CONCLUSION

THE ROLE OF THE PUBLISHER

A prominent school of thought holds that the inclusion of illustration in the publications of the late Ming period was motivated by economic considerations. The argument is simple: illustration made books more attractive and therefore increased their retail value. Presumably the increased production cost was more than recouped. It is useful to keep in mind the ever-important role of economics, but it will be argued here that it is also advisable to investigate in other directions. Publishers surely had an interest in making money, but they seem to have had an equal desire to play a role in the formation of culture and elevate themselves as literary figures in their own right. Publishers, in short, were not merely businessmen, but men of artistic temperament engaged in business, and they must be understood in this light.

One way that publishers attempted to win a place in the culture was to stamp themselves on the text through the process of editing, commenting, and annotating (Patricia Sieber’s study Theaters of Desire makes all the salient points in this regard). In the Wanli period, especially, publishers seized on illustration as another means of shaping both the text and the reception of the text. There is not much evidence that elucidates the relationship between publishers and illustrators, but the moral and philosophical coherence of most publications suggests a single organizing sensibility. At the very least, publishers exerted a certain amount of control over illustration in their mere power to choose their illustrators. They may also have given specific instructions as to style and content. The desire to become literary participants is itself sufficient to explain the inclusion of illustration, irrespective of economic considerations. This is to say, it is more than conceivable that publishers included illustration at a financial loss.

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1 For a discussion about the cost to produce books and the price of books during the late Ming see Kai-wing Chow, Publishing, Culture, and Power, chapter one, 19–56.
In their attempt to make themselves cultural participants, the publishers were distinctly successful, wielding enormous and varied power in the field of cultural production that mattered most. In the case of drama publication, publishers wielded this power in a consistent and systematic fashion, choosing sides in the late Ming debate as to whether drama publications were essentially performance scripts or reading material, and shaping their publications in support of their position. Many publishers, like many literati, strenuously attempted to maintain the interrelationship of literature and performance. Uncomfortable with the idea of upsetting the traditions of Chinese drama culture, these publishers did everything possible to advocate the importance and primacy of performance, such as providing musical notation (dianban) and keys to pronunciation (yinshi). These editorial additions suggest the text’s status as a performance script, and dovetail with the concerns of traditionalists who emphasized the importance of both music and pronunciation. In most cases, as well, publishers used larger fonts and more generous spacing to make the lyrics more legible. This too suggests an emphasis on performance, as performers tended to follow the lyrics closely, while largely improvising the dialogue. Those publishers who saw the printed play as literature, on the other hand, tended to favor landscape illustration over performance illustration (as demonstrated in Ling Mengchu’s edition of Xixiang ji) and made a hallmark of marginal commentaries, critical prefaces, and publisher’s introductions (fanli). Publishers did some of this writing themselves, but for the most part exerted control through hiring decisions and specific instructions to contributors. These editorial additions suggest the literary status of drama publication, as such commentaries have no place in performance.

The extent to which publishers imposed themselves on the text is demonstrated by a comparison of works in manuscript and published form. The famous manuscript of Pipa ji transcribed by Lu Yidian, for example, bears only one noteworthy feature: the lyrics and the dialogue are rendered in different-sized characters. Lu may have incorporated this feature on his own, or he may have retained it from some earlier manuscript. The Side Tang edition of the play published during the

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4 In the postface to his 1674 manuscript copy of Yuanben Cai Bojie Pipa ji, Lu Yidian notes that he worked from an illustrated edition printed in 1548 (post-face 1a–2a).