

# *Distorted Beauty: An Analysis of the Inevitability of Reunion Endings in Xiaoxiang Rain*

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**Abstract:** *Xiaoxiang Rain*, also known as *Xiaoxiang Autumn Night Rain at Linjiang Inn*, is a work by Xianzhi Yang, a playwright from the early Yuan Dynasty. Recorded in both the *Taihe Zhengyin Pu* and the *Guibolu*, *Xiaoxiang Rain* is most commonly found in the *Yuanqu Edition* today. Ending with the reconciliation of Luan Cui and Tong Cui without resentment reflects the traditional aesthetic of “harmony” in Chinese culture. However, this seemingly harmonious ending actually embodies a form of Distorted Beauty. This paper aims to analyze the characters’ traits that imply a reunion ending, explore how plot developments drive the formation of such endings, examine the distortion of the happy ending, and gain insights into the social reality of the Yuan Dynasty.

In the drama of the Song and Yuan Dynasties, there exists a portrayal known as Distorted Beauty<sup>[1]</sup>. This portrayal depicts beautiful plots and character images in an exaggerated, magnified, and absurd manner, resulting in a distorted effect of beauty. The plot of dramas with Distorted Beauty is often filled with absurd and bizarre elements, and the storyline is often bizarre and unreasonable. The reunion ending of *Xiaoxiang Rain* is a manifestation of this Distorted Beauty, and many scholars have criticized this overly harmonious ending, believing it to be a compromise, as even if the man is unfaithful, women in the social reality of the time find it difficult to find a way out. Therefore, it is not difficult to see that this seemingly beautiful reunion ending actually carries a sense of distortion. This distortion deeply reflects the characters’ personalities and the social reality of the Yuan Dynasty. Women in ancient China were bound by traditional ethics, unable to escape the constraints of Confucian values, and deeply ingrained with the concept of male superiority and female inferiority. The arranged marriage system prevented women from pursuing freely chosen marriages, leading to countless women becoming sacrifices under the arranged marriage system. Moreover, the corruption in the officialdom of the Yuan Dynasty led to frequent instances of men seeking advancement by aligning themselves with the powerful. This “beautiful” ending (forced reunion) thus became a product of the times, making it easier to understand the deliberate satire in the creation of the reunion ending in *Xiaoxiang Rain* by the author Xianzhi Yang.

## 1. Characters implied with traits leading to a Distorted Beauty

### 1.1 The soft-hearted Cuiquan Zhang

Cuiluan Zhang originally hailed from a prestigious family, yet her demeanor remained gentle and

pure. While accompanying her father, Tianjue Zhang, on a journey to Jiangzhou, their boat capsized, and she was fortunate to be rescued by Wenyuan Cui, a fisherman. Grateful, she regarded Wenyuan Cui as her adoptive father and stayed with the Cui family without any airs of nobility, displaying humility and kindness. This incident reflects her gratitude towards her adoptive father and showcases her modest and tender-hearted nature. It also foreshadows her eventual acceptance of marriage proposals. Due to this, Wenyuan Cui enthusiastically arranged a marriage between Cuiluan Zhang and his nephew, Tong Cui. Although Tong Cui was handsome, Cuiluan hesitated, “[Zuizhongtian] just saved me from the Huai River, and now he’s pushing me onto the Mount Chu. Oh, my father, life and death are uncertain, how can we rush into marriage?”<sup>[2]</sup> Upon learning of Wenyuan’s insistence on the betrothal, her thought “He clearly promised it himself; how can I lift my head? Although I have feelings in my heart, I must be ashamed.”<sup>[2]</sup> Though Cuiluan hesitated, feeling conflicted about her father’s uncertain fate and the marriage proposal, she felt embarrassed but ultimately agreed. Her instinctive response to her adoptive father’s arranged marriage reflects both her docile and compliant character and the traditional Chinese marital ethos of obedience to parental wishes and matchmaker arrangements.

“I fear that Scholar Cui’s departure today may lead to regrets in the future. If you reach the Zhigong Pavilion and secure the top spot, then I fear you will swear never to stop until you achieve fame.”<sup>[2]</sup> Cuiluan’s concerns about Tong Cui leap off the page, indicating that men being unfaithful after achieving success might not have been uncommon in the Yuan Dynasty. Later, Cuiluan, acting on Wenyuan’s orders, went to search for her husband, only to discover that he had unfaithfully married the daughter of an examiner. Upon learning of this, she intended to “extinguish this poor wife”<sup>[2]</sup> and went to reason with Tong Cui. Before she could even speak, Cuiluan was seized by Tong Cui’s men, severely beaten, and banished to Shaman Island. Despite Cuiluan’s indignation at the humiliation and bullying she endured, she ultimately suppressed her anger. Faced with Dianshi Cui’s malicious intent to destroy her, even though she was full of grievances, she had no choice but to bear them silently. Influenced deeply by the traditional values of respect and adherence to rites and laws, she departed with a heart full of grievances, as it was her best option. Cuiluan endured great injustice, and her subsequent conflict with the notion of “happiness in the world is nothing more than the complete reunion of father and son, and husband and wife (Tong Cui)”<sup>[2]</sup> starkly contrasts with her own desires. It is evident that the reunion of husband and wife was not Cuiluan’s intention, highlighting the forced and distorted nature of the reunion ending.

## 1.2 Deceptive Tong Cui

The image of the “unfaithful man” is a typical topic in classical drama, and it is divided into two aspects: “lust for power” and “utilitarianism”<sup>[3]</sup>. In *Xiaoxiang Rain*, the character Tong Cui embodies both aspects simultaneously. Firstly, influenced by the corrupt social atmosphere of the Yuan Dynasty’s officialdom, scholars who had spent decades studying hard finally obtained minor official positions and enjoyed some fame and fortune. They sought to climb the social ladder by forming alliances with the powerful and using marriage as a means to gain personal advantage. Thus, the idea of “exchanging wealth and status for a wife” emerged. “My uncle’s adoptive daughter, she’s not even a blood relative, how did he come to arrange this for me? What use do I have for her? I can deceive humans, but I can’t miss this opportunity. (turning back) I haven’t married yet. Do you want to accuse me of a crime? Here’s one. Go ahead, carve the words ‘fugitive slave’ on her face and send her to Shamen Island. If she dies on the way, so be it, it’s better for me to get rid of her.”<sup>[2]</sup> After achieving success in the imperial examinations, Tong Cui felt that Cuiluan could not provide any assistance to his career ambitions. Therefore, he lied about not having a wife in order to pursue the examiner’s daughter and gain greater benefits through this

deceitful means.

When Cuiluan traveled thousands of miles to find her husband, she was severely beaten and branded with the words “fugitive slave” on her face before being sent to Shamen Island. Tong Cui’s indifference “only death, not life”, expressed through his desire for her death rather than her survival, illustrates his lack of genuine affection for Cuiluan. His motives throughout were solely focused on his own career and benefits. Later, when he learned that Cuiluan’s father was the honorable inspector Tianjue Zhang, he remarked, “If I had known she was the daughter of the honorable inspector, it wouldn’t have been appropriate to recognize her as my wife”<sup>[2]</sup>. This indicates his intention to reconcile with Cuiluan was driven by the desire to align himself with a prestigious family. Tong Cui’s lust for power and utilitarianism led to his manipulative and callous treatment of his wife, as he disregarded her well-being for his own gain. His vacillation between infidelity and reunion with two women demonstrates his selfishness and lack of sincerity. Therefore, the reunion ending in *Xiaoxiang Rain* is not a traditional happy ending like that of *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, but rather a product of self-interest and compromise, signifying its distortion.

## 2. The plot propels the emergence of the Distorted Beauty ending

In *Xiaoxiang Rain*, there are also powerful plot developments that drive the formation of the Distorted Beauty ending. This seemingly accidental reunion is actually filled with many inevitable elements within the plot. Firstly, their encounter sets the stage for Tong Cui’s reconciliation, ultimately leading to their reunion. Cuiluan’s marriage to Tong Cui was arranged through Wen Yuan Cui’s introduction, as depicted in the text, “Cuiluan says, ‘Brother, may you have boundless blessings.’ Dianshi Cui replies, ‘Indeed, a fine woman.’ Cuiluan sings, ‘I see him cross both hands over the chest and insert them into the sleeves alternately.’ Dianshi Cui says, ‘Sister, sorry for not introducing myself to you in time.’ Cuiluan sings, ‘As I approach and then retreat, I hurriedly offer shy greeting’.”<sup>[2]</sup> When Cuiluan first met Tong Cui, she displayed a thorough understanding of etiquette, hurriedly greeting him with a hint of shyness. This demonstrates that Cuiluan embodies the image of a traditional and conservative woman from the ancient China, knowledgeable about proper etiquette. This sets the stage for her eventual compromise with Tong Cui and with fate at the ending.

After being abandoned by Tong Cui, Cuiluan also resisted her fate for a while: “I thought I would accompany my husband harmoniously. Who knew you would remarry before divorcing me, you shameless scoundrel... I just want to ask you, a man with a guilty conscience, how can you accuse me of nameless crimes?” Cuiluan’s rebuke of Tong Cui’s words is filled with sorrow and indignation, echoing the sentiments of countless women who experienced similar situations during that era, imbued with a sense of anti-feudalism and justice.<sup>[4]</sup> Later, when she saw her father, Tianjue Zhang, Cuiluan also expressed her inner sorrow: “Father, he is an official now in Qinchuan. If someone goes to arrest him, I cannot tolerate this indignity. I must lead the troops and personally go to arrest him. It is truly ‘always watching the crab with a cold eye, waiting for the day it will be stopped!’”<sup>[2]</sup> Cuiluan’s desire to personally apprehend Tong Cui reveals her deep resentment towards him. Perhaps there was no longer any affection or loyalty towards Tong Cui, which led to intense conflicts with the later plot of her reconciling with this unfaithful man. Cuiluan embodies the brave resistance of ancient women when facing marital problems, but this anger was extinguished by reality. Ultimately, Cuiluan’s compromise was likely a result of necessity, highlighting the distortion of the reunion ending.

The intercession of Cuiluan’s adoptive father, Wen Yuan Cui, laid the foundation for Cuiluan’s forgiveness of Tong Cui. Influenced by social traditions and economic factors, the status of men and women in marital relationships was highly disparate, with male dominance at the center and

women occupying subordinate positions. This inequality was reflected in the law, with husbands having control over decisions regarding their children's marriages <sup>[5]</sup>. This predetermined the dominant role of men in marriage. In the text, it is evident that Tong Cui views the reunion of husband and wife as a beautiful tale, and regardless of Cuiluan's reluctance, this marriage would not end in failure. The marriage between Cuiluan and Tong Cui was mainly orchestrated by Wenyuan Cui, and his intercession undoubtedly served as a catalyst for the emergence of the reunion ending. This meticulously crafted structure ensured that each plot point unfolded seamlessly, with inevitability hidden within chance occurrences. Therefore, the distorted nature of this reunion is understandable: "This play reveals the ugly soul of a vile and malicious scholar, yet it still concludes with a 'grand reunion,' making it even more illogical than the typical grand reunion ending." <sup>[6]</sup>

### 3. The sublimation of the main theme promotes the realization of the Distorted Beauty reunion

#### 3.1 Reflecting the unfortunate nature of marriages in the Yuan Dynasty

Shaoji Deng, the chief editor of *A Literary History of the Yuan Dynasty*, remarked, "The reconciliation between Cuiluan and Tong Cui is premised on Cuiluan's concessions. Although 'happiness in the world is nothing more than the complete reunion of father and son, and husband and wife,' this ending conforms to a certain folk psychology. However, when the victim makes compromises and the villain goes unpunished, it contradicts the long-standing concept of 'retribution for good and evil.' Therefore, the ending of this play always appears somewhat unnatural." <sup>[7]</sup> The significance of the distorted reunion lies in reflecting the social reality of the Yuan Dynasty through this seemingly satisfactory ending. Firstly, Cuiluan's experience highlights the position of women in Yuan Dynasty marriages. Despite some improvement in women's economic status, they were still subject to the reality of male superiority and faced significant obstacles if they sought remarriage. The chaotic social atmosphere of the Yuan Dynasty prompted the government to implement measures to promote moral conduct and family ethics. The government supported women's chastity and advocated for the virtue of purity. For women of high status, the court imposed certain restrictions. <sup>[8]</sup> The Yuan Code, Volume 18, states, "Women can receive titles if their sons or husbands contribute to the government. Their social status will be different from the other women. Once they have received the imperial command, if their husbands or sons unfortunately die, they are not allowed to remarry and must remain single." <sup>[9]</sup> As the daughter of an inspector, Cuiluan's status was esteemed, making remarriage a difficult prospect.

As the largest empire in ancient China, the Yuan Dynasty saw severe class stratification. The Mongols ranked first, followed by the Semu people, then the northern Han Chinese, and finally the southern Han Chinese. To govern these diverse ethnic groups, the rulers of the Yuan Dynasty adopted Confucian education, leading to a significant integration of Han and minority cultures. Therefore, the marriage customs of the Yuan Dynasty were deeply rooted in traditional Chinese marriage systems. The *Book of Rites* states, "Marriage ceremonies are meant to strengthen the ties between two families, to serve the ancestors above, and to ensure the continuation of descendants below". For this reason, ancient Chinese marriages often followed the principle of "parental arrangements and matchmaker's arrangements". This cultural background is reflected in Yuan Dynasty dramas like *Qiuhe Teases his Wife*, which depicts "Parents take the responsibility of the upbringing of kids. When the young men and women grow up, they should get married. They should respect and love their spouses". Additionally, in wedding arrangements, the words of male elders carried significant weight. From this cultural context, it is easy to analyze that Cuiluan, as a symbol of traditional women in ancient China, would inevitably obey her father's orders. With her

adoptive father, Wen Yuan Cui, interceding for her, and considering Cuiluan's upbringing, she would naturally agree to reconcile with Tong Cui. This illustrates the difficulty of remarriage under the constraints of ancient traditional morality and education. If Cuiluan were to remarry, she would not only face criticism but also betray her inner sense of chastity. Therefore, the seemingly beautiful reunion is actually inevitable and rigid under the constraints of tradition.

### 3.2 Depicting the lowly status of Han Chinese literati

In the Yuan Dynasty, there was severe class differentiation, and the status of Han Chinese was far inferior to that of ethnic minorities, which determined the difficulty for Han Chinese to pass the imperial examinations and obtain official positions. The Yuan Dynasty did not prioritize the imperial examinations for Han Chinese, as the central government and positions of real power were mainly monopolized by Mongols and Semu people. Even if some Han Chinese were highly capable, they found it challenging to find favorable career paths. As “Merchants and traders, relegated to lowly positions, all resorted to bribery to acquire a position in the government”<sup>[10]</sup>, the rampant practice of buying and selling official positions exacerbated the situation, especially for middle and lower-ranking officials. Meanwhile, Mongols and Semu people were favored for promotion, making the career path for Han Chinese even more convoluted<sup>[11]</sup>. The character of Tong Cui in *Xiaoxiang Rain* is a microcosm of Yuan Dynasty literati. Motivated by utilitarianism and the desire for official positions, he chose to abandon his original wife, Cuiluan, and court Zhao, the daughter of an examiner. During that time, only by associating with Mongols and other ethnic minorities could one have the opportunity for promotion. Upon learning that Cuiluan's father was an investigator, which would be beneficial for his own career, he reconciled with her. While the reunion ending may seem like the best choice for both Cuiluan and Tong Cui, it actually reflects the lowly status of Han Chinese literati at that time. To some extent, it was an inevitable result of that era, revealing the dark and corrupt social underbelly beneath the surface of this “wonderful” reunion. The “twisted reunion” is a vivid portrayal of the distorted development of society.

### 3.3 Reflecting the corrupt atmosphere of the officialdom

The rule of the Yuan Dynasty was marked by rampant corruption, especially evident towards the end of its reign. Despite the promulgation of various beneficial policies, a third of the population remained displaced and destitute. Local officials openly engaged in usury, profiting from government funds, and even participated in human trafficking. The absence of a merit-based examination system prevented genuinely talented individuals from rising in society, leading to the monopolization of power. Landlords, in their bid to maintain their status, bribed officials, further fueling corruption. However, the ruling class of the Yuan Dynasty was lenient in punishing corruption, often allowing officials to retain their positions unless they committed capital crimes, thus perpetuating the cycle of corruption. Tianjue Zhang in *Xiaoxiang Rain* exemplifies this system, where despite his slight concern for his daughter Cuiluan, he succumbs to the corrupt societal norms. As a high-ranking official in the Yuan Dynasty, he might have been complicit in corruption himself, having become accustomed to a life of luxury. Faced with the choice between his daughter's happiness and his own corrupt gains, he unhesitatingly favors the latter. Thus, while the reunion may appear idyllic, Cuiluan's remarriage does not guarantee her happiness, illustrating the compromise with fate and reality, making the ending distorted.

## 4. Impact of the reunion ending on future literary creations

This kind of grand reunion ending aligns with the Chinese aesthetic mechanism known as “the beauty of harmony”, which has been cherished since ancient times. In classics like *Liang Shanbo*

and *Zhu Yingtai*, despite facing various oppressions in feudal society and ultimately sacrificing themselves for love, the transformation into butterflies and eternal companionship at the end offers readers a sense of consolation amid sadness. Xun Lu mentioned in *The Evolution of Chinese Fiction* that “the Chinese psyche tends to favor reunions, often providing reconciliation in novels for historical events where it was absent”. Examples like the reunion of Emperor Xuanzong and Concubine Yang in the moon palace in *Changsheng Palace* or the ultimate union of Shen Chun and Lady Wang in *The Tale of Lady Wang*. The section of *Zhongyong* in the *Book of Rites* states, “To achieve harmony is to occupy the middle ground; when the heavens and earth are in their places, all things flourish.” Harmony and reunion are thus intertwined, suggesting that the temporary separations and sorrows in life’s journey are just temporary, leading to eventual fulfillment and reunion. This narrative approach serves as a means of compensating for regrets and expressing aspirations for a better life, deeply influencing the creation of subsequent works and the ideological consciousness of the Chinese people.

## 5. Conclusion

From the depiction of characters’ personalities, plot developments, and the conveyed themes in *Xiaoxiang Rain*, it’s evident that the author, Xianzhi Yang, recognizes the rebellious spirit in Zhang Cuiluan. However, by employing the seemingly perfect grand reunion ending, the author illustrates that women still cannot escape the constraints of feudal ethics. Despite some resistance, their underlying thoughts remain weak and compromising. This narrative technique is also evident in other works, such as in *Qiuhu Teases his Wife*, where Qiuhu returns home after ten years in the army and plays tricks on his wife, but Meiying, the wife, under her mother-in-law’s pressure, chooses reconciliation. These women, if determined to punish faithless men or seek divorce, would likely face societal condemnation and struggle to establish themselves. When the author fails to find a better solution for them, they are forced to return to the family, compromising their own wishes but finding acceptance in society.<sup>[12]</sup> This twisted form of happiness is a satire, deeply revealing the flaws of Yuan Dynasty society, and even the whole ancient society, sparking countless reflections on the tragic fate of women.

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