

A Study on Structural Changes of Chinese Local Plays
in Chiang-nan 江南 through about
the 15 th and 16 th Centuries (I)

by Issei TANAKA

Early from the 13 th century, there scattered village-communities called *shê* 社, all over the Chiang-nan 江南 district. Every *shê* was ordinarily organized around the temple of village-diety called *shê-miao* 社廟, where various sorts of local plays were offered in many festival days. These customs of performing plays had not only been maintained in every *shê* during the war time of the 14 th century, but also further developed both in quality and in quantity in the course of the 15 th century. In the 1st chapter of this paper, I have observed various types of plays popularized within each *shê* in these times, according to the materials found in local administrative documents or kinship books. The important aspects of the matters may be condensed into the following points.

(1) In every *shê-miao* festival, the plays constituted the important part of the agricultural rites offered to the village-diety. These types of *shê-miao* plays, in general, included the following several kinds.

- a) The play of spring prayer for a good harvest of the year.
- b) The play of autumnal prayer of gratitude for autumn or winter harvest.
- c) The play of summer prayer for preventing floods or drought.

Some of these kinds, especially the 3rd one (c), were often held by union of several village communities more than two or three, as the basis of local agricultural reproduction-system in these times more or less expanded beyond a territory of a single *shê*.

(2) Apart from the custom of staging plays as part of agricultural rites, the *shê-miao* also served as the village conference center often called *hsiang-yüeh-suo* 鄉約所, where villagers assembled once every few years to discuss and conclude their community regulations, the so-called *hsiang-yüeh* 鄉約, for securing the basis of agricultural reproduction in the village. They included prohibition of random felling of trees, doing damages to crops by letting cows and sheep trample on the farmland. The regulations concerned the hills, forests, water resources, etc., jointly owned by the villagers. At such village assemblies, which were accompanied by banquets, plays were often performed as a means to take a solemn oath before the dieties of the *shê-miao*. It was also customary to have a violator of the regulations finance the plays and at the same time have him renew his oath to the dieties. In the Chiang-nan district, these types of village plays had remarkably developed in the course of the 16th century.

(3) The *shê*, the above village community, had also been expected to serve as a famine-relief system in the local society. So, in ordinary years, every *shê* used to collect much foods, as a sort of additional tax besides ordinary one, from all the villagers including the poorer class, so as to create and maintain its own famine-relief fund enough to supply the necessary foods to famine stricken people in lean years. But almost all the villagers, especially poorer peasants, were discontented with these additional charges falling upon them, so the managers of the famine-relief system were often compelled, supposedly, to appease their complaint, in performing plays at the cost of the famine-relief fund.

In the following chapters, I shall proceed to study how the social structure in the *shê-miao* plays as above-mentioned should have changed or collapsed in the course of the 16th and 17th centuries.