THE 'SHIEH-TZE' OF CHINESE
PLAYS IN THE YUAN DYNASTY

The word 'Shieh-tze' (棊子) appears both in Chinese novels and plays. In novels, 'Shieh-tze' is merely a prologue or prelude. In plays of the Yuan Dynasty (1277-1367), the 'Shieh-tze' was used to give the plot more variety and flexibility.

In 'A Selection of One Hundred Yuan-plays' (元曲选), thirty-one of the hundred selected plays are without any 'Shieh-tze', sixty-six plays have one 'Shieh-tze'. Two 'Shieh-tze' are found in each of the other three plays. None of the plays has more than two 'Shieh-tze'.

Of the sixty-six plays with one 'Shieh-tze', the 'Shieh-tze' appears at the beginning as a prologue in forty-nine plays. In the other seventeen plays, it is found among the four acts serving as a connection to the surrounding plot. None of the 'Shieh-tze' is placed at the end of a play as an epilogue.

A Yuan-play normally consists of four acts and is without or without a 'Shieh-tze'. Each act normally contains more than ten songs. These songs are sung only by the main-roles. The lesser characters are only allowed to take part in the dialogue. In certain Yuan-plays in which there are only two main roles the second character may not have a single song to sing.

The 'Shieh-tze' consists of only one or two
songs. These songs can be sung by the supporting-roles.

The functions of 'Shieh-tze' are: 1) to introduce the characters in the play; 2) to state the events preceding to the actual plot of the play; 3) to outline the action of the play; 4) to emphasize the supporting-roles; 5) to connect the plot tightly in the preceding and the succeeding acts; 6) to bring about an effective change of background from the previous acts.

Since all the 'Shieh-tze' organically connect each act in a good play, it is not "useless" or "just an additional part" as some critics believe.

All along, the 'Shieh-tze' had been used to "put together" the four acts in a Yuan-play. Without the 'Shieh-tze', the structure might be more difficult.