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## Property of the State, Prisoners of Music: Identity of the Song Drama Players and Their Roles in the *Washi* Pleasure Precincts

ZHANG Hanmo

Department of Languages, Literature and Cultures, State University of New York,  
New Paltz

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This paper responds to the widely accepted yet overly simplistic assumption in Song drama studies that the drama players were ordinary people, who were liberated from agricultural activities because of the economic and commercial boom from the ninth century onward, and acted of their own will to choose drama performance as their means of making profit. Based on an in-depth investigation of the long history of the musician household registration system from the early medieval to late imperial periods, this paper proves that the majority of the *goulan* drama players belonged to the musician households, were trained by and for the government, and had little freedom to change their identity. It also further reveals how the Song court and its civil and military bureaus controlled and used the entertainers in the pleasure precincts, deliberately established in the capital and other cities, to facilitate wine selling and other government-owned profitable enterprises.

**Keywords:** Theater, pleasure precinct, musician household, Court Entertainment Bureau, contracting.

As a tradition that may be traced to *baixi* 百戲 (the hundred games) performances in the Han (206 B.C.–A.D. 220), Chinese *zaju* 雜劇 (miscellaneous plays) performance achieved its maturity during the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1271–1368) periods, especially following the emergence of theaters called *goulan* 勾欄 (hooked-fence), a term evidently associated with the wooden-framed structures in which they were performed. Scholars tend to believe that the emergence of the *goulan* theater indicates a new stage in the development of traditional Chinese drama, during which the actors were liberated from their agricultural obligations by the unprecedented, rapid urbanization and commercial boom. They believe that the players were now free to chase the monetary rewards of performing dramas to satisfy the needs of the *washi* 瓦市 (tile-roofed market) pleasure precincts in large and small urban centers.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, the *goulan* theaters are also defined as “commercial theaters,”<sup>2</sup> a term denoting a free-market-oriented social and economic enterprise for dramatic production comparable to modern commercial societies. Some scholars even argue that because of the quickly increasing urbanization during the Song and Yuan periods, professional dramatic groups consisting of people from different walks of life, such as the script writing clubs, were also formed for the purpose of enhancing the popularity of dramatic performance with inclusive activities in order to attract broader audiences and increase their monetary gains. According to this line of argument, both drama performers and play writers had the needs of the audience in mind. This attention to satisfying the consumers’ needs and interests inevitably led to the commercialization of Chinese drama in various aspects (performance locales and crowd-pleasing themes, for instance) as well as to keen competition among performers and

1 For the discussion of the economy, agriculture, urbanization, population, trade, as well as technology of the Song and Yuan periods, see Wilt Idema and Stephen H. West, *Chinese Theater, 1100–1450: A Source Book* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1982), 6–9; for a more recent sketch of Southern Song urban development, see Michael A. Fuller and Shuen-fu Lin, “North and South: the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries,” in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, vol.1, *To 1375*, ed. Kang-I Sun and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 533–34.

2 Idema and West, *Chinese Theater*, 9; Liao Ben 廖奔 and Liu Yanjun 劉彥君, *Zhongguo xiqu fazhanshi (di yi juan)* 中國戲曲發展史 (第一卷) (Taiyuan: Shanxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000), 394–403.