THE REPRESENTATION OF SOVEREIGNTY
IN CHINESE VERNACULAR FICTION

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Like all literatures with long traditions, Chinese narrative literature has, in the course of millennia, developed a range of set characterizations. It is particularly easy to recognize such characterizations in the genre of drama, as traditional Chinese theater has a variety of fixed role types that are visually marked by different facial make-up and costumes, each in keeping with the characteristics of the role type being represented. On the Chinese stage each character has a fixed place in relation to all other characters and no one is supposed to act out of character—and as a general rule no one does. In this sense Chinese drama is the most Confucian of all literary genres, insofar as Confucianism, always a social ideal rather than a social reality, requires that each and every member of society act according to their prescribed role: “A ruler acts as a ruler should, and a subject acts as a subject should; a father acts as a father should, and a son acts as a son should” (jun jun, chen chen, fu fu, zi zi 君君，臣臣，父父，子子). Notably, these roles exist interdependently: a king is a king in relation to his subjects, a son is a son in relation to his father. In this social system the individual disappears into his prescribed role, and each role is only meaningful in relation to the other roles; and women have no place in this web of roles except as subsidiaries of their fathers, husbands and sons.

Classical Chinese theater, both the shorter zaju 杂剧 (variety play) and the much longer chuanqi 傳奇 (southern-style play), are enactments of such an idealized social system of strict hierarchies. The “drama” in classical Chinese theater often stems from the conflict between role types (good guy versus bad guy), so that the plot of a play often turns out to be more memorable than the individuals in the

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play, who tend to vanish into the roles they inhabit, such as a beautiful woman in love, an unfaithful husband, a treacherous friend, a narrow-minded parent, or a loyal but slandered minister. The love-struck girls Cui Yingying in Wang Shifu’s 王實甫 (ca. 1260–1336) *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 (The Story of the Western Chamber) and Du Liniang in Tang Xianzu’s 湯顯祖 (1550–1616) *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 (The Peony Pavilion) do not differ from each other so much in terms of their tender but passionate personalities as in terms of the stories that happen to them. In the same way, Miss Cui’s maid, Hongniang, is hardly distinguishable from Miss Du’s maid, Chunxiang, in their vivacity and outspokenness that are so typical of lower-class female characters. That Hongniang plays a more important role in the love life of her mistress is purely a function of the plot, as Miss Du’s erotic dream and her later status as a free-ranging ghost spare her maid much trouble in arranging for secret trysts with the male protagonist.

The power of role types in Chinese theater gives it a particular character: a simplicity, a superficiality even, which can be delightful, but ultimately proves dissatisfying if one looks for complexity not in plot but in characterization. The Cui Yingying in the original Tang story from the ninth century is manipulative, controlling, and sophisticated; she ultimately falls victim to her own impulses for creating the perfect romantic story in real life. She is a much more complicated and nuanced character than the Cui Yingying in the dramatic version of the story, who is portrayed as an innocent, artless, sweet-natured and, all in all, rather uninteresting girl. In the Tang story there is no mention of any external obstacle to the union of the hero and heroine, and the hero remains emotionally attached to the heroine even after she is married to someone else. To attribute his “desertion” of her to mere fickleness is simplifying and misleading. In contrast, the difficulties encountered by the Cui Yingying of the thirteenth-century play are caused by purely external agents, namely a jealous, selfish rival and a snobbish, narrow-minded parent, both being established and recognizable role types, not by any character flaws of the male and female protagonists or by any internal complication of their emotional involvement. External obstacles are in many ways much easier to resolve than internal dilemmas and conflicts.

In Chinese theater hero and villain each occupy their destined place, which matters more than the individual who occupies it. Even Kong Shangren’s 孔尚任 (1648–1718) *Taohua shan* 桃花扇 (*Peach Blossom