

Study on the Prototype of Cao Tianguan in the Qing Dynasty Drama “The Heavenly Southern Gate”

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Abstract—Drama "The Heavenly Southern Gate" had been performed in the imperial palace of Qing Dynasty frequently and posed huge influence on people at that time. There were many heated discussion on this drama in newspapers in the late Qing Dynasty and the period of the Republic of China. It's a pity! With the decline of this drama, the famous old drama lost its former status and was gradually forgotten. Based on the discussion on the original story of this drama in Journals in the Republic of China and modern China, this paper continues the study and tries to verify the prototype of this famous drama.

Keywords: *The Heavenly Southern Gate, Cao Tianguan, Cao Yubian, Zhao Nanxing*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Heavenly Southern Gate once was frequently performed in the imperial palace of Qing Dynasty and was praised by Cixi.¹ As a result, this drama was also widely spread among ordinary people in the late Qing Dynasty and became a well-known drama. It had been involved in the voice of many local operas. Until the Republic of China, people were still enjoying in taking about this drama. The Heavenly Southern Gate circulated today is not the complete edition. Mr. Qi Rushan in the Republic of China described all the plots of this drama. Comparing his saying with the contents of the existing versions of the drama, the plots of this drama can be divided into two parts: the first part is the expression of historical fact, namely the background of the story before the opening of the drama where the families of "Cao Tianguan" were persecuted to death by eunuch Wei Zhongxian, reflecting the historical battle between Donglin Party and eunuch party in Ming Dynasty; the second part is a made-up story and is the major plot of the existing version of the drama: when the old servant Cao Fu and Miss Yulian fled to Datong of Shanxi Province, it was snowing heavily. Cao Fu gave his warm clothes to Miss Yulian and was frozen to death; hence it was given the title of "local god of the land of The Heavenly Southern Gate". Hence, this plot is also called Cao Fu's Walking on Snow Mountain and Becoming a God", and "Walking on the Snow Mountain" and so on.

¹ It is mainly found in the book "The Collection of the National Library of China · Palace Opera Archives of Qing Dynasty". The Heavenly Southern Gate (南天门) had been performed in Qing Palace almost every year since the 9th year of Emperor Guangxu Period.

With the flourishing of dramas, there had been a lot of discussions on the prototype of "Cao Tianguan" in newspapers and periodicals since the Republic of China. According to their discussions, the prototype was mainly targeted to Zhao Nanxing, Cao Dingbang, and Cao Yubian in Ming Dynasty. In this paper, it is believed that it is more reasonable to say the Cao Tianguan is "Zhao Nanxing". But when comparing the drama plots with the "History of Ming Dynasty", it is known that there is not any "Minister of Officials" or official having completely the same experience as Cao Tianguan in this drama. The Heavenly Southern Gate is a fictional drama. It tell as a story of loyal and righteous officials and servants made-up on the basis of the based on the historical battle between Donglin Party and eunuch party in Ming Dynasty and the main experience of the Minister of Officials Zhao Nanxing.

II. THE SAYING OF "CAO TIANGUAN IS ZHAO NANXING"

"Cao Dingbang" is one of the names of "Cao Tianguan" in different versions of "The Heavenly Southern Gate". As recorded in Zhang Guozhu's "The Loyal Official of Ming Dynasty: Cao Dingbang" in "Historical Accounts of Past Events of Huai'an County: the Fourth Series" published in 1993, Cao Dingbang, living in Weiningzhuang village in Xuanfu Huaianwei region in Ming Dynasty, was actually the prototype of the character in the drama of "The Heavenly Southern Gate". During the period of the Republic of China, there had been a descendant of Cao Dingbang. His name was Cao Zihuang, a senator of Huaian County in that period. He still preserved Cao Dingbang's official uniform in local ancestral hall of Cao family.²By checking, there was no Cao Dingbang in the history; but some articles accepted this saying without exploration and study³. The reasons why Cao

² Du Bo, Xing Lexian, Li Enze. "Puzhou Bangzi Repertory Dictionary". Baowentang Bookstore. 1989.11, p184. "In the 24th year of Emperor Guangxu Period (i.e., the year of 189), Guo Baochen, the leading person of Xusheng (an elderly male character) in Pu Drama, performed this drama for empress dowager Cixi in the imperial palace of Qing Dynasty; his performance astonished and attracted all the audiences. Cixi also appreciated his performance very much and praised him."

³ Huaian County Committee of The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. "Historical Accounts of Past Events of Huai'an County: the Fourth Series". 1993.12, p205.

Dingbang is a made-up person in the Republic of China were as follows:

First of all, the identity information of "Cao Dingbang" cannot be found in the existing official history and local chronicle. Tracing back to the source, this saying was firstly mentioned by Zhang Guozhu in the "Selected Collection of Guozhu's Papers (国柱类稿选集)", and the article "The Loyal Official of Ming Dynasty: Cao Dingbang" in "Historical Accounts of Past Events of Huai'an County: the Fourth Series" was sourced from the Taiwan version of "Guozhu's Papers (国柱类稿)".

Secondly, in the article, it is mentioned that Cao Dingbang ranked first in the Provincial Examination in the 19th year of Wanli Period and became Jinshi (a successful candidate in the highest imperial examinations) in the next year⁴; however, by searching the "Index to Jinshi Titles of the Ming and Qing Dynasties", it is known that there is not the name of Cao Dingbang in the list of Renchenke final imperial examination winners in 20th year of Wanli Period (the year of 1592), but the name of Cao Yubian. In this exam, there were 244 third-level scholars with the same title identity as Jinshi, and Cao Yubian was among them (ranked 18th).⁵ The information of Cao Dingbang in the article completely coincides with that recorded in the "History of Ming Dynasty: Biography of Cao Yubian"⁶. Hence, it can be inferred that the deeds about Cao Dingbang in the article "The Loyal Official of Ming Dynasty — Cao Dingbang" was copied from the "History of Ming Dynasty: Biography of Cao Yubian", but the name was changed only.

Third, Zhang Guozhu and the said descendant of "Cao Dingbang" mentioned in the article are both Huai'an people; the motive for forgery is clear. By looking up "The Great People's Dictionary of the Republic of China", it is known that Zhang Guozhu (1905—?), alias Diting, was from Chahar Huaian (now Hebei).⁷ The later generations also held that the character in the drama was a real character, even to the extent that it was indeed a fact. This provided an excellent footnote for the popularity of the drama. With respect to the saying of "Cao Dingbang's descendant" in "Historical Accounts of Past Events of Huai'an County: The Fourth Series", it is now known that it is the follow-up of later generations:

⁴ Xuan Huai, "Walking on Snow Mountain (走雪山)": a true story happened in Huai'an. *Sounds of Home (乡音)*. No.1, 2008. Li Ren. The story behind "Walking on Snow Mountain". "The World of the Elderly (老人世界)", No. 3, 2017. The two papers both mentioned this saying; there is even the entry of "Cao Dingbang" in Baidu Baike.

⁵ Huaian County Committee of The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. "The Loyal Official of Ming Dynasty: Cao Dingbang" in the Historical Accounts of Past Events of Huai'an County: The Fourth Series". 1993.12, p205.

⁶ Zhu Baojiang, Xie Peilin. "Index to Jinshi Titles of the Ming and Qing Dynasties (明清进士题名录索引)". Wen Hai Press, 1981.02, p2573. (in Chinese)

⁷ (Qing) Zhang Tingyu. *History of Ming Dynasty Vol.254*. Chung Hwa Book Co., 1974.04, p6556-p6557.

His descendants Cao Zihuang once was a senator of Huai'an County. Guozhu passed through Weiningzhuang village in his way to the Huwo Temple in the summer of the 12th year of the Republic of China, and see Cao Zihuang by the way. Cao Zihuang led him to visit the ancestral hall of Cao family. He saw the so-called Cao Dingbang's official caps, court clothes, biography and so on offered in front of Cao Dingbang's memorial tablet. Hence, he knew that the national drama "The Heavenly Southern Gate" ("Walking on Snow Mountain (走雪山)" in Jin opera) was a true story.⁸

It is very worthy of notice that forging the traces of a drama character's existence in real life so that the character not only has true descendant, but also has ancestral hall and the objects used by him goes against ethics and inner emotions. This anomaly shows that the counterfeiter can get enough benefits from the counterfeiting itself, such as chasing names; it also shows that the character himself is famous enough to be worthy of being followed up. The reason why Huai'an followed up "Cao Tianguan" probably because Cao Fu and Yu Lian might pass through Huai'anwei in the way of escape from Beijing to Datong as described in the plot of The Heavenly Southern Gate.

III. THE SAYING OF "CAO TIANGUAN IS CAO YUBIAN"

There is also a saying that the prototype of "Cao Tianguan" is "Cao Yubian" in Shanxi, but "Cao Yubian" is also not the prototype of "Cao Tianguan". The saying of "Cao Tianguan is Cao Yubian" is mainly mentioned in "Historical Accounts of Past Events of Yuncheng City: the Seventh Series"⁹ and "Sidelights of Hedong Literary History"¹⁰ and so on. The reasons of the saying given in the articles are summarized as follows: first, the last names are the same; second, the experiences of serving as officials are the same; third, they both struggled with Wei Zhongxian.

With respect to the above saying, as far as the experience of serving as officials, Cao Yubian can indeed be regarded as "Cao Tianguan" based on the record in "The History of Ming Dynasty" that "Cao Yubian once was titled Shike Geishizhong". According to the article of "Tianguan" in Gong Yanming's "A Concise Dictionary of Chinese Officials' Alias", "From (Tang) the first year of Wuhou Guangzhai period (684) to the first year of Zhongzong Shenlong period (705), the Ministry of Officials was changed into "Tianguan"; (after Tang Dynasty), Tianguan may be the alias of the Ministry of Officials. According to (Ming) Yu Tingbi's "Alias of things (事物异名) ·Part A: The monarch and his subjects", 'officer of Ministry of Officials is

⁸ Xu Youchun. "The Great People's Dictionary of the Republic of China ·Part B". Shijiazhuang: Hebei People's Publishing House, 2007.01, p1841.

⁹ Huaian County Committee of The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. "Historical Accounts of Past Events of Huai'an County: the Fourth Series". 1993.12, p205.

¹⁰ Historical and Historical Materials Research Committee of Yuncheng City Committee of The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. "Historical Accounts of Past Events of Yuncheng City, the Seventh Series", 1988.12, p88. (in Chinese)

Tianguan. ¹¹ "Tianguan" does not specifically refer to the Minister of Officials but also refer to the officials in the Ministry of officials.

However, when looking up the "History of Ming Dynasty: Biography of Cao Yubian", it is known that Cao Yubian's experience does not coincide with the plot of "The Heavenly Southern Gate". In the drama, Cao Tianguan's family was persecuted to death and destroyed by Wei Zhongxian; only a servant and daughter fled to Datong, Shanxi. Although Cao Yubian had struggled with Wei Zhongxian's Party Group and was also strongly suppressed due to his identity of the leader of Donglin Party, he and his family were not brutally persecuted. The "History of Ming Dynasty: Biography of Cao Yubian" records Cao Yubian's two battles with the Eunuch Party Group: The first battle was in the 39th year of Wanli Period (1601). At that time, Cao Yubian was responsible for assessing the dispatching of officials in the capital city. According to practices, he dispatched Wang Shaohui, Qiao Yingjia, and others (later followed after the Eunuch Party) outside the capital city. This act went against the benefit of them and thus Cao Yubian was attacked by their party. The consequence of this battle was that although Cao Yubian was promoted to the position of Taichang Shaoqing, "the appointment order was not issued for long time; even he reported the case the superior, the report was not submitted to the highest official (疏寝不下, 请告又不报)", so he went home with illness; the second battle was in the fourth year of Tianqi Period (1624), Wang Shaohui and Qiao Yingjia gained power by attaching to Wei Zhongxian's Eunuch Party, tried their best to retaliate against Cao Yubian, and instigated Shi Sanwei to impeach him for his identity of serving as the leader Donglin Party; Consequently, Cao Yubian was dismissed from office. ¹² The two battles both ended with Cao Yubian's dismissal. Unlike the experience of "Cao Tianguan" in the drama, Cao Yubian as recorded in the "History of Ming Dynasty" did not engage in a positive fight against Wei Zhongxian himself; he was retaliated by Wei Zhongxian's Eunuch Party only because his upright and daring to speak his discontent threatened the interests of the Eunuch Party. Although Cao Yubian's career experience was ups and downs, and often was promoted and dismissed repeatedly, he finally saved his life and died at home at the age of 77. The "History of Ming Dynasty" highly praised him.

To sum up, the Cao Yubian in Ming Dynasty is not the prototype of Cao Tianguan in the drama. The similarities between Cao Yubian and "Cao Tianguan" in surnames, experiences of serving as officials and integrity are misjudgments based on many scholars' sayings; but Cao Yubian's life experience is still very different from Cao Tianguan's. This difference is huge in life background.

Therefore, the saying of "Cao Tianguan is Cao Yubian" can be definitely denied.

IV. THE SAYING OF "CAO TIANGUAN IS ZHAO NANXING"

In the article "A Study of the Names of People in Drama: Cao Zhengbang in the Heavenly Southern Gate (南天门)" as published on the Journal "Ten Days of Drama (十日戏剧)", it is believed that "Cao Tianguan" is Zhao Nanxing or Zhou Jiamo, where the former is more similar to the character. The basis for regarding Zhao Nanxing as the prototype of Cao Tianguan is as follows: first, there was a deed in Zhao Nanxing's life that "he refuses to accept bribery from Wei Zhongxian"; second, "Zhao" and "Cao" are similar in pronunciation; third, the plot in the drama text that Wei Zhongxian dispatches a group of people to hind in Guan Zhuangpu to kill him may be corresponding to the words "Wei Zhongxian and his party hated him very much (忠贤与其党恨不已)". ¹³ This article considers that Zhao Nanxing, the minister of officials in the Ming Dynasty, is one of the prototypes of "Cao Tianguan". His life experience is much similar to Cao Tianguan's, but it is not completely the same. In the drama, there are many fictional elements. However, the reasons given above are not sufficient, and the above materials alone are not enough to prove the relationship between the two. After looking up the life experience of Zhao Nanxing, the article gives the following reasons again:

First, they both have similar experience to battle with Wei Zhongxian. Zhao Nanxing (1150-1627), alias Mengbai, Chaihe and Qingdusanke, was originally from Zhengding Gaoyi (now Gaoyi County, Hebei Province). He was granted the title of Jinshi in the second year of Wanli period (1574) and initially assigned the position of Runingtuiguan and gradually became the minister of officials. The battle between the Eunuch Party and the Donglin Party was going on the severest when Zhao Nanxing served as the minister of officials. In this battle, many officials upright and daring to speak their discontents were excluded and persecuted to death. According to the plot of "The Heavenly Southern Gate" recorded by Mr. Qi Rushan, Cao Zhengbang who was the minister of officials congratulated Wei Zhongxian on his birthday and Wei Zhongxian took this opportunity to draw him to control the Ming Dynasty together; hearing this, Cao Zhengbang scolded him and then was killed. Similar to this plot, Zhao Nanxing's battle with Wei Zhongxian was for reason that Wei Zhongxian failed to draw him over to Wei Zhongxian's side. According to "History of the Ming Dynasty", Wei Zhongxian originally wanted to draw over Zhao Nanxing and praised him in front of the emperor, but Zhao Nanxing didn't want to make a good relationship with him. First he rejected Wei Zhongxian's nephew Fu Yingxing and and official's meeting with him with gifts; second, at Hongzhengmen door, he said "we are officials in the imperial palace and the imperial court; we'd better make efforts to serve the emperor respectively" to Wei Zhongxian

¹¹ Wang Xueqiao. "Sidelights of Hedong Literary History: Cao Yubian in Yuncheng". Shanxi: Beiyue Literature and Art Publishing House, 2002.09, p194.

¹² Gong Yanming. "A Concise Dictionary of Chinese Officials' Alias". Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 2016.09, p72.

¹³ (Qing) Zhang Tingyu. History of Ming Dynasty Vol.254: Biography of Cao Yubian. Chung Hwa Book Co., 1974.04, p6556.

with a severe countenance, so that Wei Zhongxian was angry both in mind and face.¹⁴ Although Zhao Nanxing's response to Wei Zhongxian's drawing over was not as fierce as Cao Tianguan's scolding in the drama, the two things that Zhao Nanxing did were actually as considerable as the scolding: first, he directly refused to act for him; secondly, he implied the meaning of admonishing in the expression of a kind language description; this is actually a demonstration of his position. After that, Zhao Nanxing selected the talented personnel and violated the Eunuch Party's interests step by step. Afterwards, the Eunuch Party gained the highest power; consequently, not only Zhao Nanxing himself was repelled, but people related to Zhao Nanxing were caused a strange disaster, and those who rebuked Zhao Nanxing was promoted quickly.

Next, the accusations collected by the Eunuch Party were all for "corruption". The persecution to Donglin party members and Zhao Nanxing by the Eunuch Party was not ended, and was implicated by Wang Wenyan's confession. In July of the 5th year of Tianqi period (1625),¹⁵ Ma Fenggao interrogated Zhao Nanxing and his son and nephews strictly; Zhao Nanxing was accused for accepting corruption (this is the same as the plot in the drama), and framed for accepting 15000 liang bribery. The grievances raged inside and outside. Even all the assets accumulated by 6 generations of Zhao's family are not enough to compensate it. It was just made up by donations from his relatives.¹⁶

Again, seen from the end, they were both persecuted by the Eunuch Party to the ruin of their home. Unlike the plot of Cao Zhengbang's being killed in the way home after being dismissed as recorded in the drama, Zhao Nanxing was not subjected to assassinating, but his families died from this huge change and suffered the great sorrow of separation and departure. In December of the 5th year of Tianqi Period (1625), Zhao Nanxing was forced to join the army and exiled to Daizhou, Shanxi (now Dai County, Xinzhou City, Shanxi Province). His son Qingheng and nephew Wang Zhongpang were respectively assigned to Zhuang Lang and Yongchang. The father and son left in the same day; Zhao Nanxing's wife Mrs. Feng feel heavily sad and cried to die (in December of the fifth year of Tianqi Period), and his second wife Mrs. Li was sad and scared to die in November of the sixth year of Tianqi Period (1626).¹⁷ Suffering from the chaos, Zhao Nanxing's grandson (the younger son of Qing Heng) also died in the same year (1626).¹⁸ Zhao Nanxing himself died

in the 7th year of Tianqi Period (1627). Although he had been rehabilitated by the imperial court, the governor of Shanxi Province and the Eunuch Party member Mou Zhikui deliberately delayed to give him the order for the purpose of retaliation. Consequently, Zhao Nanxing suppressed the anger and eventually died in Daizhou with grievance.¹⁹ Zhao Nanxing and his family's brutal encounter in the struggle with the Eunuch Party attracted the sorrow of all the ordinary people in the country for them.²⁰ Later generations commented, "When reading the biographies of Nangao and Mengbai, I cannot help but cry for their experiences (余读南皋、梦白两先生传,不禁涕泗滂沱而伤心也)".²¹ Those are naturally the main creative source of "The Heavenly Southern Gate"; thus the desolation and grief of a loyal official in the depressed society of the late Ming Dynasty was described.

Finally, Zhao Nanxing's experience of serving as officials is in line with the character setting in the drama. In several versions of the drama, Cao Yulian's father was called "Cao Tianguan". "Tianguan" does not specifically refer to the Minister of Officials but also refer to the officials in the Ministry of officials. Zhao Nanxing was promoted to the minister of officials in October of the 3rd year of Tianqi Period (1623).²² As recorded in the "Records of Admission and Dismission of Officials in Tianqi and Chongzhen Periods (启祯两朝剥复录)", "In December (the 5th year of Tianqi Period), Zhao Nanxing, the former minister of

抗直,首触凶锋,举家冤死,仅沥血上吁,以祈圣鉴悯恤疏>). Taiwan Student Book Company, Early June, 1986, p3090.

¹⁹ "Collection of individual biographies of Chinese historical figures". Book No. 23: the acts of Zhao Zhongzai. Beijing: Thread-Binding Books Publishing House. 2003, p16. "In the summer of the 6th year of Tianqi period, my father left us. My mother hold my hand and said, 'my dear son, maybe we cannot meet any more' and left with heavy crying. After that, she cried every day and night till her heart and blood were exhausted. In the 3rd day of November of the year, she died without any disease. I had a son aged 7 years old and died for pox. I feel so sad! Why I am so unfortunate!" (天启六年夏, 贱父子分离, 先生母执清衡手曰: '儿, 再不得相见矣。' 大哭而别。别后日夜号哭, 心血已枯。本年十一月初三日无疾而卒。清衡一幼子七岁, 出痘而殇。伤哉! 天何毒我, 至此极乎。)

²⁰ (Ming) Jin Risheng. "Song Tian Lu Bi (颂天庐笔)" Vol.20: Zhao Qingheng (son of the previous Minister of Officials Zhao Nanxing's Litigation for his father (原任吏部尚书赵南星男赵清衡奏为<臣父孤忠抗直,首触凶锋,举家冤死,仅沥血上吁,以祈圣鉴悯恤疏>). Taiwan Student Book Company, Early June, 1986, p3091. "According to imperial order, my father left for Zhenwuwei on Oct.12 of the last year. Mu Zhixie, the Governor of Shanxi Province, hatred my father for his careless in investigation and withhold and replied the letter till Dec.15. My father felt sad an angry and died on Dec.17." (蒙恩诏, 于去年十月十二日到振武卫, 瑯党山西巡抚牟志夔以臣父察处不谨积恨, 挨至十二月十五日始给回文。臣父忧郁愤慨, 至十七日遂歿。)

²¹ Compilation Committee of the "Continuous Repair of the Si Ku Quan Shu (续修四库全书)", Book No. 438 of the Continued Repair of the Si Ku Quan Shu "Records of Admission and Dismission of Officials in Tianqi and Chongzhen Periods (启祯两朝剥复录)" vol.2" the 5th year of Tianqi period. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1996, p412.

²² (Qing) Chen Ding. Biographies of Donglin Vol.13: Biographies of Zou Yuanbiao and Zhao Nanxing. Yangzhou: Guangling Book Company. 2007.11, p275.

¹⁴ Ye Muqiu. "A Study of the Names of People in Drama: Cao Zhengbang in the Heavenly Southern Gate (南天门)". "Ten Days of Drama (十日戏剧)". No.9, 1937, p7.

¹⁵ History of Ming Dynasty Vol.131, p6299.

¹⁶ "Collection of individual biographies of Chinese historical figures". Book No.23: the acts of Zhao Zhongzai. Beijing: Thread-Binding Books Publishing House. 2003, p13.

¹⁷ (Qing) Chen Ding. Biographies of Donglin Vol.13: Biographies of Zou Yuanbiao and Zhao Nanxing. Yangzhou: Guangling Book Company. 2007.11, p274.

¹⁸ (Ming) Jin Risheng. "Song Tian Lu Bi (颂天庐笔)" Vol.20: Zhao Qingheng (son of the previous Minister of Officials Zhao Nanxing's Litigation for his father (原任吏部尚书赵南星男赵清衡奏为<臣父孤忠

officials was dispatched to join the army".²³ Zhao Nanxing's experience of serving as officials is roughly consistent with the plot in the drama. Zhao Nanxing's lifelong experience of serving as officials began in Henan and ended in Daizhou, Shanxi. In the drama, Cao Tianguan is from Henan, and Cao Yulian's fiancée to whom she is going for shelter is in Datong, Shanxi. Shanxi and Henan are precisely two important places for the plot development of the drama.

V. CONCLUSION

Drama "The Heavenly Southern Gate" is a very special old drama in the history of drama. It used to be very famous, but now is almost no longer mentioned in the existing versions of the history of dramas. What lies behind the words "The Heavenly Southern Gate" is a lively folk drama that was once full of light and shadow. It ran through the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, from the imperial palace to ordinary people, and aroused people's high enthusiasm. The popularity of this drama reflects the huge influence of dramas performed in the imperial palace of Qing Dynasty on ordinary people.

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²³ XiaoYin. A Chronicle of Zhao Nanxing. 2015 Master's Degree Thesis of Hebei Normal University. p.6. (in Chinese)