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## Retribution, Revenge, and the Ungrateful Scholar in Early Chinese Southern Drama

### INTRODUCTION

It is only by chance that southern Chinese theater, *nanxi* 南戲, began its known textual career with two revenge love stories, both concerning ungratefulness and retribution. One, *Zhao the Chaste Maid and Second Son Cai* (*Zhao Zhennü Cai Erlang* 趙貞女蔡二郎), has come to us transformed into a dramatic exemplar of duty and filiality, and the other, the story of *Wang Kui* 王魁, has survived in song and short-story form. These pieces formed part of a larger repertoire of plays in the southern tradition that dealt with themes of love, disillusion and vengeance.

Chinese southern theater is said to have begun during the Song dynasty (960–1279). Among the first scholars to mention southern theater as an established style of theater are Zhu Yunming 祝允明 (1460–1526) and the later critic Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521–1593).<sup>1</sup> Although they disagree on the date of the origin of southern theater (one arguing for the early-twelfth century and the other the late-twelfth), they agree on the subject of its first plots: namely, the first stories were *Zhao the Chaste Maid and Second Son Cai* and *Wang Kui*. These stories relate a prevalent motif in early southern drama about an ungrateful scholar who leaves his family and wife to take the imperial examinations and does not return. The theme of the ungrateful scholar is generally coupled together with plays on the desire for freedom of choice in love and placed under the general category of marriage. The latter theme takes up one-third

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<sup>1</sup> Zhu Yunming, “Tuyu” 土語, in *Wei Tan* 猥談; published in *Gujinshuobu congshu* 古今說部叢書 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1991), vol. 3, p. 4a; and Xu Wei, *Nanci xulu* 南詞敘錄, in *Zhongguo xiqu yanjiu yuan*, ed., 中國戲曲研究院 *Zhongguo gudian xiqu lunzhu jicheng* 中國古典戲曲論著集成 (Beijing: Zhongguo xiqu chubanshe, 1980; hereafter *LZJC*), vol. 3, p. 239.

of the totality of extant *nanxi* plays; however, it is the theme of the ungrateful scholar that prevails in popularity.<sup>2</sup> We have no complete extant text of either of the plays, but the stories, indirectly mentioned in other plays and in critical writing, survive in scattered arias collected in anthologies and short stories.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to these two foundational plays, a group of early southern plays on the same theme, as well as later rewritings, reveal the popularity of the theme of the ungrateful scholar in Chinese theater. The plays in question span from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, and whereas some exist in their entirety, others became fragmented, collected in anthologies of songs. As with the foundational plays, some also remain in the short-story form. Most of the titles can also be found mentioned in early bibliographies and perhaps existed previously either performed on the basis of oral traditions or in written form.<sup>4</sup> While

<sup>2</sup> See Qian Nanyang 錢南揚, *Xiwen gailun* 戲文概論 (Taipei: Muduo chubanshe, 1989), pp. 121–25, and Yu Weimin 俞爲民, *Song Yuan nanxi kaolun* 宋元南戲考論 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1994), pp. 39–41. One of the reasons for the popularity of this theme in southern plays may be that the ratio of scholars from the south taking the exams was very large. See Benjamin A. Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Taipei: SMC Publishing Inc., 2000), pp. 88–97. Elman also notes that the examination system during the late Yuan and early Ming was not the chief means of official recruitment.

<sup>3</sup> For *Zhao the Chaste Maid*, Xu Wei mentions two lines from a poem by the poet Lu You 陸游 (1125–210), which he mistakenly attributes to the poet Liu Houcun: “After he died, who could control the truth [i.e. his reputation]? The whole village listened to the song ‘*Cai the Second Son* [from *Zhao the Chaste Maid*]’ 死後是非誰管得，滿村聽唱蔡中郎。” See Li Fupo 李復波 and Xiong Chengyu 熊澄宇, eds., *Nanci xulu zhushi* 南詞敘錄注釋 (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1989), pp. 5–14. The catalog in Tao Zongyi’s 陶宗儀 (1316–1403) *Nancun Chuogenglu* 南村輟耕錄 mentions the play *Cai Bojie*; Tao, *Nancun Chuogenglu* (SBCK edn., Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1981), vol. 30, p. 204. The extant arias of *Wang Kui* have been collected in Qian Nanyang, ed., *Song Yuan xiwen jiyi* 宋元戲文輯佚 (Shanghai: Shanghai gudian wenxue chubanshe, 1956), pp. 36–40. A synopsis of the play exists in a collection of short stories, *Shier xiaominglu shiyi* 侍兒小名錄拾遺, by the Song-era scholar Zhang Bangji 張邦畿, in *Biji xiaoshuo daguan* 筆記小說大觀 (Taipei: Xinju shuju, 1985), vol. 38, pp. 353–54. There is also a short-story version collected in *Xiaoshuo chuanqi* 小說傳奇, a collection of short stories dated 1610, in Lu Gong 路工 and Tan Tian 譚天, eds., *Guben pinghua xiaoshuo ji* 古本平話小說集 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1999), pp. 63 and 89–94. It also appears in the bibliography of the collection of short stories by Luo Ye 羅燁, *Zuiweng tanlu* 醉翁談錄, ser. 1 (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1958), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in a list of *zaju* playwrights and plays, the Yuan-era *aficionado* Zhong Sicheng 鍾嗣成 mentions *The Tricked Girl Jest with Wind and Moon* (*Zha nizi tiao fengyue* 詐妮子調風月) and attributes it to the playwright Guan Hanqing 關漢卿; *A Boy from a Noble House Opt for the Wrong Career* (*Huanmen zidi cuolishen* 宦門子弟錯立身) appears as attributed to Li Zhifu 李直夫 and later, as a re-write, to Zhao Wenyin 趙文殷; *Wang Kui* as attributed to Shang Zhongxian 尚中賢; and *Joys of Love Turn to Deceit* (*Huanxi yuanjia* 歡喜冤家) to Shen He 沈和. There is an additional play with the title *Wind and Moon, A Gallant Top Graduate Thrice Ungrateful* (*Feng Yue zhuangyuan sanfuxin* 風月狀元三負心), probably on the same subject of the ungrateful scholar; see Zhong Sicheng, *Lugui pu* 錄鬼簿, in *LZJC*, vol. 2, pp. 87–274. Also, included in the table of contents of the thirty-three plays collected in the Ming-era *Great Canon of the Yongle Era* (*Yongle dadian* 永樂大典) are: *Zhang Xie zhuangyuan* 張協狀元; *Jinchai ji* 金鈿記; *Pipa ji* 琵琶記; probably a later version of *Wang Kui* as *Wang Junmin Di-*

they vary in quality and influence, all attempt to exploit the tensions that accompany duty, ambition, and success – tensions that could lead to duplicity, betrayal and revenge. It is the aim of this paper to expose (rather than explore) in this group of texts the social tensions that gave rise to this theme.

#### MALE AMBITION AND FEMININE VIRTUE

The stories, all of which begin with love and end in revenge or retribution, place a premium on female virtue and endurance, while questioning the social disruption that ensues from male ambitions for status and power. The aims of education, the examination system, the misuse of position and power and consequent destabilization of harmonious social relations are all bound up with the young scholar's quest for success and prestige. In the plays, the tension created between male aspirations to power and female virtue generated a social conflict that culminated in divine retribution or female revenge. In the process, the plays disclose the conflicting demands placed on scholars by state and family, showing that while their filial principles remained flawless, their social values were woefully deficient. These plays are a judgment on the inadequate ethical values of scholars and by extension the state's administrative system, its pedagogical approach, and the process by which it selected its administrators. Although southern dramatic convention forces the plays to focus on the two main male and female roles, I would argue that the plays are not specific critiques of individual figures, but use these roles as synecdochic figures – where scholars stand for a failed education system and female characters for orthodox moral values.

The subject-matter of the ungrateful scholar, which may have already existed in the Song, had by the early-Ming era become very popular. The connoisseur and playwright Shen Jing 沈璟 (1553–1610) playfully listed the famous ungrateful scholar stories of his day together in a poem on the fickleness of love:

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*voices His Wife* (*Wang Junmin xiushu qi* 王俊民休書妻); and *The Tricked Girl* (*Zha nizi* 詐妮子). The table of contents is also listed in Qian, *Song Yuan xiwen jiyi*, pp. 3–4. In the play *A Boy from a Noble House Opts for the Wrong Career*, which is also included in full in *Yongle dadian*, both *Zhang Xie* and *Wang Kui* are mentioned; see Qian Nanyang 錢南揚, *Yongle dadian xiwen sanzong jiaozhu* 永樂大典戲文三種校注 (Taipei: Huazheng shuju, 1990), p. 231. In Xu Wei's list of plays we have (in addition to *Wang Kui* and *Zhao the Chaste Maid*) *Cui Junrui*, *Baitu ji* 白兔記, and *Huanxi yuanjia*; See Xu, *Nanci xulu*, "Song Yuan jupian" 宋元舊篇, in *LZJC*, vol. 3, pp. 250–52.

書生負心	The ungrateful scholar Shuwen,
叔文玩月	enjoyed the moon,
謀害蘭英	and schemed to hurt Lanying.
張葉生榮	Zhang Xie reached his glory,
將貧女頓忘初恩	and suddenly forgot the former favors of Poor- lass.
無情	Heartless,
李勉把韓妻鞭死	Li Mian flogged his wife, Lady Han, to death,
王魁負倡女亡生	and when Wang Kui betrayed [Guiying], the courtesan died.
嘆古今	Alas, in ancient and modern times,
歡喜冤家	the joys of love turn to deceit,
繼著鶯燕爭春	and follow the rivalries of orioles and swallows in spring. <sup>5</sup>

The six stories alluded to in this poem – *Chen Shuwen*, *Top Graduate Zhang Xie*, *Li Mian*, *Wang Kui*, *Joyful Love Turns to Deceit*, and *The Tricked Girl*<sup>6</sup> – all deal with the general theme of the poor but talented scholar whose single aim is to take the imperial examinations. He takes leave of his newly wedded wife and aging parents and goes to the capital, where he passes the examination with high honors and is named Top Graduate. Once he acquires fame and a position, he discards his earlier provincial wife or supportive courtesan for a daughter of the nobility. Thereupon, his former wife (or courtesan) goes to the capital in search of her husband and finds him, only to be disavowed. The denouement of the stories generally seeks justice for the forsaken woman, but justice is carried out by different means, depending on the moral and social category of the victim: if she is a courtesan, she herself seeks revenge; if she is a virtuous wife, she is avenged by heaven. Further, the plays can be roughly divided into two types: those that show the scholar in an immoral light, and generally end in retribution or revenge, and those later (often modified) ones in which there is an attempt to redeem the

<sup>5</sup> Shen Jing 沈璟 (1553–1610), *Shuazi xu* 刷子序, *Nan jiugong shisan diao* 南九宮十三調, *Shanben xiqu congkan* 善本戲曲叢刊, ser. 3 (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1984), vol. 27, pp. 191–92. The last sentence refers to the title of two plays: *Huanxi yuanjia* and *Zha nizi*, also known by the title *Ying yan zhengchun* 鶯燕爭春, the last phrase of the quoted poem. *Huanxi yuanjia* is also the name of a Ming collection of love stories, but more generally refers to the pattern of male-female relationships, which follow seasonal order. They begin with the warm and tender sentiments of spring love, which proceed unsteadily through separation and betrayal in the cool days of autumn, to resentment followed by death and revenge; see Yu, *Song Yuan nanxi kaolun*, pp. 41–42.

<sup>6</sup> This is *Zha nizi* 詐妮子.

scholar for his lack of morality by shifting the causes for his solecism to another figure. To the first category, in which the ungrateful scholar is punished for his actions, belong the two foundational plays mentioned above, as well as *Top Graduate Zhang Xie*, *Li Mian*, *Three Times Ungrateful Chen Shuwen*, and *Cui Junrui Meets Snow at Dusk in Jiangtian*. To the later type, in which he is redeemed, belong *The Lute*, *Burning Incense* and *The Golden Hairpin*. Despite the fragmented nature of the corpus of plays, there is a clear homogeneity to their structure that justifies drawing examples generally from both types.

For *Zhao the Chaste Maid* – perhaps the forerunner of the most popular and influential work of the tradition, *The Lute* – we have only a few sentences from Xu Wei’s notes on southern drama which tell us little about the story but enough to allow for its thematic categorization:<sup>7</sup>

*Zhao the Chaste Maid and Cai the Second Son*. This is the old story of Bojie who abandons his parents, betrays his wife and was killed by a bolt of lightning. It is a coarse work and complete fantasy. It is, in fact, the first play of southern theater (*xiwen*). 趙真女蔡伯喈。即舊伯喈棄親背婦，爲暴雷震死。里俗妄作也。實爲戲文之首。<sup>8</sup>

We do not know what kind of sources Xu Wei had access to, whether his comments were based on original plays and if the play *Zhao the Chaste Maid* and *The Lute* coexisted. But if, as most scholars believe, *The Lute* was based on *Zhao the Chaste Maid*, it becomes clear that by the mid-Ming the story was no longer known as a story of ingratitude and divine retribution, but as an exemplary story of female virtue and endurance.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> There is an aria from the regional play *A Shorter ‘Visit to the Grave’* (*Xiao shangfen* 小上墳), a short witty skit about a forsaken wife that may have been inspired by the early story of *Zhao the Chaste Maid*: “As I was walking, my cheeks full of tears, I thought of Cai Bojie of old. He went to the capital to take the exams. Once he left for the exams, he did not return. His parents froze and starved to death, while Fifth Maiden shoveled earth to build their tombs. When the mound reached three feet tall, from heaven a lute descended. On her back she carried the lute and the portraits of her in-laws, and determined to go to the capital to look for her husband. She reached the capital but he did not recognize her and the virtuous girl marred herself with weeping. Virtuous Fifth Maiden was trampled under horses’ hoofs, and in the end five bolts of lightning fell upon Cai Bojie’s head.” 正走之間淚滿腮，想起了古人蔡伯喈。他上京城去趕考，趕考一去不回來。一雙爹娘凍餓死，五娘抱土壘墳臺。墳臺壘起三尺土，從空降下琵琶來。身背琵琶描容像，心上京找夫郎。找到京城不相認，哭壞了賢惠女裙釵。賢惠五娘遭馬踐，到後來五雷殛頂蔡伯喈。 See *Xiaoshangfen*, in *Beijingshi xiqu biandao weiyuanhui bianji*, ed., *Jingju huibian* 京劇彙編 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1957), vol. 2, pp. 42–50.

<sup>8</sup> Xu, *Nanci Xulu*, in *LZJC*, p. 250. This story is described in a variety of sources with the standard line: “Zhao the Chaste Maid who upheld the three virtues, and in her skirt carried earth to build the tombs.” See Li and Xiong, eds., *Nanci xulu zhushi*, pp. 141–42, which mention the plays *Jinqian ji* 金錢記, *Laosheng'er* 老生兒, and *Tieguai li* 鐵拐李.

<sup>9</sup> Huang Shizhong 黃仕鍾, *Pipa ji yanjiu* 琵琶記研究 (Guangzhou: Guangdong gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996), pp. 46–58. The history of the different editions of *The Lute* is ex-

In the other foundational play, the aspiring scholar Wang Kui, not yet an imperial candidate, meets and marries a courtesan called Jiao Guiying 敎桂英. As Wang Kui is about to leave for the capital, he makes a vow before a temple god swearing never to betray her. But Wang Kui passes the exams and abandons the courtesan to marry Miss Cui, presumably a girl of good family. An anxious Guiying sends someone to the capital with a letter for Wang Kui who, far from asking for forgiveness, chases the emissary from his *yamen*. Guiying then kills herself, after which her soul persecutes Wang Kui until he dies.<sup>10</sup> Like the story of *Zhao the Chaste Maid*, *Wang Kui* was popularly transmitted through other plays as a story of love, rejection and revenge, but unlike *Zhao* where the theme narrowed to revenge, in *Wang Kui* the central theme of the ungrateful scholar prevailed.<sup>11</sup>

The extant arias we have of Wang Kui are sung by four different roles, beginning with the first encounter of the two protagonists, followed by the revelation of emotions, the spring days of love, the moment of parting, and finally his ungratefulness and disavowal. The female role (*dan* 旦) dominates the singing, stressing the courtesan's generous and loving character while emphasizing the ingratitude of the male role (*sheng* 生) Wang Kui. The last concluding aria is sung by the messenger informing Guiying of Wang Kui's rejection, thus deflecting her vengeful intentions and establishing her virtue. The Ming short story on the same theme, on the other hand, greatly elaborates on her suicide and ghostly revenge. These two foundational plays and their variants show the typical structure of early plays in which the immoral scholar, fascinated by position and power, abandons his former wife or courtesan for the daughter of a powerful figure in the capital only to die shortly

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remely complex with a tendency to recover an approximation to the original Yuan text from later Ming and Qing editions, but all remaining versions are datable only to after the Jiaqing reign 1522–66. For a comprehensive study of *Pipa ji* editions and collections of arias, see Jin Yingshu 金英淑, *Pipa ji banben liubian yanjiu* 琵琶記版本流變研究 (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 2003). In this paper I use the edition collated by Qian Nanyang 錢南楊, *Yuanben Pipa ji jiaozhu* 元本琵琶記校注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1980). For a complete translation see Jean Mulligan, *The Lute* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1980.)

<sup>10</sup> The play is incomplete so we do not know the outcome, but according to Zhang Bangji's synopsis, Guiying came back as a spirit to kill him. The play in all probability was later than the story.

<sup>11</sup> Poorlass, in *Zhang Xie zhuangyuan* admonishes Zhang Xie not to betray her like Wang Kui, "Don't imitate Wang Kui, that ingrate, who drove the messenger bearing a letter from the hall. 你莫學王魁薄倖種, 把下書人打離廳 (for hall, 廳)." See Qian, *Yongle*, p. 160. In the play *Huanmen cidi cuolishen* this play is also mentioned as a story of ingratitude. And in *Cui Junrui*, when he is about to leave, Yueniang also advises him not to imitate Wang Kui: "Do not imitate Wang Kui, that ingrate. 莫學王魁負義漢." See Qian, *Song Yuan xiwen jiyi*, p. 131.

thereafter either through revenge or retribution. This basic structure is maintained in all plays with a variety of endings.

Structurally, the ungrateful scholar plays begin at the moment of parting as the hopeful scholar leaves to take the examination, generating tensions of different orders which reflect both the dichotomy between public interests (knowledge and morality) and private interests (status and lineage). From their inception, the plays forewarn us of an imbalance between the demands that government placed upon candidates for civil service and the values they were expected to uphold. The plays focus on the scholar, who is called upon to administer the state and maintain and improve his family's position. Typically, the plays begin with the scholar preparing to leave home after having expressed his great ambition for rank and office and the desire to serve the emperor. It is the occasion for parents to pile up words of caution and advice and for the wife to voice her many protestations against the lures of the city's excitement and female beauties. The scholar reacts with an initial tone of exasperation at the sentimentality of the parting scenes. Take, for instance, an early scene in *Wang Kui*:

Same Tune 前腔 ["Shuang Xichi" 雙鷓鴣]

Second Opening 第二換頭

一心爲利名牽	I am wholeheartedly intent on acquiring prestige and profit,
暫別間不久團圓	so we will part for a while, but in no time we shall be reunited.
嘆許多恩愛	Alas, with all this love and affection
怎不教我埋怨	how can I not bitterly complain?
做狀元	I shall become the top graduate,
掛綠袍	don the green robe
那時回轉	and then return;
何須苦苦長憶念	so what need is there to bitterly long with nostalgia? <sup>12</sup>

And in *Top Graduate Zhang Xie*, as Zhang Xie announces to his parents his wish to leave for the capital to take the exams:

(*Mo speaks*)<sup>13</sup> Their son said: After ten years of mastering the civil and military arts, this year I [finally] get to sell them to the imperial house. I want to change your status in life and requite your

<sup>12</sup> Qian, *Song Yuan xiwen jiyi*, p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> This passage is part of the introductory ballad. The *mo* role is the narrator.



kindness, so why must you weep? 孩兒道：十載學成文武藝，今年貨與王帝家。欲改還門閭，報答雙親，何須下淚？<sup>14</sup>

The imperial examinations were put in place to assist the ruler in government, but they also gave power, social prestige, and wealth to an elite group of exceptional, talented men:

When young, we must seek rank and profit, since rank and profit will not seek out the young. Wenlong, every moment should be treasured. Today the imperial edict is posted in order to recruit capable men, and every real man must make it his goal [to serve the emperor and take the exams.] 少年無非求名利，名利不求少年。文龍寸陰可惜，即日黃榜招賢，大丈夫當爲之志。<sup>15</sup>

While in *Zhang Xie* the scholar expresses his ambition to reciprocate his parent's investment and change the family status, in *The Golden Hairpin* the father presses the son to think beyond the family to his duty towards the state. The plays present the imperial exams as the unquestionably legitimate means of access to power yet at the same time impugn the motivation of scholars, reflecting one aspect of the neo-Confucian view on learning in which true worth was defined by the "degree of one's success in realizing the moral nature that was common to all."<sup>16</sup> According to this view, all things had an inherent natural principle (*li*), a living force that endowed them with their existence (not their morphology) and which could be understood by intelligent minds designed to "investigate things" in order to "extend knowledge." If they applied themselves to it, partially through the study of the classics, they would be able to comprehend it; but because the natural principle of things could never be entirely unraveled, study became a lifelong process. Learning thus referred both to the "moral" principle inherent in all things and to empirical cumulative knowledge of particulars. Neo-Confucians viewed learning primarily as a means to improve one's mind for the sake of individual growth, not for social advancement. These plays, however, clearly stress the opposite. While it is true that the young scholars express a desire to apply their

<sup>14</sup> Qian, *Yongle*, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Jinchai ji*; see Liu Nianzi 劉念茲, ed., *Xuande xieben jinchai ji* 宣德寫本金釵記 (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1981), p. 13. This play was discovered inside the tomb of a scholar in 1975 in Chaozhou, and is dated to 1432. See Chen Liming 陳歷明, "Liu Xibi Jinchai ji de faxian ji qi gaimao" 劉希必金釵記的發現及其概貌, in Liu, ed., *Jinchai ji*, pp. 141-45.

<sup>16</sup> See Peter Bol, "New-Confucianism and Local Society, Twelfth to Sixteenth Century: A Case Study," in Paul Jakov Smith and Richard von Glahn, eds., *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 221 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 2003), p. 249.



knowledge and serve the emperor, this is immediately qualified by the material aspect of their desires, “to sell” one’s abilities in order to acquire rank and profit. The plays describe scholars striving for material prosperity rather than to realize themselves as idealistic moral exemplars of officialdom.

This gap between knowledge and the moral man is highlighted by the contrast between the ambitious young scholar and his virtuous female companion. For instance, in *Top Graduate Zhang Xie*, the indebted scholar marries Poorlass (a *dan* role), a poor girl who has nurtured him back to health. When she returns late after spending a day collecting money for his trip to the capital, he insults and beats her, at which point she protests: “Husband, you are a person in search of success and prestige, you shouldn’t behave like this (旦) 丈夫, 汝是圖功名底人, 莫便恁地做作.”<sup>17</sup> While the implication is of course that education was an instrument of moral reinforcement, it also shows that the scholar’s (material) quest for fame and power was a single-minded aim acquired at the expense of virtuous conduct. Education was not fulfilling its goal, showing that the formative process of this elite group was defective because of the gap between the normative and the instrumental, the moral and ritual codes of behavior and their implementation. In other words, whereas the moral code could perhaps be learned, it was up to scholars to internalize it and make it effective. The dubious use of moral values by scholars and the unfeasibility of the examination system to further instill in the scholar an ethical conscience were both a pedagogical problem and an institutional one, and clearly a cause of social tension. But ultimately, the play’s critique was not an objection to the desire for material comfort, which, in any case is displayed (and accepted) in their pronounced commercialism – with their demand for a product (scholar), investments (parents) and benefits (imperial salary) – but was instead a lament for the absence of a morally strong scholar who could see beyond the immediate familial needs to the greater needs of society.

The other source of tension was related to status and lineage. While scholars’ ambitions and desire for success were understood to be “every man’s aim” and familial hopes to change their social status were contingent upon the son’s accomplishments, the plays also reveal ambivalence within the family represented as a gender-specific conflict where female considerations of lineage are set against masculine ambitions for office. In *The Golden Hairpin*, parents and wife repeatedly warn the

<sup>17</sup> Qian, *Yongle*, p. 106.

scholar not to vie for the daughters of the nobility or squander money in the courtesans' quarters:

Son, I am worried at your departure. You have been married for only three days but must already separate. Do not forget your parents in the front hall or the spiritual debt of husband to wife. And do not hanker after the daughters of the nobility or force your parents to wait by the door longing for you. 孩兒，出去我挂心機，你夫妻三日便分離，記得堂前爹共媽，也須念夫妻恩義，休貪戀丞相人家女兒，休教爹媽倚門望你。<sup>18</sup>

These words express worries of two different orders: on the one hand, the need for caution reveals the dangers and insecurity scholars were prone to on the road to the capital, which could jeopardize both the son's aspirations and the family's hopes for improving their status (*huan menlü*), as well as the continuity of lineage and the family's livelihood; on the other hand, the scholar is warned not to be led astray by the lure of the capital's bustling life and lively women.<sup>19</sup> This is repeated twice again by the scholar's wife, most straightforwardly when she finally sends him off, "Do not covet the simurgh-embroidered curtains and discard me 休要戀鸞幃，莫把奴拋棄."<sup>20</sup> From the outset, the concern expressed in the plays is the family's fear of loss of not just their emblem of hope, but of their life's investment which is set against the scholar's acknowledgement of indebtedness to his parents. Yet, while the dangers of the road pose a real threat to their son's livelihood, the lack of faith expressed by their words of caution about the excitement of the capital underline the mistrust and doubt of the scholar's moral stamina. And indeed, this initial premonition expressed in the family advice (and mistrust) and the realization of the scholar's failings turn into the leitmotif of the play itself. Hereafter, the plays move ahead through antithesis, setting the scholar's ambition against the virtue of the wife or courtesan; his flaws are juxtaposed to her absolute virtue, showing also that virtue could be inborn, and not in fact only acquired through book learning. The problem of inborn versus acquired virtue lurks in the background of these plays, in the necessary contrast between the exemplary women and unethical scholars, but we cannot discern any clear proclivity to either. It is inborn in the virtuous wives and courtesans and understood by scholars who, as we will see, were cognizant of

<sup>18</sup> Liu, *Jinchai ji*, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> See *Zhang Xie*, *Liu Wenlong*, *Chen Shuwen* and *Jinchai ji*. In the case of *Liu Zhiyuan* he is not a scholar, but the desire for fame is the same.

<sup>20</sup> Liu, *Jinchai ji*, p. 19.

ritual and behavioral codes of conduct. Their behavior was a question of choice, even if this choice was conditioned by social norm.

Although cloaked in comedy, gender demands are cleverly argued in *The Golden Hairpin*, drawing on quotations from the classics. In this passage the wife (*dan*) and mother try to dissuade the scholar by means of the Confucian *Analects*, while father and son (*sheng*), relying on the *Classic of Filial Piety*, justify men's duties:

(*Dan speaks*) In vain you have studied the books of Confucius the Sage, and know nothing of propriety and righteousness. (*Sheng speaks*) What do the books say? (*Dan speaks*) Have you not seen in the *Analects* when Confucius says "when one's parents are alive, one should not travel far?" (*Sheng speaks*) Wife, you remember the words from the *Analects*, but do you remember what the *Classic of Filial Piety* says? (*Dan speaks*) What does the *Classic of Filial Piety* say? (*Sheng speaks*) You have to establish yourself and leave a name for later generations in order to make your parents famous; this is the loyalty of the filial [son]. Although I find it hard to leave, when it comes to fame and honor... (旦白) 官人枉讀孔聖之書, 不曉書中禮義. (生白) 書中怎麼說? (旦白) 不見論語中孔子曰, 父母在不遠遊. (生白) 娘子, 你記論語中說, 可記孝經篇說? (旦白) 孝經篇[怎]麼說? (生白) 立身揚名於後世, 已顯父母, 孝之忠也. 情雖難舍, 功名之事...<sup>21</sup>

Mother and daughter-in-law seek to hold the family together and continue the family line, while father and son express a clear desire for status, further emphasizing the dichotomies of gender. From the masculine viewpoint, men should bring honor to the family for posterity; from the female's point of view, they should protect what they already have and account for the family's lineage. Although the contradiction remains unresolved, the scholar leaves, with terrible consequences for the family.

The greatest tension created within the family is reflected in the benefits brought by the daughters of ministers and the scholar's thirst for status and power. The initial fear voiced by the main female roles is justified, as scholars either abandon or are forced to abandon them. It is, however, ironic that the talented scholar and minister's beauty are an imperfect match and the final cause of disruption in these plays. Of the three women that generally appear in all these plays,<sup>22</sup> the most conspicuous is the "husk wife" (*zaokang fu* 糟糠婦), so called because, as first wife, she has endured the earlier hardships and poverty of the

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 15-16. Here it breaks off; characters are missing.

<sup>22</sup> Wife or "husk wife," noble daughter and courtesans.

scholar's earlier struggle. She is also called the "three-day" wife because she is separated from her husband shortly after they have been married. The first wife is described in absolute terms as a paragon of virtuous conduct. Her impeccable filiality toward her parents-in-law, her capacity to endure suffering without complaint and her refusal to remarry after her husband disappears are the most highly praised virtues. Of these three virtues, filiality and chaste widowhood were by the Ming dynasty the highest social standards of honor. Filiality was a virtue to be praised in both men and women, and while in such earlier plays as *Wang Kui* and even *Zhang Xie* it is either assumed or specifically praised, in later plays like *The Lute* and *The Golden Hairpin* a seeming lack of filial devotion (actually caused by a series of foolish mistakes) becomes, by sheer contrast with female virtue, a shortcoming of the main male character.

Once the scholar succeeds, contrasting action moves the plot ahead, where the harsh and rigorous travails of the *dan* are compared with the material well being of the *sheng*, and her determination to uphold virtue set against his weakness of will in refusing office. It is this contraposition between feminine resolve and the male's impotence to act firmly that elevates the female role to her prominent position. When in *The Golden Hairpin* the main female role is asked to remarry by her in-laws, she sternly refuses, displaying a firmness beyond filial duty. However contradictory may be the use of one virtue (filiality) to counter the other (chastity), her resolve here serves only to enhance her chastity.

Ming moralists publicized stories of widows as exemplary, yet while the increased praise and propagation of this particular female virtue in the Ming has been widely studied, sources remain frustratingly silent as to the reason why widow chastity was a virtue in itself and why it prevailed.<sup>23</sup> Yet, I do not discard the possibility that extolling the virtue of chastity may be related to a particular fascination with feminine endurance. This characteristic of the female role has prevailed through the ages in two favorite scenes: the *White Rabbit* and

<sup>23</sup> However, common practice was still to remarry. A comprehensive explanation and taxonomy of the virtuous woman during late-Ming can be found in Katherine Carlitz, "Desire, Danger and the Body: Stories of Women's Virtue in Late Ming China," in Christina K. Gilmartin et al., eds., *Engendering China: Women, Culture and the State*, Harvard Contemporary China Series 10 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1994), pp. 101-24. See also Bettine Birge, "Chu Hsi and Women's Education," in Wm. Theodore de Bary and John W. Chaffee, eds., *Neo-Confucian Education: The Formative Stage* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1989), pp. 325-67; and Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1993), pp. 188-203.

the twentieth act of *The Lute*.<sup>24</sup> Endurance is one of the pillars on which female virtue is built and, like determination in chastity, a measure of her character.<sup>25</sup>

The representation of chaste widowhood in these stories is limited to the refusal to remarry and, when the widow is pressed, to suicide. However, the demands of the dramatic structure that assured the play a just and happy ending (*tuanyuan* 團圓) resulted in an evolving interpretation of widowhood. In the foundational plays, the immoral scholar is chastised and retribution ensues, either meted out by divine law or by a vindictive courtesan. But from *Zhang Xie* on (or at least the current version we have of this play), the dramatic structure required that the virtuous “husk” wife be compensated in real life and that the play end on a positive note. In other words, in the ideal scenario, the chaste wife was compensated for her hardships by a return to a harmonious family life plus position, wealth, and a loyal husband. Did this shift from the ungrateful and immoral man towards the loyal and principled husband occur in order to counter the wife’s misfortunes and demonstrate discomfort with the raw violence of the earlier texts? Did it reflect in any way contemporary socio-economic changes? Was

<sup>24</sup> In *The White Rabbit*, Li Sanniang 李三娘, although three months pregnant, has been forced to divorce Liu Zhiyuan, who has now gone to a nearby military camp. Brutally treated by her sister-in-law, she is forced to deliver her baby over a pile of grass, severing the umbilical cord with her teeth. Similarly in *The Lute*, a great famine is devastating the land and Miss Zhao, in order to feed her elderly parents-in-law threshes the grain to give her in-laws while she eats the husks. See *Xinbian Liu Zhiyuan huanxiang baitu ji* 新編劉知遠還鄉白兔記, reprint of the Nuanhongshi edition (Jiangsu: Jiangsu guling keyinshe, 1997), pp. 56a–b and 57a–b; and Gao Ming, *Yuan ben Pipa ji jiaozhu*, ed. Qian Nanyang (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1980), pp. 112–16.

<sup>25</sup> Chastity or the determination not to remarry was praised also as part of the value of loyalty as correct virtuous behavior and part of the notion that “the loyal man does not serve two lords nor the exemplary woman marry twice”. See Qian ed., *Pipa ji jiaozhu*, p. 136. There is a very rich body of literature on the subject of widowhood and remarriage and a variety of attempts to explain the rise and prevalence of the cult of widowhood in the Ming. Chaste widowhood is rooted in the patrilineal and patriarchal social system where women owed filial loyalty to their deceased husband’s family. By the Ming dynasty, the cult of the chaste widow can be linked to a variety of determinants such as, for example, legal and economic factors, where widows could keep custody of children and dowry only if they remained chaste; political, where female virtue is an analogy of the male’s loyalty to his sovereign; or ethical as a desire to recover China’s cultural legacy (after the Yuan) and re-establish the moral standards of Song Neo-Confucianism. But in social reality, widows’ fates were determined by a host of additional class, regional and individual determinants. See, for example, Ann Waltner, “Widows and Remarriage in Ming and Early Qing China,” in Richard W. Guisso and Stanley Johannsen, eds., *Women in China* (New York: Philo Press, 1981), pp. 129–46; Mark Elvin, “Female Virtue and The State in China,” *Past and Present* 104 (1984), pp. 111–52; T’ien Ju-K’ang, *Male Anxiety and Female Chastity: A Comparative Study of Chinese Ethical Values in Ming-Ch’ing Times* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988); Katherine Carlitz, “The Social Uses of Female Virtue in Late Ming Editions of Lienü Zhuan,” *Late Imperial China* 12.2 (1991), pp. 117–52; and Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Women and the Family in Chinese History* (London: Routledge, 2003).

it based on popular demand by an audience's desire to renegotiate the spiritual and material fate of their heroines' aspirations? Was it simply a change of setting, from the public stage to the temple? Or did it stem from the demands of the audience for happy endings? If in the Ming chaste widows were publicly celebrated through a system of state awards, in the plays their reward is social position and wealth brought by loyal or repentant husbands upon their return.

In many of these plays, once he has achieved success in the examinations, the ungrateful scholar abandons the woman who supported him in the past for the noble daughter of a prominent figure in the capital. Noble daughters, usually the only offspring of the prime minister, play the second female role (*tie* 貼), and are described in positive terms and with a beauty that reflects their inner innocence. Their strategic position as coveted daughters of a top official of marriageable age was the natural counterpart to the top graduate. Yet, if in the earlier plays the top graduate is only too glad to exchange vows with them, attracted perhaps by feminine glamour or as a shortcut to power, in later plays marriage is the result of coercion by the prime minister who has only one daughter and needs the candidate to continue the family line. These later plays, however, critique the prime minister's abuse of power, which is in turn used to justify the weakness of the scholar.

When the main female role belongs to a courtesan, it is her economic solvency and generosity that allows the main male role to succeed socially and yet it is her social position that decides her fate and brings about her doom. In *Wang Kui*, once the scholar passes the exams he remarries in a betrothal set up by his father. In *Chen Shuwen*, the scholar, who has already married and passed the exams, is on his way to take up his post, yet his family is so poor that he asks his wife to stay back until he can send her money. He meets a courtesan whom he likes and marries. But after some time, when confronted with his wife's return, he decides to kill the courtesan by drowning her in a river.

The social critique inherent in these plays, with their great potential for melodrama and audience empathy are balanced by comedy, a tool of Chinese theater, which contrasted the extremes of pathos and the absurdly comic. In moments of imminent melancholy and gloom, comic skits are inserted to balance the mood of the play. These bizarre insertions are often unrelated to the theme of the story and are better understood as structural conventions of theater rather than satirical comments on the subject of the play. But it is also true that their comic power and dynamism, used strategically, manage to trivialize the whole

ungrateful scholar theme. As scholarly ambitions become wrapped in comedy, every other aspect of the scholar's quest and the process by which his goal is achieved, from the ultimate aims of education, the exams, to the desire for office and the vow to serve the emperor are consequently derided.<sup>26</sup> And while trivialization in practice served to diffuse potential political censorship, it also served to transmit ideas by means of entertainment, that is, by keeping the audience's attention towards an otherwise overly critical and melodramatic theme.<sup>27</sup> The one aspect that is never inconsequential is the suffering and endurance of the two most important feminine roles: the husk wife and the courtesan.

In sum, dramatic texts on the ungrateful scholar exposed two sets of issues: one was that the acquisition of knowledge was no evidence of moral character, as illustrated in *Wang Kui*, *Zhang Xie*, and most probably by *Zhao the Chaste Maid*, and the other was that candidates were motivated mainly by the desire for material gratification – wealth and social status. Although these candidates possessed values (filiality) and understood the demands society and family placed on them, their position of power allowed them to choose between the normative and the instrumental, between altruism and private desires. That such men should reach the very top of the examination ladder exposed a flawed educational and examination system, embodied in a figure that was glorified as the icon of talent: the rare scholar of humble (or near-humble) origins who came to be lauded as the Top Graduate. The hypocrisy and moral failings of the scholar brought him into conflict with the virtuous female roles, contrasting figures that allowed the play to move forward in a balance between virtue and immorality, sacrifice and injustice, melodrama and absurdity. At first, the only way to solve these problems was through revenge and retribution; later the tension was resolved through happy endings and contentment for all.

<sup>26</sup> As Liu Wenlong, ready to part for the examinations, bids farewell to his parents (both comic roles), the parents' concerns are entirely mundane: they worry that, enraptured with his new wife, he may not want to leave the house.

<sup>27</sup> Main character scholars (played by *sheng* roles) are presented as unquestionably learned candidates (e.g., *Zhang Xie*, scenes 1, 9 and 18, in Qian, *Yongle*, pp. 1–12, 49–54, 96–98). But apart from the main male role, the rest of the scholars represented in these plays are the domain of comic roles and ridiculed for their pompous attempts to display knowledge they do not have. Scholars about to take the examinations are generally played by the comic roles (*jing*, *chou*, and *mo*) and, true to the nature of these roles, parody the examinations with a mixture of wordplay and farce, taunting the shortcomings of education and the examination system (e.g., *Zhang Xie* scene 24, in Qian, *Yongle*, pp. 122–28; *Golden Hairpin* scene 13, in Liu, *Jinchai ji*, pp. 25–28).



REVENGE, RECIPROCITY AND  
THE UNGRATEFUL SCHOLAR PLAY

The description of revenge in Chinese drama appears with our earliest extant texts of both southern and northern drama, but its treatment is brought about in a variety of ways, ranging from historical themes in which the question of revenge is central to the development of the story, to the more mundane love stories of ghostly retribution. In most cases, revenge is closely linked to one of the basic principles of social relations in Chinese society: *bao* 報, or reciprocity of action. *Bao* is applied to almost all forms of human relations and expands within the public sphere, in the hierarchy governing the five principles of correct human relations (*wulun* 五倫), and in the private sphere through relations between equals, whether family, friends, or people of the same moral standards. It is similarly applied on one extreme to the desire to punish someone for a wrong perpetrated upon oneself, relatives, or friends. In such contexts we get the two-character verbal compounds *baochou* 報仇, that is, to repay with vengeance, and *baoen* 報恩, referring to personal gratitude owed someone for their help, that is, to repay with kindness. What constituted the appropriate response or *bao* was a matter of debate from ancient times. Kindness was of course to be repaid with gratitude, but of greater concern was how to repay a wrong. And while there is no clean solution to this problem – as *bao* was finally dependent on circumstance – whether one should repay with the same coin or with a “neutral” one (*zhi* 直), came to be settled, at least broadly and nominally, on the neutral repayment of injury with justice. Social relations were governed by a delicate and well-balanced web of reciprocal exchange with the coin of exchange tacitly understood. In these transactions, which run up and down the ladder of Chinese society, it was made clear that anyone who had made a social investment would eventually be repaid.<sup>28</sup>

In the early formative stages of southern Chinese drama one of the main concerns of the parting moment, when the scholar leaves to take the exams, is the long awaited moment of reciprocation, when he will repay the efforts of his parents and the kindness of his wife or the courtesan who has assisted him. As noted above, when the scholar prepares to leave, there are doubts as to whether he will in fact repay his moral debt should he pass the examination successfully. Promises of

<sup>28</sup> Lien-sheng Yang, “The Concept of *Pao* as a Basis for Social Relations in China,” in John K. Fairbank, ed., *Chinese Thought and Institutions* (Chicago: U. Chicago P., 1957), pp. 291–309; Karl S.Y. Kao, “*Bao* and *Baoying*: Narrative Causality and External Motivations in Chinese Fiction,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 11 (December 1989), pp. 115–37.

repayment are strongly voiced by the scholar as a reply to expressions of doubt, and while debts towards parents are of a filial and economical nature and repaid when the son returns to elevate the family status, debts to wives and courtesans are debts of gratitude that remain unpaid. When the courtesan Guiying expresses her doubts about the faithfulness of her lover Wang Kui, and reminds him not to let her down, he concedes to make a vow before the temple god:

To the Same Tune, New Opening 前腔, 第三換頭

伊嬌面	Your enchanting face,
伊嬌面	your enchanting face,
俏如洛浦神仙	just like the divine goddess of the river Luo. <sup>29</sup>
肯漾卻甜桃	Why would I throw away a sweet peach,
再尋酸棗留連	and go looking for bitter jujubes and durian.
是果然, 意恁堅	Since you are so set on this intent,
指日同往	in a few days we will go together
靈神祠里同設願	to the Temple of the Efficacious God and make a vow.
虧心的	[ <i>Guiying</i> ] Ingrate!
上有天	Heaven is above,
莫辜負此時誓言	so do not break the promise we will now make. <sup>30</sup>

Such doubts foreground the ultimate outcome of the play, in which the male role does indeed fail to reciprocate kindness with gratitude.<sup>31</sup> In the foundational plays we do not really know the motivation for such ingratitude, but as we have access to more complete plays, the subtleties of their motivations become more complex. The calculated option of Wang Kui, Zhang Xie, and Chen Shuwen, who decide to eliminate their obligations to indebtedness from the root by killing their virtuous female helpers, demonstrates the wisdom of the female charac-

<sup>29</sup> From a poem by Cao Zhi (192–232), “Fu on the Goddess of the River Luo” 洛神賦.

<sup>30</sup> Qian, *Song Yuan xiwen jiyi*, p. 38.

<sup>31</sup> In *Zhang Xie*, when the scholar, in a moment of gratitude, marries the country girl Poorlass, she reminds him not to forget her kindness: “Sir, you must never forget my kindness, or forget when you came to the temple. 伊須異日, 休得要忘卻奴厚期, 忘卻來廟里。” To this he confidently replies with the words of an “educated” man: “I am well versed in the classics, ritual and music, I would not dare let you down! Put your mind at rest, don’t always be worrying about me turning my back on you, my wife, worry about turning my back on you. 詩書禮樂曾諳歷, 我敢負伊! 伊我放心, 不須要慮及辜我妻, 慮及辜負伊”; see Qian, *Yongle*, p. 86. See also Chen Shuwen’s promise to his courtesan: [To the tune Shiliu hua] (*Sheng*): “Today, your humble servant has been favored by your love and support; would I dare say I would forget it even slightly. Just a few words incite me to hide my body [in embarrassment]; I guarantee that I will repay your favors and righteousness. [石榴花] 卑人今幸錯愛與扶持, 怎肯道忘了些兒。片云但得與遮體, 管須來報答恩義”; Qian, *Song Yuan xiwen jiyi*, p. 2.

ters' doubts at the moment of parting. The lack of human faith that runs through all these plays is indeed disquieting, be it in the advice parents pile upon the son, the doubts expressed by the courtesan, Liu Zhiyuan's wife's taking his seal to warrant his return,<sup>32</sup> or in *The Lute*, when Miss Zhao evaluates Cai Bojie's morality on the basis of his inability to recognize the portraits of his emaciated parents.<sup>33</sup> More than hinting at character flaws, such clues suggest that the young scholars' studies did not equip them with moral fortitude. After beating Poorlass and showing his uncouthness and lack of morality, Zhang Xie is about to leave again for the capital and sings a parting duet with Poorlass. She sings "and still you cannot discern whether I am good or bad. Oh! How sad! 你不分女皂白阿好悶,"<sup>34</sup> thereby showing the immoral man's incapacity to see the virtuous and good. The play warns us repeatedly that the fragile balance of moral debt and repayment is about to fall into disequilibrium.

To this point the plays seem to be setting up a straightforward theme of the ungrateful scholar who must be punished for his unconscionable treatment of a faithful woman, but some of the plays complicate the problem by developing conflicting ethical obligations. The cause-effect pattern, where good or evil actions are repaid evenly, is no longer clear and the degree of complexity of reciprocation varies within each play. In earlier plays such as *Zhao the Chaste Maid* or *Li Mian*, the scholar fails to repay his parents and wife. But with the development of the drama, character development adds levels of intricacy to the determinants of action and there are what seem like attempts at alternative social justification and a slight critique of mores. For example, after Li Mian abandons his parents and wife to build another family elsewhere, his father rebukes him:

To the Tune "Yi feng shu" 一封書

聞說你在京	I've heard you are in the capital,
戀紅裙	Loving up the crimson skirts
醉酒樽	and deep in your cups.
不顧閨中少婦	You are not taking care of your young wife in her quarters
不念堂前白髮親	or thinking of your white-haired parents in front of the hall.

<sup>32</sup> See Ling Jingyan 凌景埏 and Xie Boyang 謝伯陽, eds., *Zhugongdiao liangzhong* 諸宮調兩鍾 (Shandong: Shandong renmin yinshuachang, 1988), p. 69; and *Ballad of the Hidden Dragon*, trans. M. Doleželová-Velingerová and J. I. Crump (London: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 93.

<sup>33</sup> Qian, *Pipa ji jiaozhu*, scene 31, p. 182.

<sup>34</sup> Qian, *Yongle*, p. 107.

義和恩	[We have shown you] integrity and benevo-
	lence and,
重和輕	[taught you] the important and the unimportant,
問你從前不孝名	let me ask you: were you ever unfilial
	before? <sup>35</sup>

Even when *Li Mian* was known as a tale of unfiliality and abandonment, other considerations were added when in the reply to his father he asserts: “For many years I was at home enjoying your deep love and affection 卑人在館下多年恩愛深。”<sup>36</sup> Then, one day, he met another woman, ran away, and with much hardship established another family whom he also loves. Toward the latter family he showed great propriety and moral sense, not wanting to abandon them: “How can I force her to marry another?” 怎教他別取個頭條嫁個人?<sup>37</sup> We infer (and we can only infer) from his words that there must have been a more complex reasoning on matters of integrity, gratitude, and filiality. Similarly, in *Zhang Xie*, the scholar marries a country girl, Poorlass, who nursed him to health after he had been attacked by a bandit on the way to the capital. In order to compensate her for her kindness, express his gratitude, and perhaps clear her good name (since he has been living in the temple with her), Zhang Xie has no alternative but to marry her. Yet Zhang Xie’s initial gratitude turns rapidly into regret after he leaves Poorlass and continues on his way to the capital: “Although I have recently married Poorlass, that was not my plan as a scholar and it holds me back again. 近日須諧貧女, 未是吾儒活計, 依舊困其身。”<sup>38</sup> And, “Poorlass that wretch, I’d have beaten her more dead than alive. If it wasn’t for that terrible plight I was in, I would never have gone near you. 貧女那賤人, 十大打底九人沒下! 自家不因災禍, 誰恨肯近傍你每。”<sup>39</sup> Zhang Xie of course understands the rules of correct social behavior and reciprocity, but it was circumstance that provided him with no alternative: to requite her kindness (and maintain her respectability) he had no choice but to marry her. In other words, it is not the lack of ethical understanding as much as lack of moral fortitude; it is not that they do not understand what is expected of them, but that, bemused by their success, they forfeit their integrity. The problem is not the tension between morality and success; it is success (and hence power) that results in their breaching the social code of conduct and not reciprocating in

<sup>35</sup> Qian, *Song Yuan nanxi jiyi*, pp. 69–70.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* *Ta* here refers to *bei* or “this humble person.”

<sup>38</sup> Qian, *Yongle*, p. 96.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

kind. And while the scholar initially does what is expected of him, he breaks the norm once in power, showing both that his offence is closely linked to his newly acquired position and that he was clearly conscious this position could be manipulated for his own profit.

The resolution of these tensions takes various forms. When *bao* remains unfulfilled, or reciprocity does not ensue, ungratefulness becomes the great motivation or cause for revenge. Lack of reciprocity, however, is selective and particularized according to the circumstances of each case. There is a distinction between plays that end in revenge and those with a modified ending. The foundational plays, *Wang Kui*, *Zhao the Chaste Maid*, and (later) *Chen Shuwen* are clear examples of revenge plays. Among these we can tentatively distinguish between plays about chaste women and courtesans. In the chaste women plays, revenge is brought about by heavenly retribution in which women remain rather passive. In *Zhao the Chaste Maid*, revenge is divinely meted out and the offending scholar killed by a bolt of lightning. Virtuous women do not seek revenge; instead, heaven brings justice about for them. Virtue in women meant endurance of suffering, and therefore revenge was beyond their range of options.

Presiding over this complex web of debt and reciprocity is Heaven, which is present in all the plays. Appeals to its nature and justice are commonplace. It protects virtue and punishes those who do not comply with the established laws governing human nature. The notion of a heavenly justice that blesses good and punishes evil existed in China, as elsewhere, since very ancient times. In drama, however, it seems to have found its formulation with the entrance of Buddhist doctrine, and remained a popular expression of the principle of karma.<sup>40</sup> But whereas in Buddhist doctrine one's just destiny is meted out impersonally in the cycle of life and death, and "Heaven" does not initiate revenge, in these plays as in much of Chinese literature Heaven is vengeful, and karmic retribution is measured by human standards, showing, perhaps, that revenge in action is both dramatic and satisfying to an audience seeking compensation for injustices. When in *The White Rabbit*, Li Saniang gives birth, old Dou, a loyal family servant, comes out to help her, saying: "Good is repaid with good and evil with evil. If there is as yet no repayment, it is just that the time has not yet come. 惡有惡報, 善有善報, 若還不報, 時辰未到."<sup>41</sup> This notion disappears in the later re-

<sup>40</sup> See Karl S. Y. Kao, "Bao and Baoying," pp. 115-38.

<sup>41</sup> *Xinbian Liu Zhiyuan huanxiang baitu ji*, p. 56a.

writing of the play. These are common expressions in earlier plays of a popular desire to see justice enforced with the ultimate support and legitimation of Heaven, which could be humanly capricious: “If there is no retribution, it must be that Heaven and earth are partial 若無報應，果是乾坤有私。”<sup>42</sup> But Heaven does eventually respond, enacting divine justice to restore the harmonious functioning of society.

Courtesans, on the other hand, avenge themselves by first killing themselves and then willing their wronged and restless ghost to seek justice. Their initial generosity 恩 itself begins as part of an exchange. When Wang Kui fails his exams and returns home, a friend takes him to the lodgings of the courtesan Guiying. Wang Kui and Guiying immediately take a liking to each other and by the end of the evening, she offers to take care of all material aspects of his life until he passes his exams. In repayment, Wang Kui makes a vow never to let Guiying down. In the 1620 short story they marry in front of the temple god. Yet when Wang Kui eventually abandons her, in spite of the potential for divine interaction, Guiying has to seek her own justice.<sup>43</sup> When Guiying realizes Wang Kui has abandoned her, she is abruptly brought back to the reality of a courtesan’s life by the “mother”:

To the Tune “Mapo zi” 麻婆子

自古道癡心女	From old we are told of infatuated girls,
癡心太過頭	overly infatuated.
自古道虧心漢	And from old we are told of the ungrateful
	man.
他虧心你枉自守	He deceives [you], and you in vain keep your
	chastity.
浪語閑言莫儻惚	Do not let all this sensual and idle talk worry
	you.
奴家不慮你何憂	If I have no cause for concern, why are you
	so anxious?
怕你吃他負	I am afraid if he lets you down
無人替你羞	There will be no one to bear shame on your
	behalf. <sup>44</sup>

Her “mother” reminds her of the nature of her work with words that confront the enclosed world of human relations of the courtesan’s quarters with the social conventions of the outside world: she, also, is a commodity. Yet if these sobering words are of small consolation to

<sup>42</sup> Qian, *Pipa ji jiaozhu*, p. 190.

<sup>43</sup> See Lu Gong and Tan Tian, eds., *Guben pinghua xiaoshuo ji*, pp. 89–95.

<sup>44</sup> Qian, *Song Yuan xiwen jiyi*, p. 39.

the courtesan, they serve to play up the superficiality of emotions and the lack of gratitude of the male role. The tension between virtue and ambition results in betrayal and despair that can only be resolved with dramatic compensation, often in the form of revenge.

The last sentence serves only to reaffirm the courtesan's resolve, and since no one will redress her injustice, her only power comes as an avenging ghost. She sacrifices her own life not for honor or love or vain despair, but as a means to achieve repayment and justice. Suicide is the first step in her revenge. The extant arias end simply in a note of ingratitude, whereas in the early Wang Kui short story compiled by Zhang Bangji, Guiying concludes: "Kui has repudiated me like this; I should repay it [his deceit] with my death. 魁負我如此, 當以死報之."<sup>45</sup> Guiying then returns briefly to claim Wang Kui's life in return: "Guiying said: 'I will get his life and then stop, that's all I know.' 桂英曰: 得君之命即止, 不知其他,"<sup>46</sup> after which Wang Kui dies. However, vindictiveness grows increasingly complex in Wang Kui's later short story as the author revels in the description of revenge. Again Guiying decides she must die to get revenge: "I must die to repay his deceit! 我必死以報之!"<sup>47</sup> But then we find out through a Daoist priest (called to exorcize the ghost of Guiying), that Wang Kui is being judged for his ungratefulness back in the Temple of the Sea God. Needless to say, when the priest returns to the present world, Wang Kui is dead. Revenge for deceit means a very cruel death, which draws for its description on a well-established tradition of ghostly representation and revenge.<sup>48</sup> And it is indeed an odd characteristic of both early Chinese and Western theater that dramatic action does not permit the ghosts of wronged spirits to leave the world of the living until the evil perpetrated on them has been uprooted. Ghosts return from the netherworld with accrued sentiments of hatred, and are persistent in avenging themselves.<sup>49</sup> And

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 36

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. Similarly, Cui Lanying's ghost returns quietly to play up the scholar's fear of exposure, and when she asks him to pay her a visit, he concedes while taking precautions not to be discovered by his family. When he is finally discovered, he is dead, face up, as if decapitated.

<sup>47</sup> Lu and Tan, *Guben pinghua xiaoshuoji*, p. 91.

<sup>48</sup> See also Anthony C. Yu, "Rest, Rest, Perturbed Spirit! Ghosts in Traditional Chinese Prose Fiction," *HJAS* 47.2 (1987), pp. 397-434.

<sup>49</sup> This is made particularly clear in the southern adaptation of the play *Little Butcher Sun* (*Xiao Sun Tu* 小孫屠) when the ghost of the maid returns with hatred accumulated in the underworld: "(*Mei* [*Xiang*]) When I was in the World of Shades, I harbored injustice, stricken with resentment and pained by injury resented the pangs of hatred and the throes of grief. (*Jing and Dan*) Who would expect that injustice repaid with injustice would carry interest. (梅) 在陰間銜冤怨痛傷悲, (淨旦) 誰知冤報冤和債"; Qian, *Yongle*, p. 322. Perhaps the most famous of all avenging ghosts in theater is Dou'E of *The Injustice to Dou E*.



while what keeps a ghost on stage or brings it back to stage seems to be a general desire for justice in the abstract, one wonders if they are not there to represent and satisfy contained sentiments of odium for specific, real social injustices. They exorcise a restless public spirit by representing the injustice and meting out the punishment.

In sum, when a courtesan made a material (and perhaps emotional) investment in a talented and educated scholar, she expected to be repaid in recognition for her sacrifice. When the scholar was ungrateful, we have to assume, by the principle of reciprocity, that he would be judged and ultimately pay with his life for the courtesan's unrequited kindness and unjust death. The courtesan's revenge is an obligation to both a personal desire and a sense of justice that satisfies only the spectator's desire for poetic justice.

It may be owing to the harshness of the verdict on both parts, or perhaps simply the changes in the representation of courtesans as intellectual counterparts of the scholar, that this theme disappeared from Chinese plays. Plays slowly became more positive as the utilitarian view, with its critiques of human failings, faded.

The idea of *bao* in *Zhang Xie* is more complex and crosses more social spheres than in any other play. It is firmly established between son and parents but also exists between Poorlass and Zhang Xie directly, and contingently, with the prime minister who wants Zhang for a son-in-law. With the exception of the relationship between son and parents, where the filial duty is never questioned, all of these reciprocal relations are broken and all demand requital, which comes about symmetrically within the same system of reciprocation: *bao*.

For example, by the time Zhang Xie holds office, the blame is shifted to Poorlass for "coercing" him into marriage, and later humiliating him by presenting herself as a beggar in the capital. *Bao* now ensues from Zhang Xie who feels reviled, and he unfittingly seeks reciprocation by demanding revenge on Poorlass.

Ironically the one female role in these plays who does not seek revenge is the hapless main female role. Poorlass, when thrown out of the *yamen* after seeking out Zhang Xie who had abandoned her, departs with sarcasm: "I shall buy a stick of good incense and pray to Heaven that your deceitful heart will forever be honored. 買炷好香祝蒼天, 願你虧心, 長長榮貴."<sup>50</sup> As in the earlier stories of love and deceit,

<sup>50</sup> Qian, *Yongle*, p. 162.

Zhang Xie's fate may originally have been the same as other such figures who die for their ingratitude, but *Zhang Xie* has reached us in a modified form. Poorlass, like Zhao the Chaste Maid, is virtuous and helpless and when rejected does not seek revenge. The infallibility of requital, however, informs us that retribution will prevail and Zhang Xie's increasing display of scholarly arrogance and abuse of power will come to an end.

Surprisingly, the expected revenge does not come upon Zhang Xie; instead he returns to the old temple to seek revenge upon Poorlass by attempting to kill her, an action that only increases our expectations for revenge. When she is found, Poorlass once again hides Zhang Xie's uncouthness from her benefactors, and simply complains of her ill fate. But alone in the temple, Poorlass unceasingly reminds us of her unrequited kindness towards Zhang Xie, and her resentment at having been denied what he justly owes her.

But requital does eventually arrive with a twist. Whereas in the previous ungrateful scholar plays ungratefulness is repaid with divine or personal (ghostly) death, in *Zhang Xie*, playing up to the essence of *bao*, very ingeniously, the authors remarry Poorlass to Zhang Xie, hence compensating Poorlass and forcing Zhang Xie to requite her kindness. Revenge in *Zhang Xie* is female compensation rather than the redressing of a wrong or revenge upon the scholar.

## CONCLUSION

By the early Ming many of the stories of ungrateful scholars had been rewritten. One reason may have been edicts that prohibited performances of certain themes and characters on-stage, such as emperors, kings, and officials, and encouraged plays about virtuous wives, filial sons, and in a general any theme that "encourages people to do good 勸人爲善."<sup>51</sup> We do not know the degree to which these edicts were effective. The modern scholar Yu Weimin 俞爲民, following the sixteenth-century Xu Wei, believes the changes came from a general attempt by the literati to show themselves as filial and upright men.<sup>52</sup> Xu Wei, in his discussion on the origins of southern theater, notes that during the Yuan era northern-style theater spread to the south to the point of almost completely taking over the autochthonous southern theater. He

<sup>51</sup> See Wang Liqi 王利器, ed., *Yuan Ming Qing Sandai, jinhui xiaoshuo xiqu shiliao* 元明清三代禁毀小說戲曲史料 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1979), pp. 11-15.

<sup>52</sup> Yu, *Song Yuan nanxi kaolun*, p. 51.

complains that once this occurred there were too many playwrights writing northern plays in a base and crude language, and he expresses his “nostalgia” for the old school of northern playwrights. In this context he mentions Gao Ming’s intent in rewriting the *Lute*:

I regretted that Bojie was vilified, so I wrote *The Story of the Lute* to clean away this defamation. I used lovely and clear diction to completely wash away the author’s baseness so that singers from villages and alleys can be advanced to practice [with the members of the] Imperial Academy, and render it so sublime as to be unsurpassable. 惜伯喈之被謗，乃作琵琶記雪之，用清麗之詞，一洗作者之陋，于是村坊小妓，進與古法部相參，卓乎不可及已。<sup>53</sup>

According to Xu Wei, Gao Ming wrote the play to clear both the historical name of Cai Bojie as well as his literary representation as a scholar. This is perhaps Xu Wei’s understanding of the prologue and play, but it remains a hypothesis. In the prologue of *The Lute*, Gao Ming protests not against the representation of a figure or the literariness of the play’s language, but against the moral content of the play. As the *mo* role enters to assure the public that stories without moral teaching are worthless, he continues: “When discussing *chuanqi*, it is easy to please people but hard to move them to action. 論傳奇，樂人易，動人難。”<sup>54</sup> He then goes on to demand the attention of the audience to its message, not to popular dramatic features such as comedy or music. So why use this medium? How aware was Gao Ming of the theater as a medium for the propagation of ideas? It is clear that these bans were partly directed towards the theater because it was a medium of dissemination of values in which no literacy was needed. But we cannot know how effective the edicts were, since coercive and unprincipled prime ministers and ungrateful scholars prevailed both on the stage and in writing.

It is generally true that the representation of the ungrateful scholar disappeared, giving way to a comedy in which values of male chastity and loyalty replaced ungratefulness. The rewriting of *Wang Kui* into the play *Burning Incense* (*Fenxiang ji* 焚香記) is a case in point. In *Burning Incense*, Wang Kui takes the examinations and when he refuses to remarry, takes up his new post and sends a letter to his loyal courtesan Guiying that is intercepted by Jin Lei 金壘 and rewritten as a divorce letter. Guiying receives the letter, kills herself, comes back as a ghost to find out he has not, in fact, broken his pledge and is eventu-

<sup>53</sup> See Xu, *Nanci Xulu*, in *LZJC*, p. 239.

<sup>54</sup> Qian, *Pipa ji jiaozhu*, p. 1.

ally brought back to life through love and requital. The expression of violence and denunciation of earlier plays now becomes righteous didacticism. These plays lose their critical edge, and their critique of the values that governed society at large, such as the validity of education and the binding power of reciprocity, disappears.

In the earlier plays of Chinese theater, empathy, or the ability to move someone to respond, was an important requirement of a “good play,” and this sentiment mostly lay in the portrayal of the *dan* or main female role. The formula used was the dichotomy between a virtuous woman and an immoral scholar, between her endurance and his ungratefulness. When such socio-ethical norms remained unfulfilled, there were means of requital, of which the most extreme was revenge. Revenge in these plays seeks to maintain the flow of the principles of social harmony and justice, and when these cease, brought about by scholars who, lusting after power and glory, degrade knowledge and make the rule of government a utilitarian means to an end, moral virtue as principle suffered. Hence, the scholars’ ungratefulness did not only impinge on the lack of moral standards of one person, but shows that *bao* was a classless principle that worked in society at large.

But if at first there seem to be clear answers to such knotty social problems, the progress is toward showing the conflict in the realm of the private versus the public. In other words, Li Mian abandons his first family, breaching the public moral code, but the devotion for his second family shows him as a moral man; Zhang Xie marries Poorlass (for the first time) out of gratitude and to abide by the socio-ethical code of behavior, yet he does so against his will. In *The Lute*, the demands the prime minister places on his daughter are brilliantly written. We get a highly detailed description of fatherly love and emotional anxiety when the prime minister refuses to let his daughter leave his side even though correct filial conduct required that she accompany Cai Bojie to pay obeisance to her husband’s deceased parents. The fear of separation from his daughter and concerns for her security allow the prime minister willingly to breach all established filial conventions. While judgment is still passed in the play, we see also how complex private desires and social obligations come into conflict on-stage. These socio-ethical concerns, one of the most interesting aspects of the early ungrateful scholar plays, slowly disappear, giving way to romantic comedies with happy endings. Revenge in death as reciprocation, the classic denouement of the very early plays, was perhaps too harsh and unjust a punishment, and hinged, as before, on the repayment of injury with justice. In the

later plays, the resolution of conflict passes from the spiritual domain to the material one, where the main female role can finally enjoy a well-deserved comfortable life with status and wealth.

*LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS*

*LZJC*                  *Zhongguo gudian xiqu lunzhu jicheng* 中國古典戲曲論著  
                              集成