

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Woman with No Escape: Operatic Retellings of the Zhu Maichen Story

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Abstract

The Zhu Maichen story originates as a case of ‘female-initiated divorce’ in an ancient Chinese biography, before later becoming a familiar late imperial narrative. In the last hundred years, it has featured as a prominent part of the narrative heritage available for operatic reworking. The absence of a canonical authorial version gives more space for playwrights and performers to incorporate their current perspectives of gender and sexuality into various renditions. We have seen a continuance of older patterns where the wife is demonised for her desire to divorce, as well as productions tending to reconsider the travails of the wife. The Hokkien-language genre *liyuanxi* draws on local narrative versions to arrive at a happy ending, enabling Zhu to remarry his wife, while a new *jingju* (Beijing opera) version at the turn of century even enables the disillusioned wife to liberate herself from the hypocritical Confucian family. Yet in *liyuanxi* the wife is taken back, having retained chastity during their parting, while in *jingju* the wife’s materialistic motivations led to criticism in the press. The female-initiated divorce thus provides no escape for Zhu Maichen’s wife, who is condemned even when tragedy is averted or the narrative’s patriarchal morality subverted.

Keywords: Chinese opera (*xiqu*); Zhu Maichen; Jingju (Beijing opera); Liyuanxi; women in Chinese narratives; divorce in China

One noteworthy feature of *xiqu* (Chinese opera) is how, within generic, aesthetic, musical and sometimes textual bounds, and faced with new generations of audiences, it continues to deal mostly in variations of old narratives. Constituting a rich and diverse family of genres differing from one another in languages, basic melodies, styles of singing, and so forth,¹ *xiqu* plots are both exceedingly flexible – adaptable to changing mores, and relatively weakly bound by text or scores – and recognisably ‘the same story’. Despite their constant transformation and innovation, contemporary Chinese opera companies are incentivised to highlight the traditional aspect of their productions and practices, since all Chinese societies today tend to value indigenous practices principally when thus ideologically defined. One result is that reforms or alterations (necessary and unavoidable in any living theatre) can often be covert or even unconscious, co-existing uncomfortably with claims of unbroken tradition, and generally removed from portrayals in either publicity or research. Yet traditional narratives end up being exceptionally protean, working through a wide range of interpretations while retaining structurally similar plots. This is

¹ Paola Iovene, ‘Chinese Opera on Stage and Screen’, *Opera Quarterly* 26 (2010), 181–2.

visible especially when it comes to gender dynamics, where Chinese social standards have undergone a rapid change since the beginning of the twentieth century.

This article considers the Zhu Maichen story, an ancient narrative with roots in canonical history. In that story, the wife of a poor man demands and receives a divorce, only to be filled with remorse when her ex-husband is elevated to high office. The article argues that despite the many modalities of this divorce narrative in operatic productions of the last century, the woman who initiates the divorce never effectively escapes blame for her action, even where a happy end is furnished or where the narrative is deliberately subverted to exonerate her. Onstage or offstage, the story of female-initiated divorce always reverts to assigning guilt to a woman for desiring more or otherwise than her marriage can provide. The divorcee is thus a woman with no escape, whose actions must be either forgiven or punished, never ratified. Fundamentally, then, gestures towards female independence or emancipation on the Chinese opera stage may also reinforce rather than overturn a traditional patriarchal order, even if they appear at first to critique such attitudes or reclaim such female characters.

Two thousand years of divorce

The story of Zhu Maichen 朱買臣 (d. 115 BCE) and his wife is a remarkable one, providing a rare example of female-initiated divorce in an ancient Chinese context. Set in the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), the narrative originates in a canonical historical record notable – to quote Haiming Yang – for the ‘clear evidence it provides for the apparent ease with which a woman could legitimately divorce her husband in Han China’.² Although its career as a popular narrative is complex, fragments from as early as the Song dynasty (960–1279) show that a divorce tale elaborated from this historical record has been circulating on stage and page with a similar plot for a millennium or nearly.³ By the late imperial era, evidence for the narrative is widespread. The divorce of Zhu Maichen and his wife was widely familiar in dramatic, storytelling and graphic forms. It featured on Cantonese pith paintings for export,⁴ was cited by *nüshu* 女書 (female script) writers as a moral lesson and features *en passant* in the works of authors such as Li Yu 李漁 (1611–80) and Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646).⁵ It also became and today remains core repertoire in a number of *xiqu* and *quyi* 曲藝 (musical storytelling) genres. The best-known version today is probably that of *kunqu*, not least because scenes such as ‘The Mad Dream’ became core repertoire for post-Mao stars such as, in Nanjing, Zhang Jiqing 張繼青 (1939–2022) and, in Shanghai, Liang Guyin 梁谷音 (b. 1942).⁶

The basic structure of the plot is easily summarised: Zhu Maichen’s wife, dissatisfied with the penury of their life, compels Zhu to grant her a divorce, over his vigorous, sometimes plaintive, sometimes menacing, objections. Zhu, who gathers firewood to eke out a living but is committed to a life studying the classics, is not long thereafter recognised for his scholarly achievements and returns home in high honour, appointed by the state to

² Haiming Yang, ‘Zhu Maichen’s Wife’, in *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: Antiquity through Sui, 1600 B.C.E.–618 C.E.*, ed. Lily Xiao Hong Lee, A.D. Stefanowska and Sue Wiles (New York, 2007), 257.

³ Qian Nanyang 錢南揚, *Song Yuan xiwen jiyi* 宋元戲文輯佚 [A Collection of Missing Dramatic Scripts during the Song and Yuan Dynasties] (Shanghai, 1996), 54–5.

⁴ Ifan Williams, ‘Beauty in Pursuit of Pleasure’, *Apollo* 537 (2006), 62.

⁵ Anne McLaren, ‘Women’s Voices and Textuality: Chastity and Abduction in Chinese *Nüshu* Writing’, *Modern China* 22 (1996), 408; David Rolston, ‘Oral Performing Literature in Traditional Chinese Fiction: Non-Realistic Usages in the Jin Ping Mei Cihua and Their Influence’, *CHINOPERL: Chinese Oral and Performing Literature* 17 (1994), 86.

⁶ Josh Stenberg, ‘Staging Female-Initiated Divorce: The Zhu Maichen Story in Twentieth-Century Drama from Opprobrium through Approbation’, *Nan Nü* 16 (2014), 308–40.

govern his native place. His wife has remarried (or in some versions, crucially, sought but failed to remarry) and bitterly regrets her missed chance for wealth and glory as his wife. She entreats Zhu publicly to restore to her former position as wife, but he has his retinue spill water on the ground to illustrate the finality of their separation. Unable to gather the water back into the basin, she is humiliated and commits suicide (except, as we shall see, in one comic version, where she is ruefully taken back).

The development of the Zhu Maichen story from its origins in canonical biography to its various textual adaptations, and then to its performance traditions in *kunqu* and other operatic genres, has been the subject of some academic interest. It is one prominent example of the adjustment of traditional narratives taking place on the Chinese stage across many genres. Changing gender roles and attitudes resulted in both subtle and drastic adaptations of the Zhu Maichen story. While female-initiated divorce had been an action that late imperial audiences could identify as immoral *ipso facto*, the new focus on women's agency and the growing availability and respectability of divorce throughout the century rendered new perspectives on the story possible, with more sympathetic versions emerging.⁷ Contemporary actors and audiences are likely to regard the wife's aspiration and actions as legitimate, a reading that situates the story among the many narratives about female suffering in 'feudal' China, and has something in common with gender-conscious rewritings such as those applied to infamous poisoner Pan Jinlian 潘金蓮, from Ouyang Yuqian's 歐陽予倩 (1889–1962) 1926 *huaju* (spoken theatre) rendition to Wei Minglun's 魏明倫 (b. 1941) 1985 script in the *chuanju* (Sichuan opera) genre.⁸ At the same time, 'unreconstructed' versions continue to be performed. Yet are traditional and reworked versions as divergent as they seem at first glance?

The transformation of this 'female-initiated divorce' since the early twentieth century reflects how modern Chinese people have been negotiating the status of women and the question of female agency over the past century. This article first considers modern versions of the Zhu Maichen story that directly retained the traditional moral slant, focusing on two *jingju* (Peking opera) versions of 1912 and 1984. It then considers the implications of a 2016 revival of a traditional repertoire piece in the Hokkien *liyuanxi* 梨園戲 genre in which a happy ending is provided, though not necessarily to emancipatory effect. Finally, we consider a 2000 *jingju* version that deliberately sought to refashion this story as a critique of the hypocrisy and subterfuge of traditional Chinese culture, provoking a hostile reaction from *xiqu* insiders.⁹ Whether patriarchally punitive or forgiving, or even when deliberately subversive, we find the wife always already condemned. The escape into a moral system where her demands for adequate food and clothing are acceptable and reasonable is always denied.

Zhu Maichen (1912 and 1984): resilient misogyny in eras of reform

Wang Xiaonong 汪笑儂 (1858–1918) seems to have been the first professional to make a *jingju* adaptation of the Zhu Maichen story, by then already a well-known part of the

⁷ Stenberg, 'Staging Female-Initiated Divorce', 310. In response to the emergent legitimacy of the wife's aspirations, reactionary versions also developed, in which the wife considers murder as an alternative to divorce.

⁸ Pan Jinlian is a woman in the *Water Margin* stories. Traditional versions frequently portrayed her as morally repellent, an adulteress who murders her husband, Wu Dalang 武大郎. She is finally killed by Wu Dalang's heroic younger brother, Wu Song 武松. In contrast, Ouyang Yuqian develops a revisionist version of the Pan Jinlian story in order to plead for romantic freedom, describing Pan as a woman who bravely pursues Wu Song's love and finally commits suicide for him. By inserting Pan Jinlian into five other stories, Wei Minglun shows how Pan gradually falls into debauchery; instead, the patriarchal society is blamed for leading Pan into wantonness.

⁹ Zhang Manjun 張曼君, 'Maqian poshui dui xiaojuchang jingju de tansuo' 《馬前潑水》對小劇場京劇的探索 [Maqian poshui as an Exploration of Little Theatre Beijing Opera], *Zhongguo xiju* 中國戲劇 [Chinese Theatre] 11 (2001), 45.

related but more literary *kunqu* genre.¹⁰ His version had its debut in 1912 at Tianxian chayuan 天仙茶園 (Tianxian Teahouse) in Tianjin, in the midst of China's turbulent transition from the Manchu Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China. Wang Xiaonong was a Manchu scholar who chose to be a professional *jingju* performer after being dismissed from his position as magistrate of Taikang County. Significantly influenced by the late Qing reformist ethos, Wang regarded *jingju* as a tool for social education, and has gained an exalted reputation in Chinese theatre studies for new patriotic works such as *Ku zumiao* 哭祖廟 (*Weep in the Ancestral Temple*) and *Bolan wangguocan* 波蘭亡國慘 (*Poland's Tragic Subjugation*; also known as *Guazhong lanyin* 瓜種蘭因).¹¹ To judge from his stage works, however, his reform programme seems to have left out the question of gender: his *jingju* rendition of the Zhu Maichen narrative, entitled *Maqian poshui* 馬前潑水 (*Spilling Water in Front of the Horse*), and adapted from the *kunqu* stage version of *Lanke shan* 爛柯山 (*Lanke Mountain*), promotes a particularly neo-Confucian orthodox and scholar-focused morality in its endorsement of a wife's wholehearted obedience to her husband, and the justness of punishment meted out to a wife who fails in this obligation. While Qing *kunqu* scripts depict Zhu Maichen's wife, Cui Shi, as slothful and bad-tempered, Wang's version went further, demonising Cui Shi, portraying her not so much as a victim of 'feudal' repression but as a caricature of the wifely evils of gluttony and indolence. Thus, Zhu blames the divorce squarely on her avarice:

【朱買臣】想當年我把你娶家下，實指望夫唱婦隨宜室又宜家。
書生我日用三餐費用並非大，皆因是家徒四壁手中無錢花。¹²

(ZHU MAICHEN: When I married you years ago, I expected you to maintain domestic harmony with wifely virtue. As a scholar, my daily expenses for three meals are little enough. [You divorced me] simply because we were extremely destitute and had no extra money.)

In this version, as in others, Zhu Maichen's grounds for blaming Cui Shi rely on his absolving himself of any guilt for failing to provide the necessities of life to his wife. Instead of working for money, he discusses poetry and essays with friends in a neighbouring village, without any thought for their sustenance, even as their funds run low. When Cui Shi forces him to cut firewood in the mountain to earn money for rice, Zhu considers such labour to impugn his scholarly dignity. For Wang Xiaonong and the audiences of the day, the portrayal of Cui Shi as a gluttonous and lazy woman who violates wifely virtues of frugality and is negligent of her duty of household management exonerated Zhu Maichen from his failure to earn a living, and transferred liability to Cui Shi.

Her violation of wifely duties is apparent in numerous small details. For instance, having forced Zhu to cut firewood in the mountain to sell for rice, Cui Shi pawns her trousers and a hairpin for 250 *wen*, which she then gambles away. Then, when she is remarried, to a newly rich mason, Zhang San 張三, she continues her profligate lifestyle, soon dissipating

¹⁰ There is neither a full script nor an author, but the key scenes of the Zhu Maichen story feature in 'seventeenth and eighteenth century collections such as *Zui yi qing* 醉怡情 [*Enjoyment after Drinking*], *Gelin shicui* 歌林拾翠 [*Treasures from the Forest of Songs*], *Zhuibaiqiu* 綴白裘 [*A Patched Cloak of White Fur*], and *Nashuying qupu* 納書楹曲譜 [*Scores from the Bookshelf*]. See Josh Stenberg, 'Zhang Jiqing's Lecture on *Chimeng* (The Mad Dream)', *CHINOPERL: Chinese Oral and Performing Literature* 35 (2016), 155. Wang Xiaonong's *jingju* version was based on the seven scenes collected in *Zhuibaiqiu*. As a relatively new genre that formed around 1840, it was common practice for *jingju* to absorb repertoire from other genres, especially *kunqu*.

¹¹ Ruru Li, *The Soul of Beijing Opera: Theatrical Creativity and Continuity in the Changing World* (Hong Kong, 2010), 43–5; Rebecca Karl, 'Staging the World in Late Qing China: Globe, Nation, and Race in a 1904 Beijing Opera', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 6 (2000), 551–606.

¹² See Xikao 戲考 (*Textual Research on Chinese Opera*), <http://scripts.xikao.com/play/70005106>.

her new husband's savings. These details deepen the image of Cui Shi as the embodiment of wifely evil, liable to ruin any family into which she marries. Thus, in this story Cui Shi is demonised as both the destructive force within the marriage and the initiator of the divorce. This sentiment was also embodied in Zhu Maichen's scene-closing poem near the denouement of the play:

【朱買臣】崔氏當年不念舊，後悔不及面慚羞。
今日碰死在街口，這就是不是夫妻不到頭。¹³

(ZHU MAICHEN: Back then, Cui Shi did not cherish our [marital] bond, but now, too late for remorse, her shame shows on her countenance. Today she has put an end to herself on the open street; thus it goes for husband and wife not fated to see it to the end.)

Zhu Maichen delights in his rejection of Cui Shi's request for remarriage as a revenge for her initiating a divorce during his early years of misfortune. This feature separates this *jingju* version from the traditional *kunqu* version, where Zhu is rendered melancholy rather than vengeful by his wife's transgressions. Where tenderness is shown even after divorce, the inability to resume the marriage reads principally as a social constraint: a theme strengthened in post-1949 adaptations.¹⁴ When, in the *kunqu* version, Cui Shi kneels in the street begging for Zhu Maichen to remarry her magnanimously, Zhu feels not elated but extremely 'sorrowful and disturbed':¹⁵

【朱買臣】柴米夫妻我有愧，逼寫休書裂心肝。
馬前潑水非我願，破鏡殘缺難重圓。¹⁶

(ZHU MAICHEN: I am ashamed [to divorce] my wife of firewood and rice, [but] forcing me to write the document of divorce broke my heart. Spilling water is not what I desire, [but] a broken mirror cannot be made whole again.)

It can be seen from the vacillation in *kunqu* Zhu Maichen's declarations that he is obviously nostalgic for their marriage, but lacks the courage to remarry Cui Shi, partially as a result of public pressure from a hypocritical and patriarchal society, a reading much encouraged in recent and contemporary *kunqu* performance by the ideological tendency to portray the imperial state as a resolute enemy of romance and personal inclination (with the People's Republic of China (PRC) therefore occupying a space of romantic and erotic as well as political liberation). The lurking misogyny in Wang Xiaonong's rendition, on the other hand, not only demonises Cui Shi, but also reduces Zhu's motives for refusing a resumption of the marriage to petty vengeance for her unwillingness to stand by him in distress.¹⁷

¹³ These lyrics were originally seen in Wang Xiaonong's version, while being removed from He Yurong's 何玉蓉 (1913–2012) audiovisual recording.

¹⁴ Given Wang Xiaonong's social and educational background, the way that Zhu Maichen was remoulded as an innocent scholar victimised by his nefarious wife might well be a projection of his sympathies for traditional literati.

¹⁵ See the video by Jiangsusheng kunjuyuan 江蘇省昆劇院 (*Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre*), starring Zhang Jiqing and Yao Jikun 姚繼焜 (b. 1935), 1998 performance, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gieN3GTbRmY.

¹⁶ Jiangsusheng kunjuyuan 江蘇省昆劇院 (*Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre*).

¹⁷ The Zhu Maichen story in *laoting dagu* 樂亭大鼓, a story-telling genre from north-eastern Hebei's Laoting county, in dialect and accompanied by drum, likely has a genealogical connection to Wang Xiaonong's *jingju* version, although it is not yet possible to establish its exact nature. *Laoting dagu* Zhu Maichen shares some lyrics near the denouement with the Wang Xiaonong version: 'You, look at me, I wear a red [robe], a jade belt around

In 1984, Sun Yumin 孫毓敏 (b. 1940), former director of Beijing xiqu yishu zhiye xueyuan 北京戲曲藝術職業學院 (Beijing Opera Arts College), also adapted the Zhu Maichen story into a 40-minute *jingju* scene, taking the role of the wife herself.¹⁸ Unlike Wang Xiaonong's 1912 version, which performed the full story, Sun only selected one scene, 'Chimeng' 癡夢 ('Mad Dream'), which served also as the title. Cui Shi is the only major character. The plot was structurally almost a copy of the *kunqu* version although, since the genres have different prosodic, musical and choreographic requirements, script, score and performance are all substantially different. In the very beginning of this short play, two yamen runners, played by performers of the *chou* 丑 (clown) category, are gossiping:

【差人甲】最毒不過婦人心哪！

【差人乙】 是啊。

【差人甲】 啊。就拿咱們今日報錄這檔子事來說吧。朱買臣，朱老爺（如今高中了，如今做了會稽太守。）多大的榮耀啊！

【差人乙】 是啊。

【差人甲】 啊！可是他當初沒得中的時候，那家裡頭可是窮啊！.....他那夫人.....給他老人家給踹了。¹⁹

(YAMEN RUNNER A: ...No venom can surpass that of a woman's heart!

YAMEN RUNNER B: Sure.

YAMEN RUNNER A: Yes. Take, for example, our task today, announcing good news: Zhu Maichen, His Excellency Zhu Maichen [who has become the prefectural magistrate of Kuaiji, as a successful civil service examination candidate]. What glory!

YAMEN RUNNER B: Sure.

YAMEN RUNNER A: Yes! But you would never guess the poverty he came from before that! ... his wife ... even ran out on him.)

The divorce is in this version not only a crushing indictment of the wife, but also a stain on Zhu Maichen's character, and thus evidence for feminine deviousness. Sun Yumin's

my waist, a pair of court boots on my feet, and a black gauze hat on my head.' See the video of the 2001 performance by Zhao Fenglan 趙鳳蘭 (b. 1943), <https://v.qq.com/x/page/c0835pk4oks.html?> Zhao Fenglan's performance was probably influenced by PRC rewritings, since it is noticeably different from *laoting dagu* artist Cui Chengyun's 崔成雲 roughly contemporaneous version, which highlights karmic retribution in a distinctly Buddhist moral system. For instance, Zhu Maichen's mother gives birth to him at the age of forty-eight because of her sincere belief in Buddhism. A beautiful woman such as Cui Shi is also believed to have negative impacts on the male members (*ke* 剋) of her husband's family, a belief neglected in this version by Cui Shi apparently being karmically responsible for the death of Zhu's father; see <https://v.qq.com/x/page/o0169lwfjrj6.html?> Further related versions are those of *pingju* 評劇 (a Hebei theatrical genre), which shares both geography and textual similarities with *laoting dagu*. In both genres, Zhu lives in Cui Shi's parents' house due to penury. In order to divorce Zhu Maichen, Cui Shi threatens to slash Zhu with a kitchen knife in *laoting dagu*, while she throws a brazier at him in *pingju*. Zhu is infuriated, voluntarily writes the document of divorce for Cui Shi, and leaves her house. In the *pingju* version, Cui Shi is more drastically demonised, as she forces Zhu to cut firewood in the mountain on a snowy day in the hopes that this will finish him off. See also the *errenzhu* version mentioned by Stenberg, 'Staging Female-Initiated Divorce', 334–6.

¹⁸ Beijing xiqu yishu zhiye xueyuan is often abbreviated to Beijing xixiao 北京戲校. Founded in 1952, the Beijing Opera Arts College has become the principal vocational feeder school, particularly for Beijing-based *jingju* troupes.

¹⁹ Fan Jiasheng 范家盛, ed., *Sun Yumin yanchu jumu jicheng* 孫毓敏演出劇目集成 [Collected Manuscripts for Sun Yumin's Performance] (Guangzhou, 2003), 5. The bracketed lyrics do not appear in the published version but are added in accordance with the video of Sun Yumin's 1984 performance, https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNDAXNzgxOTY4.html. The version was maintained in *jingju* repertoire and in 1991 recorded by one of Sun's students, Gong Suping 龔蘇萍, but it is now seldom performed.

version also elaborates the reason for Cui Shi's wish to divorce Zhu – she wants to marry Zhang the butcher, who is full and round thanks to 'good wine and good food'. This supplementary detail further denigrates Cui Shi as a woman who is addicted to, and only interested in, material comforts. Cui Shi soon falls victim to Zhang's domestic violence and flees the home in desperation to take shelter with a friend. Her lament, 'I suffer the consequences of my snobbish favour of the rich over the poor' (嫌貧愛富終害己),²⁰ further reveals this as a story of punishment for wifely insubordination, and shows that she is, in the neo-Confucian moral system of the story, receiving her due. Arguably, this message was also consonant with Communist rhetoric about the ignobility of desiring material gain.

After the Cultural Revolution, and in the midst of China's 1980s, gender roles were in enormous flux and China was beginning to see significant and steady growth in divorce and remarriage.²¹ However, Sun Yumin's version still blamed the divorce on Cui Shi, morally hardly differentiating itself from Wang Xiaonong's 1912 version in this respect. It was this persistent and underlying misogyny on the Chinese *xiqu* stage, symptomatic of a bedrock of patriarchal gender roles persisting into the Chinese twenty-first century, that would likely provide the impetus for Sheng Heyu and Zhang Manjun to mount a challenge to this narrative in their 2000 *jingju* recreation of *Maqian poshui*, a production to which we will return in the article's final section.

Hokkien happy ending (2016)

Besides the familiar iterations of the Zhu Maichen story ending in suicide, there have been, at least since the Yuan dynasty, versions with happy endings. In these, divorce results not in the wife's suicide but in the couple's happy reunion. In one *zaju* script, in the tradition of virtuous wives (and reminiscent of stories such as Li Yaxian 李亞仙), Cui Shi is disturbed by the deleterious effect that her beauty and talent exert on her husband, causing him to neglect his studies.²² Thus, at the instigation of her father, she hatches a scheme, forcing a divorce upon him to remove the distractions and thereby return him to his exam preparations (Figure 1). Once he has triumphed in the exams, the necessary proofs are produced and a happy ending eventuates.²³

At least one genre of Chinese theatre, Quanzhou's *liyuanxi*, still performs a version with a happy ending, though its mechanics are rather different from the *zaju*, and the wife is sincere in her wish for a divorce. As with the rest of traditional *liyuanxi* repertoire, this is usually credited to an older *nanxi* (southern drama) legacy, in this case as a *shanglu* play.²⁴

²⁰ Fan, *Sun Yumin yanchu jumu jicheng*, 31.

²¹ Qingbin Wang and Qin Zhou, 'China's Divorce and Remarriage Rates: Trends and Regional Disparities', *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 51 (2010), 257–67.

²² Adapted from the *chuanqi* script of the Tang dynasty, *Li Yaxian* is a central *liyuanxi* repertoire that expounds on the love story of famous courtesan Li Yaxian and talented scholar Zheng Yuanhe 鄭元和. Li Yaxian saves Zheng Yuanhe and serves him as a virtuous wife, until Zheng becomes successful in the civil service examination. Li is also granted a title for her selfless dedication to her husband.

²³ This version was first seen in *zaju Zhu Taishou fengxue yuqian ji* 朱太守風雪漁樵記 [*Prefect Zhu, the Woodcutter and the Fisherman, amidst the Wind and Snow*] collected in *Yuanqu xuan* 元曲選 (*Selected Yuan Plays*; 1616) by Zang Maoxun 臧懋循 (1550–1620). In that play, 'Zhu's wife (who is called Jade Immortal 玉天仙 in this version) 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.' See Stenberg, 'Staging Female-Initiated Divorce', 319–20. While this wife is virtuous within the moral terms of the play, there is of course a deep-seated misogyny in narratives where male achievement is obstructed by female allures.

²⁴ One element suggesting early origins might be that Zhu Maichen is addressed as *jiyuan*, a Song dynasty practice, rather than *xiuca*, as he would be in later versions. See Wu Jieqiu 吳捷秋, *Liyuanxi yishu shilun* 梨園戲藝術史論 [*A History of Liyuanxi Artistry*] (Beijing, 1996), 29. Lin Rensheng 林任生 (whom Wu Jieqiu quotes



Figure 1. Zhao Xiaoniang (Zeng Jingping) compels her husband Zhu Maichen (Lin Cangxiao 林蒼曉) to give her a divorce. Fujian Province Liyuan Experimental Theatre, 2016. Courtesy of the troupe.

Only two scenes have been transmitted into post-Mao repertoire, ‘Bixie’ 逼寫 (‘Compelled to Write the Divorce Paper’) and ‘Tuogong’ 托公 (‘Entrusting Remarriage to Zhang Gong’), both well known as *zuibaixi* 嘴白戲 (talk scenes) repertoire.²⁵ A manuscript was dictated in 1956, mostly by the actor He Shumin 何淑敏, who in the 1930s had become one of the first women on stage in this genre.²⁶ Her own portrayal of the wife was thoroughly

from Lin’s unpublished manuscript notes) adduces a number of other pieces of evidence, including from Quanzhou proverbs, that might suggest the play had an early appearance in the area. Unlike some other pieces of *liyuanxi* repertoire, however, there is no direct textual evidence linking it to Song or Yuan dynasty *nanxi* plays. A more recent thematic analysis argues instead that it is a product of a mid-Yuan to mid-Ming theatre culture. Qiu Jianying 邱劍穎, ‘Liyuanxi “Zhu Maichen” chuantongben chuanguo kaolüe’ 梨園戲《朱買臣》傳統本創作考略 [‘On the Origin of Liyuan opera *Zhu Maichen*’], *Fujian Yishu* [Fujian Arts] 21 (2012), 41–4. Since there is no script evidence about *Zhu Maichen* before state intellectuals began to record it from actors in the early PRC, this link is likely to remain conjectural. On the other hand, Hokkien forms show no history of literati interventions in late imperial theatre scripts (very little of which survive, and none with authors attached to them), so it is unlikely to be a deliberate archaism from a pre-PRC period. Traditional *liyuanxi* repertoire is divided into two categories, *daliyuan* 大梨園 (great *liyuanxi*) and *xiaoliyuan* 小梨園 (small *liyuanxi*). *Daliyuan* is further divided into *shanglu* 上路 (northern route) and *xianan* 下南 (southern path). *Shanglu* repertoire refers to *liyuanxi* plays ultimately originating to the north, in Zhejiang province, and is believed to retain some traditions of *nanxi*.

²⁵ This is a matter for a different line of research altogether, but it is worth noting that such *zuibaixi*, featuring little or no music, would at least formally appear to be examples not of *xiqu* but of spoken theatre. It is worth considering whether the hard distinction between *xiqu* and spoken theatre, according to which China developed spoken theatre in reaction to Western and Japanese models, is in fact partially a product of the fact that core genres of comparison (*Jingju*, *kunqu*, Cantonese opera) have few if any such scenes. Certainly, several traditional *liyuanxi* scenes would essentially seem to be ‘spoken theatre’ rather than music-drama or dance-drama, featuring stock characters but no singing, little or no music, and little codified movement.

²⁶ This version, dictated to Lin Rensheng, was collected in volume 4 of the *Quanzhou Collectanea* (Quanzhou, 2000, 1–53). In recent years the troupe has preferred to revive older repertoire from the manuscripts as dictated

shrewish.²⁷ Other elder actors had fragmentary recollections regarding the other scenes, either from performance or from education as child or adolescent actors. With the assistance of retired actors (most notably Cai Qingping 蔡清平 for the title role), a six-scene version was revived in 2016. Unfortunately, no firmer link to older practice can be established through documents, since it remains true that the pre-PRC ‘history of the stage in [Quanzhou] and [Zhangzhou] is so poorly documented that, even if we include evidence from foreign observers, no coherent account can be presented’.²⁸ A late Qing fragment for the use of the actor playing the wife, however, suggests that there may have been a version without water-spilling, and might also suggest that the version now in use has a substantial component that was added or changed in the first half of the twentieth century.²⁹

As such, the gender politics as performed in the *liyuanxi* version are no doubt a mix of older oral scripts, memories reaching into the Republican and early PRC eras, and contemporary sensibilities. The revived version has been core repertoire in recent years, with performances at the 2016 Shanghai Little Theatre Chinese Opera Festival.³⁰ In November 2017 it was programmed alongside another revised divorce narrative, *Yubeiting* 御碑亭 (*The Imperial Stele*), in Beijing in the cheekily named ‘Dang ai yicheng wangshi’ 當愛已成往事 (‘When Love Is Gone’) series.³¹

The 2016 revival of *Zhu Maichen* in *liyuanxi* was part of a practice, ongoing since 2012, of reviving older plays in their fragmentary ‘original’ forms. It may also be that the troupe director, Zeng Jingping 曾靜萍 (b. 1963), selected the play in order to act against type, since she is renowned for her portrayals of elegant maidens and widows, rather than shrews. The fact that these scenes in *liyuanxi* practice constitute a *canben* 殘本 (fragmentary version) means that the modern production occurs in narrative order, but out of narrative proportion: the pacing of the narrative is determined not by an overarching logic of a script,

but before being edited for the *Collectanea*, which are held by the troupe and are reportedly more profane as well as repetitive. The 2016 version also bypasses Lin Rensheng’s own 1962 version, which to some degree adapted the plot to the necessities of party ideology (for instance by giving sympathetic characters more proletarian backgrounds). See Wu, *A History of Liyuanxi Artistry*, 230.

²⁷ Bai Yonghua 白勇華, ‘Shiqi nian “xigai” guocheng zhong de minjian yu guojia’ 十七年“戲改”過程中的民間與國家 [‘The Popular and the State in the “Drama Reform” of the Seventeen Years’] (PhD thesis, Fujian Normal University, 2016), 217.

²⁸ Piet van der Loon, *The Classical Theatre and Art Song of South Fukien: A Study of Three Ming Anthologies* (Taipei, 1992), 20.

²⁹ Qiu, ‘On the Origin of Liyuan opera *Zhu Maichen*’. *Xiqu* scripts for actor use often contained only their own role. The fragment is reproduced in a modern edition in the *Collectanea* (IV: 54–63) alongside some related lyrics for musical performance. Qiu writes that the question of why water-spilling is absent from the confrontation scene is a matter of conjecture, and considers the possibilities that it had never been in *liyuanxi* versions, that it had disappeared from such versions over the course of acting generations, or that the fragment is faulty.

³⁰ At over three hours, the full version of this ‘fragment’ is deemed too long for some audiences, and so amendments of the show mean that this version has also been performed with five scenes and other abridgements. Other touring highlights included a performance at the Hong Kong Chinese Opera Festival in June 2019 as well as shows in Nanjing and Zhejiang (Ningbo and Jinhua). Its reception outside of its home area has been somewhat limited by the heavy use of dialect speech (and comparatively little singing), which must be translated into Mandarin subtitles for audiences outside of the Hokkien-speaking area, which is broadly thought to diminish the direct earthiness of the humour.

³¹ ‘When Love Is Gone’ is a reference to the 1993 iconic pop song of the same name by Leslie Cheung 張國榮, which first featured in what remains the best-known *xiqu* movie, *Bawang bieji* 霸王別姬 [*Farewell My Concubine*]. The pairing of *Zhu Maichen* with *Yubeiting* is also of note, since the latter is a rewriting of another *xiqu* divorce narrative (also known as *Wang Youdao xiuqi* 王有道休妻 (*Wang Youdao Divorces his Wife*)) by a young woman playwright in the troupe, Zhang Jingjing 張婧婧. For a gender-conscious Taiwanese *jingju* revision of the same narrative, also by a woman playwright, see Daphne Lei, *Alternative Chinese Opera in the Age of Globalization: Performing Zero* (New York, 2011), 41–6.

but by the happenstance of a performance practice that has retained some scenes (which narratively might be of an aleatory nature) and not others (which might be central to the ‘plot’). As with the performance of ‘traditional’ *zhezixi* (‘extracted scenes’) rather than full narratives, narrative proportion is dictated by the assumption that audiences know the plot already, and that portions of it can therefore be elided. Nevertheless, there were commentators who felt that the troupe showed too much respect for ‘tradition’ in this production and would have done well to shape the script beyond the existing text.³²

The principal structural and moral difference is that the wife’s remarriage, while initially agreed upon, has been prevented from occurring. The bridegroom is something like a village idiot, and his family intervenes, reducing Zhu Maichen’s former wife, in this version named Zhao Xiaoniang 趙小娘, to menial service. The central conflict – whether the marriage can be resumed – is still played out, and the water from the basin is still poured on the dusty ground. Yet after the wife has failed to recover the water, she succeeds, through intermediaries, in convincing Zhu to resume the marriage. Evidently, where the wife has been chaste since the divorce, the divorce becomes reversible.

As with the *kunqu* versions, the first scene (‘Bixie’) depicts the attempts made by Zhu Maichen’s wife to force him to sign a document of divorce. The *kunqu* version is not without its comical passages, but the actual moment of the signing is usually imbued with high drama, and the audience is expected to sympathise with Zhu’s plights. In the *liyuanxi* version, there is little opportunity for pathos. The wife, Zhao Xiaoniang, is brash, demanding, crude and curt; as soon as she appears, she berates and insults her husband. When Zhu Maichen’s friend, Zhang Gong, tries to intervene on her husband’s side, Zhao rebukes him:

【趙小娘】自我趙氏做人，跟人吵架，從未罵輸人。今日罵輸前村張公，真正不甘願！你也不是人的親，也不是人的戚，抑不是人的房頭叔伯。

(ZHAO XIAONIANG: Ever since I, Zhao Xiaoniang, came of age, I have never lost a quarrel. From you, Zhang Gong of the neighbouring village, I would not take a defeat lightly! You are no family of his, no relative, not even a distant uncle.)

Invective of this kind is accompanied by a great deal of physical comedy; for instance, in the process of being bullied into divorcing Xiaoniang, Zhu Maichen asks for brush and paper to write the divorce document – which she instantly produces from her clothing, showing that she is ready to divorce at any moment. During the first scene, Zhao walks into her aunt, who is acting as her matchmaker. Walking backwards, they collide, and Zhao complains that she’s run into ‘a mad sow’ (瘋豬母), while the aunt remarks that she’s stumbled over a dog. What follows is a long dialogue of punning invective between the two of them. Since the two characters share the same goal – to have Zhao remarried – the exchange serves only the purpose of amusing the audience and defining the two female characters as scrappy, sharp-tongued and greedy.

In one scene with no *jingju* or *kunqu* equivalents, Dong Cheng 董成, the prospective bridegroom, appears as a lame and stuttering clown. He laments that the wedding will be broken off, with loss of promised substantial delights: the celebratory pork knuckle has already been stewed. Comically, he bemoans the disappearance of his ‘pork knuckle wife’ (豬腳老婆). Such banter, grotesque, convoluted and dialect-bound, is a constant of the play, and it too is underscored with slapstick physical comedy. Finally the uncle

³² Zhi Gong 織工, “‘Chuantong’ de xianjing: tan liyuanxi Zhu Maichen, Lü Mengzheng’, 傳統的陷阱：談梨園戲《朱買臣》《呂蒙正》 [‘The Trap of “Tradition”: On Liyuanxi Shows Zhu Maichen and Lü Mengzheng’], *Xiju yu shi-pin pinglun* 戲劇與影視評論 [Stage and Screen Reviews] 2 (2018), 31–9.

of the prospective husband forbids his dim-witted nephew from going through with the wedding. With the match off, Zhao Xiaoniang has become not a remarried wife but a single divorcee. This gives her bitterness and remorse a different tinge, since she has given up her marriage not for a worse one, but for nothing at all, and is reduced to sweeping the streets. Even here, her self-pity and snappishness are deployed not to produce empathy but laughter. With wheedling and outbursts, she finally forces herself back on Zhu Maichen, who cannot sustain his façade of severity and relents.

But she will be no social equal. The play thus ends with more slightly risqué repartee between Zhu Maichen's new mother-in-law, Madam Ni – again played as a slightly ribald female clown – and Zhao Xiaoniang in which they discuss how Zhu should be divided among his wives:

- 【倪夫人】頭頂起到胸膛止，這內一份 – –
 【趙小娘】這份要分給誰？
 【倪夫人】這一份分給我小姐兒，夜來說恩說愛。
 【倪夫人】頭頂起到胸膛止，這內一份，這份要分給誰？這一份分給我小姐兒，夜來說恩說愛，割死你這個查某！
 【趙小娘】想你也勿割吊人！
 【倪夫人】查某你要分嗎？
 【趙小娘】阮要分哪一份？
 【倪夫人】對呀。有人有份，分一份給你：腳趾下起到腳頭膚為止。
 【趙小娘】這份要分度是誰？
 【倪夫人】分給你這個查某，冥時嗅腳芴。

(MADAM NI: From the crown of the head to the chest, this is one part.
 XIAONIANG: Who's that for?)

MADAM NI: That part is for my daughter. To talk about love at night. I'll cut you up too, woman!

XIAONIANG: I don't think you would.

MADAM NI: You want a part of him too, woman?

XIAONIANG: Which part is for me?

MADAM NI: Well, everyone gets a part. You get a part too. From the toe up to the thigh...

XIAONIANG: Who's that part for?

MADAM NI: This part is for you, woman, so you can sniff the foot in the dark.)

To keep things fair, the third part of the connubial leg is awarded by Madam Ni to herself, the mother-in-law. So, rather than pathos, what we have in the *liyuanxi* version is earthy comedy.

This comedy depends on the failure of the wife's remarriage to come about. The integrity of marriage has not really been threatened. As such, Zhao Xiaoniang's status is somewhat devalued but not wholly irrecoverable: humour can be deployed without fear, since the outcome is punitive but not severe – a good-humoured warning that wives should bear their misfortunes stoically. Shrewishness is deployed to comic effect, and moral admonition is clothed in mirth. As Zeng Jingping explained in an interview about this role, 'it requires you to get hold of the proper degree. Once, because the audience was into it, I overdid it, and then she wasn't adorable (*ke'ai* 可愛) anymore. She has to be shrewish enough to be funny, but not so shrewish that people don't pity her later on'.³³ Although at the end of the play she has not quite achieved the glories she had

³³ Zeng Jingping. Personal communication, 26 September 2019.



Figure 2. Zhao Xiaoniang persuades the neighbour Zhang Gong (Li Huiyi 李輝逸) to intercede with Zhu Maichen on her behalf. Fujian Province Liyuan Experimental Theatre, 2016. Courtesy of the troupe.

her heart set on – Zhu Maichen, too, has remarried, and she cannot aspire to the same rank as the new co-wife – yet her status is much improved and domestic harmony (though perhaps not bliss) is promised. Secondary female characters (ridiculous aunt, match-maker, mother-in-law) are all greedy, meddling and preposterous, further underscoring the misogynous theme, and the happy return of Xiaoniang (as a subordinate wife) is secured by the magnanimity of Zhu Maichen and of interceding male neighbours (Figure 2). Men restore the moral order, with women suitably and ridiculously suppressed. Ultimately, the effect of a comical treatment of this story – one with apparently historical roots – is in fact more rather than less conservative, as indeed one might expect of southern Fujian's theatre culture, which tended, if the 1950s script *Collectanea* is accurate, to reproduce neo-Confucian mores uncritically.

What does this contrast between pathos and farce tell us? In this version, female demands for agency are put off as risible. Female demands for better material conditions are so negligible that even upon achieving divorce they fail to have consequences, and the weight of pathos – in modern tragic versions, the potential transformation of the wife into a martyr, executed by the patriarchy – is annulled. Instead, the result of divorce is not the dignity of tragedy but demotion: demotion as a subordinate wife, and narrative demotion into a figure of fun, a shrew whose demand to divorce results in her self-taming. Ultimately, this dismissal of Zhu Maichen's wife is even less sympathetic to the aspirations of a woman unhappy in her marriage.

Granting agency: an experiment of the Jingju Theatre Company of Beijing (2000)

In 2000, Sheng Heyu 盛和煜 (b. 1948) and Zhang Manjun 張曼君 (b. 1953), playwright and director, respectively, at the Beijing jingju yuan 北京京劇院 (Jingju Theatre Company of Beijing, henceforth JTCB), developed a new *jingju* version of the Zhu Maichen story. Entitled *Maqian poshui*, this play was first performed by Zhu Qiang 朱強 (b. 1961) in the role of Zhu Maichen and Li Xiaolan 李曉蘭 in the role of Cui Shi, at the Seventh Little Theatre Festival in Guangzhou. As the only *xiqu* piece programmed at the festival, this premiere attracted considerable public attention for its dramaturgical and ideological innovations, and has been in repertoire since then, becoming a *pièce de résistance* of the company.

JTCB's spirit of experimentation is reflected in both the form and the content of the production. Sheng and Zhang are committed to marketing *jingju* artistry to a young audience, primarily university students. Zhang, as one of the few female *xiqu* directors, was likely also keen to critique this famous divorce narrative from women's perspectives. The production attacks 'feudal' hypocrisy, where patriarchal suppression is sustained by a discourse of wifely virtue that demonises any woman who seeks the agency to leave an unhappy marriage. Yet by performing a narrative of patriarchal repression set in the pre-modern era, they also commented on contemporary gender dynamics. Since contemporary *xiqu* is largely bound to costume drama and historical settings, it is mainly by reinterpreting traditional narratives that artists try to establish relevance to contemporary society. The Han dynasty setting is as always paper thin.

The production was categorised as *xiao juchang xiqu* 小劇場戲曲 (little theatre Chinese opera), a designation that had increasingly gained currency in China over the previous decade.³⁴ This production may lay claim to being one of the first attempts to transfer 'little theatre' principles to the *xiqu* stage. The implication is of a smaller-scale, lower-stakes experimental production, and to some degree also insulates the productions from the accusation of non-traditionality, since it is explicitly innovative.³⁵ This genre allowed JTCB to use a narrative structure that significantly differentiates it from traditional *xiqu* repertoire, which is almost always chronological and linear. By contrast, the four scenes in the JTCB rendition were arranged in reverse chronology in order to dramatise the conflict. Furthermore, Sheng and Zhang removed the scene of 'Chimeng' – the emotional core of the *kunqu* versions of *Lanke Mountain*, and the scene that defines the narrative as characterised principally by remorse – and recasts the whole play as an intertwining of reality (Zhu Maichen's refusal to remarry Cui Shi) and dream (Cui Shi's recollection of their marriage).

In the first scene of this stage version (and final scene chronologically), 'Poshui' 潑水 ('Spilling the Water'), Zhu Maichen is already the successful civil service examination candidate, glorying in his role as prefectural magistrate of Kuaiji, while Cui Shi kneels at the roadside, begging him to resume their marriage. Zhu's response, 'Wretch! if you had known it would come to this, you shouldn't have divorced me' (賤人! 早知今日, 何必當初!), leads into the second scene, 'Bixiu' 逼休 ('Compelled to Divorce'), in which Cui Shi forces Zhu to divorce her due to extreme poverty. In canonical versions this is

³⁴ 'Little theatre' as understood in the PRC is the result of an avant-garde movement first launched there by Lin Zhaohua, with the work *Juedui xinhao* 絕對信號 [Signal Alarm]. Aiming to break 'the fourth wall', 'little theatre' features modernist techniques and strengthens audience interaction. At the turn of century, this experiment spread to the *xiqu* domain, and JTCB's *Maqian poshui* was arguably the earliest attempt of this trend.

³⁵ Xu Chen 徐晨, 'Nüxing zhuyi piping shiyu xia de xiqu xinbian: yi "xiuqi/fu" gushi moxing wei zhongxin de tantao' 女性主義批評視域下的戲曲新編 – 以 "休妻/夫" 故事模型為中心的探討 [Newly Composed Xiqu from a Feminist Perspective: Discussions Centring on the Story Model of Divorce], *Xiju yishu* 戲劇藝術 [Theatre Arts] 1 (2020), 34–5.

the archetypal scene of her disloyalty, and for her depiction as a shrew. Then, however, Cui Shi's memory takes her further back than canonical versions show us: to the third scene, 'Lizhi' 立志 ('To Encourage Learning'). This scene takes place on their wedding day, when Cui Shi presents Zhu with a case of red candles and encourages him to pursue scholarly achievement and an official career. When Cui Shi realizes that she has been duped – giving up her own desires to support a career in return for which she receives neither recognition nor sustenance – her reminiscence suddenly dissolves, and the narrative is drawn back to the 'present' reality again, namely 'Poshui' – the first scene.

With the narrative of regret already eliminated, and the structure of her subjection more completely illustrated than in previous versions, the creators went on to give her full agency. Instead of being humiliated or maddened by having the water spilled on the ground in front of her, Cui Shi grabs the basin and spills the water on the ground herself. Cui Shi's determined behaviour shows the feminist manifesto of this play – not only must a woman be autonomous, even in marriage, but also she may actively break the bonds of marriage if she finds that her hopes for the marriage are unfulfilled. This conclusion refashioned the wronged wife into a contemporary feminist ideal who casts the water in front of Zhu Maichen, a representative of pedantic patriarchal discipline in ancient China.³⁶ At this juncture, she easily reminds audiences of Nora's slammed door in *A Doll's House*, a key text in the development of modern Chinese views of women's liberation.

There is little doubt that this version gave Cui Shi more power to oppose her fate than any previous version. Chinese National Academy of Arts (CNAA) academic Liu Yanjun 劉彥君 argues that

the authors refuse interpretations of the play's theme in accordance with traditional morality. Rather than condemning Cui Shi, they seek to justify Cui Shi's wish for 'a better life' so as to justify women's right to divorce or to say 'no' to men, in pursuit of the understanding and sympathy of modern people.³⁷

Notably, in this adaptation, it is neither Zhu Maichen or his retinue that spills the water on the ground, but Cui Shi trumping a stale older power by 'spilling this basin of bitter water I made myself'.³⁸ As 'Bitter water' is a common Chinese turn of speech to indicate suffering, by voluntarily pouring the bitter water out, a new Cui Shi expiates her painful past, disarms Zhu Maichen and symbolically recants her previous unconditional reliance on men. Having acquired power and responsibility (she has 'herself' made the bitterness), this Cui Shi decisively diverts the logic from the pained resignation, self-pity and suicide that prevail in an overwhelming majority of other renditions. Instead, she is revitalised as a new woman, who has liberated herself by atoning for her blind gullibility in the past. The fact that this arrogation of authority and self-determination would have been impossible to almost any historical woman in her position only underlines the fact that Zhang Manjun's purposes are firmly contemporary.

Compared with traditional versions, the creators exacerbated the differences between the two characters, with Zhu described as 'over forty and ugly', while Cui Shi is younger

³⁶ Wang Haiyan 王海燕, 'Hefang chang yan chang gai: xiaojuchang jingju Maqian poshui guangan' 何妨常演常改 – 小劇場京劇《馬前潑水》觀感 ['Why Not Revising as Performing: Remarks on the Little Theatre Beijing Opera Maqian poshui'], *Zhongguo jingju* 中國京劇 [Peking Opera of China] 3 (2002), 36.

³⁷ Liu Yanjun 劉彥君, 'Zheyige "Cui Shi" weishenme bu zhaoren xihuan?: Kan xiaojuchang jingju Maqian poshui' 這一個“崔氏”為什麼不招人喜歡? – 看小劇場京劇《馬前潑水》['Why Is This Cui Shi Not Likeable?: Watching the Little Theatre Beijing Opera Maqian poshui'], *Zhongguo xiju* 中國戲劇 [Chinese Theatre] 5 (2001), 48.

³⁸ See the video of Zhu Qiang and Li Xiaolan's 2000 performance, www.bilibili.com/video/BV1ts411R7No/.

and as beautiful as ‘a celestial in the Jade Pool’ and moreover from ‘an admirable, well-off family’.³⁹ As a woman of her time, Cui Shi has no other means of attaining material advancement. Thus, she is willing to join Zhu in a marital life without material comforts for the sake of mental fulfilment created by the learning of classics:

【崔氏】諸子百家皆無價，竹籬茅舍伴聖賢。⁴⁰

(CUI SHI: The hundred schools of thought are beyond price, and in the bamboo fence and thatched cottage I will keep company with a sage scholar.)

Cui Shi appears willing to ignore their discrepancies in age, appearance, family pedigree and financial conditions to marry Zhu Maichen simply for an admiration of his knowledge. However, the subtext behind her exaltation of Zhu’s literary talent shows that in return for giving her hand in marriage, she anticipates upward mobility. As an investment, the desire of Cui Shi is not limited to avowed mental fulfilment; she sees in Zhu’s literary talent great potential for scholarly achievement in the civil service examination, which would realise her dream for high status, wearing ‘phoenix headdress and embroidered robe’.⁴¹ She hopes that his talents will enable him to rise to glory through the imperial examination:

【崔氏】盛世文章飛彩鳳，黃河鯉魚躍龍門。
世上人分三九等，男兒要做人上人。⁴²

(CUI SHI: In this flourishing age, essays allow scholars to fly like a coloured phoenix, and to jump over the Dragon Gate like a carp in the Yellow River. People in this world are classified into nine classes, while a man should be ambitious to climb to the highest one.)

The phoenix and carp being well-known symbols for the ascent from modest status to high official position, Cui Shi’s admiration for Zhu Maichen’s literary talent is in fact an expression of her hunger for the means and privilege to be brought about by Zhu’s anticipated scholarly achievement.

Furthermore, Sheng Heyu and Zhang Manjun removed all the external pressures that had led, in the *kunqu* version, to Cui Shi’s female-initiated divorce, rendering it a behaviour freely resolved upon and initiated by herself.⁴³ In contrast, in both Wang Xiaonong’s and Sheng Heyu’s renditions of the Zhu Maichen story in the *jingju* genre, the role of matchmaker (Mrs Wang) is removed, so the divorce of Cui Shi is not a deception practised on her, but a result of her own direct initiative. When she appeals to be taken back, however, she is less credibly a victim, having freely chosen a new match.

The creators of *Maqian poshui* wanted the play to ‘search for the hypocrisy which exists inside traditional culture and which takes cover under moral judgement’ in order to convey the idea that ‘the problem is not caused by either individual, but a result from the

³⁹ For example, in the *pingju* version Zhu Maichen is only 23 years of age by the time of their divorce. Shang Heyu significantly increases the age of Zhu Maichen. The Jade Pool, or *yaochi*, is where the senior female deity, the Queen Mother of the West, resides, attended by fairy-like beauties. See the video of Zhu Qiang and Li Xiaolan’s 2000 performance.

⁴⁰ See the video of Zhu Qiang and Li Xiaolan’s 2000 performance.

⁴¹ Wang, ‘Why Not Revising as Performing’, 36.

⁴² See the video of Zhu Qiang and Li Xiaolan’s 2000 performance.

⁴³ In *kunqu* versions, the reason for Cui Shi to divorce Zhu Maichen is indeed penury, but the catalyst is the persuasion of a matchmaker, the devious Mrs Wang. See the video of Zhang Jiqing and Yao Jikun’s 1998 performance.

society, an invisible net'.⁴⁴ In the Zhu Maichen story, this 'net' is knit by the lure of an official career and money, a result of the civil service examination. In other words, the reason for Cui Shi to force a divorce on Zhu is that he has failed nine times consecutively in the civil service examination, frustrating her desire for high station.⁴⁵ At the denouement of this play, Cui realises in disillusion that 'means and privilege, illusory like floating clouds, have ruined my life' (富貴浮雲多誤我). She should not rely on others to achieve her ambition.

Reception was mixed, however. At a symposium on the production, scholars' comments were polarised by the wife's fuller agency/autonomy and desire for self-fulfilment.⁴⁶ Besides Liu Yanjun, several scholars raised issues about the dimensions of playwriting and dramaturgy, especially the way in which Cui Shi shifts from being an admirer of Zhu Maichen to an initiator of the divorce. CNAA academic Liu Wenfeng 劉文峰 'feels that Cui Shi [in *Maqian poshui*] is not unified', thinking it 'does not disclose the reason for Cui Shi's transformation from a beloved daughter in a well-off family to a shrew'.⁴⁷ Liu Zhen 劉楨, CNAA academic and director of Mei Lanfang Memorial Museum, argues that 'despite Cui Shi's complexity, she should have a basic, consistent inner logic of action', advising to embody in the character 'the feeling of ordinary people', rather than 'subjective perceptions [of the director]'.⁴⁸ Ma Hailing 馬海玲, a research associate, thinks that 'the creator does not make clear, sufficient expressions of what he wants to convey'.⁴⁹ In fact, however, the director's intention to bestow upon the wife full agency to chase self-fulfilment is fairly clear. What scholars raised was a perceived lack of sufficient details that motivate Cui Shi to transform from bride and companion to a 'shrew'. This apparent disjuncture in her logic of action, as Liu's article 'Why Isn't This Cui Shi Likeable?' suggests, triggers one strain of reception that dismissed this Cui Shi on character grounds, reproducing a common chauvinist trope ('unlikability') about women in positions of strength or power.

These scholars' doubts about the inner logic of Cui Shi's transformation reveal the uneasy shift from the original story to a reinterpretation of 2000. Chen Huimin 陳慧敏 poignantly points out the inconsistency between the playwright, Sheng Heyu, who wrote a traditional story, and the director, Zhang Manjun, who used it to reflect on contemporary issues in Chinese society. While Zhang Manjun is concerned with justifying a wife's right to initiate a divorce, the response was to criticise it as implausible. So, where Zhang created a Cui Shi as a Nora-like feminist, performing outright rejection of the gendered order with a dramatic gesture, this arrogation of agency remains quite radical from contemporary Chinese perspectives, since reasons such as incompatibility were, in China in 2000, still largely seen as 'frivolous excuse[s] for separation'.⁵⁰ Before the marriage law reform of the following year, April Gu has written, 'couples had been strongly encouraged to remain together, with cases dragging out in family court for years and divorce granted only with *danwei*, or workforce, approval'.⁵¹ The premiere thus came just as society was

⁴⁴ Zhang, 'Maqian poshui as an Exploration of Experimental Beijing Opera', 45–6.

⁴⁵ In this as in much else, theatrical versions are often anachronistic. The civil service examinations were more than 700 years in the future at the time of Zhu Maichen's death.

⁴⁶ Zhang Yanying 張燕鷹, ed., 'Xiaojuchang jingju Maqian poshui yinfa relie taolun' 小劇場京劇《馬前潑水》引發熱烈討論 ['Little Theatre Beijing Opera Maqian poshui Triggers Heated Discussions'], *Zhongguo jingju* 中國京劇 [Peking Opera of China] 5 (2000), 8–11.

⁴⁷ Zhang, 'Maqian poshui Triggers Heated Discussions', 9.

⁴⁸ Zhang, 'Maqian poshui Triggers Heated Discussions', 9.

⁴⁹ Zhang, 'Maqian poshui Triggers Heated Discussions', 10.

⁵⁰ April Gu, 'Empowered or Impoverished: Divorce and its Effects on Urban Women in Contemporary China', in *International Handbook of Chinese Families*, ed. Chan Kwok-bun (New York, 2013), 542.

⁵¹ Gu, "'Empowered or Impoverished'", 541. Fan Jiasheng 范家盛, ed., *Sun Yumin yanchu jumu jicheng* 孫毓敏演出劇目集成 [Collected Manuscripts for Sun Yumin's Performance] (Guangzhou, 2003), 5.

breaking down the divorce taboo. For the relatively conservative *xiqu* commentariat, Zhang had allowed Cui to go too far, and thus voided her claim to sympathy.

Noticeably, while the creators emphasised the wife's full agency, in order to justify women's initiative to 'say no' to a marriage, many critics of their 2000 rendition of *Maqian poshui* responded by appealing for married couples to work through their difficulties, rejecting on the grounds of implausibility what they regarded as a materialist turn in gender relations – Cui Shi, in that view, investing in Zhu not emotionally but for material gain. Thus, despite her gesture and the agency she achieves, Cui Shi cannot escape censure. While the creators intended her to be triumphant in her rejection of the patriarchal system, critics felt that her transformation into a 'shrew' undermines the inner logic of her action, threatening to reduce her feminist deeds to 'casual divorce', making her 'unlikeable' and materialistic. Materialism is thus simultaneously the natural and rational attitude of a marriageable woman, but also an attitude to be morally condemned if one dares (as Sheng and Zhang do) to acknowledge it, and then furthermore derided as dramatically implausible. Without agency, Cui Shi is a suicide; with agency, she is a heartless, greedy harridan – and unbelievable to boot.

Coda: modality and morality on the Chinese stage

While Western opera texts and scores are relatively fixed, Chinese texts for the stage are much less formally bound to their textual alter-egos, which in any event generally have a complicated genealogy and many modular expressions. This pliability makes projects of reinterpretation, inversion, or satire closer to hand than on the Western stage, and also means that such choices are situated not only in design or direction, but also (and even more so) in script and actor renditions. The various products of adjustments and scholarly evaluations of the wife (Cui Shi/Zhao Xiaoniang) in the Zhu Maichen story are therefore useful for tracking the transforming views surrounding the limits of 'wifely virtue' for *xiqu* audiences, and for glimpsing how classical narratives situated in the Chinese politics of gender and sexuality evolve when presented for contemporary audiences.

First, we note that the story is never really about Zhu Maichen. In all versions, the dramatic impetus is provided by the wife, not the husband; none of the versions show great interest in his travails, his inner life, or the moral dilemma he (at least theoretically) confronts. His own range is restricted, across stage versions, to a span between rigid Confucian scholar and reluctantly forgiving magistrate. The tension of this story – a woman regretting the divorce she compelled – is focused on the wife. It is her interior life and the public actions it occasions that have provided interest across centuries of Chinese theatre and fiction, although interestingly as a wife-initiated divorce it also seems to stand alone among common narratives. While abandoned, devoted, self-sacrificing wives or for that matter shrewish ones can be counted by the score on the late imperial stage and page, the regretful divorcee does not seem to be a trope. Zhu Maichen's wife seems to be *sui generis*.

As Wenjia Liu astutely observes, the logic of late imperial fiction holds that 'virtuous wives strictly follow Confucian rituals and propriety, or *li* 禮, thereby bringing order and harmony to domestic life', in time to be 'rewarded with Confucian prosperity, marked by fertility (including, especially, giving birth to a good son) and longevity'.⁵² This is the standard that Zhu Maichen's wife has failed to meet. The virtuous wives' antithesis are shrews, and as Liu notes 'Shrews are jealous, fierce, even lascivious, and thus they

⁵² Wenjia Liu, 'Virtuous Wives and Shrews in *Feng Shuangfei*: Empowering Female Characters through a Revision of Stereotypes', *The Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 3 (2016), 59.

bring disorder to their families – they are unwanted in a patriarchal Confucian family. They are always punished with infertility or death, or are miraculously “cured” to be reincorporated into the Confucian family.⁵³ On the traditional stage, Zhu Maichen’s wife, as a shrew, is subject either to punishment or to rehabilitation. Yet her special category is generated because she is a ‘shrew’ who has rejected even the terms of her marriage, in a gesture completely inaccessible to any of her late imperial audiences, yet available to her on account of the story being set in the remote past.

In the *jingju* versions of 1912 and 1984, Cui Shi is a wife who, for compelling divorce on her scholarly husband, is represented as a shrew served her just desserts. Zhu Maichen shows no pity for her suffering and death, and in the 1912 version he even presents a poem to advocate his Confucian principles of wifely obedience and subordination. In the Hokkien genre of *liyuanxi*, the wife, Zhao Xiaoniang, is reluctantly taken back due to the intervention of kind-hearted intermediaries. Crucially, the remarriage is made possible only because she has been fortuitously kept chaste during her short-lived divorce. The (accidentally) chaste and (vigorously) chastened wife is reincorporated into the patriarchal discipline of Confucian family, defeated in her attempt to assert herself, with earthy comedy and the facade of a happy ending obviating the need even to feel sympathy. Although in JTCB’s 2000 version of *Maqian poshui*, Sheng Heyu and Zhang Manjun for the first time allowed Cui Shi to ‘succeed’ in her efforts to separate, she cannot escape a critical response that reduces her desire for agency to unconscionable materialism and rejects her actions as implausible.

After hundreds of years, Zhu Maichen’s wife is still trapped in an endless divorce. She is a woman whose right to escape an unhappy marriage is represented by turns as immoral, risible and implausible. The misogyny of the female-initiated divorce narrative shows itself to be remarkably resilient, and – aided by the versatility of *xiqu* scripting and the multiplicity of generic traditions – to take many forms. Whether carrying messages of orthodox patriarchal morality, or furnished with a happy ending, or created in explicit subversion of the opprobrium traditionally affixed to Zhu Maichen’s wife, moral condemnation has been, so far, inescapable.

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⁵³ Liu, ‘Virtuous Wives and Shrews in *Feng Shuangfei*’, 59.