SINGING IN PLACE OF SCREAMING:
SUBVERSION AS SATIRE IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

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The late Ming iconoclast Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521–1593) was well known in his day as a dramatist. His collection of four plays jointly titled Si sheng yuan 四聲猿 (Four Cries of a Gibbon) was printed several times during the late Ming, and the individual plays of this collection were included in such important anthologies as Sheng Ming zaju 盛明雜劇 (Zaju of the Great Ming) and Leijiang Ji 酹江集 (Libation to the River Collection).1

In recent years an additional play attributed to Xu Wei, Ge dai xiao 歌代嘯 (Singing in Place of Screaming), has been published in Xu Wei’s collected works and as an appendix to a modern annotated edition of Four Cries of a Gibbon.2 While clearly some scholars have accepted the attribution of Singing in Place of Screaming to Xu Wei, others have not. There is no mention of Singing in Place of Screaming in Ming and Qing bibliographies, and the only extant edition of the play dates from the Daoguang 道光 reign (1821–1850) of the Qing Dynasty.3 Tseng Yong-yih 曾永義 has further pointed out that certain details of the “Fanli” 凡例 (Directions to the Reader) to the play do not accord with what we know about Xu Wei and his dramaturgical practice.4 In the introduction to his detailed chronology of Xu Wei’s life,  

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1 For more details about the printing history of these plays, see Fu Xihua 傅惜華, Mingdai zaju quanmu 明代雜劇全目 (A Complete Catalog of Ming Zaju) (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1958), 94–100.


3 Fu Xihua, Mingdai zaju quanmu, 100.

4 For example, the sobriquet (hao 號) used by the writer of the “Directions” implies that he lived in Hangzhou, while Xu was from Shaoxing. The “Directions” also detail the ways in which the play adheres to the form of the northern Yuan zaju, including the fact that its rhymes are based on the Zhongyuan yinyun 中原音韻 (Rhymes of the Central Plains), whereas Xu did not so constrain himself in the plays of Four Cries
Xu Shuofang 徐朔方 simply states that “there is not enough proof” to consider the play Xu Wei’s work and thus he will not discuss it further.\(^5\) Scholars who accept an attribution of *Singing in Place of Screaming* to Xu Wei base themselves on the literary merit of the play, and while I am not persuaded of Xu Wei’s authorship by their arguments I do agree with their assessment of the play as an excellent satiric comedy. As such it is well worth translating in its own right.\(^6\)

One of the most interesting aspects of *Singing in Place of Screaming* is the way in which the theme of carnivalesque topsy-turvyness referred to in its title is played out in the “wedge” (*xiezi* 楔子) and each of its four acts, and is reinforced on all levels. In this play the hypocritical realities behind social ideals are made evident and also laughable by turning these ideals on their heads, thus literally substituting singing (i.e. the play) for the screaming to which one might be tempted when contemplating these realities. The world of this play is one where monks cheerfully admit a general lack of adherence to monastic vows of abstinence, where the romantic ideal of a talented scholar and a gifted beauty is replaced by a love affair between an amorous monk and an adulterous wife, and where a lecherous and corrupt magistrate is not vanquished by one who is honorable and upright but is instead henpecked by his shrewish wife. Further, just as the drama plays with expectations regarding the play’s content, so too does it subvert both language and dramatic convention in the service of its satire.

All four acts of the drama constitute an extended play on words as they each literalize a different proverb. The most common of these four proverbs is “Zhang’s hat on Li’s head” (*Zhang mao Li dai* 張帽李戴) and is the focus of Act III. In Act III, translated in full below, we see additional types of language play. The singer in this act, Monk Li, the only character that appears on stage in each of the play’s four acts, hides crude sexual allusion in lowery verbiage, cheerfully mangles Buddhist terminology to suit his purpose, and manipulates language

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\(^5\) Xu Shuofang 徐朔方, *Wan Ming qujia nianpu* 晚明曲家年譜 (Chronological Biographies of Late Ming Dramatists) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1983), vol.2, 54.

\(^6\) See for example the discussions of Wang Chang’an 王長安, *Xu Wei san bian* 徐渭三辨 (Xu Wei: Three Differentiations) (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1995), 31–60; and Ye Changhai 葉長海, *Quxue yu xijuxue* 曲學與戲劇學 (Study of Songs and Drama) (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1999), 227–248.