



# Guo Moruo's Acceptance and Reconstruction of the Image of Cai Yan in *Cai Wenji*

Yifan Wang

Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Macau, Macau, China.

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\***Corresponding author:** Yifan Wang, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Macau, Macau, China.

## Abstract

In 1959, Guo Moruo wrote *Cai Wenji*, a five-act historical comedy, which was directed by Jiao Juyin and performed on stage. *Cai Wenji* by Guo Moruo can be seen as a literary endeavor to acknowledge and rebuild the image of Cai Yan. Although Guo Moruo once defined this character as a feminist aesthetic character, the final writing is more inclined to serve as a functional character to enhance Cao Cao's image. To study Guo Moruo's acceptance and reconstruction of Cai Wenji's image, it is essential to analyze Guo Moruo's starting point in creating his work. This can be done by examining Guo Moruo's selection and use of Cai Yan's historical materials. Such analysis can provide insights into the historical value of *Cai Wenji*, explore Guo Moruo's aesthetic interests in his creation, and discuss the political and functional aspects of Cai Wenji's characters. Guo Moruo's reconstruction and portrayal of Cai Yan's image in *Cai Wenji* is a proactive exploration of legendary female narratives in Chinese history.

## Keywords

*Cai Wenji*, Guo Moruo, historical play

Cai Yan, also known by her courtesy name Wenji, was a prominent female literary figure from Yuxian County in Chenliu Commandery during the late Eastern Han Dynasty. She was also the daughter of the literary figure Cai Yong. Among the literary works handed down at present, Cai Wenji wrote two 'Poems of grief and indignation', and it is said that 'Hu Qie Shi Ba Pai' of Hu Jia was also written by Cai Wenji. In 1959, Guo Moruo wrote *Cai Wenji*, a five-act historical comedy, which was put on the stage by director Jiao Juyin. "Cai Yan" mentioned in this paper represents the historical figure Cai Wenji, while "Cai Wenji" represents the portrayal of Cai Yan in literary works.

Hou Guixin believes that Guo Moruo's re-creation of the image of Cai Wenji has undergone three periods of changes in mentality and theme. The first is 'Three Rebellious Women', which was conceived at the beginning of 1923. Among them, Zhuo Wenjun, Wang Zhaojun, and Nie Yi should have been Zhuo Wenjun, Wang Zhaojun, and Cai Wenji. At this time, the cultural spirit embodied in Guo Moruo's reimagined Cai Wenji reflects the influence of the May 4th Movement. It represents the new sexual morality of "Three Disobediences" and asserts that "my Cai Wenji is truly an ancient Nora" (Hou Guixin, 2020). Nora is the heroine of Ibsen's play "A Doll's House," which gained popularity during the May 4th Movement. She represents the image of women who left after being disappointed with love and marriage, and she embodies a strong sense of female independence during that time. During this period, Cai Wenji played a role in propagating the spirit of the May 4th Movement and emphasizing the significance of women in Guo Moruo's conception. However, it was not ultimately written down. From 1937 to 1938, Hou Guixin believed that Guo Moruo still had the desire to write about Cai Wenji during this time. However, there was no appropriate political climate. Finally, Cai Wenji's story was published in 1959. From the perspective of reader acceptance, Guo Moruo's portrayal of Cai Wenji has often been seen as a result of political service and ideological propaganda. However, this does not imply that Guo Moruo's interpretation of Cai Wenji's character is fixed and

cannot be subject to further discussion. Studying the process of Guo Moruo's acceptance and reconstruction of Cai Wenji's image can provide insights into the historical value of Cai Wenji, explore Guo Moruo's aesthetic interest in creation, and discuss the politics and functions of Cai Wenji's characters.

## 1. Acceptance from 'Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute Song 18'

About Cai Yan in history, at present, there are two credible materials: Cai Wenji's own 'poems of grief and indignation', 'Cai Bo Jie Nv Fu' and 'Cai Yan Bie Zhuan', which were collected in the book *Yi Wen Lei Ju* compiled by Ou Yangxun and others in the Tang Dynasty, and *Dong Si Qi Zhuan*, which was compiled by Fan Ye in the Southern Song Dynasty. Among them, *Cai Bo Jie Nv Fu* was written by Ding Kui, a writer of the *Hou Han Shu* • *Lie Nv Zhuan*, and the author of the incomplete biography *Cai Yan Bie Zhuan* is now unknown.

Many documents show that Cai Wenji has extraordinary musical talent. In the Tang Dynasty, Liu Shang wrote in *Hu Jia Ge Xu*: "Cai Wenji is good at playing the piano, which can help her bid farewell to cranes ..." (Liu Shang, 1918). Chen Tao's *Pen Cheng Song Bie* and Li Han's *Meng Qiu* also praised Cai Wenji's superb piano skills. *The Biography of Cai Yan* records the anecdote of Cai Yan's piano-playing skills. Cai Yong played the piano at night, and the strings were broken. Cai Yan, who was only six years old at that time, was listening to the second string. Cai Yong deliberately broke another string to test Cai Yan. Cai Yan accurately judged that the fourth string was broken. Cai Yong thought that this was only Cai Yan's good luck. To convince his father, Cai Yan quoted two allusions: "Ji Zha" and "Shi Kuang". Ji Zha reveals the relationship between "music" and "ceremony" from his comments on Zhou Yue, and the relationship between music and politics, morality and morals through Zhou Le. Based on music, Shi Kuang judged the strength of Chu and Jin and the result of the war by singing in the south wind and the north wind. Cai Yan took these two examples of *Zuo Zhuan* as evidence, which showed her talent in temperament. At the same time, at the age of six, she was familiar with *Zuo Zhuan* and used it, which showed Cai Yan's talent and knowledge.

Therefore, it is understandable that Cai Yan's literary creation shows emphasis on 'Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute Song 18'. In the historical drama 'Cai Wenji', Guo Moruo takes the creation of the protagonist Cai Wenji and the 'Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute Song 18' as the main thread running through the whole drama. At the beginning of the first act of the script, Cai Wenji's 'Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute Song 18' has already achieved the twelfth beat. Guo Moruo's plot setting corresponds to the selected poem 'Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute Song 18'. Just as Cai Wenji's complex psychology is shown in the twelfth beat, Guo Moruo's opening time of Cai Wenji is the moment when Cao Cao sent a team to take back Cai Wenji and Cai Wenji is caught in a dilemma between going and staying in his home country.

It is said that 'Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute Song 18' written by Cai Yan (hereinafter referred to as Cai's poem) is a Sao style, and Liu Shang, a poet in the Tang Dynasty, also wrote 'Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute Song 18' (hereinafter referred to as Liu's poem). According to Shao Yan's research, the 18 paragraphs of the regular script that connect the 18 images in the 'Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute Song 18' scroll that appeared at the beginning of the Southern Song Dynasty were all written according to Liu Shang's version. "A Ming Dynasty copy held by the Nanjing Museum is also printed at the end of the single-volume edition of the play 'Cai Wenji', with a postscript by Guo Moruo, which undoubtedly had an influence on Guo Moruo." (Shao Yan, 2022). In comparison to Liu's poems, Cai's poems, written in the "sao" style, directly convey her emotions. These include the turmoil and separation she experienced during the war, her forced captivity by the Xiongnu, the fleeting joy upon returning home, and the subsequent sorrow of being separated from her family. Cai's poems reveal her strong emotions about love for her country, thoughts on family and destiny, and the ups and downs of life experiences, with a strong subjective tone. By contrast, Liu's poems tend to use a third-person perspective to narrate in the first person. It can be observed that Liu's description of Cai Wenji's character is from the perspective of an observer.

Reading only Cai's poems, the image of a mother who has gone through ups and downs, lamenting and weeping blood emerges. If the lyric theme is changed to anyone regardless of gender, his feelings can be established; After reading Liu Shi, we can pay more attention to Cai Wenji's "feminine characteristics", from the emphatic female characteristics ("Bent hair", "moth eyebrow", "weak", "soft as water", "soak up the hair"), to the deliberate attention to details from the female impression, a female image is emerging, who is gentle, suffering, deeply troubled, and struggling to adapt to barbarian life.

Both Cai's and Liu's poems have influenced Guo Moruo's perception of Cai Wenji's image to different extents. One issue is that Guo Moruo confuses the emotions of Cai Wenji with those of Hu Ren or Dong Si, and the portrayal of Cai Wenji's emotions primarily revolves around her relationship with her children. Secondly, Guo Moruo

emphasized Cai Wenji's femininity and used it as the central contradiction in the play to create dramatic conflict. This was evident in the plot where Cao Cao mistakenly believed that Cai Wenji and Dong Si were having a love affair.

## 2. Functional Reconstruction of Cai Wenji's Female Image

Guo Moruo said in the preface to *Cai Wenji*: "The purpose of writing *Cai Wenji* is to vindicate Cao Cao." This idea is traceable. Guo Moruo once mentioned in a letter to Zhou Enlai a week after the script was finished that the origin of the creation of this script was "based on the instructions of the Chairman and you... You once told me that you might as well write a script to reverse Cao Cao's conviction." (Guo Moruo, 2018). The creative motivation of Guo Moruo's *Cai Wenji* has changed several times, and the protagonist is no longer Cai Wenji, but Cao Cao. The image of Cao Cao as a "treacherous hero" is deeply rooted in people's hearts, and the creation of *Cai Wenji* is to build a stage with the story of Cai Wenji, giving Cao Cao a space to show his "hero" side. When talking about *Cai Wenji*'s creation, Guo Moruo once said, "Cai Wenji was welcomed back to China only as a model: she can represent many people. Cai Wenji can be redeemed by Han, not only by money but also by Cao Cao's literary and martial arts. This event is typical and can be used to praise Cao Cao." (Guo Moruo, 1959).

According to this direct motive, the biggest conflict in the script of *Cai Wenji* is set as Zhou Jin and You Xianwang jointly framing Zuo Xianwang and Dong Si. In the first scene of the fourth act, Zhou Jin falsely accused Cao Cao that Dong Si and Cai Wenji were intimate when they returned to China; In Act IV, Scene III, the Right Xianwang falsely accused Zuo Xianwang of being dissatisfied with the Han Dynasty and colluding with Dong Si. This aroused Cao Cao's suspicion and ordered Dong Si to plead guilty and commit suicide. When Cai Wenji heard that his clothes were not whole, he hurried to tell the truth. In the confrontation with Cao Cao, he was supercilious and well-founded, and finally, the misunderstanding was solved. Cao Cao ordered to recover the order and Dong Si was promoted.

Because of the identity of "Dong Si's wife", the protagonist focuses on Cai Wenji as Dong Si's wife. Cao Cao's motivation to take Cai Wenji back to Korea was also summarized as "grieving for his childlessness"—he redeemed Cai Wenji out of help for his friends and betrothed her to Dong Si. When Dong Si committed a capital crime, Cao Cao introduced to everyone that Cai Wenji's title was also "the daughter of Cai Bokai". In the drama *Cai Wenji*, Guo Moruo gave Cai Wenji enough respect for the value and set Cao Cao's motive for redeeming Cai Wenji as inheriting his father's legacy and participating in the compilation of Continued Han Shu. On the one hand, the plot of the Book of Continued Han adds weight to the rationality of Cai Wenji's choice to return to the DPRK, making Cai Wenji's literary talent recognized through Cao Cao's mouth; On the other hand, its function is to shape the image of Cao Cao:

Dong Si: Prime Minister Cao wants to do great things in the field of cultural governance. It is because of your literary ability that he has come to take you home... please be sure to take national affairs as the priority, the world's children as your children! (Guo Moruo, 2018).

Dong Si's remarks were made on behalf of Cao Cao, which concentrated on the urgency of Cao Cao's seeking for all the wise men in the world, even the daughter of a great scholar in Xiongnu. At the same time, Guo Moruo mixed "Wenji's Return to Han" and "Pardon Dong Si" as the key plot of the drama *Cai Wenji*. There is also a premise reconstructed by Guo Moruo: Dong Si and Cai Wenji are not only relatives but also siblings. This premise reasonably explains why Dong Si comforted Cai Wenji when she couldn't help herself when she was shot in the pavilion next to her father Cai Yong's tomb in the middle of the night.

Dong Si consistently embodies the essence of Cao Cao's character throughout the play. Therefore, Dong Si's support for Cai Wenji can be seen as Cai Wenji admiring and gaining knowledge from Cao Cao. Firstly, Guo Moruo indirectly influenced the portrayal of Cao Cao through the words of Dong Si and Cai Wenji. The second approach is to portray Cao Cao in a positive light by showcasing his deep respect for Cai Wenji's literary talent, his patient listening to her explanations, his willingness to admit mistakes, and his ability to restore order. In this process, the author believes that while Cai Wenji is the protagonist in the image of *Cai Wenji*, she ultimately becomes more functional due to the author's strong intention to create another three-dimensional character.

Judging from the plot of misunderstanding, Guo Moruo paved the way for Cai Wenji's closeness with Dong Si in ethics and motivation, which gave Zhou Jin a chance to "discover" this affair and report it to Cao Cao, resulting in misunderstanding. This makes Cai Wenji's role first complete the performance of "I love playing the piano and singing at night along the way", which is self-pity and dramatic, and then let Dong Si comfort Cai Wenji at night in the dynasty at that time, even though cousins met late at night, it was unreasonable. Cai Yan said in "Cai Bo Jie Nv Fu": "Understand the requirements of ancient Chinese society for women, listen to the admonition of elders, rich talent.", this refers to Cai Wenji's understanding the esoteric and subtle truths of 'Gu Lei Nv Zhuan'. Only by implementing

the truth said by ancient female officials and comprehending the clear admonition of their fathers can literary talents realize profound truths. *Cai Wenji* in Guo Moruo's works is not consistent with Cai Yan, who "Understand the requirements of ancient Chinese society for women". Cai Yan, who read the "Lie Nv Zhuan" and married at the same time, won't and can't meet foreign men in the middle of the night like Cai Wenji. Guo Moruo's writing, which is different from Shi's, uses the characteristics of Cai Wenji's female characters to create misunderstanding plots and cause conflicts and finally points to highlighting Cao Cao's "sagacity" in solving this incident. Cai Yan's female identity has become a key point in the functional reconstruction of her image—if Cai Wenji is a proton, this key plot constructed by Guo Moruo will lose its significance.

### 3. Political Reconstruction of Returning Home

On the other hand, while using Cai Yan's female image to construct conflicts, Guo Moruo greatly weakened the emotional part when reconstructing Cai Yan's image, which was shown in Cai Wenji's choice about whether to stay or stay in his home country in Cai Wenji.

There is a saying in Cai's 'Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute Song 18': "The Huns loved me, and we gave birth to two children without shame." Among them, the "Huns" is King Zuo Xian, which is generally considered by academic circles (Aldinff, 1995). King Zuo Xian is very fond of Cai Yan, and she also has a deep maternal love for her children. And Liu Shang's "Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute," specifically Song 18, portrays a contrasting image of Cai Yan's family. In this song, Cai Wenji's family is depicted by Liu Shang as being filled with disharmony, animosity, and strife. He believes that after Cai Wenji arrived in Xiongnu, he did not have any romantic relationships, and instead led a stable life. His heart was filled with resentment due to his humiliation, causing him to consider abandoning his son with a heart full of anger. However, because the child was his flesh and blood, he eventually developed a sense of maternal love and connection. When reconstructing the image of Cai Wenji, Guo Moruo also reinterpreted the political situation of the Han Dynasty and Xiongnu, in contrast to the "love" mentioned by Cai Shi and the "hate" mentioned by Liu Shi. The plot revolves around Zuo Xianwang exchanging tokens with Dong Si as a gift after he resolves the misunderstanding regarding "the Han Dynasty borrowing Cai Wenji to return to Korea to send troops to Xiongnu."

*Cai Wenji*, based on the friendship between the Han Dynasty and Xiongnu, demonstrates that her decision to return to China is no longer a matter of choosing between her home country and an "enemy country". The friendship between Xiongnu and Cai Wenji helps to alleviate the sharp contradiction of her political background. At this time, the key to the decision lies in whether Cai Wenji will return to her country or stay at home.

For the affection between King Zuo Xian and Cai Wenji, Guo Moruo didn't delve too deeply into their love. The conversation between the two individuals in the first act also represented two opposing positions in the confrontation. Until the fifth act, eight years later, when Cai Wenji mentioned the death of Zuo Xianwang, she said, "I was saddened when I heard the news, but now I have found peace." It can be inferred that Cai Wenji was initially saddened by Zuo Xianwang's death, but her emotions have since subsided. Cai Wenji's emotional expression focuses on her two sons and daughters, which is also the most historically accurate aspect of her portrayal in art. The opening of the first act of *Cai Wenji* revolves around the plot of Cai Wenji's son being hesitant to let go because his mother is about to return to Korea. On her way back to Korea, what makes Cai Wenji most depressed and sad is the absence of her children. It was not until the reunion eight years later that Cai Wenji was tearfully reunited with her two children. When describing Cai Wenji's sense of "home," Guo Moruo chose to minimize the emotional complexities between Cai Wenji and Zuo Xianwang, portraying them as a couple who shared understanding and friendship but lacked deeper affection. Cai Wenji's life in Xiongnu did not reach the point of "humiliation" because her relationship with Zuo Xianwang was respected by the Xiongnu. The emotional support of "home" is primarily carried by Cai Wenji's children.

The main contradiction in *Cai Wenji* does not revolve around the emotional impact of her leaving home, as this is resolved early on in the first act when she decides to return to Han. Instead, the contradiction is centered around a sequence of events that are set in motion by Cai Wenji's return to Korea. Looking at the entire text, the portrayal of Cai Wenji as a composed and articulate individual who contributes to the nation through her writing appears to go beyond her role as a mother. In other words, in Guo Moruo's works, Cai Wenji, portrayed as a mother, appears to be merely a supplement to the three-dimensional character of Cai Wenji in the script. This portrayal does not delve into the essence of Cai Wenji's character, which primarily revolves around her connection to her "country."

In fact, this pull is related to Guo Moruo's mental journey. According to the beginning of this article, Guo Moruo's

first edition of *Cai Wenji* is China's "Nora", which means that she must give up her image in the family and live. Whether as a wife or a mother, the meaning of going "home" has always been retained by Guo Moruo in the background color of Cai Wenji's characters. Secondly, Guo Moruo admitted in the preface to *Cai Wenji*: "I can say the same thing: Cai Wenji is me!—is written according to me." Guo Moruo has similar experiences and feelings with Cai Wenji in his own experience. In 1937, Guo Moruo returned from Japan to participate in the cause of the Anti-Japanese War, leaving his foreign wife and children abroad and returning home alone, which is also a model of returning home. Thirdly, it is undeniable that *Cai Wenji* was written in time, which contains strong political discourse elements. Hou Guixin commented: "The 'ego' in the work has withdrawn, the 'ego' has become prominent, and personal discourse has been replaced by people's discourse." Under the influence of three thoughts, the asymmetric characters, unclear roles and even split-up situations caused by Cai Wenji's going to "home" and "returning to the country" in *Cai Wenji* have a reasonable explanation. For *Cai Wenji*, which serves the people's discourse, returning to the country is the focus of the whole grand play, and going home is only a necessary thread for the writer to shape the political consciousness. The author's strong resonance with the image of Cai Wenji is contrary to the independence of Cai Wenji's initial structure, and the limitation of Cai Wenji's role suspension in *Cai Wenji* comes from this.

#### 4. Tag

At the end of *Cai Wenji*, Cao Cao betrothed Cai Wenji to Dong Si, and Hu Er shouted greetings to parents and people all over the world. This is a classic happy ending, which means that the family is reunited, married off, and happy again. This is very different from the ending of 'Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute Song 18' or 'Poems of Sorrow and Anger' written by Cai Yan herself. At the end of 'Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute Song 18', Cai Yan used the phrase: Han and Xiongnu had different regional customs, and Mother and child are far apart. My resentment lingers in the sky, and the world is vast and should not be tolerated! The repetition of the word "Ending" evokes a sense that Cai Yan's tragic life is seemingly never-ending, making it even more challenging to conclude her story. The historical value of Cai Yan should be given more attention. Her story encompasses the journey of a talented woman, her encounter with the Huns and subsequent death in war, her eventual return to her motherland after a long time among the Huns, and the heartbreaking separation from her family. Although there are not many materials preserved so far, Cai Yan's life, pieced together from the fragments, provides a unique perspective on women with a background in war.

We should not equate Guo Moruo's portrayal of *Cai Wenji* with the historical figure Cai Yan. Instead, Guo Moruo's depiction of Cai Wenji is a literary endeavor to understand and reimagine Cai Yan's perspective. Up until now, the historical narratives of numerous female figures have not been fully acknowledged or reconstructed. *Cai Wenji* can, to a certain extent, reflect the changes in Guo Moruo's acceptance of female historical figures, as well as his evolving aesthetic taste and consciousness about literary creation. At the same time, we can explore how Guo Moruo utilizes the functionality of the figures to express himself in the process of political creation. Guo Moruo's portrayal of *Cai Wenji* has had a significant impact, not only as the daughter of Cai Yong but also as the wife of Dong Si. Because of *Cai Wenji*, we will remember the real, flesh-and-blood Cai Yan who stood between her hometown and the Xiongnu, facing the direction of home with tears of blood.

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