Zhaoshi guer (赵氏孤儿) is one of the remarkable representatives of Yuan historical tragedies. It was written by Ji Junxiang (纪君祥), who, like many authors of Yuan plays, did not leave many clues about his life to his readers. This is thus an unfortunate handicap in studying the social and historical background of this play. At the present, it is known that Ji Junxiang had written six Yuan plays and Zhaoshi guer is the only surviving work.

There are two versions of Zhaoshi guer, the Yuan and the Ming, between which there is a great difference. The Yuan version consists of four acts and one interlude/prologue, and only the lyrics and tunes have been recorded. The Ming version has five acts and an interlude/prologue, and both the lyrics and dialogues are recorded. As there is an additional act in the Ming version, its ending differs from that of the Yuan version. This academic exercise is based on the Ming version not only for the complete lyrics and dialogues, but also the relative intactness of the story.

The origins of the story can be traced back to Zuozhuan (左传) of the pre-Qin period, though the version captured in Shi ji (史记) of the Western Han dynasty is the best basis. The author of Zhaoshi guer has modified a few historical facts, but the spirit in Shi ji still remains. One cannot deny the marked difference between literature and historical writing. In order to
accommodate the requirements of stage performance, modifications of the story are inevitable.

It is obvious that self-sacrifice for justice is the main theme in this play. In addition, the incompetence of the feudal ruling class is revealed and criticised. The corruption and decadence of the Yuan bureaucracy also make their expected appearance. The author's bitter attack on the barbarous rule of the Mongols carries some nationalist ideological undertones. The play will also be analysed and appraised according to its structure, dramatic conflicts, characters and lyrics and tunes.

The influence of Zhaoshi guer on later Chinese literature is profound, because it has a positive theme and outstanding techniques in its artistic expression. It is the first classical Chinese play to reach Europe, where it stirred up controversial discussions and debates. It has been modified by some Western playwrights for the European stage, thus proving its importance in both the Chinese and international worlds of drama.

Critics throughout the centuries have unanimously agreed upon the value of Zhaoshi guer as an excellent tragedy. It ranks with many other well-known plays, for its substantial contents, the outstanding creation of the characters, the eloquence of the lyrics and dialogues and the dynamics of the play have contributed to its popularity.