On Guild Theatres during the Ch'ing Era

by Issei Tanaka

It is well-known that since the late Ming era, there had been erected many guild-halls in the big cities such as Peking, Shang-hai and Han-kou. In these guild-halls, almost of which had their own stage inside, the theatres for the guild deities were often performed. They were sponsored by the guild organization, for the sake of consolidation of the bondages within guild members. Hitherto, however, few observation have been done about the historical function of this kind of theatre as located within the historical context of Chinese drama. Thus, in this paper, the present author has tried to clarify the religious or social features of this kind of guild theatre in the context of historical development or geographical diffusion of Chinese regional theatres through the Ming and Ch'ing eras. The outline of this discussion can be condensed into the following few points.

1) In the most traditional guild organized by beaurocrats or intellectuals coming from the countryside, the conservative rituals of Confucianism were so strictly maintained that the popular theatres could be hardly accepted in any case of Festivals. It was not before the mid-Ch'ing era that this group of literal guild had become to accept the vulgar theatres as a part of their rituals even only on the occasion of popular Spring Festival. The members of these guilds not only favoured the country drama, but also preferred the more intellectual drama like K'un-ch'ü, so that through the network of these literal guild-halls which had spread to virtually every political city, the K'un-ch'ü drama could easily diffuse all over China.

2) The guild of merchants organized late after the literal guild was more free in ritual form, and positively adopted the vulgar dramas whether it was the celebratory rituals for the Birthday Festival of the guild deities or the exorcistic rituals for suppressing the wandering spirits or harmful orphan souls such as in the Hungry Ghost Festival. The members of this guild were extremely fond of their native country dramas performed with
the vulgar dialect of their home village, so they invited their local troupe of their own to perform rituals as possible as they could. Thus, through the network of these guilds of merchants, various sorts of local dramas favoured by powerful merchants could find the route to spread rapidly all over the country. For example, Ch’in-ch’iang were brought to every place where its patrons, Shan-hsi merchants, had their own guild-halls, while Hui-chou drama, or P‘i-huang-ch’ iang, could easily diffuse to every place where the famous Hsin-an merchants and their influence through their commercial activities.

3) The guild of craftsmen came into being latest of the three. Their hall was usually very small in scale, and sometimes constructed such that the hall itself was attached to another big popular temple in the street. For they were too poor to build their own hall independently. Most of them, having immigrated into city areas from the neighbouring villages, could not understand any other languages than their own dialects, so in the hall of these craftsmen, only local dramas with their native dialects were performed. Thus, through the pipe of these craftsmen’s guilds, the vulgar local dramas vastly flew into the city and cultivated the local colour of each regional drama.

4) The stage drama in the Ch’ing era was shaped by the accumulation of these guild theatres. Some of the stages in the guild-halls of bureaucrats or rich merchants were transformed into commercial stages. We can trace this process of development from guild-hall to commercial theatre in Peking.