CHARACTERISTICS AND PHILOSOPHICAL THEMES OF THE CHINESE ROMANTIC DRAMA "XIXIANGJI" 西厢记 (ROMANCE OF THE WEST CHAMBER)

Jin Yang*
Huzhou University, China

Jove Jim S. Aguas
University of Santo Tomas, Philippines

The Xixiangji, 西厢记 (Romance of the Western Chamber), is an outstanding representative of Chinese classical drama, possesses significant literary and artistic value, and expresses profound Chinese philosophical insights into life, society, human emotions, and relationships. It not only embodies the characteristics of classical culture but also profoundly reflects the complexity of human nature and the sincerity of emotions. It represents a pivotal shift in Chinese literary and philosophical thought. By transforming a Tang Dynasty tale of seduction and abandonment into a celebratory narrative of mutual devotion, the author, Wang Shifu, challenged the rigid Confucian social hierarchy of the Yuan period. This paper explores the artistic and literary value of Xixiangji, focusing on its structural, compositional, and linguistic artistry, which deeply reflects the changes in Yuan Dynasty dramatic thought. It also explores philosophical themes such as the natural forces of nature (Yin and Yang), free will and destiny, the importance of human emotions, especially love, and moral obligations, making it a suitable subject for philosophical reflection. The ultimate purpose is to demonstrate how the Xixiangji is both a literary gem and a philosophical mosaic, weaving together Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist elements, structural aesthetics, and ethical concepts. In the end, what seems to be a conflict is transformed into a state of balance and harmony (He).

Keywords: Chinese drama, duty, language art, love and law, moral obligation, Xixiangji

INTRODUCTION

The *Xixiangji*, 西厢记 (*Romance of the Western Chamber; The Story of the West Chamber, The Story of the Western Wing, The West Chamber*) was written by Wang Shifu of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). It is a classic drama consisting of five acts.

The story originates from the legendary novel "Yingying Zhuan" (*Yingying Biography, The Story of Yingying*) by Yuan Zhen of the Tang Dynasty (618-907). It has been translated into English several times, hence the different English titles. The following are some of the English translations: *The Romance of the Western Chamber* (1935), translated by Hsiung Shih-I, Methuen Publishing; *The West Chamber* (1936), translated by Henry H. Hart, Oxford University Press; *The Western Chamber* (1958), translated by Hung Tseng-Ling, Foreign Languages Press; *The Romance of the Western Chamber* (1973), translated and adapted by T.C. Lai and Ed Gamarekian, Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd., *The Story of the Western Wing* (1991), translated by Stephen H. West and Wilt L. Idema, University of California Press; *The Romance of the Western Tower* (2019) translated by Xu Yuanchong, Communication Publishing House. The *Xixiangji* is regarded as "China's most popular love comedy" (West and Edema 1991, 3). At the establishment of the People's Republic of China, when all traditional pieces had been banned from the stage, the Xixiangji was among the earliest plays revived following the Cultural Revolution (West and Idema 1991, 7). Except during the period 1966—78, when practically no work of literature, traditional or modern, the Xixiangji was considered to possess redeeming value sufficient to allow its dissemination or discussion (West and Idema 1991, 12). It has exerted a tremendous influence on Chinese vernacular literature, and many parodies and imitations surfaced as early as the end of the fourteenth century (West and Idema 1991, 10).

While there are secondary literatures that discuss its merits and influence as a literary piece (Harris 1999; Tang 2021; He 2023; Church 1999; Carlitz 2006; Hsiung 2019; West 2019; Zhao and Wang 2025), academic articles that tackle its philosophical import are almost non-existent, making this paper unique in its attempt to demonstrate its philosophical significance. The *Xixiangji* is rich in philosophical insights that reflect the Chinese profound philosophical tradition. This paper does not delve into the nuances of the translations, the classic drama's cultural influences, and historical development, but instead focuses on its artistic characteristics and philosophical themes. In studying this masterpiece, we find that its structural and literary characteristics are interesting dimensions to explore in the study of drama ethics thought. Hence, at the outset, we say it carries both literary and philosophical import, which this paper seeks to argue and demonstrate. The first part provides a historical, cultural, and philosophical context of the *Xixiangji*. A summary of the story is added to show the plot development. The second part discusses its artistic characteristics, and the third part discusses its philosophical themes. The conclusion shows how the *Xixiangji* is both a literary gem and a philosophical mosaic.

CONTEXT AND THE STORY OF *XIXIANGJI*

For context, the *Xixiangji* was written during the Yuan Dynasty, when the Chinese were under Inner Mongolian rule. The rulers adopted an open and inclusive religious policy, leading to the integration of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Confucian doctrines were combined with Taoism and Buddhism, manifested in the phenomena of "three religions of the same source" and "three-in-one" (Li 2023, 2). Thus, in the *Xixiangji*, as we will see later, these three religions are intertwined in the

plot, character, and setting of the story. During this period, however, people faced limited opportunities for government positions; they focused on writing literary pieces not only to express their thoughts but also to earn a living. The literary works of this period were primarily dominated by Yuanqu (元曲), a form of Qu poetry and opera from the Yuan dynasty, and novels. Zaju (杂剧) is a type of opera, specifically a genre of Chinese musical comedy that dominated the stage in northern China from the middle of the thirteenth century until well into the fifteenth century (West and Idema 1991, 5). Zaju, like all other genres of traditional Chinese drama, is a form of ballad opera. Music and song are an indispensable part of any form of traditional Chinese theater, but unlike Western opera or musicals, the music is not composed for each new play. The playwright writes his songs to existing melodies that he selects from a well-known and circumscribed body of tunes (West and Idema 1991, 43). The *Xixiangji* is one of the famous zaju. The structural characteristics of *Xixiangji* are incredibly innovative, as it cleverly inserts the subplot into the main line to promote story development, elevate the narrative, and sustain audience attention. Its advanced structure, beautiful lyrics, witty dialogue, and humorous scene-setting make the entire work full of vivid dramatic tension, earning it a reputation as a model of opera creation in past dynasties and influencing various forms of drama, such as Chinese Peking Opera and Kunqu Opera. At the same time, many literary works, films, and TV plays also often use them as a reference in their themes and plots.

The author, Wang Shifu, pays attention to individual differences in characterization. The characters' language is flexible and expressive, especially through vivid dialogue that depicts character and emotion. The language makes each character more solid, fresh, and honest, offering a different perspective, reflecting the role of inner conflict, showing the complexity of emotional and human nature, and also reflecting the Chinese Yuan dynasty's social background and cultural values.

The *Xixiangji* is a testament to the profound changes in love, life, and even the views on good and evil among the Chinese people during the Yuan Dynasty, making it a classic cultural symbol. It disrupted the traditional Confucian hierarchy and showed a more provocative storytelling that moved away from court politics and toward human emotion and secular life. In traditional Chinese culture, marriage was a contract between families, not individuals. By depicting the protagonists pursuing a secret, passionate affair, the play challenged the traditional Chinese practice of marriage. However, perhaps its most important cultural contribution is the character Hongniang, the maid, who is portrayed as smarter, braver, and more practical than the noble protagonists. She represents a cultural shift where the lower classes were depicted with agency and wit.

On the philosophical side, the *Xixiangji* explores themes prevalent during the Yuan Dynasty that remain relevant today. The core philosophy of *Xixiangji* is a direct challenge to Orthodox Neo-Confucianism, which emphasized "reason" over "desire" (Yù) (欲). It champions Qing (情) - a complex concept encompassing love, passion, and deep emotion. It suggests that true morality lies in being faithful to one's feelings rather than mindlessly following social rituals or Li (礼). The antagonist, Madame Cui (Yingying's mother), represents the "hollow" morality of the elite. She breaks her promise to let Zhang Sheng marry her daughter after he saves them, valuing status over honor. The play is a critique of this hypocrisy, suggesting that a "true" person is one

who acts out of sincere love. This shift reflects a philosophical optimism: that human desire, if sincere, deserves a place in the social order. The story is set in a Buddhist monastery, which establishes the symbiotic interplay between the two forces of nature, Yin and Yang; it highlights the dialectic and seeming tension between love and law, between human emotions and moral obligation, and between love and moral duty. It also portrays the conflict between free will and destiny, personal circumstances, and social status and hierarchy.

The play[1] has twenty-one acts in five parts and tells the story of a secret love affair between Zhang Sheng (Zhang Junrui, Zhang Gong/Student Zhang), a young and talented scholar, and Yingying Cui (Oriole), a young and beautiful lady from the Xiangguo Mansion and the daughter of a chief minister in the Tang court. Zhang Sheng arrived at the monastery on his way to the capital to take an imperial examination for the civil service and asked for accommodation from Fa Ben, the abbot or superior of the Southern Buddhist Monastery. He was given a room at the Western Chamber. While staying in the monastery, Zhang Sheng saw Yingying at the Pujiu Temple with her mother, Madame Cui (The Old Lady), who had stopped there to rest while escorting the coffin of Yingying's father to their native town. Zhang Sheng falls in love with her at first sight, but is prevented from expressing his feelings while Yingying is under her mother's watchful eye. The most he can do is express his love in a poem read aloud behind the wall of the courtyard in which Yingying is lodging. As the two instantly fall in love with each other, they exchange poems in secret. Through the facilitation of Hongniang (Crimson), Yingying's faithful and witty handmaid, they were able to express their love, though secretly. She acts as the messenger, delivering the secret poems and letters that allow the lovers to communicate despite the strict social segregation of the sexes.

Coincidentally, the rebel general Sun Feihu (The Flying Tiger) surrounded the Pujiu Temple and attempted to forcibly marry Yingying. He hears of Yingying's extraordinary beauty. While Yingying and her mother are staying at the Pujiu Monastery to observe funeral rites for her late father, Sun Feihu surrounds the temple and demands that Yingying be handed over to become his consort, threatening to burn the monastery and kill everyone inside if they refuse. Since the monks are pacifists, Madame Cui is compelled to devise a solution to make Sun Feihu retreat. In a hurry, she made a promise that whoever thought of a solution would have Yingying's hand in marriage. Zhang Sheng immediately thought of a solution; he wrote a letter to his old friend, General Du Que (also known as General White Horse), a high-ranking general, requesting his assistance in rescuing them. When Du Que receives Zhang Sheng's letter, he immediately marches his army to the monastery, defeats the rebels, and captures the Flying Tiger.

However, Madame Cui reneged on her promise to betroth Yingying to Zhang Sheng with the excuse that Yingying is already betrothed to Zheng Heng, the son of another high official of the court. Instead of a wedding feast, Madame Cui hosted a banquet at which she announced that, since Zhang Sheng had saved them, he and Yingying should now address each other as "brother and sister." By establishing this familial bond, she effectively used social etiquette to make any romantic relationship between them appear incestuous and impossible. Devastated by the betrayal, Zhang Sheng fell into a state of deep depression and physical illness - "lovesickness." He

retreated to the Western Chamber of the monastery, unable to focus on his studies or move on from his grief. Hongniang mocks Zhang Sheng's "lovesick" helplessness and Yingying's indecisiveness or hypocrisy, encouraging them to be honest about their feelings. Seeing the couple's suffering, Hongniang took pity on them and began acting as a clandestine courier, carrying poems and letters back and forth across the monastery walls. With Hongniang's facilitation, the two eventually began a secret affair and met nightly in the Western Chamber, completely bypassing Madame Cui's authority and the formal betrothal process.

Madame Cui eventually discovered the affair. Madame Cui, as the matriarch of the family and an embodiment of the rigid class hierarchy of the Yuan Dynasty, considers Zhang Sheng unworthy because he lacks a formal official title, has no immediate wealth or political power, and a marriage to him would not enhance the Cui family's prestige. The two lovers do not belong to the same social status. Yingying is at the top of the social hierarchy, while Zhang Sheng is a poor, traveling scholar. Although he is elite in terms of education, he lacks the official rank and wealth. Through her interrogation, Hongniang confesses everything—but she skillfully turns the blame back on Madame Cui for breaking her original promise to Zhang Sheng. She argues that if the family is "shamed" by the secret affair, it is Madame Cui's fault for being dishonest. By breaking the promise, she forced the lovers to take matters into their own hands. She points out that punishing the couple or forcing Yingying to marry Zheng Heng would result in a public lawsuit and scandal that would ruin the Cui family's noble reputation far more than a quiet marriage to a successful scholar would. Eventually, Madame Cui accepted the relationship to avoid a public scandal. However, she imposed one final, high-stakes condition: Zhang Sheng must immediately leave for the capital to pass the imperial examinations. She declared that he could only marry Yingying if he achieved high honors and got a government position.

Zhang Sheng leaves for the capital to continue his studies and take the imperial examination. He successfully passed the highest level of the civil service examinations with top honors. As a result of his academic success, he was appointed to a high government office, which finally granted him the social status and official rank required to marry into the noble Cui family. However, after Zhang Sheng succeeds in the imperial examinations—meeting the condition set by Madame Cui—Zheng Heng, the original fiancé of Yingying attempts to reclaim his "right" to marry Yingying. He uses deception to break the couple apart by telling Madame Cui that Zhang Sheng has already married another woman in the capital. He attempts to force the family to honor the original engagement now that the danger from the bandits has passed. When Zhang Sheng finally returns to the monastery as a high-ranking official, Zheng Heng's lies are exposed. General Du Que and other witnesses confirm that Zhang Sheng has remained faithful to Yingying. The story ends with the two lovers finally being married. The play ended with a heartfelt admonition that 'all lovers shall be united in marriage.'

THE ARTISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF *XIXIANGJI*

The *Xixiangji* is regarded as a representative work of the Chinese Yuan Dynasty drama and is widely recognized as an immortal masterpiece in Chinese classical opera

and even the entire history of Chinese literature. It demonstrates not only Wang Shifu's sound traditional education in the classics, the histories, the philosophers, and the major authors, but also that he was widely read in the lighter branches of literature, such as tales and lyrics (West and Edema 1991, 21). The lyrics of *Xixiangji* are elegant and magnificent, adept at using poetry to describe artistic conception, forming a unique lyrical style. Zhu Quan (1378–1448) describes the distinctive quality of Wang Shifu's arias as the sensuality of the language and compares his style to "a beauty amidst flowers."[2] The work clearly praises the autonomous union of young men and women based on sincere love and deeply criticizes and satirizes the feudal concept of family status, arranged marriages by parents, and the value system of "fame first" in ancient China, while expressing a progressive view of love that transcends time.

The View of Love Shown in the Plot Arrangement

The *Xixiangji* belongs to the typical theme of talent and beauty. Its theme originated from Yuan Zhen's *Yingying Biography*. Previously, most similar dramas have depicted the love between fairies and humans, such as the famous works *Li Wa Biography* and *Huo Xiaoyu Biography*, among others. In the late Tang Dynasty, Chinese classical literature, drama, and novels began to gain favor among scholars and women, leading to a transformation in the literary aesthetic. Until the Song and Yuan dynasties, citizens' purchasing power improved, and the public's demand for spiritual culture steadily increased. The drama themes depicting love and romance were closely linked to the lives of grassroots people, which was exactly in line with the aesthetic taste of the literati, forming a complementary situation. It is worth noting that playwrights of this historical period no longer simply copied traditional subjects; instead, they based their works on their own knowledge, experience, and observations of the social situation, as well as their growing love and tolerance. The *Xixiangji* impressed with its clear message that all lovers should be united in marriage. While the original story on where it is based started and ended on a rather sad note - beginning with chaos and the tragic end of being abandoned,[4] the *Xixiangji* reflects the desire of the people to "break the old shackles" and establish a new view of love where it triumphs over constraints. The reconstruction of the images of "talent" and "beauty" in drama works encourages women to break through traditional restrictions and men to be bolder and pursue love directly rather than yield to social constraints. Yingying's character in Zhen's *Yingying Biography* during the Tang Dynasty transformed from a negative figure of a seductress, beauty, abandoned woman, or prostitute to a more positive representation of a woman pursuing true love in the Song, Jin, and Yuan Dynasties, and into the mid- and late-Ming Dynasty. Wang Shifu's Yuan Dynasty adaptation of *The West Chamber* further shaped her into an exceptional female character, daring to love and hate, resourceful, beautiful, and intelligent.[3] If the *Yingying Biography* describes the women who are wantonly insulted and abandoned in the feudal system, *Xixiangji* describes the brave men and women who fight for love, happiness, and freedom. It has a happy ending; Cui Yingying and Zhang Sheng finally married and got their wish.[5] The happy ending of the plot embodies the concepts of love and freedom in the Yuan Dynasty of China.

How love and freedom triumph over social constraints is the central theme of

the story. According to the Chinese drama theorist Li Yu (1611–1680),[6] whose writings cover the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties, in his magnum opus *Xian Qing ouji* (1959) (Leisure Notes; published in 1671), an ancient writer would always develop a central theme first. The story unfolds around a key character and a key event, and the drama's central theme, which would spur plot development and character interaction. For Li Yu, such an aesthetic structure is presented in *Xixiangji*.[7] Although Wang Shifu's *Xixiangji* predates Li Yu's theory, we can clearly observe its application across various aspects, including structural characteristics, details, and plot/subplot arrangement. For example, in the earlier part, the love between Zhang Sheng and Yingying, facilitated by Yingying's servant Hongniang, is constrained by the cultural practice of arranged marriage. The life of Zhang Sheng, an ordinary scholar, and the noble life of Yingying, the daughter of a government minister, are important subplots in the main story. Another subplot involves Yingying's previous betrothal to a man of higher social standing. Within a cultural practice of arranged marriage, their love cannot develop or continue. Zhang Sheng and Yingying's social status and personal circumstances play a crucial role in the love story, which explains the plot's twists and turns. In the end, Zhang Sheng and Yingying's love, facilitated by Hongniang, eventually succeeded. Hence, Wang Shifu, the author of the play, expresses the concept of "freedom of love" from all constraints in the most intuitive terms, marking a shift from the "implicit expression of love" in previous literature, drama, and artworks.

The way the plot twists and turns is portrayed creatively. Wang Shifu provides a clever conception of the "fulcrum" throughout the script, using various "walls" to enrich the story structure and advance the plot. He established a "wall" as the fulcrum of the story to help shape the evolving development of the characters' relationships. Zhang Sheng, who met Yingying for the first time, was "peeping by the wall," showing infatuation and desire, highlighting the dual nature of the "wall." It is not only a barrier to isolation but also a medium of emotional communication, foreshadowing the creation of a romantic atmosphere of drama and the subsequent interaction. The "wall" has become the space for their love expression; Zhang Sheng and Yingying recite poetry to each other through the "wall," using it to achieve emotional communication. The feelings of Zhang Sheng and Yingying intensify within the confines of the "wall," revealing a secret and warm love. This poetic communication makes the plot more vivid and enhances the audience's sense of substitution. Zhang Sheng climbed over the wall and met Yingying, which is the key turning point of the plot and the first climax of the entire story. The advancement of the plot marks a shift from passive to active characters, thereby enhancing the drama's conflict and tension. This move not only breaks down physical barriers but also symbolizes a challenge to traditional ideas, showcasing Zhang Sheng's brave spirit as he pursues love. It symbolizes resistance to social constraints and a firm pursuit of love.

The "wall" also served as a medium for the characters' differing perspectives and positions. It is the fulcrum of the development of the relationship structure between different roles. For example, Yingying's mother being both inside and outside the "wall" makes the story's conflict more three-dimensional. In each interaction, the audience can feel the kind of desire and helplessness, which makes the plot more intriguing. The "wall" in *Xixiangji* is no longer a physical obstacle but the fulcrum of the script's structure and an important carrier of character emotional communication

and social criticism, which promotes the development of the whole story and deepens the expression of the theme.

Xixiangji's plot development is anchored in the dramatic interactions and conflicts among the characters with their unique personalities. Yingying, Zhang Sheng, Hongniang, and Madame Cui are characters with distinct identities and views, which not only creates a comedic effect but also reflects the impact and struggle between old and new views of love. Hongniang thought that Yingying clearly had deep feelings for Zhang Sheng, so she sent Zhang Sheng's love letter to Yingying. Yingying pretended to be angry and blamed Hongniang. However, it was difficult for her to conceal her affection. This expression of affection and eagerness, along with Hongniang's enthusiastic yet helpless state, intertwined like an "emotional fan," letting the audience or readers feel as if they were witnessing a life full of wit, subtle emotions, and diverse interests. Madame Cui also acts as another party in the affair, vigilant about the emotional bond between Yingying and Zhang Sheng. When she discovers that Zhang Sheng and Yingying are having a "private meeting," she steps forward to block the affair, setting off a new twist. During the "interrogation of Hongniang," she questioned Hongniang about the private meeting between Yingying and Zhang Sheng. Hongniang cleverly handled the questioning and quoted the most respected Chinese philosopher, Confucius (Analects, 2.22), to refute it.[8]

Hongniang argued that, to answer the scholar's argument and refute the fault pursued by the old lady, one needs to 'treat him back in the way of the person' (He Jiahuan 2023, 51-53). Her witty response to the serious query forms a sharp contrast, which makes people not only feel for the fate of the characters, but also feel that the plot progress is exciting, like a battle of wits and courage, in a tense atmosphere, and shows a different kind of interests, making the whole story full of suspense and hotspots.

Moreover, the double-line switch to control the rhythm of the fun cannot be underestimated. When the story focused on Yingying, Zhang Sheng, and Hongniang interaction scene to the portrayal of Yingying and Zhang Sheng of two people affection to tryst and rhythm light as jumping notes in spring, the audience is immersed in the beautiful love atmosphere, and then suddenly it switched to the old woman who realizes the situation turns into a furious rage and firmly opposed, the rhythm suddenly become tense shortness, like the calm lake was into the rock, thousand layers. This strong contrast in rhythm is like a roller coaster ride, bringing the audience into a relaxed, pleasant mood and suddenly putting them in a tense, suspenseful state that significantly enhances their interest in the story, making them curious and eager to anticipate the next twist and turn.

The foreshadowing design and setting cleverly use the audience's curiosity to enhance the experience. For example, when Du Que (General White Horse) said after the rescue that he would come later to celebrate, the audience at first took it as just an ordinary polite word. However, when Zhang Sheng passed the imperial examination, Du Que really came to "congratulate"; the audience suddenly realized that what was expressed as a "later celebration" was a clever foreshadowing of what was to come. The feeling of surprise, suspense, and delight sustains the audience's attention. At the beginning, when the impending love affair between Zhang Sheng and Yingying was shown, Madame Cui, Yingying's mother, confessed that Yingying had already been

betrothed to the son of Shangshu. This simple plot setting immediately raises many questions in the audience's mind, such as how Yingying and Zhang Sheng's budding love would continue and how they would overcome the obstacles of their engagement, among others.

Wang Shifu delves deeper into Yingying and Zhang Sheng's feelings, further enriching the story as the two secretly exchange autumn messages and experience twists and turns, while the mother hinders their affair, heightening the suspense and making it increasingly compelling. In this process, the audience seems to be exploring different possible scenarios. Every time they learn more about the plot, they feel a step closer to the final answer, but they cannot always see the whole picture. This feeling of isolation and uncertainty makes the whole story interesting and difficult to extricate oneself from. The layout and the echo of the sublimation sustain the audience's curiosity. When Madam Cui provided background information about Yingying, the audience was led to believe the story would follow a traditional framework and that the narrative might unfold according to a conventional ethical routine grounded in social expectations that vary by social status. However, Zheng Sheng changed that narrative, arguing that lovers should be allowed to follow their feelings and break free from conventional shackles. This reversal allows the audience to realize that social conventions can constrain love, but it always finds a way to free itself.

The *Xixiangji* is not just a romantic comedy that fully demonstrates a creative plot arrangement and the potential of the vernacular idiom as a medium for literary communication, but also a social critique that features a pair of lovers who challenge traditional morality and conventional social norms and stand for their love. Whereas Wang Shifu, the original author of *Xixiangji*, observes the lovers with ironic detachment as helpless victims of passion, to twentieth-century Chinese readers, Zhang Gong (Zhang Sheng) and Oriole (Yingying) have become victorious fighters for the right to love and choose one's own marriage partner. (West and Idema 1991, 12).

Portrayal of Love Through Language Art

In the context of literary analysis, language art is the deliberate use of language not just to convey information, but to create aesthetic beauty, emotional resonance, and dramatic structure. It is the bridge where "communication" - the exchange of facts meets "Art" - the expression of the human soul (Kaur 2020). In the *Xixiangji*, language art is the "how" of the play. It is the reason why Zhang Sheng and Yingying's love is considered "perfect" or "classic"—not because of what they do, which is conventionally scandalous, but because of how they speak about it. Their mastery of language art transforms their secret meetings into a "civilized" and "beautiful" rebellion.

First, the language expression is easy to understand and not vulgar. Compared with many works of the same generation, the emotional color of language is used as one of the means of attraction. In this play, the author's rich knowledge reserve is combined with a variety of poems, famous quotations, and oral expressions. Although the language art types are rich, the author skillfully integrates them to add color to the language expression. For example, the first time Zhang Sheng saw Yingying, he confessed:

> Stunning knockouts—I've seen a million, but a lovely face like this is rarely seen! It dazzles a man's eyes, stuns him speechless, and makes his soul fly away into the heavens… See her palace-style eyebrows, curved like crescent moons, invading the borders of her clouds of locks… Bashful in front of others before she even speaks: Cherry fruits split apart their redness; Jade grains reveal their whiteness. Time passes before she speaks…. For ten years, I did not know the face of my lord and king. Only now do I believe that a beautiful woman can lead a man astray (West and Idema, 120-122).

Such language is colloquial, engaging, lively, and lets Zhang Sheng's image convey a more three-dimensional sense. There are countless such statements. We can also feel the language art from the address change of the characters in the play. For example, Hongniang's various titles for Zhang Sheng at different stages, to some extent, also revealed the transformation of Zhang Sheng's ideas and emotions, and made the language expression more dramatic. She would call Zhang Sheng "fool," in one part, then "Sir" in another part, then "Brother" in another. Such clever language fully reflects the young Hongniang's attitude toward Zhang Sheng and the development of Yingying's love at each stage. He thinks that Zhang Sheng's cowardice is the behavior of fools; Zhang Sheng's courage is thoughtful, romantic, and worthy of respect.

Chinese literati have also fully appreciated *Xixiangji*'s linguistic characteristics. Wang Shizhen and Li Zhuowu describe the *Xixiangji* as a work of unrivaled lyrical elegance and natural genius. Wang Shizhen (1959) said, "For Northern songs, *Xixiangji* must undoubtedly be considered the crowning masterpiece (the 'volume-closer') "北曲故當以《西廂》壓卷".[9] For Li Zhuowu (2010), *Xixia*ngji is divine/natural craftsmanship (huagong) "西廂》化工，《琵琶》畫工.."[10] *Xixiangji* achieves a combination of refined and popular language expression, which can be said to be both Literary talent and true color. With a simple change of address, it reveals the characters' emotional shifts over time, providing the audience with a more intuitive experience that fully engages the reader's visual and auditory senses.

The *Xixiangji* communicates ideas with perfect language skills. In the *Xixiangji*, "perfect language skills" are not just a social grace—they are the primary engine of the plot, in which eloquence is equated with moral worth and romantic eligibility. To better promote the plot and convey his own view of love, the author cleverly crafted the language to match the structure of each part, allowing the audience to grasp the emotion and intention behind the expression easily. This stems from the author's history of dramatic conflict and character depiction, which primarily focuses on key characters to heighten the drama and capture the audience's attention. The use of a wide variety of rhetorical devices greatly enhances the language, so that the characters are portrayed in color. The use of metaphors makes the abstract emotions become concrete and tangible. The main characters, Zhang Sheng and the heroine Yingying, cannot speak openly about their feelings. Instead, they use classical poetry as a sophisticated code. Hongniang is perhaps the most skilled communicator in the play. She uses language as a tactical tool to navigate the power imbalance between the lovers and Madam Cui. She translates Zhang Sheng's awkward, high-flown desires into

actionable plans. In the interrogation, during the famous scene in which Madam Cui discovers the affair, Hongniang uses a brilliant legal defense. If Madame Cui puts scholar Zhang down, she will let the family's reputation be polluted, and if the name Zhang scholar becomes famous in the future, how could she have the heart to let him suffer such humiliation? She argues that the mother's own "lack of faith" (breaking the promise to let them marry) forced the children into their "immoral" actions. Her logic is so flawless that the mother is forced to yield. She defended Yingying and Zhang Sheng by describing them as one of them is as pure and beautiful as jade without a single defect, and the other is as outstanding as the strange flowers in the fairyland. How can such a couple, who are born with a perfect match and a perfect fit, be casually separated? Here, Zhang Sheng and Yingying are respectively compared to" beautiful jade and Langyuan wonderful flower," vividly showing their beauty and value, highlighting the purity and nobility of their love, so that the mother and the audience can deeply feel the rarity of this feeling. The hyperbole further strengthens the expression of emotion. Moreover, when Zhang Sheng expressed the pain of missing Yingying, he said:

> She's on my mind every minute twenty-four hours of the day. But how could you know? Love thoughts, drowsy and confused, my eyes too tired to open… (West and Idema, 226).

Zhang Sheng's extreme yearning for Yingying is rendered most vividly, letting the audience deeply feel his pain and persistence in love. The use of parallel makes the language more imposing and infectious. The clever use of rhetorical devices not only enriches the expression of the characters' language but also enhances the form of their language. In the conversation between Madame Cui and Hongniang, the former describes the matchmaker as "the following crimes, like ants shaking the tree" to emphasize her authority, and Hongniang may exaggerate the Cui family's reputation for stubbornness to bring the old lady back to the family.

In addition, Wang Shifu, through clever changes in language rhythm, vividly conveys the ups and downs of the characters' emotions, making the plot more exciting. At the beginning of the interrogation, Madame Cui was aggressive, her language rhythm was fast and strong, and every word was like a heavy hammer, such as " Little bitch, do you know sin?" This rapid rhythm fully conveys her anger and majesty, creating a tense, oppressive atmosphere. Hongniang's tone, on the other hand, is more moderate, and the rhythm is relatively stable. This rhythm not only shows Hongniang's calm, but also paves the way for her subsequent refutation. As the debate unfolded, Hongniang gradually gained the upper hand, and her language accelerated, with her words pouring out. She cited the classics, clearly accusing the old lady of dishonest behavior, showing Hongniang's wit and courage. She, with sharp words and close logic, pointed out the old lady's faults one by one, so that the old lady found it difficult to resist. Throughout the interrogation, the language's rhythm is constantly adjusted as the characters' emotions change. When Zhang Sheng expresses his deep feelings to Yingying, his language rhythm is relatively slow and full of emotion. This slow rhythm, Zhang Sheng's persistence, and obsession with love are shown incisively and vividly. The change in language rhythm, much like the melody of music, evokes

emotions in the audience that rise and fall accordingly. In the intense rhythm, the audience feels the characters' conflict, and in the slow rhythm, the audience can feel the characters' inner feelings. This exquisite grasp of the language's rhythm makes the "interrogation of Hongniang" unfold with drama and tension, letting the audience feel as if they are immersed in the scene, as the characters engage in a fierce confrontation. When the old lady is speechless in response to Hongniang's words, her rhythm suddenly slows, revealing her hesitation and helplessness; Hongniang may then pause, adjust the rhythm, and elaborate on her opinion further to strengthen her persuasion.

Language Tension, Mutual Collision, and Penetration of Dramatic Effects Emanate a Perspective on Love

The perspective on love in *Xixiangji* is not merely described; it is manifested through a complex interplay of language tension, mutual collision, and penetration of dramatic effects. These three pillars transform a simple courtship into a revolutionary statement against societal feudal constraints.

Language tension arises from the conflict between the social convention of propriety (Li) and individual passion or desire (Qing). Zhang Sheng and Yingying rarely speak "plainly." They use high-register, classical poetry to communicate in a way that keeps their affair a secret. The tension lies in the fact that their words must follow strict meter and metaphor (ritual) while they intend to break the law of arranged marriage (desire). When Yingying scolds Zhang Sheng for his "insolence" in a letter, her language is harsh, but her action (keeping the letter and eventually replying) creates a vibration of tension. The audience recognizes that the more formal the rejection, the deeper the hidden longing.

The *Xixiangji* uses many places to expand the character tension through spiritual dialectics, thereby contributing to different scenes of suggestion and misunderstanding. For example, Zhang Sheng "climbs over the wall," enhancing the dramatic effect of the misunderstanding and conveying a sincere image of Zhang Sheng himself. Yingying meets Zhang Sheng, but does not let him climb over the wall, because Zhang Sheng had misunderstood the poem. Zhang Sheng was a rich scholar, but in the presence of beauty, he would also panic, despairing of getting a positive reply; flattered and dizzy with great joy, even poetry would go wrong, and he was confused for a while. Although this is slightly amusing from Zhang Sheng's point of view, it has brought a greater comedic effect from the audience's perspective. By explaining the reasons for this situation through reminders and repeated hints, the attitude change process seems reasonable. There are other character tensions scattered in the play. Yingying's straightforward language still retains a dignified tone, whereas Hongniang in the lyrics, with its plain nature, is more obvious, yet also more typical and vivid. Hongniang criticized Zheng Heng's shameless forced marriage, telling Zheng Heng that he is not worth a point; he values 100, how can a firefly be more valuable than the month round?

Mutual collision refers to the friction between characters who represent different social values. The most violent collision is between the young lovers and Madam Cui. The mother uses the "language of the law" (debts, promises, and family honor), while the lovers use the "language of the heart" (Epstein 2001). There are also class collisions

between the two main characters. Zhang Sheng is a "poor scholar," and Yingying is a "Prime Minister's daughter." Their love is a collision of social tiers. The play utilizes this collision to argue that literary talent (inner worth) is a more valid basis for love than inherited status (outer worth).

The "penetration" of dramatic effects occurs when the characters' psychological states seep into the scenery and the audience's perception. In the scene about the parting of Zhang Sheng and Yingying, the scenery - the "frosty sky" and "yellow leaves" - is not just a background; it is the characters' grief. The language of the landscape penetrates the dramatic narrative, making the pain of separation feel universal. The use of humor also becomes a catalyst for the play. Hongniang provides a penetrating effect through her wit. She punctures the lovers' high-flown, tragic drama with her grounded, pragmatic commentary. This penetration of humor prevents the play from being a simple tragedy and instead turns it into a triumphant comedy of love.

The *Xixiangji* is not only easy to understand, with an intense folk-life atmosphere, but also, in line with its character and plot, skillfully uses some explicit, humble words, thereby featuring rich literary, real, and plain language (Ruoqi 2020, 110-114). To facilitate the audience's understanding and emotional connection, the *Xixiangji* employs a more straightforward tone in writing scenes, incorporating a variety of guest white lyrics. The *Xixiangji* has left a strong mark on the long history, not only through its rich storyline and popular love story, but also through its beautiful lyrics and unique language art. This colorful, unusual, and popular language system almost lets the entire audience make their first contact deeply, unable to extricate themselves. Therefore, *Xixiangji* has its unique features in the language art expression.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL THEMES OF THE *XIXIANGJI*

The philosophical themes of the Xixiangji are rooted in the three traditions that dominated China during the Yuan Dynasty. This period is defined by the tension between the "foreign" ruling elite and the traditional Han Chinese literati, leading to unique developments in the "Three Teachings" - Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. While the Inner Mongol rulers initially favored Tibetan Buddhism, they eventually institutionalized Neo-Confucianism as the state orthodoxy. Taoism remained highly influential and was notable for its "Three Teachings" approach, which sought to harmonize the teachings of Confucius, Lao Tzu, and the Buddha. The *Xixiangji* explores various philosophical themes prevalent during this period and serves as a locus where these three "great teachings" of China ultimately interconnect, proposing a radical synthesis of love and social obligation, freedom and destiny, propriety and desire, and social status and hierarchy.

Confucianism provides the moral framework that the story's characters must either uphold, navigate, or subvert. The doctrine of Li (ritual/propriety) is the most visible Confucian element in the play. Li dictates proper decorum befitting a man of moral rectitude; it anchors human behavior in its proper place. In Li, one finds the golden mean of civilized life, where the perfect balance between excess and deficiency is achieved (Co 2002, 111). Confucius (Analects, 8:2; Confucius 1893) said:

> "Respectfulness, without the rules of propriety, becomes laborious bustle; carefulness, without the rules of propriety, becomes timidity; boldness, without the rules of propriety, becomes insubordination; straightforwardness, without the rules of propriety, becomes rudeness.

It dictates the "Three Obediences" for women and the "Five Relationships" for society.[11] Li dictates that love must be secondary to family duty and social standing. The other Confucian virtues portrayed in the play are Xin (trustworthiness) and Xiao (filial piety). Xin is often translated as "faithfulness or good faith, and is associated with "keeping promise" or fulfilling what one says. A man must be committed to his words (Co 2001, 113). Sincerity, according to Confucius (Analects,1:8, 8:4; Confucius 1893), is one of the fundamental virtues and principles. For Confucius, Xiao, or filial piety, and fraternal submission are the roots of all benevolent actions (Analects, 1:2; Confucius 1893). Of all the actions of man, there are none greater than those of filial piety. When asked what he meant by filial piety, Confucius replied, "It is not being disobedient." When asked what he meant by it, he said: "That parents, when alive, be served according to propriety; that, when dead, they should be buried according to propriety; and that they should be sacrificed to according to propriety" (Analects, 2: 5; Confucius 1893).

Buddhism provides more than just a physical setting; it acts as a philosophical "container" that heightens the drama. One particular doctrine integrated into the story is the concept of Sunyata, or "emptiness" or "nothingness." In Mahāyāna, Sunyata refers to the tenet that "all things are empty of intrinsic existence and nature" (Williams 2008, 68). Sunyata does not mean that things do not exist. It means things are empty of a separate, self-sufficient, or unchanging identity; nothing possesses essential, enduring identity because everything is interconnected in a chain of becoming and in a state of constant flux (Hoang Thi Le Hang 2018). When the monk Ānanda, Buddha's attendant, asked in what respect it is said that the world is empty, the Buddha replied, "In so far as it is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self: Thus it is said, Ānanda, that the world is empty" (Suñña Sutta: Empty SN 35.85 Thanissaro 2013). All phenomena are "empty" of independent existence because they depend on causes and conditions. Realizing emptiness is the door to liberation from the illusion of "I" and "mine," which is the root of suffering. In the Buddhist perspective, reality is inherently unsatisfactory because it is impermanent and lacks a permanent self. The desire to hold on to what is impermanent is the root cause of this suffering. Human beings are subject to desires and cravings, and more often, they desire the things of this world. Tanhā is an attachment or misplaced desire for worldly things. The Buddha (Aśvaghos 2008, 305) speaks of the insatiable nature of desire.

> For men overwhelmed by pleasures find no relief
> In triple heaven, much less in this mortal world;
> For pleasures do not sate a man full of desires,
> As firewood a fire accompanied by the wind.

Buddhists do recognize that there can be positive desires, such as the desire for enlightenment and good wishes for others.

Taoism provides the aesthetic and philosophical escape route from the rigid constraints of Confucian society. While Confucianism dictates the rules of the "world of men," Taoism governs the "natural order" and the innate desires of the human heart. According to Lao Tzu, the universe, viewed holistically, expresses harmony, purpose, order, and calm power. In the *Tao Te Ching* (Chapter 39; Lao Tzu 1972/1997) Lao Tzu said:

> These things from ancient times arise from one:
> The sky is whole and clear.
> The earth is whole and firm.
> The spirit is whole and strong.
> The valley is whole and full.
> The ten thousand things are whole and alive.
> Kings and lords are whole, and the country is upright.
> All these are in virtue of wholeness.

The ideal state of things in the physical universe, as well as in the world of humans, is harmony, represented by the balance of Yin and Yang in body and mind. All things in the universe are composed of Yin and Yang energies in a symbiotic relationship. Harmony is achieved when these forces are balanced. "The ten thousand things carry Yin and embrace Yang. They achieve harmony by combining these forces" (*Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 42; Lao Tzu 1972/1997). Their ceaseless interplay is manifested in the natural order of things. Things, therefore, cannot be understood separately; everything is part of a seamless cycle. Each pole of this pair is assigned opposite attributes: to yang is assigned light, the sun, heat, maleness, the public world, generative force, and activity; to Yin, darkness, the moon, cold, femaleness, the private world, receptivity, and passivity. However, when we attempt to separate things to understand the parts without understanding the whole, what results are error, suffering, and unhappiness. Hence, Lao Tzu stresses that man must follow the Way of the Tao, that is, the way of nature Ziran (自然). In the *Tao Te Ching*, the term is often translated as "naturalness," "spontaneity," or "self-so-ness." It describes a state in which things follow their inherent nature without external interference or forced effort.

> Man follows the earth.
> Earth follows heaven.
> Heaven follows the Tao.
> Tao follows what is natural (*Tao Te Ching*, Ch. 25; Lao Tzu 1972/1997).

The Cosmic Dance of Yin and Yang

As discussed already, the universe is governed by the interaction of Yin and Yang — opposing yet complementary forces that represent darkness and light, yielding and asserting, female and male. These forces are not contradictory or mutually exclusive but are in a symbiotic relationship over time (West and Idema 1991, 52). In the *Xixiangji*, the "Western Chamber" is a Yin space—nocturnal, hidden, and moonlit.

Zhang (the Yang seeker) must enter this Yin space to achieve wholeness. Their union is described in terms of "cloud and rain" (wunyu), a classical Taoist euphemism for the harmonizing of these cosmic forces.

The *Xixiangji* transcends the romantic comedy genre by serving as a dramatic manifestation of this duality. The concepts of Yin and Yang are not typically used as abstract philosophical definitions, but rather as metaphors for the physical and spiritual union of lovers or as markers of time and cosmic balance. The most prominent Yin/Yang imagery appears in the descriptions of their secret meetings, where the harmony of the universe is mirrored in their romance. The play's tension, climax, and eventual resolution can be read as a movement from a state of imbalance to a harmonious alignment of Yin and Yang energies.

The two protagonists, Zhang Sheng and Yingying, are quintessential embodiments of the Yin-Yang binary, yet their journey involves the "interpenetration" of these qualities, a concept known as Taiji. Zhang Sheng (Yang) is a scholar traveling through the world. He represents the "active" principle. He is associated with the sun, the outdoors, and the pursuit of social advancement. However, his "Yang" is incomplete and restless; he is described as "lovesick," a state of overheated energy that requires the cooling influence of Yin. Cui Yingying (Yin) represents the "receptive" principle. She is associated with the moon, the inner chambers, and the "yielding" nature of the feminine. Her character is defined by silence and hidden depths.

The setting of the Puju Temple also serves as a physical map of Yin and Yang forces. The "Western Chamber" itself becomes a liminal space where these forces meet. The Outer World (Yang) is represented by the threat of the bandit Flying Tiger, which represents "extreme Yang"—unchecked, aggressive, and destructive masculine energy that threatens to consume the family. The Inner Garden (Yin), where Zhang Sheng and Yingying exchange poems at night, represents the "pure Yin" space. It is characterized by moonlight, shadow, and the scent of incense. In Chinese aesthetics, the moon is the ultimate symbol of Yin. The moonlit garden in the Western Chamber is not merely a romantic backdrop; it is a ritual space where the terrestrial laws of social hierarchy are suspended in favor of cosmic equilibrium" (Zheng, 2002). In Act 4, Scene 1 which details the secret tryst between Zhang Sheng and Yingying, the "union" is often described in terms of cosmic harmony.

> "My soul has soared beyond welkin's, welkin's clouds. From the moment I saw you, my passionate darling, my emaciated carcass has been thinning to a hemp stalk; tonight's harmonious concord—I still can't believe it. Dew drips on fragrant dust; the wind is quiet on still steps." (West and Edema, p. 230).

Zhang Sheng uses this metaphor to describe the relief and natural rightness of their love, comparing their meeting to the life-giving "dew" that follows a long dry spell.

In Chinese philosophy, suffering is often attributed to stagnation. The conflict in the play—driven by Madame Cui's refusal to allow the marriage—is a blockage of the natural flow between Yin and Yang. Madame Cui attempts to force Yingying into a state of "static yin" (seclusion and widowhood, like mourning for her father), while Zhang Sheng is forced into a state of "frustrated yang" (unable to act or fulfill his social

role). The role of Hongniang is that of the mediator, the spark that allows the two energies to circulate and eventually unite.

The climax of the play—the secret union of the lovers—is often described in Yuan drama through metaphors of "clouds and rain" (wuyu). This is a classical Chinese euphemism for sexual union, but it carries profound cosmological weight. The clouds (Yin/earthly vapors) and rain (Yang/heavenly moisture) coming together represent the fertilizing union of Heaven and Earth. At the end of the story, (tuanyuan) signifies that the social order has finally aligned itself with the natural order. Zhang Sheng's success in the exams and his attainment of the highest Yang honor allow him to legally claim Yingying, who is the perfect Yin companion. The story explores the interplay between Yin (receptive, feminine) and Yang (creative, masculine) energies. The play's use of feminine and masculine characters, along with the tension between the emotional and rational aspects of human nature, reflects the dynamic interplay between Yin and Yang. Yingying is a strong-willed and independent character who challenges traditional gender roles. Her actions drive the plot and shape the fate of the characters.

The *Xixiangji* is more than a love story of "boy meets girl." It is a literary expression of the Tao—the way of harmony. By navigating the obstacles of social law and physical distance, Zhang Sheng and Yingying achieve a state of He (harmony), where the active and the receptive, the light and the shadow, are brought into perfect balance. The play suggests that love is the fundamental force that ensures the "great harmony" of the universe continues.

The Dialectic of Filial Piety, Law and Propriety, and Love

In the *Xixiangji*, the monastery's wall and the presence of the matriarch, Madam Cui, represent the physical and social manifestations of Li and Xiao or filial piety. In the play, Madam Cui represents the "language of the law." The central conflict of the plot is the tension between two Confucian virtues: the mother's duty to her family's status (Xiao or filial piety) and her obligation to keep her word (Xin or trustworthiness). When Madam Cui promises Zhang Sheng her daughter's hand in exchange for saving them from rebels, she enters a Confucian contract. However, when she breaks it, she loses her moral authority and violates the Confucian virtue of Xin (sincerity/trustworthiness).

The *Xixiangji* also articulates a profound cultural tension between Li (propriety/social order) and Qing (human emotion/desire/passion). Li dictates everything from ancestral worship to the strict segregation of the sexes. Li is embodied by Madame Cui, who prioritizes family reputation and the sanctity of betrothal over personal happiness. Qing (情): This refers to "emotion," "sentiment," or "passion." In the late Imperial Chinese context, the Qing were often seen as a volatile force capable of disrupting social stability. However, Wang Shifu portrays Qing as a pure, noble impulse—the "primordial heart" that connects two individuals.

A central conflict arises when Li's legislative nature is exploited to deceive. When the bandit Flying Tiger surrounds the monastery, Madame Cui promises her daughter Yingying's hand to anyone who can save them. Zhang Sheng succeeds, yet

Madame Cui reneges on her word, citing the lack of formal marital rites and Zhang's lack of official rank. "Madame Cui's betrayal of her word is not just a personal failing; it represents the hypocrisy of Li when used to suppress Qing." (West, 1991). By forcing the lovers to address each other as "brother and sister," she attempts to use Li's linguistic labels to stifle the reality of their Qing. This creates a "clandestine" necessity; if the formal world refuses to acknowledge their bond, they must seek fulfillment in the shadows. The maid, Hongniang, serves as the narrative engine that navigates the friction between these two poles. She is the most "rational" character because she recognizes that Li without Qing is hollow. During the interrogation scene, she argues that Madame Cui is the one who has violated Li by breaking her promise. Hongniang argues that the lovers' "illicit" union is actually a fulfillment of a higher moral contract—the promise made during the siege.

Underlying the tension between Li and Qing is the Confucian requirement that a "beauty" (美丽) can only be officially paired with a "scholar" (学士) if he serves the state. The conflict is ultimately resolved through a compromise that favors the established social order. In accordance with the expectations of the Yuan audience, Zhang Sheng must travel to the capital and pass the imperial examinations. Their Qing is only permitted to exist openly once it is validated by Zhang's success in the world of Li. The play concludes with a tuanyuan (grand reunion), but it is a conditional victory. The lovers win each other, but only by conforming to the very system that initially kept them apart. The story does not seek to destroy Li, but rather to humanize it. Wang Shifu argues that a social system ignoring the depth of the Qing is inherently unstable. By the play's end, the message is clear: "May all the lovers in the world be united in marriage." This famous closing line suggests that the ultimate purpose of social law (Li) is to protect and formalize true human feeling (Qing). While traditional Confucian society demanded adherence to rigid hierarchies, the *Xixiangji* champions the "religion of love," suggesting that authentic human feeling possesses a moral authority capable of challenging social mandates.

The Paradox of Love and Social Duty

The *Xixiangji* also highlights the tension between individual emotional fulfillment through love (Qing) and communal responsibility or social duty. It is a sophisticated negotiation between the private heart and the public face. In the play's setting, social duty was synonymous with preserving the "family name." Madame Cui is the primary representative of this duty. Her resistance to the union of Zhang Sheng and Yingying is not merely personal spite; it is rooted in the pillars of social obligation: filial piety (Xiao) and propriety (Li). Filial piety demands that Yingying honor her late father's arrangements. A woman's social value was traditionally defined by her adherence to the "Three Obediences" (to father, husband, and son). As a member of the aristocratic class, Yingying has a duty to marry a man of equal status. To marry a "commoner" scholar without rank would be a dereliction of her duty to her lineage. On the other hand, Madame Cui views the world through the lens of ritual propriety (Li). To her, any love that bypasses the matchmaker and the parent is not love, but a social transgression that threatens the stability of the clan." (Sieber, 2003).

Against the rigid architecture of social duty, Wang Shifu posits love (Qing) as an alternative moral authority. Love is portrayed not as a fleeting whim, but as a spiritual force that bestows its own form of "duty"—a duty to be true to one's own nature. When Zhang Sheng and Yingying first exchange poems across the wall, they engage in a "duty of the soul." Their ability to match each other's literary brilliance suggests a cosmic alignment that transcends social rank. The lovers' secret meetings are often framed in religious or ritualistic language, suggesting that their private devotion to one another is just as "sacred" as the public rituals Madame Cui demands. The beauty of *Xixiangji* lies in its refusal to end in a tragic collision (unlike Romeo and Juliet). Instead, it proposes a synthesis: social duty must be fulfilled to authorize love. Madame Cui eventually yields, but only on one condition: Zhang Sheng must travel to the capital and pass the imperial examinations. This twist in the plot is crucial because it transforms Zhang Sheng's private passion into public utility. Zhang Sheng's love for Yingying becomes the driving force behind his social advancement. His "duty" to the state (becoming an official) becomes the only path to his "love" (marrying Yingying). And by obtaining the top honors, Zhang Sheng proves that he is not a "dissolute" lover, but a man capable of fulfilling the highest social duties. Only then does his love lose its "clandestine" status and become "proper."

The *Xixiangji* shows that while love is a primary human right, it cannot exist in a vacuum. Ultimately, the conflict is resolved not by undermining social duty, but by expanding it. The conclusion of the story (tuanyuan) suggests that a healthy society is one where Li (duty) provides the structure, but Qing (love) provides the lifeblood. As West and Edema (1991) note, the play's ending satisfies both the subversive desires of the youth and the conservative requirements of the state, creating a "harmonious compromise" that allowed the play to survive centuries of censorship.

The Subversion of Suffering and Ziran

How love can be proper and acceptable is not only made possible by compromise with social duty. It is also anchored on fighting for it, subverting suffering, and following one's natural desire (Ziran). The play begins at the Pujiu Temple (Temple of Universal Salvation), and the use of Buddhist doctrine creates a unique linguistic tension between the spiritual goal of "emptiness" and the characters' "worldly attachment." The monastery is a place dedicated to Sunyata (emptiness) and the cessation of desire. As the setting for a story of intense romantic passion, it creates an immediate collision between Sunyata, detachment, and the cessation of desire. Zhang Sheng first sees Yingying during a Buddhist ritual in the temple. The sutras being chanted in the background, with their perfect language, provide a rhythmic contrast to Zhang's sudden, internal "awakening" of desire for Yingying. The temple setting is ironic: the site of detachment and renunciation of worldly desire becomes the site of attachment, implying that passion or desire (Qing) is a force so powerful that it penetrates even the most sacred defenses. The play also uses the notion of suffering to create a sense of separation. When the lovers are separated, their pain is described in Buddhist terms as the "sea of suffering." Yingying lamented:

> Before the joy of our union ended, the sorrow of separation had taken over. I call to mind our secret passion of earlier evenings, our marriage of last night, and our separation of today. I have known full well, these last few days, the flavor of love's longing; but it turns out nothing when compared to the grief of separation" (West and Idema 1991, 241).

However, the story subverts this doctrine; instead of seeking to end the attachment to end the pain, the characters embrace the suffering as proof of the "perfection" of their love. In the story, Ziran is used to validate the instant, overwhelming attraction between Zhang and Yingying. Their love is not "cultivated" through social rituals; it happens "naturally." By framing their desire as part of the Tao (the way of nature), the play suggests that suppressing their love would be to go against the universe itself. By choosing secret meetings over arranged marriages, they are following their "natural heart" rather than the artificial rules of society. When Zhang Sheng falls ill from longing (lovesickness), it is framed as a disharmony caused by the suppression of his natural state. His recovery only begins when he acts in accordance with his natural desires (Ziran). In the story, Abbot Fa Ben represents the institutional side of religion, but the "Tao" is carried by the maid, Hongniang, who serves as a "Taoist" catalyst, breaking down rigid structures and facilitating the natural flow of events.

The Tension Between Agency/Free Will and Fate/Destiny

In the landscape of classical Chinese literature, the struggle between individual agency (free will) and cosmic or social predetermination (destiny) serves as a perennial theme. The *Xixiangji* offers a complex exploration of this duality. While the characters often invoke "heaven" or "fate" to explain their circumstances, their actions reveal a radical assertion of will that challenges the deterministic structures of ancient China. In the world of the play, destiny is not merely a spiritual concept but a social one. The lives of Zhang Sheng and Cui Yingying are hemmed in by two forms of "fate." Zhang Sheng is a "poor scholar," a designation that dictates his social inferiority until he passes the imperial civil service examinations. Yingying, a noblewoman, is bound by a pre-existing betrothal to Zheng Heng. In Confucian society, her "destiny" is legally and morally fixed by her late father's wishes. Madame Cui acts as the enforcer of this destiny, viewing any deviation as a violation of the natural order. When she breaks her promise to Zhang, she relies on the "destiny of rank"—arguing that a marriage between a scholar and a noblewoman is impossible without official status. The protagonist, Zhang Sheng, represents the intrusion of free will into this fixed system. His decision to stay at the Puju Temple upon seeing Yingying is his first act of self-determination. He rejects the scholar's linear path in favor of a romantic impulse.

Unlike tragic heroes who submit to fate, Zhang Sheng and Yingying use their intellect to manipulate circumstances. Through Hongniang, they were able to bypass social barriers, turning "chance" encounters into planned trysts. The secret meetings in the garden are the ultimate expressions of free will. By choosing each other, the lovers prioritize their internal desires (Qing) over the external mandates of their families. The lovers do not merely wait for a happy ending; they actively manufacture the conditions for their own union through a series of calculated risks (West and Edema, 1991).

Interestingly, the characters often use the language of destiny to justify their free will. When Yingying and Zhang Sheng fall in love, they frequently refer to their meeting as "predestined" (yuanfen). This creates a fascinating philosophical loop: If their love is "meant to be" by Heaven, then their rebellion against Madame Cui (social law) is, in fact, an act of obedience to a higher cosmic law. By claiming their attraction is "fate," they absolve themselves of the "sin" of individualistic desire, effectively using the concept of destiny to protect their exercise of free will.

In the end, Zhang Sheng's success in the imperial examination serves as the harmonization of will and destiny. The will demands that Zhang Sheng must study and compete to prove his worth; destiny is manifested in his success in the examination as it "proves" that Heaven favored the union all along. The conclusion of the story (tuanyuan) suggests that while individuals have the free will to pursue their hearts' desires, true social harmony is achieved only when those private choices are eventually aligned with the public structures of the state. The *Xixiangji* suggests that destiny is not a static cage, but a flexible framework. Wang Shifu portrays a world where human agency—driven by the intensity of Qing—can bend the trajectory of fate. Zhang Sheng and Yingying are not passive victims of fate; they are architects of a new destiny that compelled a rigid society to acknowledge the validity of romantic love.

CONCLUSION

The *Xixiangji* is both a literary gem and a philosophical mosaic. It is a literary gem as it revolutionized Chinese drama and societal norms during the Yuan Dynasty. It stands as the pinnacle of the zaju form, moving beyond simple entertainment to become a sophisticated work of art that influenced Chinese literature for centuries. The stories before, based on the characters Zhang Sheng and Cui Yingying, usually ended in heartbreak and betrayal. However, Wang Shifu transformed the narrative into a triumph of "free love." His famous closing lines became a cultural mantra: "For all eternity without separation, for all infinity forever united. May lovers of the whole world all be thus united in wedlock (marriage)!" (West and Idema, 285). The play was an audacious critique of the rigid "feudal" marriage system during ancient times, which prioritized social status and parental choice over personal emotion. By showing the protagonists, Zhang Sheng and Cui Yingying, pursuing each other through secret letters and clandestine meetings, and proving the profundity of their love, the work became a symbol of individual agency and emotional autonomy. Wang Shifu blended refined classical poetry with the lively, rhythmic vernacular of the Yuan Dynasty. The *Xixiangji* progresses through the overall plot structure, with each stage acting like a different level in a building, each relying on and supporting the others in turn. At the same time, the plot conflicts escalate to the end, breaking the shackles of the traditional drama structure.

On the whole, the play is like an exquisitely structured mansion, solid and fascinating. In this hierarchical structure, however, the theme of "love and freedom" is displayed, with the courage to change perceptions of love and duty, agency and fate within the system of ancient Chinese traditional Confucianism. The *Xixiangji* cleverly sets up the plot development and breakthrough, as the characters face social pressure

and personal emotional struggles. It makes the theme of "love and freedom" increasingly prominent, allowing the audience to experience love deeply. The charm of language art lies not only in its poetic use of language but also in how the text reveals the depth of the characters' emotions, enabling the audience to deeply feel their sincere emotions. This way of shaping characters through language art makes them seem to stand before the audience, so that their joys, sorrows, and struggles can be deeply felt, further enhancing the play's artistic appeal.

The structural characteristics of *Xixiangji* and language art complement each other. The structure provides a framework for the creative use of language. It is precisely because of the distinct structure that beautiful language, such as poetry, can have its most significant effect. At those moments when the plot reaches its climax, and the characters are at their most emotional, a poem with deep feeling is appropriately placed, and, with the atmosphere created by the structure, the appeal of the language is magnified. Language art, in turn, adds color to the structure. The beautiful, expressive language makes every plot and every structural level richer and more vivid, avoiding the emptiness and dryness in the structure and making the whole story more fascinating. The exquisite combination of the two constitutes the unique artistic charm of *Xixiangji*. When the audience enjoys this play, they are not only drawn to its exquisite story structure but also fascinated by its beautiful language, as if they are in an art world full of poetry and emotion. This unique artistic charm makes the *Xixiangji* stand out in numerous drama works. After years of performance, it still shines in bright light, becoming a classic of Chinese drama and representing Yuan Dynasty drama in artistic creation.

It is a philosophical mosaic; it is more than a love story; it is a carefully assembled composition of China's "Three Teachings" - Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism interlaid with promising humanism. It created a space where these often-conflicting ideologies occupy the same "frame," much like tiles in a mosaic. Through the character of Zhang Sheng, it reinforces Confucian ideals of meritocracy and filial responsibility and shows that, while society's structure is Confucian, the spirit must be tempered by humanity (Ren). The setting itself—a Buddhist monastery—is a profound philosophical choice. The "Western Chamber" embodies the Buddhist concept of emptiness, and the lovers' intense passions unfold in a space dedicated to renouncing desire. The Taoist notion of Ziran serves as a catalyst between love and duty, legitimizing the bond between Zhang Shyeng and Yingying.

The cleverness of the maid, Hongniang, often reflects a "Zen-like" directness. She cuts through the pretenses and "scriptures" of social decorum to reveal the simple, underlying truth of human emotion. The lovers' attraction is treated as a force of nature—inevitable and "spontaneous" (Ziran), which contrasts with the "artificial" constraints of man-made laws. The Taoist notion of Ziran and the naturalness of Qing can be integrated to reflect a legitimate philosophical category—a "religion of love" that could bridge the gap between the cold duty of Confucianism and the detached void of Buddhism.

NOTES

1. Condensed based on several translations: West and Idema (1991); Hsiung Shih-I (1935); Xu Yuanchong (2019); other Chinese sources are translated into English using Baidu Translate. The objective is to get the gist of the story for literary and philosophical analysis.

2. Zhu Quan was a prominent Ming dynasty prince, military commander, and one of the most significant cultural figures of his era. As the 17th son of the Hongwu Emperor (the founder of the Ming dynasty), he was originally the Prince of Ning. After retiring from military life, he became a prolific scholar, playwright, and musician. Zhu Quan ranked Wang Shifu as the leading playwright of the Yuan dynasty, largely due to *Xixiangji*. He described the play as a "yajuan" (壓卷), literally "to weigh down the scrolls," which signifies a work so superior that it sits at the very top of a pile of books; it is a masterpiece. This quote is taken from West and Idema (1991, 22). See also Zhu, Quan (1959).

3. See Wenbo Zhao and Wei Wang (2025, 196).

4. The *Yingying Biography* ended in tragedy; Zhang Sheng abandoned Cui Yingying, received an evaluation that described her as "all born to be called beautiful to the extreme woman, do not harm themselves, will inevitably harm others," and became the subject of everyone's chat and sarcasm. See Stephen Owen (2000, 172-182).

5. See Tang, L. Y. (2021, 25-26) for a brief discussion on the transformation of Cui Yingying's image.

6. He is also known by his courtesy name Li Liweng, and was a towering figure of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. He was a "renaissance man" of Chinese culture—a playwright, novelist, theater director, and lifestyle connoisseur.

7. Li Yu believes that the structure of drama should be the first, followed by the pattern, military, music, color, and other related content. The drama structure in Xixiangji is not only the layout of the article and the chapter, and the organizational relationship between the elements, but also endowed with rich connotation. Li Yu believes that the author of drama should "establish the meaning of words," which is the core of drama, to facilitate the development of the plot, link the preceding and the following, and clarify the context of the article.

8. She asked: "Trust is the root of man: 'To be a man and be without trust - I do not know if such is possible. A large cart without a crossbar, a small cart without a yoke - how can one drive them?" She continued: "That's why you have this affair, madam. If you don't put this affair to rest right now, madam, first of all, you'll dishonor the chancellor, and secondly, when Student Zhang is a famous name in the world, will he accept having been dishonored after bestowing such a favor? If you take the matter to court, then you, madam, will be sentenced for failing to keep strict control in the family. If the court inquires further into the case, they will find out that you, madam, turned your back on what was right and ignored a favor. How can you maintain your reputation as a woman of wisdom?" (West and Idema 1991, 235).

9. Wang Shizhen viewed *Xixiangji* as the absolute peak of Northern Qu style because its language was consistently elegant (huali 華麗) and perfectly captured the

romantic essence (Qing 情) without the "clunky" moralizing often found in other plays.

10. Li Zhi considers the Xixiangji to be an example of "The Childlike Heart" (Tongxin). He believes the language is so natural that it feels like a creation of nature (a divine work) rather than something labored over by a writer.

11. The Three Obediences (三從 - Sāncóng) were moral principles specifically for women, outlining whom they should defer to throughout different stages of their lives – unmarried, married, and a widow. At home, a daughter obeys her father. Once married, a wife obeys her husband. If the husband dies, a widow obeys her son. While modern perspectives view this as highly restrictive, in ancient China, it was seen as a way to ensure that a woman was always "anchored" within a protective family structure. The "Five Relationships" (also known as the Five Cardinal Relationships) represent the fundamental bonds that sustain society. Confucius believed that if everyone fulfilled their specific duties within these roles, peace would naturally follow. Between a ruler and subject, the virtue is loyalty; between father and son, the virtue is filial piety; between husband and wife, the virtue or duty is differentiation; between elder and younger sibling, the virtue is brotherly love; between friends, the virtue is trust.

REFERENCES

Suñña Sutta: Empty (SN 35.85). 2013. Translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight (BCBS Edition). http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn35/sn35.085.than.html. Accessed: September 12, 2025.

Aśvaghos. 2008. *Life of the Buddha*. Translated by P. Olivelle. New York, NY: New York University Press,

Carlitz, Katherine. 2006. "Passion and Personhood in 'Yingying Zhuan', Xixiang Ji and Jiaohong Ji." In *Love, Hatred, and Other Passions: Questions and Themes on Emotions in Chinese Civilization*. Edited by Santangelo Paolo and Donatella Guida, 273-284. Leiden/Boston: Brill.

Church, Sally Kathryn. 1999. "Beyond the Words: Jin Shengtan's Perception Of Hidden Meanings in Xixiang Ji." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 59, (1): 5-77.

Co, Alfredo. 2002. *Philosophy of Ancient China*. Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House.

Confucius. 1893. *The Analects of Confucius*. Translated by James Legge. Clarendon Press.

Epstein, Maram. 2001. *Competing Discourses: Orthodoxy, Authenticity, and Engendered Meanings in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction*. Harvard University Asia Center.

Harris, Kristine. 1999. "The Romance of the Western Chamber and the Classical Subject Film in 1920s Shanghai." In *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943*. Edited by Yingjin Zhang, 51-73. Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press.

Hart, Henry H. (Trans.) 1936. *The West Chamber*. Oxford University Press.

He Jiahuan. 2023. "The Comic Effect and Language Tension in The Xixiangji." *The*

House of Drama, No.18: 51-53. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070847. Accessed September 12, 2025.

Hoang Thi Le Hang. 2018. "The Meaning of Sunyāta in Buddhist Philosophy." *Shabd Braham International Research Journal of Indian Languages* Vol 6, (11): 29-36. https://shabdbraham.com/ShabdB/archive/v6i11/sbd-v6-i11-sn-5.pdf. Accessed December 27, 2025.

Hsiung Shih-I. (Trans.) 1935. *The Romance of the Western Chamber*. London: Methuen Publishing.

Hsiung, Ann-Marie. 2019. "Functional Perspective in Drama Translation: A Case Study of Translating Courting Passages in a Canonical Chinese Play." *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, Vol. 9, (3): 329-337. doi: 10.17265/2159-5836/2019.03.007. Accessed: December 27, 2025.

Kaur, Kamaldeep. 2020. "Language As Art: The Power Of Words." *Shaping English Literature. Ilkogretim Online - Elementary Education Online*, Vol 19 (1): 1366-1376. http://ilkogretim-onLine.org. doi: 10.17051/ilkonline 2020.661961. Accessed: January 5, 2026.

Lai, T. C. and Ed Gamarekian (Trans.). 1973. *The Romance of the Western Chamber*. Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd.

Lao Tzu. 1972/1997. *Tao Te Ching*. Translated by Gia-Fu Feng & Jane English. New York: Vintage Books. https://www.spiritual-teaching.org/ebooks-/ewExternalFiles/Tao%20Te%20Ching%20-%20Jane%20English.pdf. Accessed: September 12, 2024.

Li Zhi. 2010. *Li Zhi Quanji Zhu* (李贽全集注) *Annotated Collected Works of Li Zhi* Vol. 21. Edited by Zhang Jianye. Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe.

Li, Guoping. 2023. "Confucian Order and Religious Doctrines: Rhetorical Characterizations of Illustrations in the Fiction "Quanxiang Pinghua" in the Yuan Dynasty." *Religions* 14: 847. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070847. Accessed June 5, 2025

Li, Yu. 1959. "XianQing Ouji." In *Chinese Academy of Classical Drama: Collected Works of Critics and Commentary of the Classical Chinese Drama*. Beijing: China Drama Publishing House.

Owen, Stephen (Trans.) 2000. "Yuan Zhen's Yingying Zhuan "Biography of Yingying" In *Ways with Words. Writing about Reading Texts from Early China.* Edited by Pauline Yu, Peter Bol, Stephen Owen, and Willard Peterson, 173-182. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.

Rouqi, Sun. 2020. "On the 'Xixiangji' Literary Talent and Nature of Language." *Journal of Chengdu University of Technology (Social Science Edition),* No.6: 110-114.

Tang, L. Y. 2021. "Transformation of Cui Yingying's image in 'The Story of Yingying' and 'The Romance of the West Chamber'". *Jingu Wenchang*, 32: 25–26.

Tseng-Ling, Hung (Trans.) 1958. *The Western Chamber.* Foreign Languages Press.

Wang Shizhen. 1959. "Qüzhao." In *Zhongguo Gudian Xiqu Lunzhu Jicheng* (中國古典戲曲論著集成 - *Anthology of Classical Chinese Theatre Treatises*, Vol. 4. Beijing: Zhongguo Xiju Chubanshe.

West, Stephen H. 2019. "Story of the Western Wing: The Pinnacle of Zaju." In *A*

Companion to World Literature. Edited by K. Seigneurie, 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118635193.ctwl0137

West, Stephen H. and Wilt L. Idema. 1991. *The Story of the Western Wing*. University of California Press.

Williams, Paul. 2008. Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations, London: Routledge.

Xu, Yuanchong (Trans.) 2019. *The Romance of the Western Tower*. Communication Publishing House.

Zhao, Wenbo and Wei Wang. 2025. "The Metaphor from an Evil to a Lover: Changes in Ancient Chinese Society through the Image of Cui Yingying in The Romance of the West Chamber (9th to 17th Century AD)." *Qubahan Academic Journal* Vol. 5 (3):195-208.

Zhu, Quan. 1959. "Taihe Zhengyin Pu." In *Chinese Academy of Classical Drama: Collected Works of Critics and Commentary of the Classical Chinese Drama*. Beijing: China Drama Publishing House.

* First and Corresponding Author

Acknowledgement: This research was financially supported by Huzhou University, China.