

Introduction

I shall now tell of another woman by the name of Zhu Yingtai, who was a native of Yixing in Changzhou. From an early age, she was given to the pursuit of learning. When she heard that Yuhuang was where civil arts flourished the most, she expressed her wish to pursue her lessons there. But her brother and sister-in-law objected: "In the old days, upon reaching the age of seven, boys and girls were no longer allowed to share the same seat and the same dining table. How preposterous for a sixteen-year-old like you to travel around and get mixed up with men!" (*Point well taken.*)

Yingtai replied: "I have a better idea." Putting a cap on her head and a belt around her waist, she dressed herself up as a man. Even her brother and sister-in-law failed to recognize her when she walked up to them in her new attire.

It was the beginning of summer when Yingtai was ready to set out on her journey. She plucked a branch of blooming pomegranate flowers and, planting them in a flowerbed, prayed to heaven in the words: "As I, Zhu Yingtai, am about to go on a journey for the pursuit of my studies, I pray that this branch will take root and grow leaves every year as long as my good name and chastity remain unsullied. Should anything dishonorable happen to tarnish the family reputation, may this branch wither and die." With this prayer, she crossed the threshold and went on her way, calling herself Master Zhu the Ninth.

She came to cultivate a friendship with a man by the name of Liang Shanbo, a native of Suzhou. The two studied at the same school and, out of a mutual affection and respect, swore an oath of brotherhood. For three years thereafter, they ate together during the day and slept in the same bed at night, without Zhu Yingtai's ever taking off her clothes. There were several times when the puzzled Shanbo asked her a few questions,

but each time she got by with evasive answers. Their studies completed by the end of three years, they took leave of each other and went their separate ways, but not before Yingtai made Liang Shanbo promise to visit her in two months' time.

As it was again the beginning of summer upon her return, the pomegranate branch in the flower bed was heavy with flowers and foliage, which convinced her brother and sister-in-law of her unbesmirched purity. An immensely rich man named Ma in the Village of Peace and Happiness heard about the virtues of the ninth daughter of the Zhu family and asked a matchmaker to approach Yingtai's brother, who readily gave his consent. The preliminaries were completed and the wedding ceremony was scheduled for the second month of the following year. The truth of the matter was that Yingtai was in love with Shanbo and was biding her time until his visit to reveal her plans. Little did she know that Shanbo was detained by some business at home. She did not presume to suggest postponement of the wedding, for fear that her brother and sister-in-law would suspect her motives.

It was not until the tenth month that Shanbo set out on his journey, six months late. Upon his arrival at the Zhu manor, he was told by a tenant upon his inquiry about Master Zhu the Ninth that there was no one by that name in the manor unless he meant Zhu the Ninth Daughter. Suspecting that something was amiss, Shanbo submitted his visiting card whereupon a maid appeared and led him into the main hall, where whom did Shanbo see but Zhu Yingtai herself in full womanly attire. Shanbo was astounded. Only then did he realize that Yingtai was a woman who had been disguised all along. He reproached himself for not having been discerning enough to guess the truth. After an exchange of conventional amenities, he raised the subject of marriage. Yingtai declined, saying she had already been betrothed to Mr. Ma by her brother and sister-in-law. Bitter remorse swept over Shanbo for having arrived too late.

After Shanbo returned home, he pined away until he died in his sickbed as the year drew to a close. His parents buried him at the intersection leading to the Village of Peace and Happiness, as he had requested. The following year, as Yingtai's wedding procession approached that intersection on its way to the Ma residence, there sprang up a savage blast of wind that darkened the sky, preventing the procession from moving on. As Yingtai raised her eyes, there wafted up into her view Liang Shanbo himself, saying, "I died of lovesickness for you and I am buried at this very spot. For old times' sake, please step out of the sedan chair and take

a look.” As Yingtai did so, the ground split open with a loud bang, leaving a ten-foot wide [*sic*] gap, into which she threw herself. Her clothes, which followers in the procession tried to grab, flew off in pieces, like skin sloughed off by a cicada. The next moment, the sky cleared. The crack in the ground was found to be no wider than a thread, and the sedan chair was seen resting right by Liang Shanbo’s tomb. Now the realization came that the two sworn brothers in life were now husband and wife in death. Eyes then turned to the floating pieces of Yingtai’s clothing, which changed into a pair of colorful butterflies. As the legend has it, it was the spirits of the couple that had changed into butterflies, the red one being Liang Shanbo, the black one being Zhu Yingtai. The species multiplied and spread throughout the land and are, to this day, still called Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai. A later poet left behind these words of praise:

For three years they shared their days and nights;
 Their marriage bond was fulfilled only after death.
 Blame not Shanbo for overlooking the truth;
 Praise Yingtai instead for her unflinching virtue.¹

Given the paranormal event at the story’s conclusion, the two lovers are commonly referred to as the “Butterfly Lovers.” This charming story is perhaps the most famous of all Chinese love stories. It was adapted for numerous traditional operas, songs, ballads and, as recently as 1963, the Shaw brothers of Hong Kong produced a cinematic version. Such has been its enduring popularity that, in 2006, six Chinese cities collaboratively applied to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization for the story to be recognized as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.²

The “Butterfly Lovers” is part of a prolific literary tradition known as the scholar-beauty genre, popular throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³ Such stories typically recount romantic affairs between educated young men and beautiful young women. While the “Butterfly Lovers” concluded tragically, many featured happy endings. Detailed plot development and frequent inclusion of the lover’s poetry made for relatively lengthy narratives not unlike novellas in the West. To be sure, when one thinks of love stories in the Chinese cultural context, these scholar-beauty romances may immediately come to mind.

Although their heyday spanned the closing centuries of late imperial China, scholar-beauty romances owe an enormous debt to the short

stories of a much earlier period, the Tang dynasty (618–906), when many of China’s most famous and endearing love stories were written. Almost always taking young men as their chief protagonists, these stories narrate men’s fleeting affairs with various types of women, including courtesans, concubines, inn keepers, fox-fairies, daughters, and palace ladies. Love stories of this period were considerably shorter than those of the scholar-beauty genre and their plots less formulaic. In fact, the mid-Tang dynasty (late eighth to early ninth centuries)⁴ was a golden age in regard to several literary genres, during which time the short story attained an unprecedented level of sophistication. Throughout the centuries following the fall of the Tang, love stories continued to be produced. Besides oral renditions, written versions filled many short story collections while some anthologies focused exclusively on romantic love.

While both Tang dynasty short stories and the late imperial scholar-beauty romances have attracted extensive scholarly attention, love stories of the intervening era—some five hundred years—have been comparatively neglected. So as to help bridge this considerable gap, this book aims to trace the development of the short, classical language (as opposed to vernacular) love story throughout the period—that is, the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1279–1368) dynasties. Contextualizing selected, individual stories in a continuum between the Tang and late imperial periods will afford an overview from which this important literary corpus may be compared and evaluated. My primary focus is the love story’s dynamic nature over time. Questions I would like to address include: What are the major reoccurring themes, motifs, and plot devices? How did the love story as a literary corpus thematically develop throughout this period? Can new themes be attributable to a particular time period and, if so, how might this reflect contemporary social, political, and intellectual trends? How can thematic change help evaluate the status of the period’s love stories vis-à-vis Chinese literary history? Answering these questions will not only enhance our understanding of the love story’s development but also that of the short story in general. It will also complement existing research focused on both Tang and late imperial narrative literature. As Richard Wang has observed, “Only by revealing the influence that earlier stories had on Ming fiction and drama can we understand the real significance of, and the new ideas in, Ming fiction and drama.”⁵ Daniel Hsieh makes a similar point when addressing the importance of the Tang dynasty love story vis-à-vis Chinese literary history: “One part of the story can only be fully understood in the context of the whole.”⁶ In other words,

understanding both Tang and late imperial love stories as having developed in relation to a sustained literary tradition will offer a better basis on which to understand them. Hence, this study has implications for the study of Chinese literature outside of the love story corpus and beyond the period under study.

Neglect of Song dynasty short stories has been largely due to the prejudice of China's May Fourth-period (1919 through the 1920s) intellectuals, particularly the influential fiction writer and scholar Zhou Shuren (1881–1936), better known by his pen name, Lu Xun. In his extensively quoted *Short History of Chinese Fiction* (*Zhongguo xiaoshuo shiliue*) and his *Historical Changes in Chinese Fiction* (*Zhongguo xiaoshuode lishide yanbian*), Zhou belittled Song dynasty (960–1276) classical language short stories while extoling those of the Tang. “Stories of the strange written by authors of the Song period are insipid and lack literary polish. Their short stories tend to focus on old stories while avoiding the contemporary. Their imitation of the earlier tradition falls short and, moreover, lacks innovation.”⁷ Elsewhere, Zhou writes, “Authors of the Tang largely described contemporary affairs whereas those of the Song mainly spoke of old stories. Where Tang period fiction contains infrequent didactic content, that of the Song was largely didactic.”⁸ When praising the literature of the “common people” (*pingmin*), which he contrasts to classical language stories written by the elite, Zhou further opines, “In regard to innovation, the scholar-officials of the Song really offered no contribution.”⁹ Given Zhou's enormous stature as both a leftist writer and scholar, particularly in the People's Republic of China, his opinion on the Song dynasty short story has proven immensely influential. Hardly a scholarly paper published in the People's Republic that addresses traditional literature does not pay him homage. Another important May Fourth-period scholar, Zheng Zhenduo (1898–1958), all but ignored the Song dynasty's classical language short stories in both his pioneering anthology of traditional Chinese fiction and critical work on its history.¹⁰ Yet, Zhou's disparagement and Zheng's disregard undoubtedly have more to do with their own values and the May Fourth cultural agenda than inherent deficiencies in the Song dynasty literature itself. Critical of how traditional Chinese culture had supposedly impeded China's political and economic development, May Fourth intellectuals overwhelmingly rejected tradition as they looked to Western ideas for modernization. Confucian thought became the target of particular vehement criticism for its moral conservatism, considered the antithesis of modern, Western, progressive values. It was in such an

intellectual background that Zhou Shuren wrote his literary history. In view of the value he evidently attached to generic and conceptual innovation as enshrined by modern Western aesthetic theories, Zhou clearly used such concepts to measure the significance of traditional literary works. His appraisal of Tang dynasty stories was, furthermore, colored by his view that its authors were consciously creating fiction, as opposed to the Song dynasty tendency to narrate historically reliable events.¹¹ Given that short stories of the Song period generally remained formalistically unchanged in comparison to their Tang precursors, Zhou accordingly underrated them. His binary of elite versus popular literature and his disparagement of the former further reveals his Leftist intellectual bias.¹²

Nevertheless, given the vastly different social and intellectual environment under which literature of the Song and Yuan dynasties was written, it is hardly surprising that its forms and conventions do not equate to modern notions of good literature. Authors and storytellers of the period were not necessarily concerned with stylistic or formalistic innovation, which became an all-important standard to measure artistic merit only in the modern world. Even a cursory reading of the period's stories reveal that its authors harbored vastly different concerns and intentions than their post-Romantic era counterparts, who often subscribed to the idea of art for art's sake—that is, art devoid of utilitarian value. As Li Shiren argues, placing undue importance on artistic and stylistic features as an evaluative tool vis-à-vis Tang versus Song dynasty narrative literature contributes little to the field.¹³ Indeed, as I will discuss below, the very concept of fiction and authorship during the Song and Yuan dynasties vastly differed from that of the May Fourth era.

If Zhou Shuren did not value short stories of the Song period, Ming-dynasty writers and storytellers certainly did. It is highly significant that leading authors of vernacular fiction, such as Feng Menglong (1574–1646) and Ling Mengchu (1580–1644), based their short stories on earlier classical language versions, notably those of the Song and Yuan. Similarly, numerous playwrights of the Yuan and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties adapted both earlier and contemporary classical language stories for their plays and operas, many of which became equally—if not better—known than their sources.¹⁴ Therefore, as Cheng Yizhong perceptively observes, “Without short classical language stories of the Song period, there would be no short classical stories of the Yuan or Ming dynasties, nor could one explain the rise of *Liaozhai's Records of the Strange* (*Liaozhai zhiyi*) during the Qing period.”¹⁵ The fact that short classical language stories of the

Song and Yuan were extensively borrowed and rewritten both within and outside the genre attests to their importance for traditional men of letters. I would, therefore, take Cheng's assertion further and say that without the short classical stories of the Song and Yuan period, there could not have been new genres such as vernacular fiction or, indeed, operas, given the enormous debt the latter owed the former.

Despite the general neglect of the Song and Yuan short story, some admirable studies have been undertaken, particularly in the People's Republic of China among which the work of Li Jianguo is especially notable. Li's extensive coverage of not only the Song and Yuan dynasties, but also other periods, is a rare achievement for one scholar. His in-depth analysis of individual stories within their historical backgrounds, together with his painstaking research on textual history, constitute a major contribution to the field. Similarly, Cheng Yizhong's authoritative and wide-ranging analysis of several major narrative genres spanning several periods is no less significant. His work on Chinese opera is also noteworthy. Together with Li Jianguo, he clearly enjoys Song and Yuan dynasty narrative literature and approaches the topic with insight and sensitivity. In Taiwan, the work of Yu Shiu-yun deserves a special mention. Her volume on Song dynasty classical short stories proved especially valuable for my own research, given her attention to the love story. Unlike most scholars from the People's Republic, Yu is justifiably critical of Zhou Shuren's role in the general neglect of Song dynasty short stories. Her detailed overview of the most important individual stories and anthologies has provided an important basis for anyone interested in the narrative literature of the period.¹⁶ Nevertheless, literary studies produced in both Taiwan and the People's Republic tend to present broad overviews of a particular period's literature or else focus exclusively on one text. Others are largely bibliographic in nature. Literary histories organized by dynasty tend to arbitrarily divide the period under study into formative, high, and declining stages while overlooking developmental continuity across dynastic boundaries. In other words, period divisions are based on political, not literary, history.

The current study, while recognizing the importance of dynastic division as an organizational principle, traces the thematic development of the short story over the course of several dynasties. New developments are analyzed in the context of this broad trajectory rather than within an arbitrary timeframe offered by a single dynasty. Given the considerable quantity of extant Song and Yuan narrative literature and its generic diversity, focusing on romantic love enables me to reduce the study's scope

to manageable proportions. Moreover, while the importance of love as a literary theme has been widely recognized, in view of its enduring popularity, sustained production over several centuries, intertextual affinities, formulaic plot devices, not to mention its extensive influence, the love story deserves recognition as a corpus of literature—a genre, perhaps—in its own right, similar to the way in which the Gothic has been considered a genre in the Western literary tradition. Therefore, a specialist study of the love story for the underrated Song and Yuan is sorely needed.

Since the mid- and late Tang dynasty acted as a formative period for the short classical story, a concise overview of Tang period works is necessary before analyzing later ones. Such a survey will reveal several reoccurring themes and plot devices that were adopted and transformed by later storytellers. Tang love stories will, therefore, act as a crucial point of comparison with those of the Song and Yuan. Such an approach will enable us to identify and evaluate new themes. Accordingly, chapter 1 will survey mid- to late Tang dynasty love stories, synthesizing the work of others while offering my own insights. Song dynasty stories discussed in chapters 2 and 3 will then be compared with those of the earlier period. Similarly, stories of the Yuan and early Ming periods discussed in chapter 4 will be compared with earlier ones, thereby tracing the thematic development of the love story from the eighth to the fourteenth century—some seven hundred years of the Chinese love story. Stories have been selected based on thematic innovation. In other words, what new ideas they contribute to the development of the corpus rather than literary polish *per se*. Hence, not all of them represent the best-written examples. Such a comparative approach will evaluate the literary works in question within their own literary tradition, rather than impose modern theory developed under differing cultural and economic circumstances. While this approach is not unique to the field, the systematic comparison of the same literary corpus over a period of several dynasties distinguishes this study from similar ones of limited scope.

Although professional female storytellers existed during Song times and women participated in informal storytelling networks, all extant written stories—as far as we know—were recorded by educated, upper-class males. Accordingly, an analysis of the way in which both class and gender influenced the male author-compiler's portrayal of women forms an important aspect of this study. While it is tempting to consider women's portrayal as an authentic reflection of social reality, the male storyteller's¹⁷ mediation cannot be ignored. As Paul Rouzer has observed in the context

of Tang dynasty narrative literature, “women were more than objects of desire. They were pawns in marriage alliances, cement for the social bonds of friendship or political faction, and prizes that allowed for competition and male display. The vast quantity of Tang informal narrative provides a rich source for social history (women’s history in particular), but also continues to illustrate male concerns and provides not so much a mirror for Tang society as a key to male writers’ dreams and obsessions.”¹⁸ Rouzer’s insightful recognition of the gendered storyteller during the Tang dynasty is, to an extent, relevant to the Song and Yuan. Accordingly, my close reading of selected examples attends to both gendered and class aspects of authorship. Related questions I would like to address are these: How were women portrayed? How accurate might such a portrayal be when measured against what we know about social history? What does the portrayal of women tell us about male storytellers: their identity, anxieties, and fantasies?

Historical Overview: The Early Tradition

Outlines of many famous love stories may be found in historical works since at least the Han dynasty (207 BCE–220 CE). Among the earliest is King Mu of the Kingdom of Qin’s legendary meeting with the Queen Mother of the West, a Daoist deity thought to reside in China’s distant west.¹⁹ Similarly, there is King Huai of Chu’s sexual encounter with the Goddess of Witch’s Mountain. On the morning after, when the King inquired as to the Goddess’s identity, she professed to be none other than the morning clouds and evening rain. Henceforth the term “clouds and rain” became a ubiquitous euphemism for sexual intercourse.²⁰ Imperial prince Cao Zhi’s (192–232), frequently cited poem about an elusive encounter with the Goddess of the Luo River also influenced later works.²¹ Unlike King Huai’s experience, no physical union followed this goddess’s brief appearance, although the poet’s sexual yearning is clear. Indeed given the quest for immortality during the centuries preceding the Tang dynasty, numerous anecdotes circulated about fantastical affairs between elite males and female goddesses, premised on the idea that divine women could confer longevity on their sexual partners. During a time when some men attempted to gain eternal life through alchemical means or sexual hygiene techniques, copulation with a goddess was none other than a shortcut to immortality.²² The legend of the Oxherd and Weaver Maid is a very old

example whose protagonist is not of elite status. The Weaver Maid was originally a handmaiden of the aforementioned Queen Mother of the West. After she came to earth and had an affair with the humble Oxherd, as a punishment the Queen Mother transformed them into stars: the bright star in Altair and the star Vega, respectively. Separated by the Milky Way, they were permitted only one meeting per year, on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month when a bridge of magpies enabled them to cross the “Heavenly River”—that is, the Milky Way. This is the basis of the *tanabata* festival in Japan.

Yet other historical accounts recorded love affairs between human subjects, such as the elopement of the celebrated Han dynasty poet, Sima Xiangru (179–117 BCE), and Zhuo Wenjun (fl. second c. BCE), the young, widowed daughter of Sima’s wealthy benefactor. The couple eloped after Wenjun spied on Sima from behind a blind as he performed music for her father. Confronted with the father’s anger, the couple were forced to keep a tavern until a reconciliation could be effected. Another famous story recounts the clandestine affair between the handsome Han Shou (d. 300?) and his lover, Jia Wu, that came to light only when Jia Wu’s rare and long-lasting incense was detected on Han’s sleeves.²³ Perennial favorites such as these were extensively retold throughout the centuries and eventually became pervasive intertextual markers in later poetry and stories.

Not all early narratives celebrated human love or attainment of immortality through sex with a goddess. Short stories about the “supernatural,”²⁴ known as *zhiguai* (literally “recording the paranormal”), the writing of which flourished from the fifth century onward, tended to portray pre- and extramarital sex as morally and physically dangerous. Accordingly, male protagonists would unwittingly enter into carnal affairs with beautiful young women only to discover that their lover was a ghost or demon in disguise. Without timely intervention by friends or ritual specialists, the protagonist’s lust would often result in death. Seductive female fox-spirits with the ability to assume human form also constituted dangerous sexual partners in these stories. Less frequently, women were seduced by shape-changing male foxes and other were-creatures, or else gods, ghosts, and demons, often with similarly fatal consequences. A major apparent function of such didactic tracts was to deter elite readers—especially male—from engaging in illicit sex. In a patriarchal society which criminalized pre- and extramarital sex among the commoner and upper classes and which strove to ensure the unsullied transmission of the

male genealogical line, such stories—exceptions notwithstanding—helped uphold orthodox values.

New Developments

In contrast to the ubiquitous *zhiguai* tradition, the mid-Tang dynasty witnessed a paradigmatic shift in literary production that Stephen Owen has termed the “culture of romance.”²⁵ Coinciding with the “development of individual acts of interpretation or valuation and the demarcation of private space,” men of letters began to valorize romantic love between human protagonists, often without reference to the paranormal.²⁶ Henceforth love poems and songs were composed, sung, and disseminated according to this new discursive practice. Short prose stories examined freely chosen romantic attachments, as opposed to customary arranged marriages. Even funerary inscriptions sometimes addressed one’s romantic life.²⁷ For the Harvard-trained scholar Hong Yue, this was a “burgeoning counter-culture” in which “officials were celebrated as devoted lovers,” as distinct from filial sons or righteous civil servants. Likewise, “esteemed literati recollected their associations with courtesans in their youth, and gifted poets wrote of themselves as participants in romantic affairs.”²⁸ Paul Rouzer similarly observes how women became more important as literary topics during this period.²⁹

Howard Levy links the emergence of love poetry and exploration of amorous themes in narrative literature to the rise of “individualist thought” during the Tang-era. He explains how, in contrast to the post-Han dynasty period (third to sixth centuries) during which aristocratic families tended to marry exclusively among themselves, the Tang-era’s influential aristocratic clans were officially censured for this practice. In fact, these illustrious clans were at one time forbidden to intermarry, although sustained enforcement proved problematic. Levy argues that a new attitude toward romantic love emerged in which rigidly demarcated class boundaries were not always observed. Consequently, romantic themes became common topics for the storyteller’s writing brush.³⁰ As Levy does not provide historically grounded evidence, it is nevertheless unclear whether he bases his argument on the love stories themselves.

Although liaisons between humans and paranormal beings were not expunged from short stories of the period and the recording of such

phenomena as a separate genre continued, from about the early ninth century onward, love stories were freed from the shadow of the paranormal, particularly in its didactic form. Fresh themes and authorial concerns informed the new stories, such as female fidelity, romantic freedom of choice, marital predestiny, and the like. Although a strong, didactic tenor may still be discerned in many, the focus shifted from moralistic warnings premised on the belief in ghosts and retribution to a more complex exploration of human desire and morality. This new approach even affected the writing of *zhiguai* stories. Dai Fu's (fl. mid- to late eighth century) *zhiguai* collection titled *Extensive Collection of the Strange* (*Guangyi ji*) includes several stories in which young men have affairs with deceased young women who later come back to life and marry their self-chosen lovers.³¹ Such stories rarely, if at all, appeared before the late eighth century.³²

As noted above, after the fall of the Tang dynasty, the oral telling and recording of love stories continued throughout the Song and Yuan period. New stories purportedly based on contemporary gossip were circulated, while old ones were repeatedly anthologized. Many fine collections from the Tang-Song dynastic transition period have survived. Fan Shu's (fl. late ninth century) *Conversations beside Cloud Creek* (*Yunxi youyi*), for example, contains short stories on diverse themes, including romantic love. Similarly, both Chen Han's (fl. ninth century) *Collection of Strange Tales Heard* (*Yiwen ji*) and Pei Xing's (825–880) no longer extant *Transmitting the Remarkable* (*Chuanqi*) included many famous love stories. Zhang Junfang's (fl. early eleventh century) milestone, *Collected Love Stories* (*Liqing ji*), is the first extant (redacted) compilation to specialize in love stories. Following these, many others were produced throughout the three hundred or so years that spanned the Song dynasty, with extant collections from the twelfth century being particularly numerous. Among these, Liu Fu's (1040–after 1113) *High-Minded Conversations beside the Green Lattice Window* (*Qingsuo gaoyi*) is a treasure house of well-written, sophisticated short stories, many of which focus on love. Li Xianmin's (fl. twelfth century) *Comprehensive Record of the Cloud Studio* (*Yunzhai guanglu*) is a topically arranged short story collection that includes two chapters categorized as “love stories”—that is, *liqing*, an identical term that also appears in Zhang Junfang's title. *New Stories from a Green Lattice Window* (*Lüchuang xinhua*), written under the pseudonym Romance Master of the Imperial Capital (Huangdu fengyue zhuren), likely compiled in the late twelfth century or somewhat later, is another exclusive collection of love stories, as is Luo Ye's (dates uncertain) *Drunken Man's Talk* (*Xinbian zuiweng tanlu*). *Miscellaneous*

Stories from the Green (*Zhiqing zashuo*), attributed to the famous man of letters and statesman, Wang Mingqing (1127–after 1214), also contains several well-written love stories. Besides these notable works, a perusal of Song dynasty bibliographies reveals several other no-longer-extant collections whose titles strongly suggest a focus on romance. For example, *Stories from a Green Lattice Window* (*Lüchuang jishi*), cited by later anthologists, appears to have been a mid-thirteenth-century work. The *Trousseaus Recorded with a Brush* (*Bilian lu*), written around the mid- to late eleventh century, appears to have been another.

Although the circulation of love stories continued throughout the fourteenth century, few survive. The late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were a formative period for opera, and this may partially explain the dearth of surviving short stories, as men of letters tended to have produced love stories in genres other than the short story. The longest and most detailed love story, *Bella and Scarlett* (*Jiao Hong ji*), was nevertheless produced during this period. Several short story anthologies were compiled in the early years of the Ming dynasty, foremost among which is the famous *New Stories Told while Trimming the Lamp-Wick* (*Jiandeng xinhua*), which spurred several copycat compilations. While the reasons for such copious literary production are complex and not unworthy of a separate study, suffice to note here is the sustained and widespread interest in the love story over the course of several centuries.

The Traditional Status and Bibliographical Classification of Love Stories and the Concept of Authorship

Most love stories were written in a structurally homogenous genre known as *chuanqi*. The term was first coined by Pei Xing as a title for his aforementioned short story collection, although not in a generic sense. The term was first used generically by poet and writer Yu Ji (1272–1348) when referring to the practice of Tang authors who composed narratives to match poetry—that is, both a poem and a narrative may have been produced on a given topic. Many short stories were written in this way.³³ Translated literally as “transmitting the remarkable,” Chinese scholars of the May Fourth period adopted the term *chuanqi* to label short prose narratives ranging from 800 to approximately 3,500 characters in length.³⁴ They were written in classical Chinese, which was to the Chinese literary tradition what Latin was to Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire—that

is, the written language of the educated elite as opposed to the spoken vernacular. As its conventions were developed and atrophied centuries before the Common Era, an increasingly wide gap opened between classical and spoken forms over time. Accordingly, the worldview projected in such texts is mediated through the mindset of the educated, male elite. Although *chuanqi*-type short stories acted as a vehicle for many of China's most influential love narratives, their content was broad ranging and included diverse subjects, such as martial artists, historical narratives, and paranormal occurrences. Nevertheless, a marked focus on humanistic themes characterized the genre.³⁵

From the eleventh century onward, bibliographers classified texts characterized by modern scholars as *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* under the larger rubric of *xiaoshuo*, or “petty stories,” itself a highly amorphous category. In terms of content, *xiaoshuo* was a catch-all category for an enormous body of heterogeneous literary work that included narratives, textual criticism, historiography, anecdotes, humor, and the like. Given its enormous breadth of subject matter, it is difficult—if not impossible—to define the term *xiaoshuo* as a literary genre according to modern formalistic methods. During the Song and Yuan dynasties, works considered *xiaoshuo* had already been subsumed into a quadripartite bibliographical taxonomy. First in this schema were the Confucian classics, a canonical set of texts purportedly related to Confucius that remained unchanged. Next were official histories, reflecting the high status that historical works enjoyed in traditional China. The remaining two categories were “philosophers” and *belles lettres*, respectively. *Xiaoshuo* works were generally catalogued under “philosophers,” itself an eclectic assortment of heterogeneous writing ranging from what may be understood as philosophical treatises to works on agriculture.

Although proponents of the May Fourth literary revolution employed the term *xiaoshuo* to denote “fiction” in the modern, Western sense,³⁶ the term's pre-twentieth-century connotation is fundamentally dissimilar. In line with Confucius's famous remark that he was a transmitter rather than a creator, the transmission of purportedly “true” events was common in imperial China. Accordingly, storytellers throughout the Song and Yuan tended to base their written stories on orally circulated gossip, hearsay or, in the words of Howard Levy, “on actual historical episodes.”³⁷ Versions proliferated, particularly in their oral forms, but even supposedly fixed, written texts exhibit considerable variation. As is often the case with gossip, stories were gradually embroidered, improvised, filtered through a variety

of dissimilar worldviews, and adapted to suit new contexts until they were recorded. In this chain of oral transmission, much unreliable detail was undoubtedly added while original events became distorted. Occasionally, a story preserved in a lost book was even recorded from memory.³⁸ Under such circumstances, imperfect memory may well have been occasionally responsible for inaccurate transmission. Contemporary readers, recognizing the possibility of factually spurious content, evaluated the reliability and plausibility of what they heard and read in their prefaces, metatextual and marginal commentaries, as well as anecdotal jottings.

Nevertheless, stories were sometimes consciously fabricated. Indeed, the famous aforementioned man of letters, Zhang Junfang, was reportedly assaulted in the street by the son of a man whom he had portrayed as a reincarnated turtle in one of his *zhiguai* accounts.³⁹ Similarly, in the renowned Tang dynasty *chuanqi* story “Tale of the White Ape,” historical dates were manipulated to slander a famous courtier.⁴⁰ The renowned statesman, historian, and collector of anomalous accounts, Hong Mai (1123–1202), told how a storyteller attempted to pass off a wholly fabricated story as factually true.⁴¹ In a preface to the third installment of his *zhiguai* collection, *Record of the Listener* (*Yijian zhi*), where he expresses regret for the factual inaccuracy of some of his stories, he remarks, “[after citing several story titles] are all largely unlike [the facts] and even border on the slander of good people.” He shortly after says, “This is probably partly due to the fault of the tellers, and partly due to my listening and not having verified the details—for this I am deeply ashamed.”⁴² Here, then, is an admission to the factual unreliability of Song dynasty short stories by an author-compiler who boldly claimed that stories that he spent his lifetime collecting and recording recounted real-life events.⁴³

Despite the possibility of fabrication and factual unreliability, readers throughout the Song and Yuan tended to interpret narratives literally—that is, based on what they considered more or less a factually reliable source or chain of events.⁴⁴ Even prior to this period, readers and compilers of the Tang and Six dynasties tended to understand narrative in a similar way.⁴⁵ Ming Dong Gu characterizes this tendency as “the tyranny of history”—that is, prior to the late sixteenth century, official historiography was so esteemed that the reading and writing of narrative was largely justified by claims of historical factuality.⁴⁶ In the context of Tang dynasty storytelling, Sarah M. Allen understands such a discursive and interpretive approach as one of “documentary intent”—that is, “events recounted may not have actually happened, but the recorder probably believes that they did and

recounts them with the expectation that his audience will take them at face value.”⁴⁷ Accordingly, the famous poet and statesman Su Shi (1037–1101) read the ninth-century “Story of Yingying” as biographical and considered Zhang Ji (765–830) its historical male protagonist.⁴⁸ The twelfth-century author Wang Zhi (dates uncertain), rejecting this attribution, argued that the protagonist was none other than its recorder, the famous poet Yuan Zhen (779–831), a viewpoint that remains influential today.⁴⁹

An end commentary to one of Shen Liao’s (1023–1085) stories superbly illustrates this phenomenon. In chapter 8 of his *Cloud Nest Compilation* (*Yunchao bian*), Shen records a story titled “Miss Ren She’s Story,” which tells of how a courtesan serving the Southern Tang court, just prior to its annexation by the Song state, was commanded to seduce Tao Gu (903–970), a diplomat sent by the Song emperor. Historical sources testify to Tao’s hypocritically serious nature. So as to discredit him, the Tang ruler, in collaboration with his minister Han Xizai (902–970), sent a courtesan to seduce him. After spending a night with the courtesan, Tao composed a commemorative lyric poem that circulated widely and, indirectly, exposed his indiscretion. At the conclusion of the narrative, Shen remarks: “When I first heard of Tao’s lyric, the events leading to it were said to have occurred in the North. I did not quite believe it. To be sure, from what we may infer from the lyric’s import, events should have occurred elsewhere. When I heard about the Renwang Temple and one of my guests related the story from beginning to end, I recorded it since it was different from what I had previously heard. I have heard of many such cases whereby courtesans have donated to temples.”⁵⁰ Several aspects of Song and Yuan period storytelling may be gleaned from this small snippet. First, the written record is based on oral telling, probably having passed through several hands before Shen heard it. The narrative was circulated together with a poem; as noted above, this was a common aspect of narrative production. Shen’s initial disbelief demonstrates his tendency to read the lyric and its associated narrative literally—that is, as having a factual basis. It was only after he “verified” the story’s historical foundation that he considered it worthy of recording. The convincing detail for Shen was the existence of the Renwang Temple, for whose construction the courtesan was said to have donated money in her middle age. Shen considers this plausible based on his existing knowledge. Finally, although Tao Gu was a historical personage who would have been known to men of Shen’s generation, even though his lyric circulated widely, news of his peccadilloes with the courtesan was evidently not well known given the

passage of time. This would explain the discrepancy between the courtesan's historical name, Qin Ruolan, and the narrative's heroine, Miss Ren She. Shen's ultimate motivation to record the story was the new information it offered. This is but one example of how stories of the period were circulated and recorded.

The persistent tendency to read literally may further be seen in the famous bibliophile and literary critic Hu Yinglin's (1551–1602) discussion of *zhiguai* accounts. When assessing the literary merit of tenth-century author-compiler Xu Xuan's (915–991) *Investigation into the Spirit World* (*Jishen lu*), Hu blames Xu's guests for spinning spurious stories in order to curry favor. Hu similarly criticizes Hong Mai's overreliance on informants for his massive twelfth-century collection of paranormal accounts, *Record of the Listener* (*Yijian zhi*). So as to substantiate his assertion, Hu cites several examples of stories found in either Xu or Hong's compilations that were largely identical to earlier ones. He concludes that the tellers simply changed the names and dates, thereby fooling the two author-compilers who unwittingly recounted old stories as new. Hu's reasoning that the existence of an earlier story discredits the historical veracity of a later one reveals an expectation that the latter should be unique and, therefore, have a historical basis. His emphasis on the reliability of a written text is also interesting because it disregards possible mutability introduced by oral sources.⁵¹

Given that stories generally circulated orally as gossip before being recorded, and that both tellers and recorders alike, influenced by historiographic practice, tended to receive and relate such material with “documentary intent,” the modern Western notion of a single, self-autonomous “author” is largely irrelevant. The “author,” in most cases, was merely the recorder. This is not to say that men of letters did not fabricate stories, as illustrated above. In this respect, Zhou Shuren's idea that Tang dynasty writers were beginning to “consciously create fiction” (*yi wei xiaoshuo zhe*) is, to an extent, justified.⁵² Nonetheless, intentional fabrication appears to be the exception. Much more common was well- or ill-intentioned elaboration of stories as both written and oral versions proliferated. Therefore, as Wilt Idema has observed, it is not accurate to speak of Chinese “fiction” in the modern sense until the large-scale importing of Western ideas into China during the early twentieth century.⁵³ Cognizant that individual recorders relied on a wide network of informal storytellers and gossips, I replace “author” with terms such as “storyteller,” “recorder,” and “author-compiler” throughout this study. Well-known historian and statesman Hong Mai

is a case in point. Hong spent most of his life collecting and recording paranormal events that he compiled into the aforementioned 420-chapter serial, *Record of the Listener*. Hundreds of storytellers from diverse class backgrounds provided him with material over a vast geographic area.⁵⁴ As Hong was not a professional storyteller, his discursive practice may be understood as informal storytelling. Nevertheless, we know that Hong's magnum opus was later consulted by professional storytellers; that is, numerous professionals utilized it as a source for oral stories that they related to paying customers (presumably both elite and non-elite) in the marketplaces and specialized urban entertainment centers.⁵⁵ My understanding of traditional short stories is, therefore, premised on the idea that (1) they tended to be read literally given their purported factual basis, and (2) they circulated in both oral and written forms akin to common gossip, notwithstanding exceptional cases.⁵⁶

The fact that stories recorded by an amateur story collector based on an informal network of raconteurs and gossips ultimately provided the material for professionals blurs the boundary between “popular” and “elite,” “professional” and “informal,” and “oral” and “written” in the literature of the period.⁵⁷ In the twelfth century, what were initially “popular” (among the general populous) stories became “elite” (Hong Mai and his upper-class peers), and what were “elite” returned to the “popular” (the professional storytellers' general audience). The late Ming dynasty play “Encouragement for Goodness” is another example. Based on the popular Buddhist story of Mulian, the storyline was heard and recorded by a minor literary figure, Zheng Zhizhen (fl. 1582), during a visit to Anhui. After initially circulating in manuscript form, popularity led to its publication. Some decades later, it was again being performed in villages to a general (popular) audience. As Anne McLaren notes, the “play is thus an example of a work which was derived from the villages, rewritten by a literati figure, circulated in manuscript form then published by someone who is aware of popular demand.”⁵⁸ Given the symbiotic relationship between popular and elite raconteurs, I would therefore argue that, in regard to the classical language short stories of the Song and Yuan, it makes little sense to distinguish between “popular” (*tongsu xiaoshuo*) literature and that of the educated elite.

As noted above, *xiaoshuo* as a discursive practice was accorded comparatively low status by the intellectual elite. It is therefore not surprising that author-compilers of short stories tended to avoid metatextual discussions about it. This, however, vastly differs from their approach to

poetry and the classics. For the educated men of imperial China, the study of Confucian classics and the histories was considered far more important than the reading and compiling of short stories given the moral edification thought to be derived therein. Short story writing or anthologizing was generally considered a dubious pursuit. Related to this is the factually unreliable nature of *xiaoshuo*, especially when compared to supposedly more reliable and morally edifying historical works. Accordingly, many anthologies contain a decidedly apologetic preface. Despite this, the practice continued.

Anthologizers of love stories, as opposed to those of other subject matter, therefore faced a twofold dilemma: if compiling prose narratives derided as *xiaoshuo* was bad enough, focusing on romantic love was equally dubious, especially if the love stories in question deviated from orthodox social mores. Many a love story featured illicit premarital and extramarital sex and, in contrast to their male counterparts, adulterous female characters were rarely, if ever, allowed to escape unscathed. Likewise, interclass marriage was generally considered potentially subversive vis-à-vis the structured social hierarchy of the Song and Yuan, as was the portrayal of young unmarried couples who eloped or else arranged their own marriages. All this contradicted orthodox social values and moral standards in addition to threatening social control. Such is the evident embarrassment of several author-compilers that they wrote under pseudonyms.

Given the material and social conditions of the period, it is not surprising that educated men derived pleasure from circulating and recording gossip stories. A famous love story or sexual encounter, such as pertaining to the aforementioned Tao Gu, or else an inexplicable paranormal phenomenon, would have often inspired informal gossip, much to the entertainment of participants, be they members of the ruling elite or humble farming folk. Worthy stories brought to the attention of educated men were consequently recorded, sometimes with matching poems. Given advances in printing technology, written versions were then re-recorded, anthologized, edited, and, where further information was available, enhanced. New editions and narrative anthologies fed an ever-increasing consumer book market hungry for novelty. At the same time, such written version fed verbal retelling both informally and during formal, professional performances. In this way, storytelling in both written and oral forms supported several cottage industries, such as printing and publishing, professional storytelling, the dramatic arts, et cetera. And, to be sure, the populous as a whole was kept entertained as a consequence.

Finer Bibliographic Distinctions

Although love stories were widely understood as *xiaoshuo* from the Song dynasty onward, a somewhat finer distinction was made by the compilers of *Extensive Records from the Era of Supreme Peace* (*Taiping guangji*). Completed by 978, this was a state-sponsored editorial project charged with collecting, classifying, and preserving the narrative *xiaoshuo* works of previous dynasties. The result was an unprecedentedly voluminous work comprising 500 chapters (i.e., *juan* or scrolls). Individual narratives were topologically arranged under ninety-two main categories and 150 subcategories. Many of the finest prototypical love stories were classified as “miscellaneous biographies” (*zazhuan*, chapters 484–92). The term “miscellaneous” (*za*) connotes the idea of “mixed” or “mongrelized,” which, in Chinese culture, is decidedly derogatory. That love stories were so labeled in the late tenth century is perhaps not surprising given the low status of short stories in general. Nevertheless, the *zazhuan* as a bibliographical category was clearly created as a supplement to historical works, thereby revealing the influence of historiography on *xiaoshuo* writing at the time. To be sure, the fact that many love stories’ titles are derived from the main protagonist’s name indicates their affiliation with historical biography. The same may be said for other types of stories now considered *chuanqi*. Five other categories from the *Extensive Records* (chapters 271–73) labeled “sagacious women,” “talented women,” “beautiful women,” “jealous women,” and “courtesans” contain romantic stories whose themes were developed in later anthologies. The following chapter, 274, is labeled *qinggan*. This term may be understood as “transformation brought about through *qing*” (love/emotion). Narratives thus categorized feature instances whereby the power of romantic love engendered a significant change of behavior, caused death, or else brought about resurrection from the dead. Many prototypical love stories featuring such occurrences were classified under the *qinggan* rubric. On the other hand, if a love story’s main protagonist was a ghost, it was classified under one of the many chapters labeled “ghosts.” Similarly, if the story featured a fox, it was classified under “foxes.” Therefore, no distinct, unified category that recognized the love story’s romantic focus had been devised by the late tenth century.

The first individual to classify love stories as a discreet literary corpus was Zhang Junfang, above-mentioned author-compiler of *Collected Love Stories* (*Liqing ji*, completed approximately in the mid–eleventh century).⁵⁹ Zhang’s titular use of the term *liqing* for an anthology exclusively focusing