

Exploring the Fate of Common People in Feudal Society: A Case Study of *The Lute*

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Abstract. In the Yuan Dynasty, common people referred to those living at the lower strata of society, including the proletariat or small producers. Yuan Dynasty dramas depicted numerous images of common people. This paper begins with the image of “common people” and takes the Yuan Dynasty southern drama *The Lute* as its text. It deeply analyzes the fate trajectory of Cai Bojie and Zhao Wuniang, who represent common people in feudal society, exploring the reasons behind such tragic fates. Furthermore, it excavates the enduring literary value and contemporary significance of *The Lute*. *The Lute* not only reflects society and the era from a literary and artistic perspective but also perceives the tragic fate of common people during the feudal period. Indirectly, it demonstrates the significant contribution of traditional Chinese opera to the reconstruction of cultural concepts and moral-ethical notions.

Keywords: common people, *The Lute*, “Three Non-Compliance”, feudal ethics, tragedy

1. Introduction

As a unique art form in ancient literature, traditional Chinese opera carries rich historical and cultural connotations, while also reflecting the complex and tragic fate of the common people at the bottom of society during the feudal period. *The Lute*, written by Gao Ming, is a representative work of the Yuan Dynasty that explores the fate of common people, with its vivid character portrayals and profound emotional depiction. It stands as a classic in ancient Chinese opera. Therefore, this paper uses a literature-based approach to deeply analyze the images and fates of the common people in *The Lute*, aiming to reveal the reasons behind their fates and living conditions in the feudal period, and to explore the social roots and ethical conflicts behind their destinies.

2. Overview of the Creation of Common People Characters

2.1. Definition of the Concept of Common People Characters

With the rise of critical realism literature in the 19th century, Russian literature began to feature the image of “common people” extensively. In Russian literary works, the depiction of common people typically includes not only the laboring and impoverished people at the very bottom of society but generally also low-ranking officials and minor clerks. Through the portrayal of their tragic fates, authors criticized the ugliness and darkness of Tsarist autocracy and the bleak social reality where people could hardly make a living. The literary image of common people not only gained prominence in Russian literary history but also appeared frequently in Chinese literary history.

Similar to the “common people” in Russian literature, the “common people” in Chinese literary works also come from the lower strata of society, and they are unfree both materially and spiritually. The “common people” can be defined as: a group of characters widely existing among the urban populace, who are the oppressed at the bottom of society. Economically, they are generally proletarians or small producers; politically, they are marginalized and discriminated against by society, unable to rise to the upper echelons. Under the dual oppression of politics and economy, common people are also extremely depressed and repressed spiritually. Considering the broader context of Chinese feudal society, the types of common people mainly include: lower-class scholars, lower-class women, ordinary laborers, servants, merchants, and vagrants. Writers, by creating a series of “common people” images, reflect ethnic conflicts and social oppression. The life wisdom and spirit of resistance inherent in these “common people” also mirror the inner thoughts of writers at the time and carry progressive significance.

2.2. Overview of the Creation of Common People Characters in Chinese Literary History

The image of common people appeared as early as in the literature of the pre-Qin period, but in small numbers and often as supporting characters. It was not until the mid to late Tang Dynasty, a transitional period in the development of ancient Chinese literature, that the creation of common people characters became more prominent. This period not only inherited the traditions of previous literary works but also laid the foundation for later urban literature, transforming the elegant into the common, and producing many images of common people. These “common people” differed from the traditional scholar-official class, with a focus on depicting the realities of everyday life rather than political and official life, with a particular emphasis on love and romance. Character portrayal is key to literary creation, and this trend influenced not only the late Tang and Five Dynasties periods but also the early Northern Song Dynasty. Liu Yong, for instance, expanded the creation of long-form ci poetry, pursuing a style that employed plain and colloquial language to depict urban life, thus steering aesthetic tastes towards popularization. For example, in “Mi Xian Yin” (迷仙引), Liu Yong writes: “万里丹霄，何妨携手同归去。永弃却、烟花伴侣。免教人见妾，朝云暮雨” (“In the vast red sky, why not return hand in hand? Forever abandoning, the companionship of fireworks. Never let people see me, in the morning clouds and evening rain.”), expressing the lower-class courtesans’ desire for independence and freedom from prostitution. This type of poetry not only differs in content and style from similar works of the late Tang and Five Dynasties periods but also reflects a change in conceptual thinking. As a special social group closely tied to the daily life and consumption patterns of citizens, the fate of courtesans in Liu Yong’s poetry is vividly portrayed, resonating with the daily life and tastes of the urban populace.

Since the Yuan Dynasty, the image of common people has appeared extensively in literary works and flourished in forms such as ci poetry, drama, and popular novels. Both the creative interest and artistic thought naturally inclined towards common people, making a narrative shift towards these characters inevitable. The types of common people characters also expanded significantly, covering various individuals from the lower strata of society, rather than focusing on a single type. Their commonality lies in their extreme lack of freedom under the oppression of the ruling class. In Yuan Dynasty drama, the character traits of common people became more complete and independent. Despite being subject to tragic fates, they began to exhibit a consciousness of self-awakening and resistance, making them vivid and well-rounded characters.

2.3. Common People in *The Lute*

The Lute, adapted by Yuan Dynasty playwright Gao Ming from the folk opera *The Story of Zhao Zhennv and Cai Erlang*, is a southern drama that, alongside Wang Shifu’s *The Romance of West Chamber*, is considered one of the most popular operatic works of the Yuan and Ming periods. It is also known as one of the “Five Great Legends” along with *The Story of the Jade Hairpin*, *The Story of the Moon Worship Pavilion*, *The Story of Killing the Dog*, and *The Story of the White Rabbit*, earning the title “Ancestor of Southern Drama” for its vivid character portrayals and intricate plot. With its unique dual-line structure and narrative perspective, *The Lute* is a model work of Yuan Dynasty southern drama, comprising 42 acts with a complete and complex structure, and lively, elegant language. It stands as a remarkable blend of highly developed Chinese lyrical literature and theatrical art.

The play primarily tells the story of the scholar Cai Bojie, who, after marrying Zhao Wuniang, is reluctant to go to the capital for the imperial examination but is forced by his father to bid farewell to his wife and go. After passing the exam and becoming the top scholar, Prime Minister Niu wants Cai Bojie to marry his daughter. Though Cai Bojie initially refuses, he is eventually compelled to comply due to Niu’s immense power and influence. While serving in the court, Cai Bojie is torn between loyalty and filial piety, desiring both to continue his official career and to return home to care for his parents. When he finally decides to resign and return home, the emperor does not grant permission, forcing him to stay in the capital. After Cai Bojie leaves, Zhao Wuniang shoulders the responsibility of serving her in-laws alone. During this time, she endures extreme hardships, facing years of famine, scarcity of food and clothing, and an almost suffocatingly difficult life. After her parents-in-law pass away, Zhao Wuniang carries a lute on her back and goes to the capital to find her husband. After many trials and tribulations, the couple is finally reunited. However, their brief reunion conceals numerous unspoken sufferings and the dark societal persecutions of the time. Through the depiction of the three main characters—Cai Bojie, Zhao Wuniang, and Miss Niu—Gao Ming profoundly illustrates the deep harm inflicted by the feudal examination system and moral ethics on individuals, enveloping the entire play in a heavy atmosphere of suffering. Yet, the thoughts, concepts, and the vicissitudes of the characters’ fates in this play continue to hold significant contemporary and timeless relevance.

3. Common People Characters in *The Lute*

3.1. Cai Bojie: The “Three Non-Compliance” Image of Someone Who Desires Complete Loyalty and Filial Piety but Achieves Neither

3.1.1. Resigning from the Imperial Examination

Cai Bojie is the most fully developed and layered character in *The Lute*, whose “Three Non-Compliance” not only serves as the

central point of the play's conflicts but also becomes the root of his life's tragedy. As a scholar, he should have had a promising future and a life as an official, harboring great ambitions of making significant contributions and engaging in intellectual debates. However, his life is marked by countless conflicts and dilemmas, and despite his struggles against the constraints of feudal ethical thought, his efforts are in vain. Confronted with the immense harm brought by feudal ethics, as a small figure of his era, he finds no way to cope or resolve his issues. After marrying Zhao Wuniang, he originally hoped for a happy family, where he could take care of his parents and live with Zhao Wuniang. However, under the influence of the feudal examination system, his father believed that such behavior was not true filial piety but rather an excuse to avoid becoming an official and staying with his wife. His father forced Bojie to become an official, considering it as the highest form of filial piety and seeing all else as inferior. "When you become an official, it will bring honor to your parents. Isn't that the greatest filial piety?" [1] Faced with the imperial court's call for talents and his father's pressure, Bojie, despite his reluctance, had no choice but to go to the capital for the examination. This examination led him down a path of no return to his hometown.

3.1.2. Resigning from the Marriage Proposal

Bojie, who yearns to "embrace poverty and practice filial piety," planned to return home and reunite with his wife immediately after passing the imperial examination. However, he was unaware that once he passed the exam, his life would be marked by a lack of freedom. Prime Minister Niu wanted Bojie to become his son-in-law and marry Miss Niu, but Bojie's mind was entirely occupied with thoughts of Zhao Wuniang and his parents. He was determined not to agree to such an "unreasonable" request from Prime Minister Niu. However, Miss Niu's influence was so overwhelming that he had no choice but to comply. As a scholar, Cai Bojie inevitably harbored ambitions of seeking fame and personal glory, with a touch of scholarly idealism deep down. Upon marrying Miss Niu, he marveled at the luxurious life, once exclaiming, "The beauty rolls the beaded curtain and sits deep in thought," thoroughly enjoying the wealth and comfort. His official career was also thriving. Yet, "the tipsy man's purpose lies not in the wine"; it was precisely Bojie's conflicted character, torn between advancement and loyalty, that made his heart remain with Zhao Wuniang and his family, far away and out of touch, even though he was physically by Miss Niu's side. He often resorted to playing the pipa to alleviate his inner sorrow. When Miss Niu requested him to play, he performed mournful tunes expressing his longing for home and loved ones. The contrast between their emotional states is evident in their language. Miss Niu's words reflect the joy of reunion, while Cai Bojie's forced smiles are tinged with sadness and grief for his wife and parents, deepening the tragic aspect of his character in the play.

3.1.3. Resigning from Official Duties

Although Bojie's career was flourishing, his life was temporarily stable, and his marriage seemed happy, his mind remained occupied with thoughts of Zhao Wuniang and his parents back home. This profound inner conflict further revealed Bojie's weak and indecisive character—wherever he went, his heart always yearned for his family. Under the influence of the feudal society, Bojie's ambiguous and contradictory nature led him to seek fame without achieving it, to seek freedom without finding it, and to seek stability without securing it. Confronted with the emperor, who held much more power and authority than him, Bojie attempted to resign from his official position, citing his elderly and frail parents living far away and his wife Zhao Wuniang struggling to sustain the family. However, he could not challenge the authority of the turbulent court and ultimately had to comply with the court's decision under the oppressive feudal examination system. At that time, feudal ethics itself was fraught with irreconcilable contradictions—one could not fulfill filial duties while being loyal, and vice versa. In this context, Bojie found himself unable to protect even his own well-being. On one hand, he had to contend with the grandeur of the court, and on the other, he faced the decline of his family. He wanted to rebel against the feudal examination system but was deeply influenced by the conservative, backward, and corrupt nature of the feudal ethics. Consequently, he repeatedly compromised. Initially, he sought fame and honor to fulfill his father's wishes, aiming to achieve greatness for both himself and his family, embodying the wisdom of balancing minor and major filial piety. However, one side was his conservative and outdated self, another side was his dying family, and the third side was the court's oppressive and intimidating power. Over time, Bojie became a figure who could not reconcile loyalty with filial piety, a small person caught in a tragic and somewhat pathetic struggle amidst laughter and tears.

3.2. Zhao Wuniang: The "Virtuous and Filial Wife" Image Constrained by Feudal Ethics

3.2.1. Women Also Have Lofty Aspirations

In contrast to Cai Bojie's weak, conservative, and compromising "three non-compliance" image, shaped by the corrupting influence of feudal ethics and the imperial examination system, Gao Ming's portrayal of Zhao Wuniang is the embodiment of goodness and beauty, leaving readers deeply moved even today. As a newlywed entering Cai Bojie's family, Zhao Wuniang originally anticipated a harmonious family life, caring for her in-laws, and supporting her husband in achieving great filial piety through his success. Their lives were supposed to be filled with mutual respect and love. However, Cai Bojie's father strongly urged and opposed his son's desire to stay home, forcing him to leave for the exams and leaving Zhao Wuniang to manage

everything alone. After Cai Bojie achieved top honors in the exams, he wanted to return home immediately to serve his parents and reunite with Zhao Wuniang. Yet, his refusals to resign from his official position and to reject the marriage proposal left Zhao Wuniang alone to bear the family's burdens. Unlike other female protagonists in literary works who, left alone for long periods, would spend their days in melancholy and idleness, Zhao Wuniang did not succumb to despair. She didn't spend her days lamenting her fate or bemoaning her surroundings. Even under the oppressive influence of feudal society, Zhao Wuniang's character stands out for her unique persistence, filial piety, and kindness. Initially, she did complain about Cai Bojie's departure, the famine at home, and the immense suffering brought upon her as a housewife navigating a dark society. However, the virtues and spirit she displayed far surpassed those of her time. Her resilience was forged through the hardships of life. Though she initially seemed unable to manage on her own, Zhao Wuniang discovered her strength and capability to support the family through numerous trials. Her story illustrates that women are not necessarily confined to the inner chambers. Zhao Wuniang's admirable quality lies in her ability to transform the unwarranted suffering imposed on her into a powerful force for moving forward.

3.2.2. *A Selfless Woman Creates a Vast World*

In the face of an unending famine, Zhao Wuniang single-handedly shouldered the heavy burden of the family, serving her in-laws with filial piety and managing the household with great hardship, without uttering a single complaint. To help the family through their difficult times, she first sold her hairpins and jewelry, and then bravely stepped out of the secluded inner chambers to collect the relief grain distributed by the court. Food is the basic lifeline for a family, and for Cai Bojie's family, which relied solely on a woman's strength in a patriarchal society, it was even more crucial. Confronted with such suffering, Zhao Wuniang contemplated ending her life, and Cai's father, feeling the absurdity of his previous decisions, also entertained thoughts of "ending it all." Zhao Wuniang understood that she was now the pillar of the family, the sole support for the two elders, and that she needed to fulfill Cai Bojie's entrusted responsibilities. She not only consoled herself but also painstakingly persuaded Cai's father, saying, "Father-in-law, he has left us, how can I express my hardship! If you also die, how can mother survive? If you both perish, how can I manage alone? Though the suffering is unbearable, I must endure it. I grieve deeply but must force myself to comfort you" [2]. Later, thanks to the generous help of their neighbor, Zhang Dagong, they received some rice to survive. Yet, Zhao Wuniang's first thought upon receiving the grain was not for herself, but for her in-laws. To ensure that the elderly couple could eat, she secretly ate bran on her own. Treating her in-laws, who had no blood relation to her and whose son had long been absent, as if they were her own parents, Zhao Wuniang truly exemplified the saying, "Do not say that women are not heroic; every night the Jade Dragon Sword sings on the wall."

3.2.3. *Chaste and Loyal in the Capital*

Soon after, Cai's father and mother fell ill and passed away. Zhao Wuniang, enduring immense grief, was determined to ensure that her in-laws would have a dignified burial. She not only cut off her long hair to sell along the street but also dug graves by hand, using cloth to wrap the earth, to give her in-laws a grand and honorable farewell. Through hard work and with divine assistance, Zhao Wuniang succeeded in building the graves and was able to disguise herself as a Taoist nun to travel to the capital to reunite with Cai Bojie. Despite her arduous journey of thousands of miles to find Cai Bojie, Zhao Wuniang did not express dissatisfaction or complain about Cai Bojie's "three non-compliances." Instead, driven by the fear of her in-laws' being forgotten, she carried their portraits through the streets, praying until she finally found Cai Bojie. In the play, Zhao Wuniang is portrayed as a filial, virtuous, and kind-hearted woman who suffers greatly. In an era dominated by the imperial examination system, where women had no rights and were judged solely by their academic and official accomplishments, women like Zhao Wuniang, who had no education and were confined to their homes, had virtually no status or influence. In fact, women of such a low status were often regarded as less valuable than a dog in the old society. However, Gao Ming, in crafting her character, imbues her with traits that defy feudal moral constraints, reflecting instead the excellent traditional virtues of kindness, steadfastness, and filial piety, and embodying the firm and benevolent qualities of traditional Chinese culture.

4. Causes of the Fate of the Small Characters

4.1. Tragic Colors in the Torrent of the Times

4.1.1. *Economic Inability to Support Itself*

The economic foundation determines the superstructure. The persistent harm inflicted by the feudal society over two millennia on people's moral and intellectual life, as well as its own corruption, can be seen as a reflection of economic factors. The Chinese feudal society was primarily driven by a small-scale peasant economy, characterized by a combination of large land ownership and small-scale peasant production. The state and large landowners continuously exploited the peasants, and the feudal land ownership system was a significant feature of the economic development at that time. The economic nature of individual peasant production was quite pronounced. In the backdrop of a generally stagnant economy, it was impossible for peasants to find a way

out. Without a solid economic foundation, feudal households were heavily impacted by the prevalent poverty and economic downturn. While attributing economic stagnation solely to the backwardness of feudal moral and ethical concepts is problematic, it undoubtedly had a profound impact on the political and cultural development of the society at the time. As the saying goes, “A grain of sand in the times, when placed on the shoulders of ordinary people, becomes a mountain.” Cai Bojie and Zhao Wuniang, as small characters with no status and close to the bottom of society in the feudal period, could not escape the significant limitations imposed by the outdated peasant economy. Ultimately, they were doomed to endless futility.

4.1.2. *The Loss of Individual Freedom under the Imperial Examination System*

Gao Ming, during the creation of *The Lute*, was likely in the chaotic period of the late Yuan Dynasty. He had retired to the Lishan area in Ningbo's southern countryside, engaging in self-entertainment through composing lyrics and music. *The Lute* was probably written during this time. There are several theories regarding his motivation for writing the play: one is to promote feudal ethical morals, another is to vindicate Cai Bojie, and a third is to reflect on the harm caused by the feudal imperial examination system, criticizing its restrictions and the disruption it caused to societal harmony and stability. In ancient China, the imperial system was the core of the feudal system, essentially an absolute monarchy where all that the state possessed was viewed as the emperor's personal property. Cai Bojie's father was deeply influenced by the allure of the imperial examination system, not realizing that his stubbornness pushed Cai Bojie into a deeper abyss. As a powerless scholar, Cai Bojie, after passing the examination, could only serve as an official alone. Even though his career initially seemed to improve upon marrying Miss Niu, he was still merely a vassal under the imperial authority. Cai Bojie's father's notion of “great filial piety” was, from a self-serving perspective, not truly concerned with Cai Bojie's future but rather with avoiding a life of disgrace once Cai Bojie achieved success and honored his parents. Cai Bojie's father saw this as more practical compared to merely being filial without any substantial outcome. However, his obstinacy deprived Cai Bojie of autonomy. Amidst a famine-stricken homeland, Cai Bojie needed to go through Tai Shi Niu to send a letter; if not for Zhao Wuniang's search for him in the capital, he would not even have known of his parents' separation and death.

Under the dark shadow of the feudal imperial examination system, which proclaimed “all else is inferior, only reading is esteemed,” Cai Bojie took the first step on the path of abandoning his family and wife. He initially thought that after taking this first step, he could reunite with his wife and family after leaving the capital. However, this was merely the beginning of a deeper descent into despair. Following the rejection of his father's wishes, he also faced rejection in his attempts to resign from his official post and later his marriage. The “three non-compliance” (not following his father, resigning from his post, and refusing his marriage) were the root causes of Cai Bojie's lifelong tragedy and also the sources of the tragedies experienced by the Cai family and Zhao Wuniang. Although Cai Bojie attempted to resist, he could only become an outcast of the feudal examination system, a victim of its toxic influence. The imperial examination system, with its relentless pursuit of success, was the root cause of the separation of the Cai family, the death by starvation of his parents, and Zhao Wuniang's suffering from famine. For marginalized “small characters” like Cai Bojie, who carried the air of a scholar, the fate left to them was an endless tragedy.

4.1.3. *The Lower Status of Women under Feudal Ethical Morals*

An age-old concept that has persisted since ancient times is “a woman's lack of talent is virtue.” This notion is aptly illustrated by the character of Zhao Wuniang created by the playwright Gao Ming. Although both Cai Bojie and Zhao Wuniang are portrayed as minor figures in feudal society, Zhao Wuniang, compared to Cai Bojie, a scholar, is portrayed as “poor and destitute,” embodying the image of a housewife emerging from a feudal society. In Gao Ming's creative intent, Zhao Wuniang is depicted as a model of feudal ethical morals, inevitably bearing the mark of outdated and conservative thinking. In the societal context of the time, women were considered the disadvantaged group. They longed for freedom in love and stability in life but continuously faced failures and obstacles. In Wang Shifu's *The Romance of West Chamber*, the characters Cui Yingying and Zhang Sheng are ultimately given a beautiful ending of “never parting, eternally united, and wishing all lovers in the world become couples.” However, their pursuit of love is also constrained and confined by feudal, outdated thoughts and moralities. They undergo many trials and tribulations, and only through the help of the matchmaker do they finally overcome these constraints. This indirectly reflects that even someone like Cui Yingying, who comes from a wealthy family and has parents with high social status, cannot escape the influence of such a corrupt society. Indeed, Cui Yingying is locked away in the back courtyard by her mother, ostensibly for love and protection, but in reality, it is a defense of feudal ethics and an attempt to mold her into a paragon of obedience to these outdated morals, severely repressing her human and emotional nature.

Gao Ming's portrayal of Zhao Wuniang embodies the pure and unadorned inner world, as well as the strong, kind, and resilient qualities of traditional Chinese women. She never succumbs to adversity, always remains filial to her parents-in-law, and faces life's hardships with commendable moral qualities that still hold profound contemporary significance. In contrast, Wang Shifu's depiction of Cui Yingying shows a woman who dares to break free from the constraints of her time and courageously pursues love and a happy life. On the surface, both women appear to be influenced little by their era due to their strong personal wills. However, a deeper analysis of Zhao Wuniang's struggle with a life of scarcity and isolation and Cui Yingying's eventual union with Zhang Sheng reveals how arduous and lengthy the pursuit of equality, freedom, and stability is for the small characters, especially women, in a feudal society.

4.2. Limitations of the Character's Own Personality

The tragic fate of minor figures in feudal society is influenced not only by the specific historical context but also by the limitations and contradictions inherent in their own personalities. Compared to Zhao Wuniang's profound understanding of moral principles and worldly affairs, Cai Bojie's life is characterized by constant internal conflict and painful struggle. As a scholar, Cai Bojie inherently harbors ambitions to achieve success and recognition through his official career. Although he is reluctant and worried about his family when urged by his father to go to the capital for the imperial examination, he subconsciously accepts his father's concept of "great filial piety" as reasonable. After moving into the Niu family, he refrains from confiding his troubles to Miss Niu, fearing that angering Niu Taishi might result in losing the chance to reunite with his own family forever. Despite his smooth career and happy marriage, his thoughts are constantly occupied with his own family. Dissatisfied with the current situation but afraid to argue his case, he is caught in a profound conflict between personal desires and societal realities, and can only choose to endure in silence. The formation of his "three non-compliance" is closely related to Cai Bojie's endless patience and passivity; he is a timid scholar who also represents the character traits of many intellectuals in feudal society, a typical figure meticulously crafted by Gao Ming within the context of a specific environment and era.

Faced with the understanding and powerful Miss Niu, Cai Bojie never reveals his true feelings in his interactions with her. This is partly due to his weak and contradictory nature, and partly because his meager self-esteem as a scholar is wounded by the forced marriage, which he perceives as an insult to his personal dignity. This weakness not only harms the well-intentioned Miss Niu but also jeopardizes his own and his family's future. Throughout the play, Cai Bojie's predominant psychological state is one of endurance: enduring his marriage to Miss Niu and enduring his official duties with the court. He fantasizes that enduring will resolve all his issues, but the result is even greater tragedy. Gao Ming concludes with Miss Niu stepping in to help, Cai Bojie resigning from his official position and returning home to observe filial piety for three years, and the court sending Niu Taishi to commend Cai Bojie and allow him to resume his official duties. While this resolution seems smooth and harmonious, it actually hints at the significant moral and ethical conflicts faced by Cai Bojie in his interactions with Zhao Wuniang, Miss Niu, and Niu Taishi. This reveals that Cai Bojie, as a minor figure in feudal society, remains a relic of the old society due to his unwillingness to resist.

5. Conclusion

Wang Guowei, in his "History of Song and Yuan Drama," noted: "In Yuan southern drama, the works *Jing*, *Liu*, *Bai*, and *Sha* are grouped together, and the addition of *The Lute* makes it five. Among these five, *Bai Yue* and *The Lute* are especially noteworthy. This has been the established view since the Ming dynasty." [3] Gao Ming's creation of *The Lute* not only reflects society and the era from a literary and artistic perspective but also explores the tragic fate of small characters in the feudal society. The intertwining narrative lines of Cai Bojie and Zhao Wuniang add depth and historical weight to the play. By depicting the misfortunes caused by social turmoil and the eventual happy ending where Cai Bojie becomes an official and returns to the court with his two wives, it is evident that Gao Ming aimed to promote a more valuable cultural and historical view. From a literary standpoint, Gao Ming examines the fate of small characters constrained by feudal ethics and morals, demonstrating the significant contributions and reference points that traditional Chinese opera offers in reconstructing cultural and ethical concepts.

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