Staging Female-initiated Divorce: The Zhu Maichen Story in Twentieth-Century Drama from Opprobrium through Approbation

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Abstract
Traditional theatre narratives in China have altered to accommodate changing gender attitudes over the last century. One such narrative, the Zhu Maichen story, revolves around a female-initiated divorce. Though traditionally a reviled figure, in recent and contemporary theatre Zhu’s story is reoriented to make the transgressive woman either more of a victim of feudal society, or blameworthy for reasons unrelated to the divorce. What is called ‘traditional theatre’ and thought of as conservative performance of heritage scenes is nevertheless highly responsive to social shifts.

Keywords
Zhu Maichen – contemporary xiqu – Kunju – traditional Chinese theatre – divorce in China

Introduction
The repertoire of traditional theatre stories in China has undergone and continually undergoes adjustments of various kinds to suit the demands of authorities and audiences, and reflects the changing conceptions of its creators.1

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Despite its rhetoric of tradition and slogans proclaiming its yuanzhi yuanwei 原汁原味 (original flavor), Chinese traditional theatre practitioners frequently alter arias, dialogue and musical accompaniments, rework old scripts, commission new ones on old subjects, alter role-types to suit the available creative personnel or meet financial constraints, cut lines, improvise others, and in general treat the performance tradition as the source of material, which they may proceed to express with a considerable degree of liberty.

Tradition is a brand, a cachet and increasingly a status symbol, as well as a genuine set of rules of movements, vocal production, dramaturgy, musicology, costuming, set design, make-up, etc. all of which are obeyed to varying degrees, and all performances of which are subject to (muted, often not-quite-public) criticism from ‘conservative’ or ‘progressive’ quarters. Thus, even when xiqu 戏曲 (Chinese music drama, sometimes known as ‘Chinese opera’) troupes are not performing newly-written pieces, the choice of repertoire and forms of presentation are not independent of the tastes, pressures and mores of their own time. In any event, permanent and static ‘authenticity,’ presuming it could ever be established, would be an illusory and eventually self-defeating pursuit.

However, while it is perfectly ordinary for Western companies to reset works by Shakespeare or Mozart in another era or place, in abstraction or in surreality, traditional xiqu theatre, especially in zhesixi 折子戏 (independent scenes which usually presented in succession, compose a performance), does not usually acknowledge ‘production’ in this sense as a substantial element of performance. Consequently, the audience is invited to assume that the performance is somehow ‘unchanged’ and ‘original,’ a claim which sometimes constitutes an important selling point. The evolutions undergone by ‘traditional’ theatre pieces remain known (and of interest) largely to practitioners and aficionados. Like any other form of theatre, however, traditional Chinese practice is always and necessarily in tension and negotiation with the present day.

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2 This interesting English word’s ambiguity is worth noting, since it can mean both ‘creating an origin’ and ‘deriving from an origin,’ and thus means either entirely old or entirely new. In this paradox, it seems to point to something essential about tradition and novelty; neither one is ever entirely free of the other. Unfortunately, the linguistic paradox does not work in Chinese, though it does in several other European languages.
Certain stories, such as the story of Fei Zhen'e (費貞娥), the Ming palace maiden who sacrificed herself in order to assassinate one of Li Zicheng’s (李自成 1606–45) peasant generals, became politically untenable in the early People’s Republic. Similarly, the Jingju 京劇 performer Gai Jiaotian 蓋叫天 (i888–1971) made sure that his Wu Song 武松 character no longer indiscriminately slew proletarians. Other narratives were adjusted to eliminate elements perceived as superstitious (such as divine intervention), obscene, or misogynistic. One of the furthest-reaching shifts has been the adjustment of traditional narratives to reflect changing gender attitudes. This essay traces a narrative of female-initiated divorce in traditional theatre in order to examine how it altered as the status of women in twentieth-century China evolved. Certain traditional narratives (such as those surrounding Pan Jinlian 潘金蓮) were already the subject of criticism and reorientation in the Republican period, and in the People’s Republic the whole repertoire was potentially subject, if in practice somewhat unevenly so, to criticism or non-performance based on its unacceptability in gender terms. Thus, changing gender attitudes in the twentieth century affected a wide range of traditional narratives, especially those concerned with women who in the original narrative had been considered transgressive. This essay takes the story of Zhu Maichen 朱買臣 (d. 115 BCE) and his wife as a case study to investigate the pressure put on traditional narratives by the reoriented gender perspectives of the creators of a performance: actors, playwrights, directors and audiences.

This study first examines the historical basis of the story, then briefly summarizes the narrative’s occasional role in poetry and fiction, and finally gives an overview of the history of the story’s dramatic treatment. These older materials provide the necessary background to show the narrative from which the modern and contemporary alterations depart. In the contemporary period, performance description and primary materials are included in an effort to evoke the stage experience, particularly as it is most familiar to me, in its form as a linked series of Kunju 崑劇 scenes.3

3 A major xiqu form, known also as kunqu 崑曲, developing in the late fifteenth century and reaching its highest popularity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when it was the performance genre for chuanqi plays such as Mudan ting 牡丹亭, Taohua shan 桃花扇, and Changsheng dian 長生殿. Declining in the later Qing dynasty, it struggled to survive the twentieth century, but now enjoys renewed prominence as the most “classical” of existing xiqu genres.
The Historical Zhu Maichen

Zhu Maichen was a major official of the Former Han dynasty (206 BCE–CE 24). His involvement in the highest level of court politics is recorded by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 85 BCE) with particular reference to his implication in the dismissal and subsequent suicide of the counsellor Zhang Tang 張湯 (d. 116 BCE). A considerable literary reputation is also attributed to him; at one point in the Hanshu 漢書 (History of the Former Han) he is listed alongside luminaries such as Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE), Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179–117 BCE), and Sima Qian himself. However, the three fu 賦 (rhymed prose, sometimes translated as ‘rhapsody’) on which this reputation rested are not extant.

Zhu Maichen features in traditional stories as a virtuous scholar whose commitment to study finally earned its just reward at an advanced age. After years of making ends meet as a woodcutter, he has a chance encounter with Yan Zhu 嚴助 (d. 122 BCE), a fellow townsman, who (according to some versions of the story) had been dispatched by the imperial court to search for talented men. Zhu was raised by imperial favour out of obscurity, and granted a high official post. This romantic elevation placed Zhu in an identifiable category of rags-to-robes scholars and appealed to the Confucian virtues of perseverance, assiduity and uncomplaining poverty. Until the late imperial period, he earns mention in literature in this context: for instance, in Li Bai’s 李白 (701–62) yuefu 樂府 (ballad-style poem) Xiaoge xing 笑歌行 (Song of laughter). He also occasionally appears in the visual arts in this guise, with episodes from his rise out of penury to high office depicted, for example, by Xie Shichen 謝時臣 (b. 1488).

However, Zhu Maichen’s reputation as a paragon of scholarly perseverance has been largely overshadowed by accounts of his domestic troubles, especially the unusual story of his divorce. A historical account of the marriage dominates Zhu’s biography in the Hanshu, and both Tang and Song literati treated the subject. However, the stage is the medium in which the narrative really thrived, and to which the narrative owes its continuing familiarity. Ranging from a Song/Yuan nanxi 南戲 (southern drama) script to versions still being performed today in various xiqu genres, the story clearly possesses a broad and persistent appeal. A closer look at the content of these plays, however, shows that their focuses and interpretations have been far from unitary. Twentieth

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4 Ban Gu 班固, Hanshu 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 65.2863.
century stage treatments especially have seen the narrative undergo substantial evolution.

Let us ‘set the stage,’ so to speak, with an excerpt of the account in the *Han-shu*.

Zhu Maichen, courtesy name Wengzi 翁子 was a man of Wu 吳. 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 stopped him from singing on the trail, but Maichen only sang louder. This shamed his wife, and she asked permission to leave him. Zhu Maichen laughed, saying, “At fifty, I will certainly be wealthy, and now I am already over forty years old. You have experienced hardship 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... As it happened Yan Zhu, a man of his own district who enjoyed both nobility and imperial favour, recommended Maichen to the throne. Maichen was summoned to the emperor...⁶

Zhu Maichen's classical learning impresses the emperor, and he embarks on an official career. Although he falls into disfavour, he later recovers a high official position, being named prefect of Kuaiji 會稽.

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.⁷

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The limited evidence on Han dynasty marriage practices suggests that female-initiated divorce was neither unusual nor heavily stigmatised, and that remarriage was controversial to a degree but common. The biography does not judge the wife’s act outright, nor explicitly explain the motivation behind her suicide, though most readers will likely have inferred that she could not live with the consequences of a decision she had come to regard as shameful. This narrative, presented originally in this unembellished, somewhat suspended, form, would later evolve in its subsequent incarnations to explicitly comment, condemn and in the twentieth century even endorse the wife’s choices. Before moving to dramatic depictions, a brief overview of earlier literary appearances is offered to demonstrate the narrative’s form and tone.

Treatments and References in Poetry and Fiction

Typically, the story of Zhu’s wife is treated explicitly as a parable of marital immorality whenever it appears in classical Chinese literature. An early allusion occurs in Li Bai’s *qiyan gushi* 七言古詩 (seven-character ancient-style poem) *Nanling bie ertong rujing* 南陵別児童入京 (Parting from the children at Nanling to go to the capital) where Zhu’s wife is referred to as “Kuaiji yu fu qing Maichen” 會稽愚婦輕買臣 (the silly woman of Kuei-chi [who] may scorn Chu Maichen”).

She is granted more extensive, but not more sympathetic, poetic treatment in the shi “Kuaiji fu” 會稽婦 (Wife of Kuaiji) by the Song poet Mei Yaochen 梅堯臣 (1002–60), where she already appears as a humiliated and remorseful

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8 Jack L. Dull. “Marriage and Divorce in Han China: A Glimpse at ‘Pre-Confucian Society,’” in David C. Buxbaum, ed., *Chinese Family Law and Social Change in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978), 23–74. See p. 52–67. Dull writes that “in the Han period divorce was generally accepted, whether initiated by the man or the woman,” and points out that the minister Zhang Er 張耳 (d. 202 BCE), for instance, had married a divorcée (p. 52).

woman. Fang Xiaoru’s 方孝儒 (1357–1402)’s shi “Maichen fu mu” 買臣婦墓 (The grave of Maichen’s wife) is equally 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.

Thereafter, xiumu 羞墓 (shameful tomb) became standard vocabulary for mention of Zhu Maichen’s wife. The common ‘husks and chaff’ reference also sets up a contrast between Zhu Maichen’s wife and the Hou Hanshu 後漢書 (History of the Later Han) story of Song Hong 宋弘, who refused the Guangwu 光武 emperor’s (r. 25–57) offer of marriage to his widowed sister, a princess. Song refused to abandon his wife who had shared his hardship and proclaimed that “the wife of husks and chaff must never be cast off” zaokang zhi qi bu xia tang 糟糠之妻不下堂. Zhu Maichen’s wife, having left her husband to bear his hardship alone, suffers not only the shame of inconstancy, but also the continuation of the penury she had sought to escape.

Zhu’s wife features also in late imperial prose fiction. She appears in Wu Jingsuo’s 吳敬所 (fl. 1597) work Guose tianxiang 國色天香 (Celestial fragrance of national beauties). A more elaborate version of her tale appears as the prologue of the twenty-seventh story in Feng Menglong’s 馮夢龍 (1574–1645) Yushi mingyan 喻世明言 (Illustrious tales to instruct the world). These detailed stories resemble the theatrical versions of the narrative, and it seems probable that they were influenced by stage adaptations.

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.” The wife’s shame is beautifully described: “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.” Bu Jian 卜鍵, “Lanke shan Cui shi xingxiang yu gushi yuanliu xunyi,” 《爛柯山》崔氏形象與故事源流尋繹 Yishu baijia 藝術百家 4 (1987): 34–46. See p. 39.


The earliest substantial literary treatment of the subject, however, requires brief and separate mention because its standpoint is so different from the other pre-twentieth century accounts. This is a Tang dynasty prose piece by Luo Yin 羅隱 (833–909) called ‘Yue fu yan’ 越婦言 (Words of a woman of Yue), included in his Chan shu 諗書 (Slanderous writings). The piece, written, but for a brief introduction, in the voice of the wife speaking to one of Zhu’s attendants, 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. She deplores his failure to uphold as a powerful official the ideals that he had propounded as a poor woodcutter:

“... I was married to [Zhu Maichen] for years. Whenever I recall those times of hunger, cold, toil and hardship, I remember his ambition. Wasn't Zhu Maichen always speaking of his personal responsibility to bring order to the realm and advise his sovereign once he had attained success, and wasn't it his heart's desire to bring peace to the people and aid all beings? Yet unfortunately I left him some years ago, and Zhu Maichen did indeed meet with success in the end. The Son of Heaven gave him a nobleman’s rank and granted him clothes of brocade, showing him great favour! Yet I haven't heard that he has done the things he previously said he would. Are there really no problems needing attention anywhere about? Or is he so anxious for wealth and honor that he cannot think of anything else? In my opinion one may well boast in front of a woman, but one sees nothing of those things [of which he formerly boasted]. How can I eat of his food?” Thereupon she held her breath and died.

In this version, Zhu’s wife may be motivated by shame, but it is shame she feels on her ex-husband’s behalf, rather than on account of her own actions. Unlike other early treatments in traditional literature and on stage, all of which as-

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cribe 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 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 Yin 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.”16 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. Luo Yuming’s A Concise History of Chinese Literature, refers to the passage as an example of late Tang “short satiric pieces” written in “despair and indignation.”17

Jan de Meyer also takes up Luo’s account of the Zhu Maichen story in the context of the general intent of Slanderous Writings. His analysis is that Nienhauser’s view is not corroborated by the evidence of the work as a whole.18 Luo Yin’s reason for rearranging the narrative likely has more to do with his own projects of ‘slander’ than a critique of gender relations; as such it is an interesting anomaly, but neither formative nor representative, though its accusation of Zhu does anticipate the strategies (if not the values) of twentieth-century adaptations.

Dramatic Adaptations

Records of this narrative’s onstage presentations 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.”¹⁹ Altogether, one nanxi, two zaju (short drama genre, popular in the Yuan and Ming, sometimes translated as ‘variety theatre’) and five chuanqi (longer drama genre, developing from nanxi) scripts based on this story are known, although of these pre-twentieth-century scripts only one zaju has survived in its entirety.

Four short fragments of a nanxi play called Zhu Maichen xiuqi ji (Zhu Maichen divorces his wife) are extant and included in Qian Nan-yang’s Song Yuan xiwen jiyi (Collected fragments of Song and Yuan drama).²⁰ 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.”²¹ This narrative arc suggests that the plot bears substantial similarities to later versions.

A further element of later versions is first found in Hanshan tang qupu (Scores from Hanshan Hall) by Zhang Dafu (1554–1630). Although this collection contains no text, this work refers to a play by the title Zhu Maichen poshui chuqi ji (Zhu Maichen spills water to repudiate his wife). This alternate title’s mention of “spilled water” alerts us to the fact that the crucial theatrical climax of later plays has entered the narrative:²² This climax consists of Zhu illustrating the irreversibility of his separation from his wife by pouring water on the ground (or, more usually, commanding someone else to spill it) and demanding that his former wife gather back the spilled water from the ground. In Kunju versions, the moment is especially touching because the wife, already driven half-mad, does not realise immediately the impossibility of the task. She is left desperately scrabbling in the mud and debasing herself, acting out of a hope, while the audience, and the other characters, already know the situation is hopeless.

The “spilled water” element is so central to the narrative that several performance traditions, including those of Peking Opera, Qinqiang Kuanxiu, Huiju, Yuju, and Hebei Bangzi, give the whole play this title. It

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²⁰ Qian Nanyang, Song Yuan xiwen jiyi (Collected fragments of Song and Yuan drama) (Shanghai: Shanghai gudian wenxue chubanshe, 1996), 54–55.
²¹ Qian Nanyang, Song Yuan xiwen jiyi, 55.
is, however, not an “indigenous” narrative element and is absent in the original *Hanshu* account. As the early Qing writer Chu Renhuo 褚人獲 (c. 1630–c. 1705) pointed out in his *Jianhu ji* 堅瓠集 (The hard gourd collection), the pathetic device was in fact borrowed from a story about Jiang Ziya 姜子牙.\(^{23}\) The first record of this no doubt apocryphal story is to be found in *Yeke congshu* 野客叢書 (The miscellany of a rustic) compiled by Wang Mao 王楙 (1151–1213) in the Song dynasty, and the account is remarkably similar to Zhu Maichen’s story as staged today:

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.’\(^{24}\)

The absorption of this element from another (folk) biography was perhaps facilitated by the fact that Jiang Ziya and Zhu Maichen already belonged to the same category of virtuously poor men risen to high station, and to the fact that their wives had left them. 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 less well-defined reasons, is clearly less theatrical. 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. The greed and desperation of the wife (as she scrabbles in the mud), and her audacity paid out in humiliation – all of these acquire dramatic immediacy through this device.

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\(^{23}\) Zhu Yixuan 朱一玄, ed. *Ming Qing xiaoshuo ziliao xuanbian* 明清小說資料選編 (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 2006), 557. Jiang Ziya (fl. eleventh century BCE) was fishing in the river Wei 渭 when Duke Wen of Zhou 周文公 came upon him. Impressed by the wisdom of this unassuming old man, the Duke made him his senior advisor. In various dramatic adaptations of the drama, the character Zhu Maichen refers to Jiang Ziya as an example of high office achieved at advanced age.

Largely or completely lost Zhu Maichen scripts include the *zaju* Zhu wengzi 朱翁子 (Old man Zhu), a Ming work attributed to Chen 陳, of whom nothing further is known, and the *chuanqi* plays *Peiyin ji* 佩印記 (To carry the official seal), a Ming play by Gu Jin 顧瑾, fl. 1596; *Lushou ji* 露綬記 (The dew tassel) author unknown; and two plays named *Fu xin ji* 負薪記 (Carrying firewood), one of which is a Yuan *zaju* by Yu Tianfu 庾天福 (fl. mid-thirteenth century),25 and the other a *chuanqi* of unknown authorship. It is evident from contemporary sources that these plays all conformed to the same basic story plot as the *nanxi*: poverty, divorce, grovelling regret, suicide.26 This is equally true of *Lanke shan 爛柯山* (Lanke mountain), the partially extant Qing *chuanqi* script that forms the basis for most living stage versions of the story.27

The only exception, of sorts, to this tragic storyline occurs in a plot altered, following a common Yuan dramatic form, 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 *zaju* Zhu Taishou fengxue yuqiao ji 朱太守風雪漁樵記 (Prefect Zhu, the woodcutter and the fisherman, amidst the wind and snow), as well as the lost *chuanqi* adaptation thereof, which is one of the two plays entitled *Fu xin ji*.

The *zaju* play, collected in *Yuanqu xuan* 元曲選 (Selected Yuan plays; 1616) by Zang Maoxun 臧懋循 (1550–1620), presents a version of the story in which Zhu’s wife (who is called Jade Immortal 玉天仙 in this play) 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 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

25 Perhaps better known by his courtesy name of Jifu 吉甫, this playwright was a major contemporary of Guan Hanqing 關漢卿 (c. 1245-c.1322), whose works have sadly been lost all but entirely. *Lu gui bu* 錄鬼簿 (The register of ghosts) and *Lu gui bu xu bian* 錄鬼簿續編 (The continued register of ghosts) both hold him in high regard.

26 For short excerpts from *Lu shou ji* and contemporary criticism of these lost plays, see Bu Jian, “Lanke shan,” 41–43; and Qian Nanyang, *Song Yuan xiwen jiyi*, 44.

27 Scenes are preserved in such collections as *Zui yi qing* 醉怡情 (Enjoyment after drinking; 1628–1644) and *Gelin shicui* 歌林拾翠 (Treasures from the forest of songs; 1642), as well as in the Qing dynasty collections *Zhuibai qiu* 綴白裘 (A Patched Cloak of White Fur; 1770) and *Nashuying qupu* 納書楹曲譜 (Scores for the Bookshelf; 1792–1794). See Bu Jian, “Lanke shan,” 43–44.
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 ending is contrived. Thus, the water can be spilled without the attendant tragic circumstances and the morally unsettling questions surrounding the wife's abandonment are left out; 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.

_Lanke shan_ Versions

Though there is evidence that _Lanke shan_ was revised at the beginning of the Qing, the popularity of the same scenes both between the Ming and Qing scores and among the five major Qing texts suggests that they shared considerable similarity with Song and Yuan scripts. All of the scenes still performed in _Kunju_ today are included in these scores. Their proximate textual heritage in Ming and Qing scripts is briefly presented here to establish the continuity of the contemporary _Kunju_ repertoire with the late imperial stage, before we move into recent performance history.

Scenes of Cui Shi 崔氏 compelling her husband occur in both of the Ming scores, in _Gelin shicui_ 歌林拾翠 (Treasures from the forest of songs) as “Cui shi po jia” 崔氏迫嫁 (Cui Shi's urgent [re-] marriage), though the end is missing, and in _Zui yi qing_ 醉怡情 (Enjoyment after drinking) as “Hou xiu” 後休 (The divorce – latter part). “Qian bi” 前逼 (Compelled to divorce – former part) occurs in four of the Qing scores. “Hui jia” 悔嫁 (Regretting [re]marriage), the lament of Zhu's wife after her second marriage has gone wrong, is also 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.

“Chi meng” 痴夢 (The mad dream) has an antecedent in _Gelin shicui_ entitled “Cui Shi zuo meng” 崔氏做夢 (Cui Shi has a dream) 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 reflects the text of the Qing scores quite closely. There are records of a late Qing actor Chen Si 陳四 (fl. late nineteenth century) earning particular praise for “Po shui” 潑水 (Spilling water): “The

28 Bu Jian, “_Lanke shan_,” 44 and 44n21.
recitative loud and clear, the atmosphere urgent, the tone tragic, reaching absolute superiority.”

The Ming Gelín shicuí scores collection has “Ma qian fu shui” (Upending water in front of the horse) and the same is included in four of the five Qing collections as “Po shui” (Spilled water). 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 “Bei qiao” (Woodcutter of the north) in which Zhu Maichen commiserates with a woodcutter and a fisherman, and “Jī xīn” (Sending a letter) in which Zhang Biegu 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 – “Qian bi,” “Hui jia,” “Chi meng” and “Po shui” – were in the usual Kunju repertoire.

The most recent chapter of Lanke shan’s onstage history begins with the September 1961 performance of “Chi meng” by the Jiangsu performer Zhang Jiqing in the Shanghai renmin yishu juchang (Shanghai People’s Art Theatre). This performance took place in the presence of Yu Zhenfei and many of the “Chuan” generation of performers,31 who had themselves performed it into the 1950s. Since the piece was a family specialty of the Shen family, Zhang had a year earlier asked Shen Chuanzhi to instruct her. Shen in turn had learned it in the 1920s from his father Shen Yuequan at the Kunju chuanxisuo (Institute for the preservation and transmission of kunju).32 Hua Chuanhao 華傳浩 (1921–75) wrote an article in praise of

29 Hong Weizhu 洪惟助, Kunqu cidian 崑曲辭典 (Yilan xian: Guoli chuantong yishu zhongxin, 2002), 97.
30 “Bi xiu” (Compelled to divorce) which occurs once, is also derived from the Yuan play. The Kunju scene sometimes known by this name is actually derived from “Qian bi”. Hong Weizhu, Kunqu cidian, 53, 291, 293.
31 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 and Hua Chuanhao were both performers (and teachers) belonging to this generation. A group of their students, ultimately performers in Nanjing and Suzhou, were given stage names including “Jī” (Continuation).
32 Yao Jikun 姚繼焜, “Cong zhezixi Chi Meng dao benxi Zhu Maichen xiu qi.” 從折子...
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, “Chi meng,” and is also linked to the following scene, “Ma qian fu shui”.”33

According to Yao Jikun 姚繼焜 (1935–), Zhang Jiqing’s husband and frequent collaborator, this article spurred their interest in the whole Lanke shan narrative, and shortly thereafter he and Wu Jijing 吳繼靜 (1942–) learned to perform another scene from it (“Qian bi”). Then, in the following year, Zhang Jiqing learnt “Ma qian fu shui,” with Shen Chuanzhi the teacher for all scenes.34 In time, “Chi meng” became a signature piece for Zhang, and she gained fame as Zhang Sanmeng 張三夢 (Zhang Three-dreams): a reference to “Jing meng” 驚夢 (The startling dream) and “Xun meng” 尋夢 (Searching for a dream) from Mudan ting 牡丹亭 (Peony pavilion), in addition to “Chi meng.” Since the other two are perhaps the two most famous scenes in Kunju repertoire, this classification also shows the prestige and difficulty of “Chi meng.”

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 “Chi meng.” Her performance brought the play to the attention of influential theatre critics such as Zhang Geng 張庚 (1911–2003) and drew an admiring article from Renmin xiju 人民戲劇 (People’s drama). 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 an evening-length version of Lanke shan: “The last scene was Zhang Jiqing’s “Chi meng.” After the performance, the audience was unwilling to exit, and some people said they wanted to see “Ma qian fu shui.”35 Only after the repeated explanations and apologies of the theatre and troupe officials did the audience reluctantly leave.”36 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 (1907–94), the script, entitled Zhu Maichen xiu qi 朱買臣休妻 (Zhu Maichen divorces his wife) premiered to public and critical acclaim.37 Meanwhile, Liang Guyin 梁谷音 (1942–) of the Shanghai Kunju Troupe had begun to perform "Chi meng" in 1979, followed in 1980 by a four-scene performance with Gu Zhaolin 顧兆琳 (1943–) in the role of Zhu Maichen. After a rewrite by Lu Jianzhi 陸兼之 (1916–86), which sought to soften the original vicious portrayal of Cui Shi, a full-length five-scene play with the title Lanke shan premièred in January 1981, with Ji Zhenhua 計鎮華 (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.38 These two versions, in Shanghai and Nanjing, have been performed frequently since then, and represent the dominant texts and performance practices for the narrative as a Kunju piece today.

37 Fu Jin, “Ruhe rang,” 49.
The Mad Dream in Performance

The role of Cui Shi is considered among the most difficult in the Kunju repertoire. Much as in Western opera, it is commonly felt that some roles need to be “grown into.” One Suzhou performer, Gu Weiying 顧衛英 (b. 1978), recounts that she felt she needed more life experience before she could master “the psychology of a woman entrapped in emotional family conflicts,” or evoke the “great joy and great sorrow of Cui Shi, four parts laughter and one part tears.”

“Ma qian fu shui” is the dramatic denouement of the play, but “Chi meng” forms the play’s emotional core, and risks being mawkish or cloying if done inexpertly. Through her gestures and voice, especially her laughs, the performer must seek to demonstrate Cui Shi’s growing imbalance. She works within broader aesthetic parameters, deviating from the ordinary behaviour of the dan (female role-type), which reads as ‘madness’ to an audience familiar with the plot and staging, since deliberate technical alteration is semantically rich for the knowledgeable viewer. Delivered well, the scene 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. The account I give here is derived from over a dozen performances of the play or scenes from the play witnessed in Nanjing at the Jiangsu Kunju Opera since 2004, supplemented by audiovisual materials and a few performances by other Kunju performers.

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 that events have turned out just as Zhu had foretold, she is overcome by an intense dream. As in other traditions, dreams are a common device in Chinese theatre for allowing characters’ desires to become manifest to an audience. In the Daoist tradition of linking dreams with the vanity of human ambition, there are several famous plays where most of the action takes place in a dream, such as Tang Xianzu’s Handan meng 邯鄲夢 (The dream of Handan) and Nanke ji 南柯記 (The southern bough). In Daoist discourse Cui Shi’s dream may be viewed as expressing the vanity of worldly ambition, though her dream has a far more brutal dramatic irony since it promises not only the fulfilment of an ambition or the satisfaction of a passion, but also the recovery of a status she would have been entitled to and has inadvertently spurned.

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Cui Shi dreams that Zhu Maichen 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 Cui Shi believes and behaves as though she has been woken, while the audience knows that she is still asleep. 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 that this good fortune cannot be true, 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.

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40 Gu Weiying, “Chuancheng,” 47.
Ecstatically, she adorns herself with a phoenix headdress and beautiful robes, glorying in her new position, accepting the deference of the messengers with false magnanimity and exhibiting the kind of unrestrained laughter seen only from *dan* who are in the grip of madness. Half-donning the clothes (as in Figure 3) indicates not only that she is deliriously happy, but also that she is unhinged. Her excitement at putting on the clothes in front of messengers is recognizable as a social transgression, and the fact that she dresses herself incompletely and without decorum shows that she has lost inhibition and self-respect. Her elation also reveals her desire for her husband’s advancement as crass materialism, without any basis in the attitude of benevolent administration which supposedly underpins hopes of official advancement. On the one hand, the viewer is invited to feel compassion, realising that upon awakening, her elation must collapse into despair – but on the other hand, the observer sees the nature of her hope as pure self-interest mixing pity with censure. The phoenix headdress reminds the audience of the divorce scene, which in full performances today is usually the first act. In that scene, Zhu had promised his wife a future of affluence and luxury, crowning her with a rice basket.

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41 The other obvious example in contemporary *Kunju* repertoire is Xiao Xifen 蕭惜芬, the protagonist of "Chisu dianxiang" 瘋訴點香 (‘A mad account’ and ‘Lighting the incense’). In fact Xiao Xifen is only shamming madness to escape her persecutors.
representing the phoenix headdress which would one day adorn her. At the
time, after momentarily being drawn into the fantasy, she had angrily rejected
it and forced him to sign the divorce documents. Now she has the real article –
but the audience knows that she will lose it all the moment she is woken
back into reality. In some versions, the same rice basket is used in the final
scene, in which she desperately tries to recover the spilt water.

Her exhilaration is abruptly cut short by her new husband’s entrance. The
officials fade away, and her husband, a carpenter, threatens to crack open her
head with the axe he is brandishing. She flees, and abruptly wakes from the
dream. Cui Shi realises that, far from having been recognised as the wife of the
prefect, she has been fantasizing in the company of nothing more than “crum-
bling walls, a dying lamp, the waning moon.”

Hua Chuanhao had already noted in his essay on Zhang Jiqing’s perfor-
mancess the importance of laughter. In Kunju’s codified performance transmis-
sion, a laugh is circumscribed by role type rules. Guimendan 閨門旦 (‘boudoir
dan’, i.e. young dan from a good house) don’t laugh at all; tiedan 貼旦 (second-
ary dan, often a maid) laugh in girlish mischief or delight; and zhengdan 正旦
(‘lead dan’; generally in Kunju a married young woman, despite the name not
necessarily the principal Kunju role-subtype of dan) laugh only when they are
madwomen (and without covering their mouths). Consequently, with a scene
such as “Chi meng” 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 should not be surprising then, that the Kunju per-
former Gu Weiying 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: “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...eu-
phoria, I would be a fine lady for certain.” The laugh reveals the regret beneath
her apparently calm reaction, and as such 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 slum-
ber. At this point, she hears the knocking at the door. Transferring her own
mental unbalance to the noise, she calls the unknown visitors crazy and gives
a laugh already verging on madness. The third time she laughs is when the fe-
male yamen official calls her “my lady” (furen 夫人), indicating that she has

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attained a position of high respect. For the first time in her life of penury and misery she is 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 first right, then left, to see if she can spot him. This is the first hint for her that this 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 stillness.43

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.” 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.

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

Maintaining focus on Cui Shi’s suffering primarily provokes 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 e.g. at the beginning of “Chi meng”: “I have taken the wrong path, my deeds have been wicked; Ah, I have become the butt of jokes for others.”), she can no longer appear automatically 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, the testimonials of actresses support the hypothesis that Kunju performers, even when regarding themselves as conservative, have adjusted their performance to soften Cui Shi and make her

43 Gu Weiying, “Chuancheng,” 47.
more sympathetic.44 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 its focus and sympathy in order to retain audience sympathy.

**Blameless Tragedy in Shanghai**

Liang Guyin is a performer renowned for her innovation within the Kunju tradition. While her status as master of this conservative art is secure, 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 egregious traces of their provenance. Among the most prominent examples of this are her interpretations of the Lanke shan scenes, as a result of which the performance style and script noticeably diverge from the more orthodox tradition of Nanjing.

The conclusion of the play is particularly problematic for modern audiences. In the traditional Lanke shan versions, and as still performed in Nanjing, Cui makes an appeal to the 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 case, she finds herself rejected. In the context of late imperial morality her survival might not provide a feasible resolution for a play about a guilty woman; on the other hand, changing the script to give Zhu an active part to play in her death might diminish the sympathy he is meant to command. Her suicide satisfies traditional mores in that it provides a clear resolution and an understandable distribution of responsibilities, but Liang has found it problematic for today’s audiences, warranting subtle alteration to accommodate the moral sympathies of contemporary spectators. The Shanghai version, as adapted through Liang Guyin’s suggestion, altered the ending to dissolve this dissonance. Though Cui still dies, this occurs accidentally, as a function of her madness.

In a collection of essays on Kunju from a contemporary actor’s perspective, entitled *Yusifengpian 雨絲風片* (Threads of rain, sheets of wind), Liang Guyin

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44 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.
considers the necessity of adapting traditional plays to contemporary morality. Indeed, she is often concerned with how to perform *huai nüren* 壞女人 (bad women) (besides Cui Shi, other roles she discusses include Pan Jinlian and the runaway nun in “Si fan” 思凡 [Longing for worldly pleasures]), which suggests a persistent tension between older interpretations of the moral status of such characters, and the attitude Liang takes toward them. The character of Zhu Maichen’s wife, Cui Shi, may have offended 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.

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 the ground, Cui is mesmerised by the river and wades into it.

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.

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.”47

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 must not show.48 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 shan, 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.

Northeastern Extremes

Besides Kunju versions, the story of Zhu Maichen has been taken up in other genres of xiqu as well as in non-xiqu performing arts. This section examines two works that adopted opposite approaches in pursuit of the same goal: making the narrative morally 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 and first printed in Shenyang’s Shengjing shibao Shengjing shibao (Shengjing times), the second an example of the Northeastern xiqu genre errenzhuan 二人轉 (song-and-dance duet) as currently performed. The radio play transforms Zhu’s wife into a proud and unapologetic woman defending her rights and actions, the errenzhuan into a villainess in the mould of Pan Jinlian.

47 Liang Guyin, Yusi fengpian, 82.
48 Liang Guyin, Yusi fengpian, 82.
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 the *Hanshu*, deliberately avoiding the usual theatrical treatment, 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* (Songs of Chu).
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?49

And so on. They are impoverished and starving. She finds his chanting and singing socially embarrassing, which is an element that harkens back to the version in the *Hanshu*. He refuses to “behave the way poor people ought to.”50 He 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, “I can go without food, I can go without

50 An Xi, *Zhu Maichen*, 201.
clothes, but I can't go without reading my books,” 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.” 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 to 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.” The attendant notes, “Sir, your wonderful words will no doubt be committed to history,” 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 demonization 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 sanctimonious 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.”), 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.

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53 An Xi, Zhu Maichen, 208.
The radio play *Zhu Maichen’s* effort at rehabilitating a villainous woman is reminiscent of what Ouyang Yuqian (1889–1962) had attempted, albeit more extensively, in his 1928 play *Pan Jinlian*. Like Pan, Cui Shi had in traditional versions been “sacrificed to a rigid male-centered social system.” 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 imperial 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 becoming defensible and understandable, especially in the context of progressive intellectual movements to reform the family system. 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.”

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 wealth, forces Cui and her new husband to live in his residence, and 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 *Ma qian po shui* (Spilling water in front of the horse), presents a Cui who has been moved so far into

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57 An Xi, *Zhu Maichen*, 201.
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,”

為奴一枝花，
落在糞土窪，
要想隨心願，
離開老朱家。

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!

When he returns home, she throws his books on the ground and in response to his invocation of Su Qin 蘇秦 (d. 284 BCE) as a model of a scholarly late bloomer, “...she derides him, mockingly singing that one cannot “wear courtly boots over bear’s claws, nor hold ivory tablets with dog’s paws” (xiongtizi chuan cha­oxue diusigeren 熊蹄子穿朝靴丟死個人, gouzhuazi nabuzhu xiangya huban 狗爪子拿不住象牙笏板). She proceeds to abuse his ancestors. If, in An's

59 Jilin sheng yishu yanjiusuo, ed., Ma qian po shui, 2.
60 Jilin sheng yishu yanjiusuo, ed., Ma qian po shui, 2.
61 Jilin sheng yishu yanjiusuo, ed., Ma qian po shui, 5.
radio play, it was necessary to make Zhu unsympathetic to valorise Cui Shi, in this *erenzhuan* script 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 operated 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 slovenliness, greed and lust, and is ultimately reduced to beggary. By trickery and lies, and echoing the happy end offered by the Yuan *zaju* script, she tries to make Zhu believe that she divorced him in order to encourage him to study harder, that driving 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 version, is tempted to believe her until the second husband appears and reveals that Cui Shi immorally threw herself at him immediately after her divorce. Cui Shi then aggravates her own crimes by accusing the second husband of having forced himself upon her. The second husband can however produce Zhu’s document of divorce, proving that he married Cui 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, 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.62

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” (the initiation of divorce) 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 *erenzhuan* version is able to maintain a story arc that otherwise would no longer be justified by the moral assumptions of its day. 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* piece also called *Ma qian po shui*. This play,

Staging Female-initiated Divorce


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 Cui 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 and burns his books to cook rice. Finally, in exasperation, she forces him to write the document of divorce. When Zhu returns as a high official, Cui demands of him her share in the glory as a right, a compensation for the nine years (in this play) 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 divorced spouse, she has the right to a share of her husband’s affluence. Perhaps the narrative has in this instance shifted once again to reflect its audience’s attitudes towards marital mores – a twenty-first century caricature of the scheming, materialistic ex-wife?63 Despite her “endless pestering”64 (a far cry from the heart-rending entreaties of the traditional Kunju Cui Shi), Zhu Maichen ignores her demands.

Conclusion

Many narratives on the xiqu stage deal with men who rise to high office and are tempted to abandon their wives. Those narratives are thoroughly sympathetic to the abandoned wife, and typically the couple is reconciled, the dramatic tension resolved with the male protagonist being married to both women. Thus, while the constancy of men can also be a dramatic concern, female inici-
tiated divorce cannot easily be turned to a happy ending; and not at all if the woman has remarried.

Depending on treatment and performance, Zhu Maichen’s wife onstage has been a tragic victim of feudal circumstances, a proto-feminist, a scheming materialist, a criminally oversexed plotter, a devoted wife and daughter, or a woman who has consciously contravened convention and must pay the price. One noteworthy aspect is that despite the various titles for the narrative which highlight the figure of Zhu Maichen, in many versions – whether victim or villain – the wife’s story dominates the man’s. In my experience with the play as an audience member, Zhu Maichen seems to exist only to provide the foil and context for his wife’s pathos or deviousness. Cui Shi is a woman making an extraordinary choice and thereby creating the drama; in many versions, Zhu Maichen is a standard Confucian scholar. As an abandoned husband, a talented actor may make something of Zhu in the first scene – but he then proceeds to disappear for the rest of most scripts until he is summoned back to occasion Cui’s death.65

The Zhu Maichen story is also a remarkable example of the modality of Chinese theatrical narratives. Without much altering the “facts of the case,” the treatment and meaning of the story change drastically according to the performance context. Female-initiated divorce goes in the twentieth century from being a villainy which does not need an explanation for the audience to share in the condemnation, to an act which is either an event of tragic consequence, or else a corollary to more sinister motives. Social changes in the perception of appropriate gendered behaviour give the drama the potential to gather meaning as time progresses, since the contemporary audience also has access to the knowledge that the story legitimately derives from traditional China, while having the historical distance to regard it critically. Contemporary audiences can thus look at the play both from within the traditionally accepted morality, and from a contemporary perspective. At the same time, the interpretations of the agents creating a piece of theatre – actors, directors, adaptors – are making concessions to the same shift in the gender climate.

65 A colleague, Kim Hunter Gordon, asked me to consider whether this might be a Nanjing/Shanghai distinction, since his experience of Liang Guyin’s and Ji Zhenhua’s performances was of two equally well-rounded characters. I think this view has merit, given that my understanding of the scenes has been fundamentally formed by Nanjing performances. It also makes sense in terms of adaptors writing for troupe dynamics – while Zhang Jiqing was in terms of fame and influence by far the dominant performer of her generation in Nanjing, Liang Guyin and Ji Zhenhua have approximately even status in Shanghai.
One may also ask what type of bigger-picture considerations apply. Firstly, to make a methodological observation, evidence presented by xiqu actors about their interpretation reminds us that the actor-centred tradition of xiqu remains strong, and that neither established performance convention nor the rise of director and fixed texts inhibits the potential for actors to shape their own interpretations. However, since many actors do not write down their observations, such approaches benefit from fieldwork at theatres. The evidence presented here, especially by Liang Guyin, demonstrates that social shifts in gender expectations directly impact performance choices as well as audience reception, and that traditional plays are eminently subject to the political and social concerns of its actors, as well as to the influence of non-xiqu and non-theatre forms of entertainment.

Secondly, the varying treatment of the Zhu Maichen story is a reminder that the narrative units of the Chinese arts are enduring, adaptable and resilient, capable of acquiring different meanings over time and through different approaches.

Thirdly, changes in attitudes towards gender need not effect straightforward changes on textual treatment and performance tradition; both valorisation and demonization have proven effective ways of interpreting Cui Shi’s demand for divorce. The evolution undergone by this character is therefore not at all a progressive justification, but changing attitudes towards the effects of divorce changes in the way the character’s morality will be judged. Thus, some adaptations can lead towards a reading of the character as trapped by traditional gender expectations, while another adaptation can feature a murderous character which more resembles a misogynistic caricature than anything present in traditional texts.

This narrative serves as an important reminder that “tradition” is a constant process of negotiation. Stage productions such as those listed in this article earn the stamp of “tradition” from even the most conservative of commentators. However, the actual choices made in stage portrayal are deeply informed by contemporary concerns, and cannot be conceptualised as simple extensions either of text or of established performance tradition.

Finally, a personal note. The evaluative aspect of theatre has a great deal to do with subjective experience, and so I gladly admit that it was while watching – deeply moved by the sufferings of the actresses portraying Zhu Maichen’s wife during various Jiangsu Kunju performances – that it occurred to me the narrative is ostensibly a story of her perfidy, not of her trials. Essentially, I (and, I think, my fellow spectators) were watching the story in sympathy with the putative villainess and at odds with the dominant narrative. This seemed to me a product of contemporary adjustments, involving both spectator and actor.
(and other authorial elements) colluding to deal with traditional attitudes that would otherwise be dissonant. This was my motivation to dig deeper into the story.

No doubt a major reason for this narrative’s enduring popularity is the moral question implicit in the plot. To the best of my knowledge, it is a dilemma seldom if ever found in pre-twentieth century Chinese theatre or fiction, namely: can a wife be justified in divorcing her husband? It may well be that the Zhu Maichen narrative is particularly well-suited to contemporary treatments, and its recent performance history could also be examined in connection with other non-<i>xiqu</i> divorce plays on the China stage, such as the immensely and enduringly popular <i>A Doll’s House</i>. Though its pedigree as a traditional stage piece is unassailable, its popularity today surely also owes something to the relevance of divorce as a topic before and after the turn of the Chinese twenty-first century.