ABSTRACT

In this essay, I examine two rather different “historical” narratives of the traditional stage in order to identify the specific temporal relationship between the historical record and the Chinese stage. The first example, the story of Zhu Maichen and his wife, traces the narrative of a female-initiated divorce from its initial appearance in canonical history, through fiction and poetry, and into late Imperial and ultimately modern and contemporary Kunju theatre, with reference to related theatre traditions. As social mores shifted, the narrative was altered to fit with meanings appropriate to the times. The second example, “Slaying the Tiger,” (Ci hu) examines the story of a female assassin as it appears in unofficial and standard histories, and in the Kunju tradition. The narrative plays fast and loose with historical “fact” in order to enhance its theatrical effect. The character of the main character is formed not by historical record, but by xiqu convention. Costume and props do not indicate era. Representations of history in traditional Chinese theatre take place in a single, unspecific past tense; history is mined as a repository of “stories” (the vocabulary of the theatre) but does not bear on the manner of the telling.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii
Table of Contents ................................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................ iv
1 Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1
2 The Divorcée ......................................................................................................................... 5
  2.1 The Historical Zhu Maichen ......................................................................................... 5
  2.2 Treatments in Fiction and Poetry .................................................................................. 9
  2.3 Dramatic Adaptations .................................................................................................... 13
  2.4 You Can’t Recover Spilled Water, Except When You Can ............................................. 16
  2.5 Lanke Mountain Versions ............................................................................................. 18
  2.6 The Mad Dream ............................................................................................................. 23
  2.7 Blameless Tragedy in Shanghai .................................................................................... 28
  2.8 Northeastern Extremes ................................................................................................. 31
3 The Assassin ......................................................................................................................... 40
  3.1 The Brief Life of Palace Maiden Fei, and the Briefer Records Pertaining to It .......... 40
  3.2 From Scene to Playlet: Tieguan’s Paintings and the zhezixi form .............................. 46
  3.3 The Palace Maiden Onstage .......................................................................................... 53
  3.4 To Kill or Be Killed: the Fourth dan ............................................................................ 57
  3.5 The Lingering Resonance ............................................................................................. 60
4 Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 64
Bibliography ............................................................................................................................. 69
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1. Introduction

Every society's cultural products incorporate the past "to serve the present," though patterns of this production are bound up in specific cultural contexts. In modern times, the nature of historical drama has sparked a lively debate in China, although it did not traditionally have generic status. In this essay, I undertake the examination of two rather different "historical" narratives of the traditional stage in order to identify the specific temporal relationship between the historical record and the Chinese stage.

My initial interest in these plays derives from a period of employment in Nanjing from 2005-2007 at the Jiangsu Kunju Theatre, where I had the opportunity to experience their performance. With their strong, transgressive female characters, these two examples stood out from the repertoire; no doubt an examination of the gender subtext of the two narratives might afford a different avenue for fruitful study. However, as I began to examine the historical sources and context of these uncharacteristic female roles, I became interested in the manner in which these narratives had progressed from history to stage.

It was not surprising to find that both stories had been iterated in other forms besides the official histories and the current stage narrative. The first narrative, which dates from the Former Han, appears in prose and poetry beginning in the Tang Dynasty.

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1 Li-Ling Hsiao's *The Eternal Present of the Past* provides a useful summary of the debate regarding the genre of historical drama in Chinese sources from the 1950s. She describes the idea of "the past serving the present" as "an idea that seized the imagination of all those engaged." Hsiao, Li-Ling. *The Eternal Present of the Past.* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 177-179; here 178.

2 Hsiao, *The Eternal Present of the Past*, 178.
before the flourishing of the stage generated a multitude of scripts, examples of which are among the earliest extant fragments of writing for the stage. The other, much later, narrative, appears in unofficial histories and fiction as well as in dramatic scripts. The genealogy of the narratives is complemented by a discussion of the narratives as currently performed on Chinese xiqu stages, particularly Kunju. This approach requires the examination of generically diverse and historically wide-ranging texts, while also incorporating the performance tradition in the discussion.

The first example traces the narrative of a female-initiated divorce from its initial appearance in canonical history, through fiction and poetry, and into late Imperial and ultimately modern and contemporary Kunju \(^3\) theatre, with reference to related theatre traditions. As social mores shifted, the narrative was altered to fit with meanings appropriate to the times.

The second example examines the story of a female assassin as it appears in unofficial and standard histories, and in the Kunju tradition. The narrative alters historical “fact” in order to enhance theatrical effect, lionising a minor, potentially even fictional figure because of her dramatic resonance as a function of an actor- and scene-oriented theatre tradition.

The two cases illustrate different manners in which the theatre tradition overrode historical consciousness: the first by the variability of the narrative over time in order to serve audience expectations; the second by the operation of a tradition which isolated and

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3 *Kunju* 洪武 (“theatre of Kunshan”) and *Kunqu* 洪曲 (“melodies of Kunshan”). The two terms are used interchangeably in China, and in English “Kun opera” is common. Here I employ *Kunju*, since I am concerned with stage performance; *Kunqu* appears in the translations of score collection titles.
highlighted narrative elements and imposed performance norms with little regard for the received hierarchy of the official histories.

We note that “accurate” representation of the past in these two cases is subordinate to the need for accommodating audience desires and expectations. The “authors” of the theatre, in this case the actors are not concerned with the historical context; there is not even the potential for historical authenticity given the nature of codified performance. Upon incorporation into the performance repertoire, these narratives operate in a universal past tense, which reaffirms the theatregoer’s own mores while projecting them onto the canvas of an unspecific and alternate past, a xiqu time which is immediate but unreal.

Several caveats should be made before proceeding to the two cases at hand. Firstly, these examples are core, but not necessarily representative, examples of the Kunju repertoire. They are among those scenes which lack of acknowledged literati authorship and are relatively accessible in their registers. The universalising element here may be more pronounced in that Kunju strain geared to a wider audience; literati authors might well have been more concerned with conformity to official history and avoidance of anachronism than are these examples. Today, as the familiarity of actors, audience and adaptors with the treasury of Chinese historical narratives declines, it is inevitable that the universalising tendency has been exacerbated. To make a complete argument, more attention would also have to be paid to the key xiqu elements of costume and setting, which contribute signally to a universalising tendency.

Nevertheless, it is my hope that this examination may prove useful as an initial inquiry into this phenomenon as it appears in the Chinese theatre; an inquiry that can
shed light on the way in which Chinese theatre constructed, and continues to construct history.
2. The Divorcée

2.1 The Historical Zhu Maichen

Zhu Maichen 朱买臣 (d. 115 BCE) was a major official of the Western Han Dynasty (202 BCE-9 CE). His involvement in the highest level of court politics is recorded by Sima Qian 司马迁 (c. 145-c. 86 BCE), with particular reference to his involvement in the dismissal and subsequent suicide of the counsellor Zhang Tang 张汤 (d. 115 BCE). A considerable literary reputation is also attributed to him; at one point in the History of the Former Han 汉书 he is listed alongside luminaries such as Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179-104 BC), Sima Xiangru 司马相如 (179-117 BC) and Sima Qian himself. However, the three fu 赋 on which this reputation rested are no longer extant.

The traditional elite knew Zhu Maichen as a model of ardent study through and despite adversity. He had gained an official post at an advanced age, raised by imperial favour out of the obscurity in which he toiled as a woodcutter. This romantic elevation placed Zhu in an identifiable category of rags-to-robes officials and appealed to the classical virtues of perseverance, assiduity and uncomplaining poverty. Until the late imperial period he appears in literature primarily in this context: Li Bai 李白 (701-762), for instance, evoked him as a woodcutter languishing in obscurity but hoping to be recognized in one yuefu poem, called Song of Laughter 笑歌行:

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4 Ban Gu, Hanshu (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 65.35.
6 Both were ambitious Warring States political strategist; Sima Qian felt that they had ruined their countries in service of their own vanity.
How laughable, how laughable! Haven't you seen that if someone was crooked as a hook, the ancients knew he might be raised to nobility? Haven't you seen that if someone was as straight as a bowstring, the ancients knew he might die on the roadside? This is the reason Zhang Yi wagged his three-inch tongue, this is the reason Su Qin refused to cultivate two qing of land.  
How laughable, how laughable! Haven't you seen the old man of Canglang River singing, and saying the water of the Canglang River is for washing his feet? All his life, Qu Yuan never knew how to plan stratagems for his life, all in vain he wrote "Encountering Sorrow" for people to read. How laughable, how laughable! In the state of Zhao there was Yu Rang, in Chu there was Qu Ping, and they sold themselves for a thousand years of fame.  
What did Chao Fu and Xu You gain by washing their ears and refusing the posts? Boyi and Shuqi achieved nothing by starving themselves to death. You love your posthumous reputation, I love the wine in front of me. I can drink the wine before me and grow merry, but where is the empty fame you seek? A man's poverty or affluence depends on luck, he may bow at the waist in reverence to his lord, but the lord will not know it. A ravenous tiger pays not attention the meat on the table, the great furnace does not forge an awl in the pouch.  
How laughable, how laughable! Ning Wuzu sings to his ox's horn, Zhu Maichen carries his firewood. If today you encounter your lord and he does not recognise you, won't you seem to be feigning madness?

笑矣乎，笑矣乎！君不见曲如钩，古人知尔封公侯。
君不见直如弦，古人知尔死道边。
张仪所以只掉三寸舌，苏秦所以不垦二顷田。
笑矣乎，笑矣乎！君不见沧浪老人歌一曲，还道沧浪濯吾足。

7 Mencius wrote that "When the Canglang runs clear, I wash my official cap; when the Canglang River runs muddy, I wash my feet."
8 Yu Rang tried unsuccessfully to avenge his master; Qu Ping refers to Qu Yuan.
9 Xu You was offered rulership of the state but refused it and went to wash out his ears; Chao Fu led his ox upstream to avoid contamination from drinking the water.
10 These were brothers who fled rather than inherit the throne, ultimately starving to death in protest when King Wu of Zhou killed the sovereign.
11 Ravenous tigers represent greedy government; meat on the table the oppressed subjects. The great furnace is the world; the awl in the pouch is an extraordinary talent without outlet. Great talent goes unrecognised because of an unsuitable environment.
12 Ning Wuzu usually refers to Ning Yu, but here apparently to Ning Qi. Ning Qi was employed in Qi as a keeper of the Duke's herd of oxen. Duke Huan of Qi heard him singing as he beat an ox's horn and realised he was a man of talent, elevating him to high office; hence "to beat the ox's horn" was understood to mean "to seek office."
Zhu Maichen appeared also in the visual arts in this guise, with episodes from his rise from penury to high office depicted, for example, by Xie Shichen 谢时臣 (b. 1488).14

However, Zhu Maichen’s reputation as a paragon of scholarly perseverance has been largely eclipsed by accounts of his domestic troubles, especially the highly unusual story of his divorce. A historical account of the marriage dominates Zhu’s biography in the History of the Former Han, and Tang and Song literati both treated the subject. Still, there can be no doubt that the stage is the medium in which the narrative has really thriven. Ranging from a Song/Yuan nanxi 南戏 script to versions still being performed today in the nation’s various theatrical traditions, the story has proved to be of broad and persistent appeal. A closer look at the content of these plays, however, shows that their interpretations have been far from unitary, and particularly in the twentieth century have undergone substantial evolution.

No doubt a large part of the reason that this narrative has proven so enduring is the moral question implicit in the plot, which to my knowledge is quite without obvious analogues in Chinese theatre or fiction, namely: can a wife be justified in divorcing her husband? The narrative proposes different moral judgements depending on the era and

13 Li Bai, Li Bai quanji, ed. Bao Fang (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1996), 66.
the attitudes of the society with respect to the parameters of wifely duty. Let us begin with the account in the History of the Former Han.

Zhu Maichen, courtesy name Wengzi, was a man of Wu. Of poor family, he was fond of study, and did not administer his property. He frequently chopped firewood and sold it in order to procure food. With a bundle of firewood slung over his shoulder, he would read out loud as he walked. His wife followed him, also burdened with firewood, and repeatedly forbade him from singing on the trail, but [Zhu] Maichen sang even louder. This shamed his wife, and she asked permission to leave. Zhu Maichen laughed, saying, “At fifty, I will certainly be wealthy, and now I am already over forty years old. You have experienced bitterness for a long time. When I am wealthy, I will reward you for your merits.” His wife responded angrily, “A man like you is certain to end up in a ditch. How could you ever become wealthy?” Maichen could not restrain her, and so he allowed her to go. Thereafter, Maichen walked by himself, singing along the trails, carrying his firewood among the graves. When his former wife and her husband visited the graves, they would see Maichen cold and hungry, call him over and give him some food...Fortunately, he encountered Yan Zhu, who was from Kuaiyi [in the same county] and recommended Maichen. Maichen was summoned to the emperor, who appointed him prefect of Kuaiji. When it was heard in Kuaiji that the prefect had arrived, people were enlisted to repair the road. The county officials greeted the prefect, and there were over a hundred carriages. Reaching the border of Wu, he saw his former wife and her husband repairing the road. He ordered his carriage stopped, and commanded his former wife and her husband to be transported in a carriage at the back of the cortege. Reaching the prefectural residence, they were established in the garden and given food. After living there a month, his [former] wife hanged herself. Maichen gave her husband money for the burial.\(^{15}\)

朱买臣字翁子，吴人也。家贫，好读书，不治产业，常艾薪樵，卖以给食，担束薪，行且诵书。其妻亦负戴相随，数止买臣毋歌呕道中。买臣愈益嫉歌，妻羞之，求去。买臣笑曰：“我年五十当富贵，今已四十余矣。女苦日久，待我富贵报女功。”妻恚怒曰：“如公等，终饿死沟中耳，何能富贵？”买臣不能留，即听去。其后买臣独行歌道中，负薪墓间。故妻与夫家俱上冢，见买臣饥寒，呼饭饮之。。。会邑子严助贵幸，荐买臣，召见，拜买臣会稽太守。会稽闻太守且至，发民除道，县吏并送迎，车百余乘。入吴界，见其故妻，妻夫治道，买臣驻车，呼令后车载其夫妻，到太守舍，置园中，给食之。居一月，妻自经死，买臣乞其夫钱，令葬。\(^{15}\)

\(^{15}\) Ban Gu, Hanshu, 64a.34a.
The limited material on Han Dynasty marriage practices suggests that female-initiated divorce was neither unusual nor very stigmatised, and that remarriage was controversial to a degree but common.\(^\text{16}\) The biography does not judge the wife’s act outright, nor condemn or explain the motivation behind her suicide, though traditional readers likely drew conclusions of their own. This narrative, presented originally in this unembellished form, would later evolve in its various later incarnations to explicitly comment, condemn and sometimes even endorse the wife’s choices.

### 2.2 Treatments in Fiction and Poetry

The first known substantial literary treatment of the subject is a Tang Dynasty prose piece by Luo Yin 罗隐 (833-909) called *Words of a Woman of Yue* 越妇言.\(^\text{17}\) The piece, written from the standpoint of the wife, proposes that her motivation to commit suicide is an unwillingness to accept charity from a man whom she deems to have failed in his obligation to society, now that he has become a high official. She deplores his failure to uphold as a powerful man the ideals that he had propounded as a poor one:\(^\text{18}\)

“I was married to [Zhu Maichen] for years. Every year in times of hunger, cold,
toil and hardship I could see [his] ambition. Hadn't he spoken of his personal responsibility to square the world and advise his lord once he had attained success? Or of his heart’s desire to pacify the people and aid all beings? Yet unfortunately I left him some years ago. And [he] did meet with success after all. The Son of Heaven appointed him to a noble rank and clothed him in brocade, making his status obvious. This was truly the most favoured of treatments! Yet I haven't heard that he has done the things he previously said he would. Is it because there are no problems in any of the four directions? Is it because he is too preoccupied with matters of wealth and honor to think of anything else? In my opinion it is all right to boast in front of a woman, but I haven't seen him do any of those things (he formerly boasted), so how can I eat his food?” Thereupon she suffocated herself.

“吾乘箕帚于翁子左右者，有年矣。每念饥寒勤苦时节，见翁子之志，何尝不言通达后以匡国致君为己任，以安民济物为心期。而吾不幸离翁子左右者，亦有年矣，翁子果通达矣。天子疏爵以命之，衣锦以昼之，斯亦极矣。而向所言者，蔑然无闻。岂四方无事使之然耶？岂急于富贵未暇度者耶？以吾观之，矜于一妇人，则可矣，其他未之见也。又安可食其食！”乃闭气而死。

She may still be motivated by shame, but it is shame she feels on his behalf, rather than on account of her own actions. Unlike other treatments in traditional literature and on stage, all of which ascribe some kind of remorse, humiliation and/or stupidity to the wife for leaving her husband, Luo Yin’s account portrays a woman who accuses Zhu on his own territory, that of classical Chinese morality. This gives it a unique status in the history of the narrative, since for the next millennium Zhu’s wife accepted and lamented her guilt.

The piece is also interesting in that it prefigures developments that occurred much later in this narrative’s evolution: the potential blameworthiness of the man, and his peripheral role in a narrative which came to be focussed on the woman. Luo was an extremely eccentric writer, and William Nienhauser posits that the “selection of this theme indicates that [Luo]'s major interest may have been in the broader problem of the oppression of women,” perhaps even a “criticism of the traditional, especially the
Confucian, relationship between men and women.” And while there is no explicit
judgment of the wife in The History of the Former Han account, the traditional reader
would likely have inferred that she committed suicide out of shame. Luo turns this logic
on its head, by making Zhu the inconstant one.

Though the modern reader may find Luo’s account sympathetic, his adaptation of
the narrative puts him in a minority of one among traditional references and renderings.
Elsewhere, the story of Zhu’s wife is always treated explicitly as a parable of marital
immorality whenever it appears in classical Chinese literature. An early allusion occurs
in Li Bai’s shi “Parting from the Children at Nanling to go to the Capital” 南陵别儿童入
京 where Zhu’s wife is referred to as “the silly woman of Kuei-chi [who] may scorn Chu
Mai-chen.”

ON THE ROAD OF AMBITION (The poet departs from Nan-ling for the capital)

Home in the mountains in autumn-tide
Of new-brewed wine and yellow chick fattened on grain.
I call the boy to boil the fowl and pour the white wine,
While my children, playing noisily about, tug me by the sleeve.
I sing and imbibe the bland ecstasy of the cup;
I rise and dance in the tangled beams of the setting sun.

It is not too late to win a lord of ten thousand chariots.

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19 Nienhauser, “Some Preliminary Remarks on Fiction, the Classical Tradition and
Society in Late Ninth-century China,” 9.
20 Nienhauser, “Some Preliminary Remarks on Fiction, the Classical Tradition and
Society in Late Ninth-century China,” 9.
21 The full poem in the translation of Obata Shigeyoshi, which uses Wade-Giles
romanization. Obata gives an English title, “On the Road of Ambition,” and provides the
Chinese title parenthetically. Obata also remarks in his note on the same page that “silly
woman of Kuei-chi” may be a dig at Li Bai’s own wife “who had left him because of his
poor success in life.” Obata, Shigeyoshi. The Works of Li Po (New York: Paragon, 1965),
121. Chinese from Zhang Ruijun, “Li Bai songbieshi de gousi tese.” Yili shifan xueyuan
Let me ride and spur my horse on the long, long road!

The silly woman of Kuei-chi may scorn Chu Mai-chen,
I take leave of my family and journey west to Chin.
Looking up at the sky, I laugh aloud and go.
Ha, am I one to crawl ever in the dust-laden weeds?

南陵别儿童入京
白酒新熟山中归，黄鸡啄黍秋正肥。
呼童烹鸡酌白酒，儿女歌笑牵人衣。
高歌取醉欲自慰，起舞落日争光辉。
游说万乘苦不早，著鞭跨马涉远道。
会稽愚妇轻买臣，余亦辞家西入秦。
仰天大笑出门去，我辈岂是蓬蒿人。

She is granted more extensive, but not more sympathetic, poetic treatment in the
shi “Wife of Kuaiji” by the Song poet Mei Yaochen 梅尧臣 (1002-1060), where
she already appears as a humiliated and remorseful woman. She is granted more extensive, but not more sympathetic, poetic treatment in the
shi “Wife of Kuaiji” by the Song poet Mei Yaochen梅尧臣(1002-1060), where
she already appears as a humiliated and remorseful woman.22 Fang Xiaoru 方孝儒 (1357-
1402)’s shi “The Grave of Maichen’s Wife” 买臣妇墓 was unequivocal in its
condemnation:

Green grass on a mound on the edge of a pool
The bones have been buried a thousand years, but not the shame.
Let the women of this world be warned,
Since ancient times, though they eat husks and chaff, [wives and husbands]
remain together until the end.

青草池边一故丘，前年埋骨不埋羞。
丁宁嘱咐人间妇，自古糟糠合到头。

22 The poem begins moralistically with, “Eating lotus, you do not ask if the water was turbid; when she marries, a woman does not ask if the home will be humble.” 食藕莫问浊水泥，嫁婿莫问寒家儿。The wife’s shame is beautifully rendered: “He called for his former wife to be carried back in a carriage at the rear; her tears of remorse fell silently in the night.” 旧妻呼载后乘归，悔泪夜落无声啼。Bu Jian, “Lanke shan Cui shi xingxiang yu gushi yuanliu xunyi,” Yishu baiji 4 (1987): 39.
Thereafter, "Shameful tomb" became standard vocabulary for mention of Zhu Maichen’s wife.\textsuperscript{23}

Clearly, for readers of the classical period, Zhu’s wife was a familiar figure of shameful behaviour in a wife. References in poetry naturally persisted, and Wu Jingsuo’s 吴敬所 (fl. 1597) work *Celestial Fragrance of National Beauties* 国色天香 includes a prose account of the story.\textsuperscript{24} A more elaborate version appears as the prologue of the twenty-seventh story in Feng Menglong’s 冯梦龙 (1574-1645) *Illustrious Tales to Instruct the World* 喻世名言.\textsuperscript{25} These stories more closely resemble the theatrical versions of the narrative, and they were likely influenced by stage adaptations.

\section*{2.3 Dramatic Adaptations}

Records of this narrative’s onstage forms date back to the earliest period of extant Chinese dramatic scripts. In fact, one scholar noted that “we know that more or less since the beginning of Chinese drama, [Zhu Maichen’s] personal life has been staged, generation after generation; and, one supposes, as long as there is drama in China, they will continue to perform Zhu Maichen divorcing his wife.”\textsuperscript{26} Altogether, one *nanxi*, two *zaju* 杂居 and five *chuanqi* 传奇 scripts based on this story are known, although of these pre-twentieth-century scripts only one *zaju* has survived in its entirety.

\textsuperscript{24} Qian Nanyang, ed. *Song Yuan xiwen jiyi*. (Shanghai: Shanghai gudian wenxue chubanshe, 1956), 54.
Four short fragments of a nanxi play called Zhu Maichen Divorces his Wife are extant and included in Qian Nanyang’s Collected Fragments of Song and Yuan Drama. Though brief, the excerpts make it clear that the plot elements of later plays are already in place, and that this script was a direct antecedent of later scripts. The first remnant consists of Zhu’s aria as he is returning home from cutting wood on the mountain; in the second the couple is fighting about their poverty; in the third he promises his wife that he will soon achieve high office; and in the fourth he warns her that the divorce will be final: “Today you have set your heart on marrying another, but I fear that one day you will reconsider, and then there will be no way back.”

Another clue that the scripts in question already bear substantial similarities to later versions can be found in Scores from Cold Mountain Hall 寒山堂曲谱 by Zhang Dafu (1554—1630). Although it contains no text, this work refers to the same play by the title The Story of How Zhu Maichen had Water Spilled to Repudiate his Wife 朱买臣泼水出妻记. This alternate title’s mention of “spilled water” alerts us to the fact that the crucial theatrical climax of later plays has already been incorporated. Zhu illustrates the irreversibility of their separation by pouring water on the ground (or, typically, commanding someone else to spill it) and requiring his former wife to gather it back up. In Kunju versions, the moment is especially touching because the wife, already half-mad, does not realise immediately the impossibility of the task. She is left desperately scrabbling in the mud and debasing

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27 Qian Nanyang, Song Yuan xiwen jiyi, 54-55.
28 Qian Nanyang, Song Yuan xiwen jiyi, 55.
29 Bu Jian, “Lanke shan Cui shi xingxiang yu gushi yuanliu xunyi,” 40.
herself, acting out of a hope that the audience, and the other characters, already know is illusory. The “spilled water” element is so central to the narrative that several performance traditions, including those of Peking Opera 京剧, Qinxiang 秦腔, Huiju 徽剧, Yuju 豫剧 and Hebei Bangzi 河北梆子 give the whole play this title. It is, however, not an “indigenous” narrative element and is absent in the original History of the Former Han account. As the Qing writer Chu Renhuo 裘人获 (c. 1630-c. 1705) pointed out in his Hard Gourd Collection 坚瓠集, the pathetic device was in fact borrowed from a story about Jiang Ziya 姜子牙. The first record of this no doubt apocryphal story is to be found in The Miscellany of a Rustic 野客丛书 compiled by Wang Mao (1151-1213) in the Song Dynasty, and the account is remarkably similar to Zhu Maichen’s story:

“Prefect Jiang’s wife, a woman of the Ma family, could not bear their poverty and then left him. And so when the prefect had achieved honour, she returned. The prefect had a kettle of water poured out on the ground and ordered his wife to recover it, telling her ‘You say that we can be reunited after parting, but spilled water is difficult to recover.’”

姜太公妻马氏，不堪其贫而去。及太公既贵，再来。太公取一壶水倾于地，令妻收之，乃语之曰：‘若言离更合，覆水定难受。’

The absorption of this element from another (folk) biography is not surprising. Jiang Ziya and Zhu Maichen already belonged to the same category of virtuously poor men risen to high station; the fact that their wives had left them put them in an even

30 Zhu Yixuan, ed. Ming Qing xiaoshuo ziliao xuanbian (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 2006), 557. Jiang Ziya (11th Century BCE) was fishing in the river Wei when Duke Wen of Zhou 周文公 came upon him. Impressed by the wisdom of this unassuming old man, the king made him his senior advisor. Zhu Maichen actually deploys him in various versions of the narrative as an example of high office achieved at advanced age.
smaller fraternity. Traditional Chinese theatre had and has absolutely no inhibitions about ascribing events and characteristics from one figure to another. Whether it was a question of confusion or deliberate conflation, the incorporation of the “spilled water” as the immediate precedent to the suicide (a tragic ending the Jiang Ziya story does not offer) created a narrative arc that proved enduring. The Han Dynasty story, in which Zhu’s former wife is quietly incorporated into the cortege and commits suicide for undefined reasons, is clearly less dramatic. In its place, we have the basic plot still familiar today: the wife’s dissatisfaction at Zhu’s poverty, the divorce she initiates, his rise to high officialdom, her remorse and abject appeal, his rejection through the “spilled water”, her suicide. Now we have immorality, Solomonic cruelty, remorse and suicide; we have suspense, irony and tragedy—in short, we have a play.

2.4 You Can’t Recover Spilled Water, Except When You Can

With only one exception, no scripts from the traditional era have survived in their entirety. Largely or completely lost works include the zaju Old Man Zhu 朱翁子 (a Ming work attributed to Chen 陈, of whom nothing further is known) and the chuanqi plays To Carry the Official Seal 佩印记 (a Ming play by Gu Jin 顾瑾, fl. 1596), The Dew Tassel 露绶记 (anonymous) and two plays named Carrying Firewood 负薪记, one of which is a Yuan zaju by Yu Tianfu 庾天福 (fl. mid 13th Century), and the other a chuanqi of

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32 Another example is how the exploits of other contemporary generals were attributed to Yue Fei. Deng Junjie, “Yue Fei gushi de yanbian,” Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu 3 (2000): 128.

33 Perhaps better known by his courtesy name of Jifu 吉甫, this playwright was a major contemporary of Guan Hanqing, whose works have sadly been lost all but entirely. The
unknown authorship. It is evident from contemporary sources that these plays all
conformed to the same basic story arc as the nanxi: poverty, divorce, grovelling regret,
suicide.\textsuperscript{34} This is equally true of the partially extant Qing chuanqi script that forms the
basis for most living stage versions of the story, \textit{Lanke Mountain} \textit{烂柯山}.\textsuperscript{35}

The only exception, of sorts, to this tragic storyline occurs in a plot manipulated
(in a manoeuvre typical of implausible comedies across the globe) to allow apparent
crime or fault to be transformed into a “misunderstanding”, thus permitting Zhu’s wife to
be exonerated without threatening the underlying morality. This was the approach
adopted in the extant \textit{zaju} \textit{Prefect Zhu, the Woodcutter and the Fisherman, Amidst the
Wind and Snow} \textit{朱太守风雪渔樵记}, as well as the lost \textit{chuanqi} adaptation thereof, which
is one of the two plays entitled \textit{Carrying Firewood}.

The \textit{zaju} play, collected in \textit{Selected Yuan Plays} \textit{元曲选} (1616) by Zang Maoxun
(1550-1620), presents a version of the story in which Zhu’s wife (in this play called Jade
Immortal \textit{玉天仙}) divorces her husband not out of her own frustration with his poverty,
but at her father’s command. His intention is to motivate his son-in-law to advance his
scholarly career, which has apparently stalled through the excessive comfort of
domesticity. Consequently, though apparently repudiating Zhu, his father-in-law actually

\begin{flushright}
\textit{Register of Ghosts} and the \textit{Continued Register of Ghosts} \textit{录鬼簿续编} both hold him in
high regard.
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{34} For short excerpts from \textit{The Dew Tassel} \textit{露绥记} and contemporary criticism of these
lost plays, see Bu Jian, \textit{“Lanke shan Cui shi xingxiang yu gushi yuanliu xunyi,”} 41-43;
and Qian Nanyang, \textit{Song Yuan xiwen jiyi}, 44.

\textsuperscript{35} Scenes are preserved in such collections as \textit{Enjoyment after Drinking} \textit{醉怡情} (1628-
1644) and \textit{Treasures from the Forest of Songs} \textit{歌林拾翠} (1642), as well as in the Qing
Dynasty collections \textit{A Patched Cloak of White Fur} \textit{缀白裘} (1770), \textit{Scores for the
Bookshelf} \textit{纳书楹曲谱} (1792-1794). See Bu Jian, \textit{“Lanke shan Cui shi xingxiang yu
gushi yuanliu xunyi,”} 43-44.
surreptitiously finances his trip to the capital to sit the imperial examination, engaging the woodcutter who appears in the title to act as intermediary. Zhu passes the examinations and returns to his home in official splendour. When his wife appeals to him for a reunion, he humiliates her with the test of the spilled water, just as in other versions of the narrative. At this point, however, the father-in-law exposes his own ruse, elicits the necessary testimony from third parties and a happy end is contrived. Thus, the water can be spilled without the attendant tragic circumstances, though it also drives the poignancy of the scene towards the absurd.

The practice of rewriting well-known scripts to provide a happy ending was common, perhaps most notably in the remarkable twist given to The Injustice Done to Dou E 窦娥冤 in the Ming Dynasty script The Golden Lock 金锁记. In this way, the morally unsettling questions surrounding the wife's abandonment are elided; not only is she acting out of regard for Zhu's own advancement, but she is doing so at her father's behest, thus combining pragmatism with filial virtue. It hardly needs to be remarked that the script is unsatisfying for the modern reader, precisely because it divests the play of all moral inquiry and the wife of transgression and agency.

2.5 Lanke Mountain versions

Though there is evidence that Lanke Mountain was revised at the beginning of the Qing, the popularity of the same scenes between the Ming and Qing scores, and among

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36 For instance, see Yang Ji, “Fan bei wei xi shi ye fei? <Jinsuo ji> luelun,” Yueju yu xiezuo 11 (2006): 17-18. Scenes from this play were until very recently in the Kunju repertoire, until reworked versions of the original The Injustice Done to Dou E were staged after the Cultural Revolution.
the five major Qing scores suggests there was no radical change in plot. All of the scenes that are still presented today are included in these scores.

Scenes of Cui Shi compelling her husband occur in both of the Ming scores, in *Treasures from the Forest of Songs* as “Cui Shi’s Urgent [Re-]marriage” 崔氏迫嫁, though the end is missing, and in *Enjoyment after Drinking* as “The Divorce—Latter Part” 后休. “Compelled to Divorce—Former Part” 前逼 occurs in four of the Qing scores.

“Regretting [Re]marriage” 悔嫁, the lament of Zhu’s wife after her second marriage has gone wrong, is present in four of the Qing score collections. Though now seldom if ever performed as an independent scene in the Kunju tradition, it has been incorporated into full scripts of the story in both Nanjing and Shanghai, and is present in other theatre traditions.

“The Mad Dream” 痴梦 has an antecedent in the *Treasures from the Forest of Songs* as “Cui Shi Has a Dream” 崔氏做梦 and also appears in three of the Qing score collections. This scene remains a tour de force for the Kunju zhengdan 正旦 role type and is performed both individually and as part of full plays. Performance today still follows the text of the Qing scores quite closely. There are records of a late Qing actor Chen Si 陈四 (fl. late 19th Century) earning particular praise for “Spilling Water”: “The recitative loud and clear, the atmosphere urgent, the tone tragic, reaching absolute superiority.” 白口清朗，神情迫切，声调悲凉，最臻绝顶。38

The Ming *Treasures from the Forest of Songs* has “Upending Water in front of the Horse” 马前覆水 and the same is included in four of the five Qing collections as

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37 Bu Jian, “*Lanke shan Cui shi xingxiang yu gushi yuanliu xunyi,*” 44 and 44n21.
38 Hong Weizhu, *Kunqu cidian* (Yilan xian: Guoli chuantong yishu zhongxin, 2002), 97.
“Spilled Water” 浒水. This scene, in its various adaptations, enjoys repertoire status in the broadest range of opera traditions. In Kunju, it is performed both individually and as part of full plays, though, as we shall see, this scene has been substantially altered by the Shanghai Kunju Troupe.

Other scenes, such as “Woodcutter of the North” 北樵 (in which Zhu Maichen commiserates with a woodcutter and a fisherman) and “Sending a Letter” 寄信 (in which Zhang Biegü 张别古 delivers a letter from Zhu advising his former wife to remarry quickly), each of which appears in two scores, are more closely derived from the Yuan Dynasty script, and as such bore little relevance to the emerging plot. Nor were they subsequently incorporated into twentieth-century scripts of full plays. By the late Qing, only the four scenes mentioned above—“Compelled to Divorce—First Part”, “Regretting (Re-) Marriage”, “The Mad Dream” and “Spilling Water”—were in the usual Kunju repertoire.

The most recent chapter of Lanke Mountain’s onstage history begins with the September 1961 performance of 痴梦 by the Jiangsu performer Zhang Jiqing 张继青 (1938-) in the Shanghai People’s Art Theatre 上海人民艺术剧场. This performance took place in the presence of Yu Zhenfei 俞振飞 (1902-1993) and many of the "Chuan" 传 generation of performers, who had themselves performed it into the 1950s. Since the

39 “Compelled to Divorce” 逼休 which occurs once, is also derived from the Yuan play. The Kunju scene sometimes known by this name is actually derived from “Compelled to Divorce—First Part”). Hong Weizhu, Kunqu cidian, 53, 291, 293.
40 The "Chuan" generation of performers, whose stage names all included the character "Chuan" were trained at the Institute for the Preservation and Transmission of Kunju specifically to ensure the survival of the art. Shen Chuanzhi, Hua Chuanhao, Zhou Chuanying, Zhang Chuanfang, Zhu Chuanming and Liu Chuanheng are performers of this generation who appear at various points in this essay. A group of their students,
piece was a family specialty of the Shen family, Zhang had a year earlier asked Shen Chuanzhi (1906-1994) to instruct her. Shen in turn had learned it in the 1920s from his father Shen Yuequan (1865-1936) at the Institute for the Preservation and Transmission of Kunju. Hua Chuanhao 华传浩 (1921-1975) wrote an article in praise of Zhang’s performance, and reflected that it showed how the “madness” in the scene’s title pointed forward in the play. “After her weeping, as Cui Shi is about to exit the stage, she turns back and laughs. This laugh tells the audience that following the dream Cui Shi’s nervous condition is already abnormal. This is the origin of the scene’s title, 'The Mad Dream', and is also linked to the following scene, 'Spilling Water in Front of the Horse.” According to Yao Jikun 姚继焜 (1935-), Zhang’s husband and frequent collaborator, this article spurred their interest in the whole Lanke Mountain play, and shortly thereafter he and Wu Jijing (b. 1942 吴继静 learned another scene from the play (“Divorce under Duress, First Part”). Then, in the following year, Zhang Jiqing learnt “Spilling Water in Front of the Horse,” with Shen Chuanzhi acting as instructor for all scenes.

ultimately performers in Nanjing and Suzhou, were given stage names including “Ji” 继 (Continuation). Performers of that generation mentioned in this essay are Yao Jikun, Wu Jijing, and Zhang Jiqing.

41 Yao Jikun, “Cong zhezixi Chi Meng dao benxi Zhu Maichen xiu qi,” in Kunju Zhu Maichen xiu qì: Zhang Jiqing Yao Jikun yanchu banben, ed. Lei Jingxuan (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2007), 46; Hong Weizhu, Kunqu cidian, 97. Hong notes that Shen Yuequan taught three scenes, with “Forced to Divorce—First Part” being the product of the "Chuan" generation’s own re-staging.
42 Hua Chuanhua qu. in Yao Jikun, “Cong zhezixi Chi Meng dao benxi Zhu Maichen xiu qi,” 47.
43 Yao Jikun, “Cong zhezixi Chi Meng dao benxi Zhu Maichen xiu qi,” 47.
Their careers interrupted by the Cultural Revolution, these performers did not stage scenes from the play again until a 1980 event in honour of Yu Zhenfei at which Zhang Jiqing again performed “A Mad Dream.” Her performance brought the play to the attention of influential theatre critics such as Zhang Geng 張庚 (1911-) and drew an admiring article from People’s Drama 人民戏剧. The warm reception of the Nanjing troupe’s performance while touring Northern Jiangsu is also remembered by Yao Jikun as a factor in the decision to create a “whole play” version of Lanke Mountain: “The last scene was Zhang Jiqing’s “Mad Dream”. After the performance, the audience was unwilling to go, and some people said they wanted to see ‘Spilling Water in front of the Horse.’ Only after the repeated explanations and apologies of the theatre and troupe officials did the audience reluctantly leave.”

Upon his return to Nanjing, Yao began work on a full adaptation of the play in four scenes. In 1983, after Yao’s draft had undergone revision and direction by the playwright A-jia 阿甲 (1907-1994), the script, entitled Zhu Maichen Divorces his Wife 朱买臣休妻 premiered to public and critical acclaim.

Meanwhile, Liang Guyin 梁谷音 (1942-) of the Shanghai Kunju Troupe had begun to perform “The Mad Dream” in 1979, followed in 1980 by a four-scene performance with Gu Zhaolin 顾兆琳 (1943-) in the role of Zhu Maichen. Following a rewrite by Lu Jianzhi 陆兼之, which sought to soften the original vicious portrayal of Cui Shi, a full-length five-scene play was premiered in January 1981, with Ji Zhenhua 计镇

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44 Though “Spilling Water” conforms to the convention of giving Kunju scenes two-character titles, “Spilling Water in front of the Horse” remains a common alternate title.
华(1943-) taking over the part of Zhu Maichen, a role for which he would win China's highest honour for theatre performance, the Plum Blossom Prize 梅花奖, in 1986.47

2.6 The Mad Dream

The role of Cui Shi is considered among the most difficult in the Kunju repertoire. Much as in Western opera, there are roles that an actor grows into with maturity. One Suzhou performer, Gu Weiying, recounts that she felt she needed more life experience before she could master “the psychology of a woman entrapped in emotional family conflicts” 纠缠于家庭青冈矛盾中的女人心理, or evoke the “great joy and great sorrow of Cui Shi, four parts laughter and one part tears” 崔氏大喜大悲，四笑一哭.48 No doubt “Spilling Water”, as the dramatic denouement of the play, demands an impressive command of high tragedy, but “The Mad Dream” forms the play's emotional core, and risks being mawkish or cloying if done inexpertly. Delivered well, however, it poignantly draws the viewer profoundly into sympathy with Cui Shi, because he or she must enter into her delusional dream while knowing full well that the hopes expressed therein are certain to be crushed.

Already regretful of her hasty decision to divorce and remarry, Cui Shi is shattered to learn by chance—the messengers of good fortune are looking for Zhu at his old residence—of her former husband’s subsequent success. Shocked at this turn of events, predicted by Zhu, she is overcome by an intense dream. Of course, dreams are a

47 Fang Jiaji and Zhu Jianming, eds. Shanghai Kunju zhi (Shanghai: Wenhua chubanshe, 1998), 94, 118.
common device in Chinese theatre as in other traditions for allowing desires to become manifest to a theatre audience. In the Taoist tradition of linking dream with the vanity of human ambition, there are several famous plays where most of the action takes place in a dream, such as *The Dream of Handan* 邯郸梦 and *The Southern Bough* 南柯记, both by Tang Xianzu 汤显祖 (1550-1616). In Taoist discourse Cui Shi’s dream may be viewed in this discourse of the inconsequence of earthly vanities, though her dream has a far more brutal dramatic irony, since it promises not merely the fulfilment of an ambition or the satisfaction of a passion, but the recovery of a status she would have been entitled to and has inadvertently spurned.

In this dream, Cui Shi imagines that Zhu has sent officials to summon her to his side, and they are knocking at the door. The noise appears to wake her, though she is in fact still dreaming. This device has the effect of deepening the dramatic irony of the dream because, unlike other Kunju dreamers, Cui Shi believes and behaves as if she were awake, while the audience knows that she is sleeping.49 Others present in the scene act in a recognisably oneiric mode, with lugubrious tone and stiff movement. At first, Cui Shi cannot overcome her suspicion, but finally she accepts the message that these lowly officials are bearing: Zhu has taken her back, and she shall be arrayed as the wife of a high mandarin.

Ecstatically, she adorns herself with phoenix headdress and beautiful robes, gloring in her new position, accepting the deference of the messengers with false magnanimity and exhibiting the kind of unrestrained joy seen only in adult female characters in Kunju who are in the grip of madness. Her exhilaration is abruptly cut short.

49 Gu Weiyi, “Chuancheng Chi meng ganwu Cui shi,” 47.
by her new husband’s entrance. The officials fade away, and her husband threatens to

by her new husband’s entrance. The officials fade away, and her husband threatens to
crack open her head with the axe he is brandishing. She runs away, and abruptly wakes
from the dream. Cui Shi realises that, far from having been recognised as the wife of the
prefect, she has been fantasising in the company of no more than “crumbling walls, a
dying lamp, the waning moon.”破壁，残灯，碎月。50

Hua Chuanhao had already noted in his essay on Zhang Jiqing’s performances the
importance of laughter. In Kunju’s codified performance transmission, a laugh is

importance of laughter. In Kunju’s codified performance transmission, a laugh is
circumscribed by role type rules. Guimendan don’t laugh at all, tiedan laugh girlishly and
zhengdan laugh only when they are madwomen (and without covering their mouths).
Consequently, with a scene such as “The Mad Dream” both the rules of technique and
artistic choices inform a serious discussion on the execution of the laughs as an

expression of both Cui Shi’s insanity and her joy. It shouldn’t be surprising then, that the
Kunju performer Gu Weiyiing largely frames her essay on the role by the sequence and
development of laughs.

The first laugh precedes the dream, and is one of bitterness and matchless regret:

The first laugh precedes the dream, and is one of bitterness and matchless regret:

“Oh, Cui Shi, if you hadn’t done what you did, oh, well then, the bearers of good tidings
just now would have brought you such joy, such...hahaha...euphoria, I would be a fine
lady for certain.”咳，崔氏啊！你当初若没有这节事做出来，嗯，嘻嘻嘻，方才那报
喜的到何等欢喜，何等----哈哈----快活，这夫人么稳稳是我做的。The laugh

operates to reveal the regret beneath her sober reaction, and so is sudden and involuntary,
but it is briefer and more restrained because there is still the possibility of reunion. Cui

realises that she has offended against morality, and so she automatically thinks of her parents, whom she has let down. Then she sinks into self-pity and slumber.

At this point, she hears knocking at door. Transferring her own mental unbalance to the knocking, she calls the unknown visitors crazy and gives a laugh already verging on madness. The third time she laughs is when the female yamen official calls her “mistress” 夫人, indicating that she has attained a position of high respect. For the first time in her life of penury and misery she is being addressed in this manner, and so the laugh is an involuntary expression of her joy, accompanied by gestures of delight. However, the laughter is cut short by the thought of Zhu Maichen, and she looks right and left to see if she can spot him. This is the first sign that her perfect moment may be a delusion. To indicate this unease, Gu Weiying’s actions abruptly alternate between action and tranquility, release and restraint, and motion and cessation. 

The last laugh is the most explosive and shocked. Gu notes that one can omit this laugh, but if it is included it must convey “earth-shattering, surging passion.” 惊天动地，激情澎湃. It is a laugh of utter contentment, for the attendants have explained that they are following Zhu’s instructions to collect her, have brought the trappings of her new station with them, and that she should mount the palanquin as soon as possible. She tries on the clothes, and is so overcome with joy that she works her way up to an enormous laugh. Gu even adds a turn, facing the finery again and giggling in disturbed glee. Time and again, her gaze fixes on the headdress and the robe, the articles that announce her new status and prove its tangibility.

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51 Gu Weiying, “Chuancheng Chi meng ganwu Cui shi,” 47.
The collapse that follows the shocking appearance of her second husband, and her subsequent “waking,” is distinguished by great stillness of gesture and absence of actual tears. Cui Shi is so ravaged by the experience, so desolated by her return to comfortless, guilty waking life that her emotion is expressed not through an extravagant release of tears, but by a hopeless immobility. From this point on, Cui Shi has become insane.

Dramatically speaking, this allows the character to behave without self-regard or realistic inhibitions, thus provoking the “Spilled Water” scene. Her madness, especially since she is driven to it by her own remorse, also conveniently absolves Zhu of her suicide.

For the modern audience watching this traditional scene, however, the focus that it maintains on Cui Shi’s suffering is likely to provoke sympathy for the character. Though the text never condones or mitigates Cui Shi’s behaviour, and consistently expresses contempt of it (often with the judgments being placed in Cui Shi’s own lines), she can no longer appear as a villainess by virtue of the mere fact of her divorce. Though it is difficult to establish, given the dearth of earlier recording evidence, it seems likely that Kunju performers, even if naturally conservative, have adjusted their performance to soften Cui Shi and make her more sympathetic. Some adaptations have overtly addressed the changing attitudes towards the role of women, since it is now difficult to accept that Cui Shi’s madness and suicide are just desserts for leaving, after twenty years of starvation, her impecunious, complacent husband. Twentieth century performance of the narrative necessarily adjusts it, the better to reflect the mores of audiences.

52 Some older visual recordings of Kunju do of course exist. Examination of older xiqu materials leads me to conclude that even when executed “conservatively,” every aspect of performance tradition is naturally transformed over time. A process of modernisation goes on, inevitably, often subconsciously.
2.7 Blameless Tragedy in Shanghai

Liang Guyin is a performer renowned for her innovation within the Kunju tradition. While her status as canonical performer is unchallenged, she is unafraid to integrate non-xiqu elements into her performance, so long as they serve the purpose of the play and do not leave traces of their provenance. Among the most prominent examples of this are her interpretations of the Lanke Mountain scenes, as a result of which the performance style and script noticeably diverge from the more orthodox tradition in Nanjing.

The conclusion of the play is particularly problematic for modern audiences. In the traditional Lanke Mountain versions, and as still performed in Nanjing, Cui makes an appeal to the Late Imperial morality she has rejected, deploying the famous platitude that “one night of kindness makes husband and wife forever” to convince herself that Zhu will accept her pleading. Attempting to subscribe to conventional models now that they would clearly benefit her, she finds herself rejected. In a traditional setting, her survival would fail to carry the unambiguous condemnation expected; a judicial execution, however, might give the impression that Zhu is wantonly cruel. Her suicide satisfies traditional mores in that she has herself atoned by providing clarity and accepting guilt, but is likely to strike modern audience members as very excessive. The Shanghai version, as adapted by Liang Guyin, altered the ending to dissolve this dissonance. Though Cui still dies, this occurs accidentally, as a function of her madness.
In an essay titled “Don’t Call Me a Bad Woman” 不要叫我坏女人, Liang Guyin considers the necessity of adapting traditional plays to contemporary morality. The character of Zhu Maichen’s wife, Cui Shi, may have offended against traditional moral precepts, “but from a contemporary point of view, I really empathise with the fact that she didn’t leave her husband on account of ‘a third person’ or because she despised her poverty and was greedy for wealth. It was only to get some food into her stomach. Zhu Maichen wants her to make a big pot of congee from a few grains of rice and be happy about it. An ordinary woman wouldn’t be able to do it.” Besides rejecting the demands that Zhu made upon the virtue of his wife, including that she suffer hunger with silence and resignation, Liang also remarkably relates the character to a more modern dilemma.

During the Cultural Revolution the wives of many beleaguered old cadres divorced their husbands or even denounced them. It was in order to prevent the children and the family from being subjected to further trials. It might have been cruel, but they also did so because they had no alternative. After the old cadres were freed, I think the emotional state of these women must have resembled Cui’s. I heard the wife of an old cadre remark that she maintained relations with her former husband, a cadre, but neither of them could find the nerve to remarry. The husband was afraid others would say he was a good-for-nothing, and the wife feared that people would say she was ungrateful, on account of her returning to him as soon as he received a post. If people in our age cannot stand the pressure of public opinion, how much more so in the Han Dynasty? I think in both cases, these people had no alternative, and I want to bring out this human element in my performance. Perhaps some people today will be able to identify with it.\(^54\)

The most obvious consequence of this effort to “humanise” Cui is to soften Zhu Maichen’s reproaches and to change Cui’s manner of death from suicide to a madwoman’s death. In this version, having failed to recover the water that Zhu spilled on


\(^54\) Liang Guyin, *Yusi fengpian*, 80-81.
the ground, Cui is mesmerised by the river and wades into it. She laughs and pleads, “Won’t you take me back?” supposing in her madness that by drawing water from the river she can recover her position as Zhu’s wife. Ultimately she drowns. Zhu is suitably crushed.

Liang’s inspiration for the manner of performing is rather unexpected, especially in the relatively conservative Kunju world. Struck by the similarities between Cui—with the hibiscus in her hair and her madness—and Ophelia, whom she knew from Laurence Olivier’s 1948 *Hamlet*, she “borrowed this image of the watery grave, though if I didn’t say anything, people would probably think that it was traditionally performed that way.”

Liang’s attitude here is typical of her understanding of Kunju performance: alterations are acceptable and necessary to adapt a play to contemporary mores and tastes, but mustn’t show. It should be noted that, like the cadres of whom she is speaking, or many a Hamlet, the cruel actions of the man towards his erstwhile beloved are against his own will, in fealty to a greater pressure. In modern productions of *Lanke Mountain*, Zhu can always be seen vacillating as he rejects his wife, inclined to take her back, but prevented from doing so by the witnesses, by his responsibilities as official—by the public eye. The play acquires a much more modern concern, becoming the tragedy of a suicide occasioned by pressure from a hypocritical and patriarchal society, despite the affection existing between the protagonists.

\[55\] Liang Guyin, *Yusi fengpian*, 82.
2.8 Northeastern Extremes

Besides Kunju versions, the story of Zhu Maichen has naturally been dealt with by other media, primarily but not exclusively other forms of Chinese opera. Their plotlines run parallel to Kunju versions, which is unsurprising since they can all trace their origins to the same Lanke Mountain scenes from the complete chuanqi version.

This section examines two works that adopted opposite approaches in pursuit of the same goal: making the narrative acceptable. Depending on how divorce is coded—as a legitimate option for women or as an offense against morality—Cui Shi is transformed into either a proto-feminist or an arch-villain. Presumably by coincidence, both works come from the Northeast. The first is a 1939 radioplay by An Xi 安犀 first printed in Shenyang’s Shengjing Times 盛京时报, the second an example of the Northeastern xiqu genre errenzhuan 二人转 (“song-and-dance duet”) as currently performed. The radioplay transforms Zhu’s wife into a proud and unapologetic woman defending her rights and actions, the errenzhuan into a villainess in the classical mould of Pan Jinlian.

An Xi’s play stands alone among Zhu Maichen treatments in both its medium—radio broadcast—and its treatment of the material. The play does not merely exonerate the wife, Cui Shi, but glorifies her as a model of an independent and righteous woman. It seems likely that An consulted in the History of the Former Han, ignoring the well-established theatre tradition, since his version reintroduces elements of the original Zhu Maichen biography, and retells the story in the context of modern leftist views on class, traditional learning and gender relations.

The first scene begins with depressingly realistic bickering between the spouses:
Wind howls wildly outside.

Zhu is reading out loud from the first part of “The Great Summons” from Chuci.

WIFE: I’m talking to you. Are you listening to me?

Zhu continues to read Chuci.

WIFE: Why are you still reading? It’s not snowing outside anymore, so we should go.

Zhu continues to read Chuci.

WIFE (snatching up the book and hurling it to the ground.) If you ask me, you really go too far!

ZHU: What’s eating you? (picking up the book)

WIFE: I told you, it’s not snowing anymore, it’s not snowing anymore! And you’re still reading out loud! Hum-hum-ya-ya.

ZHU: So it’s not snowing, I was just reading my book, why pick a fight with me?

WIFE: And why shouldn’t I fight with you? Let me ask you, will all that reading stop your stomach from growling tonight?  

[风在外面狂吼着。
[朱读《楚辞·大招》一节。

妻 我跟你说话你听着没有啊？
[朱仍读《楚辞》。

妻 你怎么还念呢？外头雪不下了，咱们倒走啊！
[朱仍读《楚辞》。

妻 （把书抢过来，摔在地上。）我看你也太不像话了！

朱 你怎么的！（捡起书来）

妻 告诉你雪不下了，雪不下了！你还穷念！哼哼呀呀地。

朱 不下就不下，我念好好的书，你跟我吵吵什么啊！

妻 哼！像我不应该和你吵吵似的。我问问你，念书，晚上你的肚子就可以不饿了吗？

And so on. They are impoverished and starving. She finds his chanting and singing humiliating, which is one of the elements from the History of the Former Han.

He refuses to “behave the way poor people ought to” 穷人所应该做的. 他 tries to quote the classics at her, but she throws these quotations back at him, denouncing them as propaganda written for males in the interest of men. When Zhu states his scholar’s credo,

57 An Xi, Zhu Maichen, 201.
“I can go without food, I can go without clothes, but I can’t go without reading my books,” 饭可以不吃，衣裳可以不穿，我书却不能不看 she answers, “Then you can go walking down the road to death, but I’m not going to walk eyes wide open into starvation to keep company with a piece of trash.” 那你就是往死路上走，我不能眼睁睁地陪着一个废物一同饿死。58 She leaves him, while he sullenly predicts that she will one day regret her behaviour.

The second scene shows Zhu’s wife now happily remarried to Tian Dalang 田大郎. It is a scene of hard-working domestic bliss until the subject of Zhu comes up. Tian (rather preternaturally devoid of jealousy) and his wife consider Zhu’s likely plight in the snow, especially since Tian has heard that Zhu’s shack has burnt down. As in the dynastic history, the cold and starving Zhu is treated charitably by his ex-wife. He is fed and allowed to warm himself, but his former wife’s exultation of Tian’s industry drives Zhu away.

In the third scene, Zhu has become prefect. In a magnanimous gesture, he has taken Tian and his wife to live in the back garden of the magistrate’s estate. Sycophantic attendants praise him for his unusual generosity of spirit, but his former wife appears and takes him task for taking revenge by forcing them into captive idleness. He dismisses their protests, and they choose to commit suicide rather than be the objects of his charity. Tian survives the attempt, and is given money to bury his wife. Zhu remarks, “What a very stupid affair. I meant well by them.” 这真是愚事,我原是为他们好。The attendant notes, “Sir, your wonderful words will no doubt be committed to history.” 大人，这一段

A dramatic irony which implicitly indicts the traditional narrative as a slanderous, sexist account. The play ends with a display of Zhu's vanity as he announces that he will give a feast for all those who once mocked him or despised him.

In this play, the wife's suicide, not clearly motivated in the historical account, has been lent meaning as an act of protest against false charity, idleness and a corrupt social system. Since the exoneration of the wife requires the demonisation of Zhu Maichen, he becomes a quintessential 1930s leftist villain: an effete bookworm who shuns manual labour, repays good sense with classical gibberish, and performs good deeds with a self-serving appearance of benevolence. With her heavy irony, which goes so far that it not only questions Zhu's motives but also, unthinkably, the validity of the achievement, ("You know, an illustrious prefect isn't necessarily anything higher than an ordinary person." 你知道，太守老也不见得就比小百姓高多少), she bluntly challenges the whole moral universe of traditional Chinese ambition. Far from being the mercenary or the lascivious woman of other versions, she has become the soul of proletarian honour.

The radioplay Zhu Maichen's attempt at rehabilitating a villainous woman is reminiscent of what Ouyang Yuqian 欧阳予倩 (1889-1962) had attempted, albeit more extensively, in his 1928 play Pan Jinlian 潘金莲. Like Pan, Cui Shi had in traditional

61 An Xi, Zhu Maichen, 208.
62 An English translation of Ouyang Yuqian's play by Catherine Swatek can be found in Edward M. Gunn, ed. Twentieth Century Chinese Drama: An Anthology (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 52-75.
versions been “sacrificed to a rigid male-centered social system.”\textsuperscript{63} The story of Zhu Maichen makes an easier subject to provoke sympathy because the basic facts of Cui’s “crime” had substantially shifted in valuation in the transition from traditional to Republican China. While Pan’s crimes, especially the murder of her husband, remain inexcusable according to any moral standard likely to be applied by a Chinese audience, the right to female-initiated divorce was now defensible and understandable, especially in the context of progressive intellectual movements to reform the family system.\textsuperscript{64} Cui was no longer automatically coded as a villainess. Her story fit more comfortably into the modern narrative of female independence, and was written at a time when divorce was beginning to gain acceptance in China. When Zhu exhorts her to stay with him, invoking classical models of fidelity, Cui replies point-blank, “Isn’t it just you men speaking in the interest of men, about how women should serve and serve you? I’m sick of it. I don’t know how many times you’ve read it to me.”\textsuperscript{65}

The exoneration of Cui comes at the expense of Zhu. The traditional motives of Zhu, a righteous male character, are altered so that he appears self-interested, vain and bullying, his Confucian morality a hypocritical subterfuge (much like it was in Luo Yin’s Tang Dynasty prose piece). In this case, Zhu, having returned to show off his status and

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\textsuperscript{64} Republican China had a very liberal divorce law, allowing female-initiated divorce on ten different grounds. In practice, of course, access to and application of the law was mixed. See Kathryn Bernhardt, “Women and the Law: Divorce in the Republican Era.” In \textit{Civil Law in Qing and Republican China}, edited by Kathryn Bernhardt et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 187-214.
\textsuperscript{65} An Xi, \textit{Zhu Maichen}, 201.
wealth, forces Cui and her new husband to live in his residence, his "charity" has become a form of oppression.

If An Xi chose to try and rehabilitate Cui, then the *errenzhuan* treatment has taken the equally logical option of turning Cui into a character of perfect classical reprehensibility. This script, called *Spilling Water in Front of the Horse* 马前泼水, presents a Cui who has been moved so far into villainy that in her motivations, gestures, and expressions she distinctly resembles Pan Jinlian, a tendency accentuated by the earthiness and even vulgarity of the *errenzhuan* genre. All of the character defects are exaggerated. Her first lines, "A flower like me / fallen into this manure ditch. / If I could follow my heart / I would leave old Zhu's home," are followed by her description of Zhu Maichen as "both poor and mopey, stubborn and foolish, nagging and brooding, [a man who] can't even talk properly." She married him in the belief that he would be a great official, and is bitterly disappointed at his failure. She sings of how she is trying to orchestrate an "accidental" death by sending him out into a storm:

*A daughter of the Cui family sitting inside, grinding her teeth*  
*Hating above all my husband Zhu Maichen*  
*Gnawing away at his books, as dumb as he is foolish,*  
*Causing me this miserable poverty.*  
*These freezing days have brought a large snowfall,*  
*And I forced him into the mountain forests for firewood.*  
*The Northwest wind blows the misty snow more and more cruelly*  
*And if he escapes the snow, he's sure to be devoured by wolves.*  
*If, all of a sudden, he should lose his life,*  
*I would take up my roots, put on a gauze dress and marry another!*

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68 Jilin sheng yishu yanjiusuo, ed., *Ma qian po shui*, 2. Italics are used here to represent singing.
When he returns home, she throws his books on the ground and in response to his invocation of Su Qin (d. 284 BCE) as a model of a scholarly late bloomer, she derides him for seeking to “wear courtly boots on pig’s trotters...hold ivory tablets with dog’s paws.” She proceeds to abuse his ancestors. If, in An’s radioplay, it was necessary to make Zhu unsympathetic to valorise Cui Shi, in this errenzhuan play Zhu Maichen has become a blameless victim and a model of scholarly honour and virtue. He grants Cui Shi the divorce only once it seems she is on the point of subjecting him to a violent beating. The motives that obtained in the earlier narratives—escape from direst hunger—have been replaced by ambition, vanity and lust.

Having left Zhu, Cui Shi proceeds to ruin a second husband through sloth, greed and lust, and is ultimately reduced to beggary. By trickery and lies, and echoing the artificial happy end offered by the zaju play, she tries to make Zhu believe that she divorced him in order to encourage him to study harder, that compelling him into the mountains to cut firewood was merely to clear his head from all his reading. Zhu, being the good-hearted, rather simple-minded man that he is in this play, is tempted to believe her until the second husband appears and reveals that Cui Shi threw herself upon him immediately after her divorce. Cui Shi then aggravates her crimes by accusing the second husband of having forced himself upon her (the truth is nearly the reverse), but he produces Zhu’s document of divorce, proving that he married her in good faith.

At this point, Zhu has the water poured out, but this particular Cui Shi is too craven (and too intelligent) even to be properly humiliated: she refuses to attempt to retrieve the water, knocks her head on the ground and dies. Zhu Maichen’s reaction,

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unlike all other stage versions in which he feels remorse and even despair, is unemotional. He tells his attendants: “Very well. You go buy a coffin and put the body in it,” and then joins the second husband and the attendants in some final moralising couplets.\(^70\)

This Cui Shi has been deprived of all sympathetic traits. She is not humanised by any poignant mad dream, does not suffer from hunger or self-recrimination. Having become a caricature of wifely evil, Cui’s original “crime” recedes beneath the other vices and offenses she has accrued: shrewishness, vanity, lust, greed, impiety, even attempted murder. By creating a character morally indefensible also by modern standards, the errenzhuan version is able to maintain a story arc that otherwise would no longer be sustained by changing moral assumptions.

Faced with the moral acceptability of female-initiated divorce, the two preceding examples took opposite tacks to re-establish a cogent moral viewpoint: one by lionising Cui, the other by demonising her. An interesting third solution to this challenge has been provided more recently by a Jingju called Spilling Water in Front of the Horse 马前泼水. This piece, premiering in 2000 in Beijing with a script by Sheng Heyu 盛和煜 (1948-), appears to have been conceived with the idea of making Cui sympathetic.

Presumably in the service of stacking the odds in Cui Shi’s favour, Sheng has increased Zhu’s age while making her younger and more beautiful. The marriage, by modern standards, appears unfair and unequal to begin with. On Zhu’s ninth failure at the exams, Cui Shi pushes him out to get firewood, burns his books to cook rice, and forces him to write the document of divorce. Like the errenzhuan Cui Shi, the result of her

schemes is penury rather than the happiness she had anticipated. Her character is
impatient and ambitious, and she divorces him because she is disappointed that he has
failed to provide for her in the expected way: her complaint has become a breach of
promise. Consequently, when he returns as a high official, she demands of him her share
in the glory as a right, a compensation for the nine (in this play) years of misery she
“paid” him.

This construal of motives removes all the outside pressures and trappings of
traditional versions. There are no parents, no scheming matchmakers, no second husband.
While making Cui Shi the central figure in the traditional Kunju version causes audience
members to sympathise with her torment and delusive hopes, observers of this Jingju
adaptation felt that Cui Shi had become a mercenary, unsympathetic character, devoid of
shame or regret. The marriage had become a financial transaction, and Cui Shi’s plea to
be taken back is premised on the assumption that, like a modern divorcée, she can claim a
share of her husband’s affluence. It’s a bleak thought to entertain, but perhaps the
narrative has in this instance shifted once again to reflect its audience’s attitudes towards
marital mores?71 Despite her “endless pestering” 死乞白赖地缠着72 (a far cry from the
heart-rending entreaties of the traditional Kunju Cui Shi), Zhu Maichen ignores her.

3. The Assassin

If the multiplicity of moralities accruing to the Zhu Maichen narrative illustrates the historical unconcern of the traditional Chinese stage, the performance of scenes emphasising Cui Shi’s mad dream and pathetic attempt to recover the spilled water undermine the superficial narrative of punishment for immoral behaviour. Because the stage representation of Zhu’s wife is centred in her remorse and growing insanity, audience sympathy tends her way, perhaps especially in the modern era.

The second narrative shows more explicitly how the structure of Kunju performance tradition encouraged an onstage articulation of history highly divergent from, and perhaps even subversive of, official accounts.

3.1 The Brief Life of Palace Maiden Fei, and the Briefer Records Pertaining to it

There may once have been a palace maiden whose family name was Fei 费. Supposing that she ever lived, then it is in the late spring of 1644 that she died. The occasion for her grand debut in history was the brutal arrival of Li Zicheng 李自成 (1606-1644) and his rebel armies in the imperial capital of Beijing, driving the Chongzhen 崇祯 emperor (reign 1627-1644) and several of his ministers to suicide. If we adopt the rather categorical manner of history textbooks, this event marks the end of the last Han Chinese dynasty.

Besides the emperor and the loyal eunuch who hanged himself at his side on Meishan 魏山,73 hundreds of palace maidens also ended their lives rather than fall victim

to Li Zicheng's "bandit" army, as the History of the Ming informs us offhandedly.

This is where the palace maiden Fei is to be found, arriving just in time for her death, tucked in among the panoply of miserable fates set down in the History of the Ming's biographies of Chongzhen-era empresses and concubines.

Given the obscurity of this figure in Western scholarship or even for the Chinese reader today, the entire Fei palace maiden episode from the History of the Ming, is included here to provide a starting point for the reader.

When the bandits entered the palace, a palace maiden of the Wei family shouted loudly, 'We are bound to be dishonoured by the bandits; those who have the will to act should do so as soon as possible.' Then she threw herself to her death in the imperial moat, and in a moment one or two hundred [other palace maidens] were dead. A palace maiden named Fei, aged sixteen, threw herself in a dry well. When the bandits pulled her out, they were struck by her beauty and quarrelled over her. The palace maiden said, "I am the eldest princess." The crowd of thieves did not dare force her, and took her to Li Zicheng. Li Zicheng commanded a eunuch to examine her, and he said that she was not a princess. Li then bestowed her upon a division commandant by the name of Luo. Fei spoke again to Luo, "I am indeed of royal blood, and my honour may not be easily compromised. You must choose a propitious time for the ceremony." Luo was pleased, and provided wine for great merriment. Fei had a sharp blade concealed in her bosom. As soon as Luo was drunk, she severed his throat, killing him on the spot. Astonished at herself, she said, "I am but a feeble female, and it is enough for me to have killed a bandit commander." Then she cut her own throat. When Li Zicheng heard this he was greatly astonished, and ordered that she be properly buried.74

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74 Zhang Tingyu et al., eds. Ming shi (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 7.114.3545.
References to the palace maiden Fei are also made in a few early Qing histories of the Li Zicheng rebellions, including accounts from the pen of Ming-Qing transition literati such as Mao Qiling 毛奇齡 (1623-1716) and Peng Sunyi 彭孙贻 (1615-1673). 75 Probably the most extensive treatment of Fei as a historical figure was written by Lu Ciyun 陸次云 (fl. 1680), who dedicated a biographic essay to her. Lu’s account elaborates on Fei’s patriotic motivation, recounting her repeated anxious requests to the loyal eunuch Wang Cheng’en 王承恩 (d. 1644) for news of the rebellion. Unlike the History of the Ming account, where her act of revenge appears crafty but spontaneous, Lu’s palace maiden is consistently forging plans for the revenge she foresees becoming necessary once the dynasty has fallen. Her speech and action foreshadow her ultimate actions, and the build-up to her sacrifice augments her virtue (since it is premeditated rather than serendipitous) while deriving suspense from this new "back-story".

“Palace maiden Fei was sixteen years old. It is not known where she was from. She was beautiful in appearance and virtuous in deed, and so Emperor Huaizong [the Chongzhen Emperor] told Empress Zhou to place Fei in the service of the princess. The princess was extremely fond of her. When the palace maiden saw that the Emperor was perturbed at how the bandit insurrection was flourishing, she too was overwhelmed by anxiety every time. Emperor Huaizong’s personal servant was Wang Cheng’en. The palace maiden privately asked him for news of the bandits. Cheng’en answered, ‘You live deep in the palace, what use is it for you to know these things?’ The palace maiden said, ‘Living deep in the palace, one must not fail to know [these things] in order to plan one’s stratagems.’ Cheng’en was astonished at this. The more the bandits flourished, the more deeply the Emperor was perturbed, and the more often the palace maiden made inquiries of Cheng’en. Cheng’en said, ‘Why do you never inquire of others, but inquire only so often of me?’ The palace maiden answered, ‘The people are all dissolute. Who has the sovereign and the state at heart? It seems to me that you are loyal, and so I ask you.’ Cheng’en was exceedingly astonished at this, and said, ‘You say that you plan a stratagem. How do you plan to enact it?’ The palace maiden said, ‘If things go badly, the only stratagem is death. But this death

75 Peng Sunyi, Pingkou zhi (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1984), 207-208; Mao Qiling, Xiheji (Siku quanshu wenyuange, electronic version), 23.19.
cannot be in vain.’ Cheng’en said, ‘The ancients said, “If someone living dies, and then [that] dead [person] returns to life, [to find that those yet] living have not betrayed their promise, then they can be called trustworthy.” Are you able to do this?’ The palace maiden said, “One day you will be able to verify that I can.”

The capital falls to Li Zicheng. The emperor, empresses, concubines, Wang Cheng’en and other palace maidens kill themselves. She switches clothes at the palace maiden’s suggestion. Discovered in an abandoned well and taken before Li Zicheng, he covets her for himself but senses that misfortune would befall him. Instead, he grants her to Luo.

“Luo was extremely pleased. The palace maiden said, ‘I dare not disobey the Dashing King [Li Zicheng]’s command! Yet, since I am the child of the emperor, you must offer sacrifices to the departed emperor. In this comply with my wishes.’ Luo was even happier, and complied with her request. Once the weeping palace maiden had bade the departed emperor farewell, she offered sacrifice to Cheng’en, saying, ‘Lord Wang [Cheng’en]! Lord Wang! Can you return to life to verify my words? I will now carry out the words by which my whole life has been led.’ All the bandits made merry to congratulate Luo, and Luo got extremely intoxicated. Returning inside, the palace maiden had prepared the cups of wine for the tonglao [meat-eating] ceremony. Then she also had Luo drink from a great pitcher. Luo said, ‘I ought to thank the Dashing King for giving you to me, but I have carelessly neglected it. I am ashamed that he will think me uncultured.’ The palace maiden answered, ‘That’s no trouble! I can do it. Why don’t you sleep, and I’ll carry your message?’ Luo was even gladder, and lay down to sleep without a care, snoring like thunder. The palace maiden sent off the servant girls, lighted the lamp and sat alone. Hearing the pipe fall silent outside, she took her dagger with her fine fingers, and glared at the bandit Luo’s throat before stabbing it powerfully. Luo’s throat was cut. Injured, he leapt up, now falling, now leaping, finally falling, rigid. Many of the bandits were alarmed, and broke down the door
to save him, but it was too late. The lamp still shone brilliantly, and they all saw
the palace maiden sitting in silence, beautifully attired and sitting upright.
Looking carefully, they saw that her beautiful neck was already cut and that she
was dead. When Zicheng heard this, he gasped in fright and had her buried with
ceremony. And so they assumed the princess was already dead, and did not
pursue her.

All of Lu’s details accentuate the drama of the situation, the magnitude or
motivation of her sacrifice. The device of having Fei dress in her mistress’ clothes is both
explicitly mentioned (as it is not in the History of the Ming) and rendered as a useful act
(since Li Zicheng now presumes that the Changping princess 长平公主 (c.1630-1646) is
dead, and does not continue his search for her).76 The number of palace maidens who kill
themselves has risen to “over three hundred” 盈三百, and the victim is identified as a
particularly able commander, whose martial feats are “of the first order” 首功. Fei
demands of Luo not only a wedding banquet but also a ritual sacrifice to her own father

76 Two relevant sections of Lu’s biography are translated here for reference.

(Beijing: Shumu wenxian chubanshe, 1987), 416-418. The idea that Chongzhen’s
daughter, the Changping Princess, has escaped doom has remained a popular story,
though the palace maiden is not typically invoked. Probably the story is best known
through the Cantonese opera treatment by Tang Disheng 唐涤生 (1917-1959), The
Emperor’s Daughter 帝女花.
and Wang Cheng'en. Then, once she has exacted her revenge, the narrative switches to
the perspective of those who discover her, her posture in death so dignified that it
necessitates a second look to establish that she is dead:

During the upheaval of the Jiashen year [1644], the Palace Maiden Fei climbed
out of the well to meet the bandits, and lied, "I am the Changping Princess," in
order to bestow herself upon [Li] Zicheng. Zicheng asked, "What is your title,
princess?" She said, "It is Zhaoren." "And your name?" She did not answer. An
old palace servant was asked to identify her, and he said that it was not [the
princess]. She was bestowed upon a [soldier by the name of] Luo. Luo took her
back in his carriage and was about to wed her, when Fei lied again, saying
"Though I am a palace maiden, I am actually the daughter of a great family. For
today’s wedding, general, could you invite some esteemed guests for a celebration?
Luo was very pleased, and invited several distinguished commanders. They drank
until intoxicated. Fei had a sharp blade concealed. She called Luo inside, and
crushed [cut?] his throat. Coming outside to serve the wine, she stabbed two
commanders in succession, then cut her own throat. On the point of death, she
cried, "The reason I could not kill Zicheng is Heaven!" The old palace servant
said, "Fei served in the Zhaoren palace. Because the second princess as a child
had no title and was known as the Zhaoren Princess, Fei gave the name of the
princess as Zhaoren. Since the Changping Princess’ name was Huichuo, and her
title was the Changping Princess, how could it be that Fei forgot this at the
moment?

Mao’s account, though shorter, similarly includes details which reinforce Fei’s
extraordinary virtue: for instance, she has previously insisted that Luo invite comrades-at-
arms to the wedding banquet, and dispatches two of these as well. Then she expresses
regret that she has eliminated such unimportant figures rather than Li Zicheng himself,
attributing this outcome to Heaven.\textsuperscript{77} Mao’s and Lu’s accounts present a more elaborate palace maiden story, which already contains some of the same elements—like the exchange of clothing and Fei’s regret at the limits of her revenge—that are integral to the theatrical version.

Other historical materials are scant. Lu Ciyun specifically remarks that Fei’s place of origin is unknown, but local tradition in Tianjin associates her with a Fei clan that arrived from Jiaxing 嘉兴 towards the beginning of the Ming Dynasty. A paifang honouring the “Residence of the Ming Dynasty Palace Maiden Fei” stood at the entrance to the Great Fei Family hutong in Tianjin until the 1950s, and a 1946 poem by Zhang Boling 张伯苓 (1876-1951) references Fei as a famous martyr from Tianjin. However, though Fei was clearly strongly identified with Tianjin in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the connection between this family and the Fei palace maiden is probably opportunistic.\textsuperscript{78}

3.2 From Scene to Playlet: Tieguan’s Paintings and the Zhezixi Form

In fact, Fei may not be a historical figure at all. One reason to suppose this is her relatively early appearance in fictional and dramatic accounts. The lost chuanqi script for Tieguan’s Paintings 铁冠图, which included “Slaying the Tiger” 刺虎, is thought to date

\textsuperscript{77} Mao Qiling, Xihe ji, 23.19.
\textsuperscript{78} This Fei clan produced a variety of prominent military officials in Tianjin, including several guard commanders. One local historian has come to the conclusion, after reviewing gazetteers, that the association was a product of a supposed genealogical connection discovered in the Jiaqing or Daoguang reigns. Shen Yi, “Tianjin lienü jianzheng Daming wangchao xiemu,” in Tianjin xijie yu yanxing, ed. Zhang Jianxing. (Tianjin: Tianjin guji chubanshe, 2004), 270-275.
from the Shunzhi period (1644-61), while recent scholarship suggests that a fifty-
chapter novel entitled *The Complete Story of Tieguan's Paintings* 铁冠图全传, which
also featured Fei, was written between 1664 and 1667, during the Kangxi reign. This
would place Fei's earliest appearances in theatre and fiction over half a century before
completion of the draft of the *History of the Ming*. Added to the similarities between
“Slaying the Tiger” onstage and the accounts by Mao and Lu, as well as the fact that the
incident receives no mention in contemporary accounts of the Li Zicheng rebellion such
as the *Transmitted Record of the Jiashen Year* 甲申传信录 or *Events of the Jiashen Year*
甲申纪事, it would seem plausible to suppose that the palace maiden has her origins in
folk or unofficial history before moving from that realm into fiction, theatre and historical
chronicle.

Both the novel and the play of *Tieguan's Paintings* relate events of the Li Zicheng
rebellion from the perspective of the Chongzhen emperor and a certain standard corpus of
military and martial heroes of the period. The usual villainous excesses appear in the
form of eunuch venality and mandarin moral weakness. Following the convention of

81 Shen Yi notes that Mao Qiling, also worked on the *History of the Ming*. This is, of
course, far from convincing proof that Mao inserted her into the official accounts. Shen
Yi,"Tianjin lienü jianzheng Daming wangchao xiemu," 271. Though compilation began
as early 1645, the *Draft for the History of the Ming* was only completed in 1723, and the
final version of the *History of the Ming* printed in 1739. Wolfgang Franke, "Historical
Writing During the Ming," in *Cambridge History of China, Volume 7*, ed. Frederick W.
82 The latter work should not be confused with the collection of stories by the same name,
edited by Feng Menglong 冯梦龙 (1574-1646).
83 The other obvious fictional treatment of these historical events is of course *The Peach Blossom Fan*, but this takes place mostly in the Jiangnan region and deals primarily with
the day, both novel and play are episodic, held together by the logic of the rise and
demise of the Li Zicheng rebellion. The title of script and novel is drawn from a framing
device about prophetic paintings which foretell the end of the Ming Dynasty and the
ultimate failure of Li Zicheng to establish the Shun 顺 Dynasty. For the modern reader,
perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the novel is how it fashions a coarse justification for
the passing of power from late Ming (over Li Zicheng) to the Qing, legitimised by
inevitable fate in the person of the early Ming Taoist mystic Tieguan.84

As for the scenes known in the theatre world today as Tieguan’s Paintings, its
origins are to be found in three different scripts. The development of the narrative helps
to illustrate certain features about attitudes in traditional Chinese theatre towards script
and authorship. While chuanqi plays were invariably written as a series of chu (scenes),
most performances have consisted of individual scenes, known in performance as zhezixi 折子戏 (sometimes referred to as “highlights”) since the eighteenth century.85 This
practice means that only certain scenes from any given play have been maintained in the
performance tradition, a tendency exacerbated in more recent history by the many

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84 The Tieguan in question is a Taoist master known as Tieguan Daoren 铁管道人 (fl. 1362-1370), who impressed Zhu Yuanzhang with his prophetic capacities. According to
the novel, his birth name was Zhang Chong 张冲, and his zi Zihua 子华. (Qi and Ouyang, Zhongguo lishi xiaoshuo tongshi, (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000), 209-213. The authors
conclude that Tieguan’s Paintings is by far the most literary example.
85 Lu Eting, Kunju yanchu shigao, (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1980), 170-
175. Since the establishment of the PRC, “full” plays 全本戏 have once again become
popular. They do not, however, reflect the actual structure of original scripts or
performance traditions, but, to varying degrees, abridgement, adaptation, invention and
segucing.
interruptions or stagnant periods in Kunju performance and education during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, since this decline saw the decimation of the repertoire and the near-extinction of the art form on at least two separate occasions. Consequently, most Kunju scenes might have been written as autonomous parts of a coherent if highly episodic whole, but they have not usually operated as such for over two hundred years. Since the rise of the zhezixi, they can be best understood in terms of the theatre as independent units, bearing dramatically incidental allusions and connections to other scenes. In the terms of an audience member or an actor, then, “Slaying the Tiger” does not occur as the thirty-first scene of forty-four, but rather as an entire story in and of itself.

The evolution from script to performance tradition is often complex, and over time additions and excisions have been made. While there are scenes in the repertoire which are credited to no author, the majority of Kunju scenes can easily be traced to a literati script, the wenben 文本. In some cases, their evolution can be traced through collections of scenes. With many scripts, including “Slaying the Tiger”, the literati version and the script used for performance today differ only minimally. Inclusion, with little differences, in intermediate libretto collections such as A Patched Cloak of White Fur (mid 18th Century) and The Collected Scripts of the Qing Mongol Prince Che’s

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86 This is especially true of a class of scenes known as shiju 时剧, the scripts of which are usually less literary and are often shared between different genres of Chinese opera. The classic example of shiju is “Pining for the Secular World” 思凡. For a discussion of the origin of this scene in particular and an example of how shiju arose see Andrea Goldman, “The Nun Who Wouldn’t Be: Representations of Female Desire in Two Performance Genres of ‘Si Fan,’” Late Imperial China 22, no. 1 (June 2001): 71-138.
87 Qian Decang, comp. Zhuibaigiu (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), 61-68.
Residence 蔣蒙古午王府藏曲本 (early 19th Century)\(^{88}\) show a continuous performance tradition.

Several scenes in the current Kunju repertoire are considered to belong to Tieguan's Paintings, but the original script is not extant. Its content, however, is sketched in General Catalogue of Opera Abstracts cur海总目提要, an early Qing work.\(^{89}\) Like the novel, the script dealt with the rise and fall of the Li Zicheng rebellion, through the framing device of the Taoist master Tieguan. Even in this early version, the story of Fei is included (presented in the General Catalogue much as it was in the History of the Ming). In the Kangxi period, Citations for Loyalty 表忠记 appeared, written by Cao Yin 曹寅 (1658-1712), a prominent textile commissioner and salt censor, remembered today also as the grandfather of Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (1715?-1763).\(^{90}\) Citations for Loyalty is predicated not on the Tieguan story, but on an autobiographical account by Bian Dashou 边大绶 (fl. 1642), the magistrate of Li Zicheng's native place, Mizhi County 米脂县.

The play recounts how Bian despoiled the family graves of Li Zicheng for geomantic

\(^{89}\) Wu Xinlei, "Kunqu jumu fawei," 94-97. Huang Wenyang, comp. Huang Wenyang. Quhai zongmu tiyao, (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1959), 3.33.1559-1565. This book was thought to have been compiled by Huang Wenyang (b. 1736), but recent work suggests this is a misattribution. The error occurred because of confusion with a work of Huang’s called quhai mu 曲海目 (Opera Catalogue), and some think that it is a Kangxi-era work. See Wang Longlin. “Qingdai xiqu muluxue de shiji jiangou,” Xinjiang da xue xuebao 33, No. 3 (2005): 126-128.
\(^{90}\) See Jonathan D. Spence, Ts'ao Yin and the K'ang-his Emperor: Bondservant and Master (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966) for a detailed biography of Cao Yin and his relationship to the Kangxi Emperor.
purposes, thereby bringing about his defeat. The plot of this script, too, is attested only through the summary in the General Catalogue of Opera Abstracts and once again, Fei’s story is related in similar terms. The editor of the catalogue inserted a particular note to the effect that Fei’s victim was Luo, not the hapless “Tiger” assassinated in the stage version. The fact that this annotation had to be made suggests that at the time of the catalogue’s compilation, a legend regarding the slaying of the Tiger General had arisen, and was probably being depicted onstage.

Finally, in the Qianlong reign (1736-1795), Out of the Tiger’s Jaws 虎口余生 appeared, credited to the pseudonym Yiminwaishi 遗民外史 (Unofficial History of the [Ming] Loyalists). A hand-copied script was reprinted in 1986. It has been proposed that this is the same work as Citations of Loyalty—and indeed, Out of the Tiger’s Jaws is that play’s alternate name. Generally, however, the two plays are held to be separate pieces.

Thus, two scenes both considered to belong to Tieguan’s Paintings may in fact bear very different pedigrees. Fei’s revenge scene existed in some manner in the lost Shunzhi Tieguantu, and was passed down through Citations of Loyalty before achieving its more elaborate form in Out of the Tiger’s Jaws (where Luo has been transformed into the more important “Tiger”). Other scenes, such as the double scene “Striking the Bell, Splitting the Court” 撞钟分宫 do not appear in Out of the Tiger’s Jaws, and may have

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93 One reason to assume that they are separate pieces is that Out of the Tiger’s Jaw contains 44 scenes, while records indicate that Citations of Loyalty was 50 scenes long. Xu Peijun et al., Zhongguo gudian mingju jianshang cidian (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), 774.
evolved from scenes of the Shunzhi *Tieguantu* script that were not picked up in *Citations of Loyalty*, though they survived in the stage tradition. By the time these scenes were included in the many libretto collections of the mid-to-late Qing, the distinctions had been obfuscated, and all scenes are listed as belonging simply to *Tieguan's Paintings*.95

Consequently, the “play” treated in the theatre world today as *Tieguan’s Paintings* consists actually of a series of heterogeneous scenes that share the same time period and same universe of historical events. They do not have in common the same era of creation, authorship, or narrative arc, and only some characters are shared. The “play” now known as *Tieguan’s Paintings* is in fact more of a hodgepodge than a single script or narrative.

As this exercise in script genealogies shows, the isolation of *zhezixi* from their original narrative context, in tandem with a subsequent process of attrition whereby many, usually the vast majority, of the surrounding scenes have been lost, has permanently reoriented narratives in the *Kunju* tradition. The *chu* structure of *chuanqi* involves inclusion of extended scenes which focus on stories that are, in the grand scheme of the play, no more than subplots. Over a single script, an enormous number of characters are introduced and problems presented and resolved. When performed individually, these scenes have been severed from their immediate context. More importantly, over the long term the historical context itself, once automatically familiar, has vanished from the minds of actors and audiences. The scenes stand alone. It is perhaps telling that Western observers of *zhezixi* have sometimes used the term “playlet”, probably not always aware

94 Wu Xinlei, "Kunqu jumu fawei," 96.
that these scenes once belonged to a larger whole. The evolution of performance practice
in the Kunju tradition represents a transition from “scene” to “playlet”.

This development made the crucial element for retention of a scene such as
“Slaying the Tiger” not its relation to the grand historical narrative of Tieguan’s
Paintings, but its theatricality. Given the length of the play (Out of the Tiger’s Jaws is
forty-four scenes long) this has the effect of allowing every character and every
subplot—be they ever-so-minor in the full script—a moment, often forty minutes long, of
full attention. The separate presentation of minor incidents allowed actors to invest
certain scenes and roles with an importance disproportionate to their status outside the
theatre world. In the context of Out of the Tiger’s Jaws, "Slaying the Villain" (as it
is called in the script) is not a central moment; and Fei otherwise appears only briefly, in
the preceding scene. But it is this scene, rather than the Bian Dashou scenes that provide
the narrative structure, or the stories involving the emperor, or those centred on Li
Zicheng, which has enjoyed the most illustrious career. Through separation from the
historical context which identified her as an insignificant figure, the palace-maiden could
upstage both the rebel and monarch. To identify what ensured the theatrical durability of
the character, we should first consider the narrative thrust.

3.3 The Palace Maiden Onstage

Violent percussion begins to sound; unrest. The palace maiden Fei Zhen’e 费贞娥
enters, having exchanged her own attire for that of her mistress to dupe the Tiger

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96 No historical records provide her with a given name. In all scripts, however, she calls
General. She vows to exact revenge on the dastardly rebels. There is nothing cursory about the establishment of motives, and her opening monologue, on an otherwise empty stage, continues uninterrupted for fifteen minutes.

From her first appearance, the dual nature of Fei Zhen'e's role is apparent: “I gnash my teeth and stain my carmine lips. Holding back tears, I apply the powder.” 倚切着齿点绛唇，揺着泪施脂粉。97 Alone onstage, we see her as a woman torn with rage and sorrow, preparing herself feverishly for seduction, vengeance and suicide. She recounts how she has been granted in marriage to Li Zicheng’s brother, The Tiger, and swears that she will prove that “the Ming Dynasty had a woman of distinction!” 大明朝有个女佳人!98 Perhaps the most telling indication of her state of mind are the stabbing motions she inflicts on the empty ground in anticipation of her bridegroom’s arrival. This is one of the troubling elements of the performance: hers is a consuming hate that borders on derangement. When she hears the fanfare of his arrival, she exits and he takes the stage.

Yizhihu, a rather affable painted face 花脸 role, appears with his soldiers. This character is known in theatre tradition variously as Li Guo 李过 or Li Gu 李固, with Second Great King 二大王 being the appellation used for him by his soldiers and the palace maidens. Fei herself addresses him as General. Historically, The Tiger was Li

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97 Yiminwaishi, Hukou yusheng (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), 47. The Patched Cloak of White Fur and Chewangfu scores include almost exactly the same script, as do modern scripts such as the Zhenfei Scores 振飞曲谱.
98 Yiminwaishi, Hukou yusheng, 47.
Zicheng’s nephew, known variously as Li Guo, Li Jin 李锦, Li Xiu 李绣 and Li Zhixin 李志心. However, no historical sources associate him with the Fei palace maiden, and his death occurred well after that of Li Zicheng, in 1645. Clearly, the replacement of an all but anonymous foot-soldier in the prose texts by a “tiger” closely related to Li Zicheng is designed to magnify the otherwise very modest extent of Fei’s revenge against the “bandits”.

The general returns to the encampment after much carousing in celebration of the gift his brother has bestowed on him in the form of this princess. Servant girls inform him that she is waiting for him. She re-enters, and they exchange ceremonious greetings. The Tiger proposes that they retire, but Fei insists that their wedding be properly celebrated with wine. Over his protests, she convinces him to drink bowl after bowl of liquor, all the while herself cleverly abstaining. Then, they proceed to the nuptial chambers, where she finds excuses for him to send the servant girls away and remove his armour.

FEI: General, why are you still wearing your armour, even today?
TIGER: I must always guard my imperial brother in his tent and protect him from enemy agents. I must never remove my armour, day or night.
FEI: But having secured the realm, what enemies could trouble you? Tonight is the beginning of everlasting matrimonial bliss. How can you wear this inauspicious attire?
TIGER: You are right. I will take off my armour and allow my body a respite. Let me call the maidservants to remove my armour.
FEI: Don’t bother calling them. It is my duty as wife to help you off with it personally."

[费贞娥] 将军今夜为何还穿此铠甲？
[一只虎] 不满公主说，一向在黄兄帐中护卫，提防奸细，日夜不能卸甲。

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100 Yiminwaishi, Hukou yusheng, 48.
Very sleepy, he presses her to join him in bed, but she explains that she will arrive as soon as she has removed her adornments. He lies down and falls into inebriated sleep immediately, a fact she ascertains for herself by softly calling his name. Now she strips off her costume and reveals the ordinary adornments of a zhengdan. Her first attack with a dagger injures him and he fights back, kicking away her weapon. She takes hold of his own sword before he can reach it, and runs him through.

This is the crucial moment of the scene. Her head and torso are parallel to the ground as she lunges out at him, the sword extending straight from her hand and striking the standing man at a right angle, in the chest, singing “The steely blade has run him through, the grievance is avenged.” At this instant the wedding night has culminated in death, eros has revealed itself as thanatos, a humble palace maiden has worked herself into an instrument of grim retribution. The Tiger General stands motionless for a moment, gasps and staggers, then falls straight-backed to the ground, his hand clutching the sword. She twists the sword in the dead man’s wound, frenzied by her hate.

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101 Yiminwaishi, Hukou yusheng, 49.
Presently horrified servant girls arrive. She reveals her true identity to them, laments (as in Mao's account) that though she was "of great potential, small use" 大材小用 was made of her, and slits her own throat.

3.4 To Kill or Be Killed: the Fourth dan

Besides the story told on stage, there are formal elements which show the duality of Fei Zhen'e's role and situate her as a representative of a particular stage tradition. Her adherence to Kunju performance convention trumps historical fact.

Kunju roles divide into five types and many more subdivisions. While dan encompasses practically all female roles, no single performer plays the full range: a laodan 老旦 (older dan, typically mothers) performer, for instance, usually plays no other types. Though fine divisions vary, there are generally considered to be seven types of dan, distinguished by a combination of age, social rank and morality. In the division set forth by the "Chuan"-generation performer Zhou Chuanying 周传瑛 (1912-1988), zheng 正 is for married (younger) women, liu 六 for serving girls, wu 五 (or guimen 闺门) for high-

102 Yiminwaishi, Hukou yusheng, 50.
103 It is important to distinguish here between script and performance convention. The cishadan is a designation arising from theatre tradition. Chuanqi scripts record no such thing as a cishadan. The palace maiden Fei in hukou yusheng is written for a xiaodan "small" dan, a designation for which, in turn, the Kunju stage tradition has no direct equivalent.
status romantic heroines, *tie* 贴 for flighty young *girls*, *lao* for older ladies and *zuo* 作 for ugly women (often *chou* 妆 performers cross-dressing).^{104}

Fei Zhen’e belongs to a very small category of roles known as the fourth *dan* 四旦 or piercing-or-killing *cishadan* 刺杀旦, who mix the qualities of other roles—*guimen* when she is pretending to be the gracious princess, elements of *zheng* in her bitter lamentation, *wudan* skills in the final struggle. Because of the difficulty of balancing these requirements in a single performer, the *cishadan* roles are featured in a small category of bravura scenes, and today are often a showcase of a particular *dan* performer’s versatility. Typically, these roles are the signature scenes of young *dan*—it is now rare for an older *guimen* or *zhengdan* to retain the physical agility for such a scene, just as a specialised *wudan* now seldom has the voice to carry her through such a musically demanding piece.

The category of *cishadan* is made up of six roles, divided into three “piercing” and three “killing”. The three “piercing” roles are virtuous assassins (besides Fei Zhen’e, they are Wu Feixia 邬飞霞 from *Joy of the Fisherman’s Family* 渔家乐 and the concubine Xueyan 雪艳 from *A Handful of Snow* 一捧雪), while the three “killing” roles are *Water Margin* 水浒传 women, though from different dramatic adaptations, who have compromised their honour and pay for it with their deaths (Pan Jinlian 潘金莲, Pan Qiaoyun 潘巧云 and Yan Poxi 阮婆惜).

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^{104} It should be noted here that Zhou does not mention *wudan* 武旦—warrior females. The category is considered to be imported from *Jingju*, and thus sometimes does not figure in traditional divisions. Zhou Chuanying, *Kunju shengya liushi nian*, (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1988), 121-4.
Unlike other role types, the tie that binds the piercing to the killing *dan* is performance requirements. However, the combination of elements of other *dan* subtypes signals a crucial element: all six *cishadan* roles are pretending to be something they are not. Fei Zhen'e has assumed the identity of a craven princess who would prefer marriage to a peasant over a virtuous death. Wu Feixia impersonates a dancer in order to gain entry into the residence of her father's murderer. Xueyan, a concubine, feigns agreement to a marriage with the man who has framed her husband; once alone, she kills him. As for the killing roles: all three protest their virtue, though all have been carrying on illicit affairs. The virtuous must pretend moral craveness to achieve their revenges; the morally corrupt feign virtue in order to forestall the violence which will be done to them by or on behalf of their jealous husbands.

Naturally, this body of material was hardly enough to create a particular corps of performers. Instead, the roles have traditionally been drawn from performers otherwise known for their *zheng*, *guimen* or *wu* (martial) *dan* roles. Zhou Chuanying recounts that in "Chuan-era performances of The Fisherman’s Joy and A Handful of Snow, the *guimen dan* actor Zhang Chuanfang 张传芳 (1911-83) would perform any of Xueyan or Wu Feixia's scenes except the piercing scenes ("piercing Tang" and "piercing Liang", respectively), in which he would be replaced by the *wu* and *cisha* actor Liu Chuanheng 刘传衡 (1908-86).105

Given the relatively late date of its compilation compared to theatrical and fictional representations, we might consider that Fei’s narrative derived primarily as an expression of Ming loyalty performed according to the conventions of the *cishadan* role

or analogous traditions in less well-documented xiqu genres). The visceral nature of the scene, with its cathartic revenge, must have made compelling viewing as long as the cultural memory of the 1644 conflagration remained strong. Over time, however, the historical specificity of the episode disappeared. By the twentieth century, the performance tradition did not differentiate in historical terms between Wu Feixia, whose story of revenge takes place in the Han Dynasty, and the seventeenth-Century Palace Maiden Fei, effectively telescoping history into a single xiqu time.

3.5 The Lingering Resonance

Today, knowledge of the palace maiden's story appears to be largely limited to Chinese opera circles, but the scene still enjoyed broad recognition in the early twentieth century. This was surely in no small part because it was one of the signature pieces of Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳 (1894-1961), chosen for performance in New York and San Francisco (1930), as well as Moscow and Leningrad (1935).\(^{106}\) The character was sufficiently in vogue that a new Peking opera called Palace Maiden Fei 贵官人 was written in 1937 for another one of the four great dan performers 四大名旦, Cheng Yanqiu 程砚秋 (1904-1958), with the legendary Yu Zhenfei 俞振飞 (1902-1993) playing

the Chongzhen emperor. Nor, in the heyday of xiqu cultural power, was the palace maiden’s symbolic value restricted to the theatre world. In 1935, sympathetic newspaper commentators invoked her as a model of righteous revenge during the trial of Shi Jianqiao 施剑翘 (1906-1979), who in 1935 assassinated the warlord Sun Chuanfang 孙传芳 (1885-1935). In 1940, a patriotic film was made based on Fei’s story, enlisting the character in the Anti-Japanese cause. In 1957 a Hong Kong publication for young readers made her into a symbol of the struggle against Communism, and as late as 1978, also in Hong Kong, she featured in a compendium of short biographies of model women.

But in Mainland China, all of the scenes associated with the Tieguan’s Paintings "play" were banned in the 1950s after a series of restrictions made particularly “feudal” plays undesirable. In the context of the People's Republic, the scenes committed the cardinal sin of valorising imperial loyalty against peasant enemies characterised as “bandits”. Nor could the play easily be edited into acceptability, given that, in Communist historiographical terms, it involved a reactionary member of the proletariat assassinating a revolutionary hero, out of loyalty to her oppressors. Mei Lanfang himself had to give up the role, writing “In the past, I gave little thought to its content…Now that

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107 Hu Jinzhao, Cheng Yangjiu (Changsha: Hunan wenyi chubanshe, 1987), 100. Ma Shaobo, ed. Zhongguo jingju shi. (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1990), 627. The script was penned by well-known Jingju writer Chen Moxiang 陈墨香 (1884-1942).


109 Jubin Hu, Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 126.

110 Ding Miao, Fei gongren cihu (Hong Kong: Yazhou chubanshe, 1957) and Yu Zhenbang, Zhongguo lidai mingnü liezhuang (Taipei: Lianya chubanshe, 1978).

111 Hong Weizhu, Kunqu cidian, 105.
I realise the gross error of glorifying a despot’s lady in waiting, who avenges her master by assassinating the leader of a peasant revolt, I have put it aside without the least feeling of regret.”

A second objection usually went unspoken: the frank sensuality of the scene. A 1951 article about unhealthy children’s comic books 小人书, published in the Northeast Daily 东北日报 and reprinted in the People’s Daily 人民日报, identifies four categories of insalubrious reading, the last three of which are “supernatural martial arts”, “vulgar humour”, and “promoting aggressive wars and lethal weapons.” But Fei Zhen’e Slay the Tiger is classed with the first group of noxious books: the erotic.

Performance of the piece was only revived in 1980, with the relaxing of xiqu controls. On contemporary stage, it has become rare for non-martial Jingju performers to include Kunju scenes in their repertoire, and “Slaying the Tiger” is now performed only by a handful of Kunju companies. To my knowledge, there are three: the Northern Kunju Theatre 北方昆剧院 based in Beijing, the Jiangsu Kunju Theatre 江苏昆剧院 in Nanjing and the Shanghai Kunju Troupe 上海昆剧团. Since the Northern tradition is distinct from Jiangnan, and this particular scene is associated there with the theatre director and dan performer Han Shichang 韩世昌 (1897-1977), the version now performed by Wei Chunrong 魏春荣 (1972-) differs substantially from the Nanjing-Shanghai version. This southern tradition is descended from the “Chuan” generation of

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113 He Guo, “Shenyang shi Beishi qu he Shenhe qu xiaorenshu yuedu qingkuang de diaocha,” Renmin ribao, April 1 1951.
114 Hong Weizhu, Kunqu cidian, 105.
teachers and actors generally credited with rescuing the Kunju repertoire into the modern age. Zhang Chuanfang and Zhu Chuanming 朱传茗 (1921-74) both included “Slaying the Tiger” in their repertoire, and their students include living performers such as Hu Jinfang 湖锦芳 (1949-) in Nanjing and Zhang Jingxian 张静娴 (1947-) or (formerly) Hua Wenyi 华文漪 (1941-) in Shanghai. However, all three of these performers are no longer seen in the role, and only a few students have taken up the scene.
4 Conclusion

Most traditional Chinese theatre is superficially "historical." A small minority of plays take place in the contemporary world, with the remainder of repertoire being scattered widely across historical eras. Even stories dealing primarily in the supernatural tend to have a nominal historical link. The white snake stories, for instance, are usually clearly situated in the Southern Song, and the romance of Zhu Yingtai 祝英台 and Liang Shanbo 梁山伯 set during the Eastern Jin. Sometimes, as with Mengjiangnü 孟姜女 wailing at the Great Wall, the era plays an important role for the narrative. More often the settings are ahistorical; that is, they operate simply as once-upon-a-time even when they are specified.

The two narratives examined in this essay are both overtly historical in the sense that they deal with real biographical or political events. And yet, various versions of the Zhu Maichen narrative have manipulated the story to change the ending, or the motive of suicide. In the case of Fei Zhen’e, the manipulation is similarly overt, with, at the very least, the identity of the victim being augmented in order to increase the importance of the deed.

If the Zhu Maichen narrative’s historical unconcern is most evidently expressed in the manipulation of moral impact over the course of different iteration, the story of the palace maiden demonstrates how Kunju role-type norms and zhezixi structure encouraged a subversion of historical hierarchy. The zhezixi system’s potential to subvert narrative is also noticeable in the Zhu Maichen narrative, where audience sympathy shifts, against the
apparent judgment of the play, towards Cui Shi because of her theatrical centrality. The malleability of narrative iteration is also evident in the Palace Maiden’s case, since she was ultimately deployed in anti-Japanese, anti-Warlord and anti-Communist causes as well.

The Chinese theatre tradition has a temporally and geographically universalising element, which traditionally was more pronounced in popular rather than elite theatre, and in the present day is overwhelmingly the case. While costumes and make-up indicate role-type, assigning elements of gender, status and character, it does not account for time or region—instead all costumes are according to models of the formative Ming Dynasty, with the exception of barbarians, who have special generic conventions. By ignoring the evolution of social norms and treating everything as occurring in the present, a dilemma such as the Zhu Maichen story was resolved unproblematically according to the standards of late Imperial morality, then altered in the Republican and PRC eras in order to conform to new ones. The traditional theatre took era-specific stories and treated them in the ahistorical present, always relevant, always incrementally adapting, never frozen.

Consequently, Chinese historical drama is often paradoxically uninterested in historical events. What catches the imagination is mood and theatrical situation. From *The Palace of Long Life*, with its supernatural framing, to the fantastical biography of Zhuangzi in *The Butterfly Dream*, historical figures serve as characters in familiar parables, to lend legitimacy to a tale, or to introduce pre-existing resonance. The play most obviously concerned with genuine and recent political-historical events is *The Peach Blossom Fan*—and it was essentially absent from the repertoire until its literary reputation revived its fortunes in the late twentieth century.
From 2005 to 2007, I was privileged to be employed at the Jiangsu Kunju Theatre in Nanjing. My vantage point for Chinese theatre has always been primarily as a viewer and enthusiast. Though it is notoriously difficult to describe theatre on the page, my understanding of these plays is deeply informed by the immediacy and urgency with which actors brought these roles to life. If I have concluded that history is not relevant to the narrative in the moment that it is performed, it is not least because I have seen the scenes performed and experienced them as profoundly relevant to the human condition, even though neither actors nor audience are noticeably concerned with historical era or context. Li-ling Hsiao writes about the “conflation of drama and history,” but we must also recall that the suspension of belief is neither permanent nor entire. It seems to me that drama overrides history for the duration of the performance, since theatre “enhances the feeling that events are unfolding in the here and now, even if the events staged are drawn from ancient history.”

Hsiao argues that audiences and readers experienced a direct and specific link to history; on the other hand, the case studies in this essay show anachronistic theatrical approaches and narratives more responsive to shifting attitudes than attached to historical record. Zhezixi structure undermined historical hierarchy; narrative shifts made (and make) no serious attempt to replicate a specific era; and the conventions of traditional Chinese theatre, which costume all characters in Ming Dynasty attire, do not differentiate between historical periods. While Hsiao reads the divergence from official history as consistent with drama becoming “synonymous with historical fact,” (201) it seems likelier that the “authors” (including actors) regarded official history as a useful, but not

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115 Hsiao, The Eternal Present of the Past, 195.
prescriptive, source.

If we turn for a moment to Western theatre, we find a very different relationship to the past. While a new production can re-imagine a Shakespeare play in an Edwardian parlour, or in 1920s Shanghai, or in outer space, the text will remain largely consistent, and cannot stray from a fictionalised but broadly accepted history. Roger Chartier writes that “forms produce meaning, and that even a fixed text is invested with new meaning and being (status) when the physical form through which it is presented for interpretation changes.”6 The ever-changing social context of performance guarantees that new meaning is constantly being created.

In the case of Tieguan’s Paintings, scenes deriving from distinct scripts are ultimately knit together in an assumed shared representation of history; meaning changes by convergence. In the Zhu Maichen narrative, the various streams of Chinese traditional theatre have over time produced not new productions of the same script, but new scripts and adaptations of the same narrative; meaning changes by divergence. In each case, the nominal setting and historical context remain unchanged. Here, new versions are not created with the object of placing the story in a different place or time, but rather to “correct” or “improve” the narration according to changing audience expectations. The setting is ostensibly still the same; and for that matter, none of the markers of time—language, costume, music, movement— that differentiate Western productions are operational, since these are all circumscribed by xiqu convention. Consequently, history is mined as a repository of “stories” (the vocabulary of the theatre) but does not bear on

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the manner of the telling. That is the universal past tense: a suspension of disbelief to
enter the past of the xiqu universe, the conventions of which were never naturalistic nor
imitative of reality, thus flattening time and creating a universal past, creating an art that
is governed by convention but dynamic, conservative but fluid, formal but reactive.
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Besides the sources noted above, my understanding of the scenes has also been informed by other performances in Nanjing 2004-2007, including memorable
performances by Xu Yunxiu 徐云秀, Xu Sijia 徐思佳, Wang Yueli 王悦丽, Zhao Yutao 赵于涛 and Wang Ziyu 王子瑜. As well, excerpts from some of these and other performers are often available online from Chinese streaming websites such as sina.com and tudou.com; that viewing has also influenced and refreshed my recollection of the scenes.