



MUSICUNITESUSSM

Study Guide

for use with

ORPHAN OF ZHAO

By Mia Chung

A Production of the Brandeis Theater Company

Generated by Phoebe Roberts, Brandeis '09

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**Origins of the Play**

The *Orphan of Zhao* that can be seen at Brandeis University is by no means the only version of this play, directed in tandem by Eric Hill and Naya Chang, M.F.A. '08, in partnership with the university's MusicUnitesUS program, founded and directed by Judith Eissenberg. This version by Mia Chung is an adaptation of an ancient work of Chinese drama that has been told and retold for centuries since its creation in the late 13<sup>th</sup> Century. The original *Orphan of Zhao* has the distinction of being the first Chinese play known in Europe. Its writing has been credited to one **Ji Junxiang**, about whom practically nothing is known, including the dates of his birth and death.

The play was produced during the period of dramatic development during the **Yuan Dynasty** of Chinese rule. The Yuan Dynasty was founded by ethnic Mongols under the authority of the conqueror Kublai Khan, lasting officially from 1271 to 1368. This regime, established by foreign invaders, was the first dynasty since the Han whose rule spanned all of China, absorbing the country into Kublai Khan's already vast Mongolian Empire. Though it began with conquest by force, this time in Chinese history grew to foster the development of many forms of art and culture, including advancements

in the production of national drama.

## **Unique Form of the Drama**

China has had three so-called Golden Eras of theater in its long history. The first of these great three is the time of Yuan Drama, named for the Yuan Dynasty that was then the ruling family of the nation. Those works written during this period are referred to as **Yuan Zaju**, dramatic pieces characterized by their poetic language and structure and their close accompaniment by music. While the traditional poetry of the preceding Song Dynasty was declining, the Yuan Zaju form rose up as the new high art form of the time. The writing of these dramas also played a large part in developing and resolving the written vernacular that would express the spoken language on the page.

The play was not watched in the same way we see plays today, sitting quietly in a theater for the duration of the piece. Usually they were put on in a festival setting, and despite the respected status of the art, they were performed in venues where those present could choose whether or not to pay attention to the play. Additionally, prostitutes sometimes doubled as actresses. As the show went on people milled about, eating food bought from vendors and talking to one another, free to come and go as they pleased throughout the performance.

What we would today call straight plays— that is, a piece of theater with only spoken words —was unheard of at this time in China. All drama produced in this period was accompanied not only by music and singing, but sometimes also other manners of spectacle. Even tragic pieces like *Orphan of Zhao* might be punctuated with upbeat interludes of things like martial arts, acrobatics, dancing, and even fireworks. Men and

boys often played female roles, and in prostitute productions there would be women playing men.

The typical form of a Yuan Zaju was made up of a brief prelude before a main story told in four acts, but the primary characterizing feature of such a piece was its marriage of dramatic recitation with music. All four acts contained traditional music underscoring the story with a number of songs sung by the male or female lead. Improvisation was also frequent, livening up the piece with amusing ad-libs on the spur of the moment. Even tragedies like this were not without many moments of humor that added an enlivening comedic touch.

In the Brandeis Theater Company production, the musical accompaniment will be supplied in connection with the play's traditional pairing of drama with music. Visiting artists Jiebing Chen and Yangqin Zhao, at Brandeis for the Spring 08 MUUS Intercultural Residency, bring "Chinese Modulations," a musical program that presents a classical Chinese repertory to campus. They will be providing a touch of traditional Chinese music to add authenticity to the musical accompaniment. Chen plays a Chinese instrument called the **erhu**, a vertical violin with two strings, and Zhao's instrument is the **yangqin**, or hammered dulcimer. They have recorded the accompanying music in collaboration with two members of the Lydian String Quartet: Mary Ruth Ray, viola and Joshua Gordon, cello, and percussionist Timothy Feeney. They will be playing an original score written specifically for this play by Brandeis composer Yu-Hui Chang, whose music has been performed throughout seven nations by all manner of orchestras and ensembles.

## **Historical Roots of the Plot**

Though the very first version of the play was written during the Yuan Dynasty, the happenings that the story retells have their basis in historical events of an era known as the Spring and Autumn Period. This time in the history of China is named for a chronicle of the Chinese state of Lu from 722 BC to 481 BC, a work by the same name that is traditionally attributed to Confucius. The setting is within the **state of Jin**, one of the most powerful geopolitical entities in the Spring and Autumn Period, located in the Shanxi province. The events this play retells involve the conflict between two high-ranking Jin state officials, the virtuous civil minister Zhao Dun and the wicked military minister Tuan Gu. Tuan Gu was the fierce political rival of Zhao Dun, and finally decided to conspire against Zhao Dun to frame him as a traitor and have him executed. The wicked counselor then seized power for himself, usurping the throne of the emperor and enforcing his own harsh regime on the state of Jin. His first act in power was to seek out and destroy all who might seek revenge for his treachery in support of his murdered rival. The people called this massacre the Murder of Three Hundred, and nearly every person connected to the Zhao family was slaughtered.

The wife of the betrayed Zhao Dun, however, gives birth to his son, the last member of and only remaining hope for vengeance for the Zhao family. He is entrusted to the care of a courageous country doctor called Chen Ying, who protects and teaches the growing orphan in his destiny to restore just rule to the province, leading a series of people in their sacrifices for his protection, including Chen Ying's own baby being given up in the place of the orphan so that he might live to manhood. The orphan grows into a brave, strong man who at last defeats the wicked emperor Tuan Gu and fulfills his destiny as the savior of Jin in the name of the Zhao family. This traditional story has been

long-regarded as an example of the indefatigable national spirit of China and the tireless struggle for the freedom and justice of the people. It is for this reason that it was captured by Ji Junxiang in the form of his enduring Yuan Zaju. Since then, the epic narrative has been theatrically retold many times, rewritten time and again by a number of different playwrights. Some of the most famous versions include Voltaire's *L'Orphelin de la Chine*, and Stanislas Julien's *Tchao-chi-kou-eul, ou L'orphelin de la Chine: drame en prose et en vers* in 1834.

As is the case with any literary adaptation, a number of changes have been made between this interpretation and the older ones. The most notable difference is, interestingly, in the gender of the protagonist. Cheng Ying, the courageous doctor who gives her own child to ensure the safety of the orphan of Zhao, is a female character in this production, a wife and a mother as well as a strong, self-sacrificing hero. In every other version of the story, including the original, Cheng Ying is male, as most proactive heroes in Chinese dramas tend to be. Though there certainly are female protagonists in Yuan Zaju as well, they usually lacked the same agency to act for themselves as their male counterparts have.

### **Social Commentary of the Play**

Like many Yuan Zaju plays produced in this period, *Orphan of Zhao* deals with a situation of social upheaval, its subject matter having to do with a time of political strife in China. The new Mongol regime devalued Confucianism, at one point the prevailing school of Chinese philosophical thought, to the point where it no longer had its previous influence on the arts. The restrictive Confucianist dramatic guidelines thus removed, plays could now serve as a means of personal expression for the conquered people's

plight under Mongol dominion. The point of many plays written during this time was not to chronicle and dramatize history, but rather to use the significance of events of times past to illustrate their feelings about their own times.

The lyric poems prevalent in the preceding Song period tended to only express the personal feelings of the poets that wrote them. By contrast, the plays of the Yuan Dynasty addressed the larger issues of current social problems. The playwrights of this period were not sheltered aristocrats in positions of comfort and privilege, but instead lived as members of the general society, and so were in touch with the troubles the general society had to face.

The nation during the Yuan Dynasty was made up of the native Chinese general population and a ruling class of Mongol conquerors. Though the Mongol newcomers grew more and more sinocized as time went on, they were still invaders that had taken their power by force from native Chinese. With plays like this, depicting the past victories of the Chinese people and the Chinese spirit, playwrights and their audiences could express their feelings of longing for the times when they were their own masters and when those that would control them by force received justice for their wrongs.

## **Cross-Cultural Understanding**

Perhaps one of the most significant effects exposure to a dramatic production such as this is that it affords a modern American audience a window into the way people of a different culture in a different time think, act, and believe. Tales that depict times of conflict and the way contemporary people react to them do a great deal to illustrate the values and moral directions of the culture and time period at hand. Involved herein are two violently opposed sides, one an oppressive force seeking to maintain absolute control

over the people of the state of Jin, the other a rebellious, revolutionary force seeking justice for its enemy's bloodshed and freedom from a tyrannical regime. In the desperation of such a situation, those things that are most important to people become readily apparent. Given the extremity of this situation, coupled with the foreign nature of the people and the time in which they live, the audience is given an opportunity to observe some moral choices made and try to understand why the characters chose the way they did.

Often between cultures and periods in time moral standards and values can be very different. Observe some of the things the characters in *Orphan of Zhao* do in the service of what they feel is most important. Regardless of what their personal needs or travails may be, every character is faced with the overreaching issue of the oppressed state of their province. It affects every aspect of their lives, and there is no way to avoid the realities of life under this tyrannical regime. Most of the major characters must take some kind of extreme measure to deal with the crisis in the way each feels best serves justice. The Zhao princess, mother of the title character, and General Han Jue both take their lives as a result of the struggle of the people for the Zhao family and the unjust Emperor. Even Gongsun Chujiu, a hermit who strives to live outside the concerns of normal life in the province, finds he cannot close his eyes to the struggles of those who would win their freedom, and gives his own life to further the cause. Others too die for the sake of the orphan and the hope that he will one day right the province's wrongs; the baby's mother Princess Zhao and the great General Han Jue both commit suicide when faced with the need to protect the revolution's future, taking their own lives rather than allow themselves to fall into the hands of their enemies. Perhaps most striking of all are the actions of Cheng Ying, who sacrifices her own baby son in order to preserve the life

of the orphan of Zhao.

These deeds may seem unfamiliar or even troubling to the modern sensibilities of an American audience, being often fundamentally different from what is considered good and appropriate by the standards of our morality. But this very strangeness makes it necessary to examine the reasoning behind the taking of these drastic steps. The actions of these characters demonstrate a mentality devoted to the greater good. Here, the idea that for the righting of so vast an injustice, there is no sacrifice too great. The sacrifice of one's own child for the future of another child who is more important to the entirety of a people was the choice, given the cultural and historical context of the story. For these characters, the needs of the individual must be sacrificed in order to serve the needs of the people at large; the suffering of a few is preferable to the suffering of many.

Some of the results of this mentality, Chen Ying's choice in particular, may cause distress or consternation in a modern audience. But we must recognize that people's values vary from era to era and culture to culture. Situations too, especially those as dire as that portrayed in this play, may also influence feelings in ways that we, who have not shared these challenges, might not imagine. Even if we as modern-day Americans cannot necessarily agree with the choices of ancient Chinese people in their time of struggle, the better understanding we gain of the mentality that would drive a person to such an act, the better able we are to respect, relate, and even forgive those who do not think or act as we do.

**Discussion Questions**  
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1. What are the distinguishing characteristics of Yuan Zaju plays?
2. What did most Chinese dramatists use the Yuan Zaju form to express?
3. Why might this story resonate with a people who lived under the rule of outsiders who conquered and absorbed them?
4. What aspects of the traditional Chinese way of performing the play do you see in this performance?
5. Which aspects are not present?
6. What do you think might have been the author's reasoning behind turning the Cheng Ying character into a female when in all previous versions she was male?
7. Think of some of the extreme choices made by several of the characters in the play. What choices have these characters made, and what do they reflect about their personal morals and values?
 - 1 The Zhao Princess?
 - 2 General Han Jue?
 - 1 Gongsun Chujiu?
 - 2 Cheng Ying?
8. How are these values different from modern-day American values?
9. How are they similar?
10. For each character, what would you have done?
11. What is the value in examining the art and culture of people of different times and places than our own?