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# SELLING SCANDAL IN THE REPUBLICAN ERA: FOLK OPERA IN PERFORMANCE AND PRINT

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*The publication of vernacular texts in regional languages is a vibrant but relatively little-known niche in the history of Chinese print culture. This study will draw from extant opera texts (tanhuang) produced in Shanghai for Wu-speaking audiences and readers in the Republican era. In the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, tanhuang performances were regularly proscribed by local authorities because of their erotic and scandalous content. By the early twentieth century publishers attempted to adapt traditional tanhuang material to keep up with radical changes in society and to avoid prohibition. The term “reformed” (gailiang) appeared in story titles to signify new notions of modernity. Considered ephemeral reading in their day, very few tanhuang booklets remain in mainland China. This study will take advantage of the rich corpus preserved in the Fu Ssu-nien Library in Taipei’s Academia Sinica to investigate tanhuang texts published in 1920s Shanghai. The intention is to examine the strategies of authors and publishers in the adaptation of this conventional folk genre. A particular focus will be the clash between the traditional corpus and new notions of gender equality.*

KEYWORDS: Chinese print culture, performance texts, *tanhuang*, folk opera, Chinese modernity, status of women in China

In the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century, Chinese reformers called for radical change based on imported notions of what constituted “civilized” society. The status of women became a touchstone of China’s social progress towards this goal. As women were offered new educational opportunities and attained greater visibility in public life, their status also became more controversial. The printing press played a huge role in contemporary debates. Newspapers debated the rights of women, magazine installment fiction dealt increasingly with social issues, and women gained prominence as authors, mentors and educators. Current scholarship on Chinese print culture in the modern era has rightly given pride of place to studies of leading newspapers and women-authored works in tracing Chinese modernity and improvements in the status of women.<sup>1</sup> However, the burgeoning print culture in urban areas also promoted the publication of material derived primarily from regional performance cultures, such as folk opera, storytelling, and folk songs. These performance genres, typically sung in various topolects (regional

<sup>1</sup> For a recent collection of scholarly essays on these issues see Michel Hockx, Joan Judge, and Barbara Mittler, eds., *Women and the Periodical Press in China’s Long Twentieth Century: A Space of their Own?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

languages), were extremely popular amongst mainly lower-class audiences. Once published in cheap illustrated formats they attracted wide readerships, including newly literate women. The educated classes tended to regard these works as ephemeral and vulgar, if not downright obscene.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, popular texts in regional languages have rarely been examined within the context of China's revolution, social change, and the introduction of a Western-style modernity.

To a great extent the twentieth-century song booklets examined here reproduced the songs, stories, thematic material and notions of conventional morality known to performance genres of the late imperial era. However, by the early twentieth century, authors and publishers felt compelled to keep up with new social trends in order to retain contemporary readerships. This could lead to a dramatic clash between the familiar motifs, characterizations, and plots of the original material, and the demands of the era for performances that dealt with new issues such as women's attempt to step out into society, to choose their marriage partners, and to strive for gender equality. This study will explore these issues through a focus on song booklets relating to a performance tradition known as *tanhuang*, variously written as 灘黃, 灘王, 攤黃, 彈黃, 彈王, which are all homophonous in the Wu (吳) speech zone spoken in the lower Yangzi delta, specifically the Shanghai region and most of contemporary Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. This was the wealthiest area of China in the early twentieth century and had the most developed publication industry.

### TANHUANG PERFORMANCE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

It is believed that *tanhuang* performance emerged in Suzhou, Wuxi and Changzhou in the early to mid-eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> According to records of the time, *tanhuang* was performed by itinerant performers who travelled between the villages and townships of the lower Yangzi delta. In its earlier development, *tanhuang* was a type of prosimetric story-telling performed in song and spoken dialogue.<sup>4</sup> The players were seated and did not carry out dramatic action. They accompanied themselves with stringed instruments such as the lute or fiddle. However, their singing roles were divided into the familiar roles of Chinese traditional opera such as *sheng* (生

<sup>2</sup> Li Jiarui 李家瑞 completed a study on *tanhuang* in the 1930s. On the perceived status of the (some) *tanhuang* as "obscene" see Wang Ch'iu-kuei 王秋桂, ed., *Li Jiarui xiansheng tongshu wenxue lunwenji* 李家瑞先生通俗文學論文集 (The collected writings of Mr. Li Jiarui on popular literature; Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1982), "Tanhuang," 1st published in 1935, pp. 63–65.

<sup>3</sup> For a succinct description and history of *tanhuang* see Colin Mackerras, *The Chinese Theatre in Modern Times: From 1840 to the Present Day* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), pp. 107–111. For more detail see the studies of Zhu Hengfu 朱恒夫 cited here and his monograph, *Tanhuang kaolun* 攤簧考論 (Investigations and studies of *tanhuang*; Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> According to Liao Ben 廖奔, the *tan* of *tanhuang* refers to "speech" and *huang* to "song," see his *Zhongguo xiqu shengqiang yuanliu shi* 中國戲曲聲腔源流史 (The origin and development of Chinese musical theater; Taipei: Guanya wenhua, 1992), pp. 243–44. Zhu Hengfu has proposed another interpretation where *tan* is read as 攤 in the sense of "to unfold or repeat" a tune and *huang* 簧 is read 黃, homophonous with a Wu idiom meaning "fictional." See Zhu Hengfu, "Quanguo yishu kexue guihua zhuan'an (xiju xiqu lei) chengguo xuanjie" 全國藝術科學規劃專案 (戲劇戲曲類) 成果選介 (A selection of the achievements of the National Arts and Science Plan specific items: [Category of spoken and musical theater]), *Xiju yishu lei yuekan* 戲劇藝術類月刊 2017.5: 152.

leading male) and *dan* (旦 leading female), which gave it a strong potential for further dramatization. The earlier *tanhuang* could be termed a type of “folk” opera as it was commonly performed in rural areas in the Wu-language idiom of specific regions.<sup>5</sup> In story content and song material it drew heavily from folk songs known as *shan’ge* 山歌 (mountain songs) sung by local farming populations.<sup>6</sup> *Tanhuang* was also influenced by other storytelling traditions and by regional staged opera such as Suzhou *Kunqu* (崑曲). In the case of stories derived from *Kunqu*, the complex melodic arias were converted into a less musically-demanding format.

In the aftermath of the Taiping Rebellion (also known as the Taiping War, 1850–1864), which devastated the region, *tanhuang* players fled Suzhou for the foreign concessions of Shanghai. It was here that *tanhuang* shed its lowly “folk” origins and gradually developed into a professional staged performance known today as Shanghai Opera (*Huju* 滬劇). A key element that remained in the urbanized *tanhuang* was performance in the different regional speech forms of the lower Yangzi delta. The delta region is linguistically very complex, comprising five distinct linguistic zones in the late imperial era.<sup>7</sup> This linguistic diversity meant that a *tanhuang* from one region might not be comprehensible to people from another area.<sup>8</sup> The major performance zones for *tanhuang* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were the townships of Shanghai, Hangzhou, Ningbo, Suzhou, Wuxi, and their rural hinterlands. This regional specificity with regard to local idiom and song modes was adopted in the later publication of *tanhuang*, which were characteristically identified in the title pages as *Ningbo tanhuang*, *Suzhou tanhuang*, and so on. The market for these texts included not just particular regions but also the sojourning communities that had migrated to Shanghai from elsewhere in the delta.<sup>9</sup>

*Shan’ge* and *tanhuang* were notorious for their stories of illicit passion (*siqing* 私情). The women protagonists fell in love with the “wrong” person, commenced an affair, were discovered by their family and community, and then faced dreadful

<sup>5</sup> Here I seek to distinguish between performance forms that had a restricted circulation due to language and geographical barriers and those that were comprehensible to broader audiences. The earlier *tanhuang* circulated in rural areas for mostly illiterate populations. It could be deemed “folk” as distinct from the adapted *tanhuang* that was performed for broader urban audiences at a later stage. The latter could be deemed “popular” urban entertainment. For notions of “the folk” see “Folklore,” in Richard Bauman, ed., *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 29–40. Features of “folk” culture are oral transmission, face-to-face communication, a shared mother-tongue, and shared traditions.

<sup>6</sup> For the influence of *shan’ge* on *tanhuang*, see Zheng Tuyou 鄭土有, *Wuyu xushi shan’ge yan-chang chuantong yanjiu* 吳語敘事山歌演唱傳統研究 (Studies in the performance tradition of narrative folk songs in the Wu language; Shanghai: Shanghai cishu, 2005), pp. 113–19; Wang Fang 王仿 and Zheng Shuoren 鄭碩人, *Minjian xushi shi de chuangzuo* 民間敘事詩的創作 (The creation of folk narrative poetry; Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi, 1993), pp. 180–213.

<sup>7</sup> For the five zones see Zhou Zhenhe 周振鶴 and You Rujie 游汝傑, *Fangyan yu Zhongguo wenhua* 方言與中國文化 (Regional languages and Chinese culture; Shanghai: Shanghai renmin, 1986), pp. 97–98. In the contemporary period six linguistic zones have been identified. The Wu language form spoken in the northern sector (the Lake Tai region) and the five southern language forms are mutually unintelligible, see Wang Ping 汪平, *Wujiang shi fangyan zhi* 吳江市方言志 (A Study of the Regional Speech of Wujiang; Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexue yuan, 2009), p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> As noted in Li, “Tanhuang,” pp. 63–64.

<sup>9</sup> The Shanghai entertainment world sought to attract the various sojourning communities residing within the city. See Jin Jiang, *Women Playing Men in Yue Opera: Social Change in Twentieth-century Shanghai* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), pp. 9–12.

consequences, which could include violent punishment, abortion, infanticide or enforced suicide. There was rarely a happy ending to these stories, which were considered to be scandalous tales about known individuals of the region.<sup>10</sup> Local governments banned the performance of *tanhuang* as early as the 1850s. A stone inscription was set up in 1850 by authorities in Wujin County, Changzhou, to prohibit these performances:

In my opinion, *tanhuang* is the worst of the illicit plays with regard to undermining public morals. They enact the secret love affairs of men and women and perform private games belonging to the boudoir. Men and women mingle together in the audience and view the spectacle throughout the night. Because of *tanhuang*, women lose their chastity, young men become dissolute, ne'er-do-wells take advantage of this to set up gambling dens, and thieves seize the chance to steal and pilfer.

竊淫戲之敗壞風俗，攤簧為最。揣摩兒女私情，演習閨房秘戲，男女雜坐，長夜聚觀，婦女為之失節，子弟為之蕩心，匪徒從而設局賭博，盜賊因而乘間劫竊。<sup>11</sup>

The crackdown on “immoral” performances was particularly strong under the jurisdiction of Ding Richang 丁日昌 (1823–1882), governor of Suzhou, who was in charge of the post-Taiping reconstruction of the prefecture. In 1868 he placed a ban on the printing of a large list of *tanhuang*, *shan’ge*, regional opera, and fictional works (see later discussion). His well-known list includes the first of the *tanhuang* to be discussed in this study. However, government bans were largely ineffective and *tanhuang* continued to be performed throughout the nineteenth-century and continued with various changes in the Republican era. Hong Yu and Liu Yongguang have described the “guerilla-style tactics” of the itinerant *tanhuang* players. If on the run from the authorities, they would hide in farmers’ homes by day and then set up a make-shift stage under the eaves of houses in the evenings. When authorities arrived they would hastily dismantle the stage.<sup>12</sup> In the late imperial era, women

<sup>10</sup> For *siqing* stories amongst delta *shan’ge* see Anne E. McLaren, “Gossip, Scandal, and the Wanton Woman in Chinese Song-cycles,” in Cuncun Wu and Mark Stevens, eds., *Wanton Women in Late Imperial Chinese Literature: Models, Genres, Subversion and Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 184–228.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Hong Yu 洪煜 and Liu Yongguang 劉永廣, “Huayu, xushu yu lishi jiyi—Jindai Wuxi tanhuang xingxiang jiangou yu ziwo jiushu” 話語，敘述與歷史記憶——近代無錫灘簧形象建構與自我救贖 (Discourse, narrative, and historical memory—The image construction of modern Wuxi tanhuang and self-redemption), *Jiangnan daxue xuebao* 江南大學學報 14.1 (2015): 25. The term yin 淫 can be variously translated as lewd, licentious, obscene or illicit. By the mid nineteenth century, the Manchu court had begun to relax earlier prohibitions on Chinese musical theater. However, after the Taiping Rebellion (or Taiping Civil War) prohibitions returned in the region of Suzhou (see discussion below). On prohibitions against Chinese drama see Chen Fan Pen, “Forbidden Fruits: Ethnicity and Gender in Prohibitions on Performances in Late Imperial China,” *CHINOPERL Journal of Chinese Oral and Performing Literature* (2004) 25: 1, 35–85. The term *mixi* 秘戲 refers to lewd or obscene games belonging to the bedroom. One could infer that this critic is referring to the enactment of lewd actions in performances of *tanhuang*. A common term for pornographic pictures is *mixi tu* 秘戲圖。

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

were still generally banned from performing on stage. However, *tanhuang* players defied this ban and included both men and women performers.<sup>13</sup>

## THE EMERGENCE OF URBAN *TANHUANG*

The late nineteenth-century saw a major change in *tanhuang* performance as players flocked to the rapidly growing urban centers of the delta and began to adopt urban identities. This was also an era when the humble *tanhuang* shed its “folk” origins and began to be performed in theaters with elaborate costumes and western-style settings and curtains. Jonathan Stock has noted the “institutionalism” and “internationalism” of Shanghai operatic forms, including *tanhuang*, at that time.<sup>14</sup> Performances were now commonly held in tea-garden style theaters, where clients sat at tables and were served refreshments. By the twentieth century, *tanhuang* were enacted in Western-style theaters and giant entertainment complexes in the foreign concessions.<sup>15</sup> The sit-down style of performance was discarded in favor of dramatic action. A dedicated musical troupe accompanied the performance; singers no longer needed to be musicians as well. The *tanhuang* texts discussed here reflect the new urban identity of both players and audiences, however, the repertoire still largely retained the song styles, characters, plots and thematic material characteristic of *shan’ge* and regional opera.

By the early twentieth century, performers and publishers of *tanhuang* came under increasing pressure to keep up with radical new trends in marriage and the status of women. In 1914 the Shanghai newspaper, *Shenbao* 申報, published a call to reform *tanhuang* with a view to lifting government bans.<sup>16</sup> Thereafter, the term “reformed” (*gailiang* 改良) was often added to story titles to signify the removal of “immoral” content and the insertion of modern themes.<sup>17</sup> Inspired by the introduction of Western-style spoken drama, women for the first time were allowed to play female roles on a public stage. *Tanhuang* were now boldly advertised as “jointly performed by men and women” (*nan nǚ heyuan* 男女合演).<sup>18</sup> In 1920 *tanhuang* was renamed *Shenqu* 申曲 (Shanghai Opera), in imitation of the famous *Kunqu* opera of Suzhou. This was done in an attempt to raise the status of *tanhuang* and evade

<sup>13</sup> Li, “Tanhuang,” p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan P. J. Stock, “Place and Music: Institutions and Cosmopolitanism in ‘Shenqu’, Shanghai Traditional Local Opera, 1912–1949,” *Music & Letters* 83.4 (2002): 546.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Dong Jianbo 董建波 and Li Xuechang 李學昌, *20 shiji Jiang Zhe Hu nongcun shehui bianqian zhong de wenhua yanjin* 20 世紀江浙滬農村社會變遷中的文化演進 (Cultural progress in the social transformation of twentieth-century Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Shanghai rural society; Shanghai, Huadong shifan daxue, 2010), p. 154.

<sup>17</sup> Hong and Liu, “Huayu, xushu yu lishi ji,” pp. 31–32. Zhu Hengfu 朱恒夫, “Xinhai geming hou de Chang Xi tanhuang” 辛亥革命後的常錫灘簧 (Changzhou and Wuxi *tanhuang* after the 1911 revolution), *Zhejiang yishu zhiye xueyuan xuebao* 浙江藝術職業學院學報 13.2 (2015): 9–10.

<sup>18</sup> In the final decades of the nineteenth century women began to appear on stage in urban centers such as Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai. However, polite society regarded them as on a par with prostitutes, see Weikun Cheng, “The Challenge of the Actresses: Female Performers and Cultural Alternatives in Early Twentieth Century Beijing and Tianjin,” *Modern China* 22.2 (1996): 197–233; and Luo Suwen, “Gender on the Stage: Actresses in an Actor’s World,” in *Gender in Motion: Divisions of Labor and Cultural Change in Late Imperial and Modern China*, ed. Bryna Goodman and Wendy Larson (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), pp. 75–95.



the ire of the authorities. *Tanhuang*, whether “reformed” or not, was still immensely popular with members of the urban public. In the 1930s there were about thirty *tanhuang* performance sites in Suzhou, Wuxi, and Changzhou alone.<sup>19</sup> However, the genre proved somewhat recalcitrant to well-meant attempts to “reform” its style and content. In this study we will trace the dilemmas of performers, publishers, and audiences in the adaptation of three *tanhuang* booklets in the urban environment of 1920s Shanghai.

### TANHUANG AS PRINTED TEXT

The printed *tanhuang* is an example of a popular performance genre belonging to a particular speech community that was transformed into a printed text for more general circulation. A *tanhuang* booklet was neither a script to assist actors nor a record of any actual performance. It could be considered as a simulacrum of performance designed for easy reading by those who were very familiar with *tanhuang*. The booklet comprises the complete songs and speech of the players, including “padding” syllables used for purely phonic effect. An aficionado of *tanhuang* familiar with the traditional song melodies could easily vocalize their reading experience in their own mother tongue. This lent a particular ambience of intimacy lacking in the reading of so-called “vernacular” texts produced mainly in *guanhua* 官話 (Mandarin), the lingua franca used to communicate with people from outside one’s own home region.<sup>20</sup> In 1925, Yu Pingbo 俞平伯 (1900–1990), a native of northern Zhejiang province, wrote the following in a preface to a collection of Wu-language folk songs: “Only my mother tongue gives me the strongest feelings of intimacy and familiarity; only the mother tongue presents absolutely no barrier to understanding, and only my mother tongue can fully express my feelings to others” 惟有它[母舌], 和我最親切稔熟, 惟有它, 於我無纖毫的隔膜; 惟有它, 可以流露我的性情面目於諸君之前。<sup>21</sup> *Tanhuang* also dealt openly and unashamedly with private issues commonly repressed in more public mediums such as a young girl’s love-longing, sexual desire, pregnancy, abortions, and infanticide. In the texts examined here there were only two players, a man and a woman engaged in a flirtatious or sexual relationship. The chief attraction of *tanhuang* lay in its intense focus on two lovers singing to each other and to the audience as they are caught up in the joys and heartbreak of a love affair that is both transgressive and alluring. Vulgar comedy and farce were also much enjoyed features of the performance. The plots were conventional rather than novel. *Tanhuang* aimed at a heightened affective experience instead of a particular message or moral (at least

<sup>19</sup> Hong and Liu, “Huayu, xushu yu lishi ji,” p. 23.

<sup>20</sup> As Wei Shang has pointed out, the May Fourth reformist movement advocated a form of plain writing (*baihua* 白話) based on the *guanhua* language form used in transregional communication across the country. This meant that it was not the true vernacular of any single region, see Wei Shang, “Writing and Speech: Rethinking the Issue of Vernaculars in Early Modern China,” in Benjamin A. Elman, ed., *Rethinking East Asian Languages, Vernaculars, and Literacies, 1000–1919* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 260. The new *baihua* literature was later criticized as a literary language removed from common speech (p. 264).

<sup>21</sup> See Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 et al., *Wuge. Wuge xiaoshi* 吳歌吳歌小史 (Wu songs; A brief history of Wu songs), ed. Wang Xuhua 王煦華 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji, 1999), p. 17. Yu Pingbo was an advocate of literature based on Guoyu (國語), or the national language, as well as literature based on “fangyan” (方言), or the spoken language of communities and regions. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

not until the advent of “reformed” *tanhuang*). The goal of a *tanhuang* performance was to recreate the feelings of the male and female protagonists as they engaged in their “illicit” relationship, clashed with their kin and community, and dealt with the usually catastrophic outcomes.

*Tanhuang* players did not use fully-written out scripts, so one could conclude that the *tanhuang* printed booklets examined here were written *ab initio* in imitation of the *tanhuang* performance. Players learned their art from observation and practice.<sup>22</sup> In rehearsals they worked from scene outlines (*mubiao* 幕表) with brief headings such as “spring outing” or “roadside encounter.”<sup>23</sup> The actual authors of the printed *tanhuang* were never identified but the performers of the *tanhuang* they were seeking to recreate were highlighted on the title page. In some cases, particularly the first example to be discussed here, these unknown authors drew their material from popular *shan’ge* and manuscripts of *shan’ge*.<sup>24</sup> In this regard publishers of *tanhuang* were following a common practice of adapting dramatic entertainments into fictional reading.<sup>25</sup>

The printed *tanhuang* texts sought to associate themselves with current or recent *tanhuang* performances. For this reason, they became out-of-date quite quickly. *Tanhuang* were usually very brief, many comprising only a few folios and were published on cheap paper. Title pages record the names of contemporary performers and feature the rubric “performed together by men and women” (*nan nǚ heyān*), a key indicator of “reform” and “modernity.” Idiomatic Wu language expressions abound in dialogues and songs. The texts appear “authorless;” only the publishing house is given, often with a detailed address to invite further purchases. Publishers pursued various strategies to make their “brand” recognizable. For example, they would publish a series of similar works or installments of the same story to entice the reader to purchase more booklets. The same ornamental style was employed on the title page to make the texts readily identifiable in a highly competitive market. As with many other popular genres, *tanhuang* texts were published using both woodblock and lithography technologies during this period.<sup>26</sup> Some circulated in manuscript, although extant holdings are relatively few in number.

It is very difficult to find *tanhuang* texts extant in China. Even in the 1930s, earlier examples of *tanhuang* texts were difficult to find, as noted by Li Jiarui in his study of

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan P.J. Stock, “Learning ‘Huju’ in Shanghai, 1900–1950: Apprenticeship and the Acquisition of Expertise in a Chinese Local Opera Tradition,” *Asian Music* 33.2 (2002): 12.

<sup>23</sup> Stock, “Place and Music,” p. 556.

<sup>24</sup> For discussion of a *shan’ge* manuscript from the mid-nineteenth century see Anne E. McLaren, “Folk Epics from the Lower Yangzi Delta Region: Oral and Written Traditions,” in *The Interplay of the Oral and the Written in Chinese Popular Literature*, ed. Vibeke Børdahl and Margaret Wan (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asiatic Studies Press, 2010), pp. 157–86.

<sup>25</sup> For example, in 1914 a publishing house known as the Xinju xiaoshuo she 新劇小說社 (Fiction based on new plays) was set up in the Shanghai Sima Road (Fuzhou Road) entertainment quarters to publish fiction based on play performances. See Liu Hecheng 柳和城, “Xinju xiaoshuo she yu ta de chubanyu” 新劇小說社與它的出版物 (The new plays and fiction society and its publications), *Chuban shiliao* 出版史料 2007.3: 119–25.

<sup>26</sup> During this transitional era one finds the simultaneous use of older and newer forms of printing. See Cynthia Brokaw, “Commercial Woodblock Publishing in the Qing (1644–1911) and the Transition to Modern Print Technology,” in *From Woodblocks to the Internet: Chinese Publishing and Print Culture in Transition, circa 1800 to 2008*, ed. Cynthia Brokaw and Christopher A. Reed (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 39–57.



1935.<sup>27</sup> His own study of *tanhuang* was based on performances, not scripts or printed renditions. China-based scholars working on the history of *tanhuang* rely on transcripts of elicited performances by elderly players recorded by folklorists in recent decades.<sup>28</sup> Further, folk performance texts hardly feature at all in the scholarship on publishing in the late imperial and early Republican period. As the chosen reading material of the less educated, the cheaply-printed *tanhuang* sung in local vernaculars was not held in high regard by the cognoscenti, nor preserved in private collections. As Christopher Reed has pointed out, the agenda of much mainstream China-based scholarship was to profile the importance of the publishing industry to China's journey from colonialism to modernity.<sup>29</sup> Traditional entertainment texts were hardly part of this "grand narrative" of China's emergence from semi-colonialism to national independence. Nonetheless, as discussed here, even the scurrilous and vulgar *tanhuang* could not avoid engagement with the new social trends of the era.

The Taipei Fu Ssu-nien Library probably has the largest holding of *tanhuang* imprints in the world but has been studied by relatively few researchers.<sup>30</sup> The core holdings were originally collected by Liu Fu 劉複 (also known as Liu Bannong 劉半農, 1891–1934) in 1917. Under the influence of imported notions of the importance of "the folk" in building notions of citizenship and nationhood, a number of Chinese intellectuals and scholars began collecting manuscripts and imprints of material related to popular performance art forms.<sup>31</sup> Tseng Yong-Yih has recorded the dramatic story of the vicissitudes of this valuable collection during the Japanese invasion and the later civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists.<sup>32</sup> Once shipped safely to Taiwan, the collection was preserved in the Fu Ssu-nien Library, Academia Sinica, Taipei, where it remained largely unexplored for decades. From 2001 to 2006, five hundred volumes of photo prints of material from the collection were published, making China's pre-contemporary performance texts more accessible to scholars around the world.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Li, "Tanhuang," p. 65.

<sup>28</sup> For example, the pioneering study on the relationship between *tanhuang* and folk songs by Wang Fang and Zheng Shuoren relies entirely on this recently recorded material. See their *Minjian xushi shi de chuanguozuo*, pp. 180–213.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Reed, "Gutenberg and Modern Chinese Print Culture: The State of the Discipline II," *Book History* 10 (2007): 303.

<sup>30</sup> The *tanhuang* holdings can be found in volumes 278–283 of Huang Kuanzhong 黃寬重, Li Xiaoti 李孝悌, and Wu Zhengshang 吳政上, eds., *Su wenxue congkan* 俗文學叢刊 (Folk literature collection), 500 vols. (Taipei: Xin wenfeng, 2001–2006). An online version of the same collection is available in some libraries in North America, such as the University of California Berkeley and Harvard University libraries. A final installment appeared in 2016.

<sup>31</sup> On the role of Liu Fu in this intellectual movement see Chang-tai Hung, *Going to the People: Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature, 1918–1937* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 33–40.

<sup>32</sup> See Tseng Yong-Yih 曾永義, *Shuo su wenxue* 說俗文學 (Speaking of popular literature; Taipei: Liangjing chuban shiye, 1980), pp. 1–10. For a report in English on the collection see Vibeke Børdahl, "Re: Popular Literature in the Fu Ssu-nien Library of the Academia Sinica," *Asian Folklore Studies* 58.1 (1999): 231–35.

<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that the photo prints in *Su wenxue congkan* do not necessarily represent fully the material circumstances of the original item. In November 2011, I had the opportunity to view a number of the Fu Ssu-nien song booklets and noted that there were various anomalies in how they had been rebound. For example, parts of one text were rebound in fragmentary form

Below are discussed three examples of *tanhuang* booklets from the same publisher in 1920s Shanghai. Each has been selected because it exemplifies different aspects of the process of adaptation and “reform” of the *tanhuang* in the Republican era. The first one reflects a relatively direct transformation of material very familiar in *shan’ge* singing of the lower Yangzi delta. The simple story shows minimal adaptation from popular song to printed booklet; however, the female singer is explicitly described as having unbound natural feet rather than the conventional but now old-fashioned “small lotus feet” (bound feet). The second and third examples below parallel similar stories in the long narrative *shan’ge*-style songs of the delta but were influenced by imported Western ideas of freedom in love and gender equality. The third example was produced contemporaneously with a much-celebrated court case involving a scandalous love affair that transgressed both gender and class divides in 1920s Shanghai. All three examples come from the tradition of Ningbo *tanhuang*, thus allowing a perspective on how a single region adapted traditional performance forms to the new conditions of the early twentieth century. Ningbo, a coastal city in Zhejiang province, was an important commercial center in the Republican era and strongly influenced by foreign practices and ideas. As early as 1904, a Ningbo critic had called for reform of the local theater in order to “teach everyone notions of citizenship, and let them understand the current condition of the world” 教各人有國民的思想，曉得現在世界上的形勢。<sup>34</sup> The Ningbo community in colonized Shanghai played a strong role in the politics and commerce of the city.<sup>35</sup> The Ningbo sojourner population in Shanghai would have been an important market for these *tanhuang* texts.

### ROCKING BOAT (DANG HU CHUAN 蕩湖船)

This sexually-explicit tale about a woman singer entertaining a male client on a boat circulated widely across the Yangzi delta in the later imperial era. It was often performed by prostitutes. In 1868 Jiangsu governor Ding Richang listed the “Rocking Boat Song through the Five Watches of the Night” (*Dang he chuan nao wu geng* 蕩河船鬧五更) in his list of unorthodox or immoral songs that should be banned, together with the infamous “Eighteen Grotes” (“Shiba mo” 十八摸).<sup>36</sup> A novel about courtesan life in late nineteenth-century Shanghai, *Haishang hua liezhuan* 海上花列傳 (1894) by Han Bangqing 韓邦慶 (1856–1894), includes a scene where “Rocking Boat” is performed in a brothel by two courtesans playing stringed instruments.<sup>37</sup> In 1924 Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893–1980) included “Eighteen Grotes”

together with other texts with no indication in the catalogue. Sometimes manuscript and imprints of diverse origins were bound in the same volume without identification in the book title or the *Su wenxue congkan* catalogue.

<sup>34</sup> Ma Youyu 馬幼漁 published a call to reform plays in the *Ningbo baihua bao* 寧波白話報 (Ningbo vernacular language paper) in that year, see discussion in Dong and Li, 20 *shiji Jiang Zhe Hu nongcun shehui*, p. 154.

<sup>35</sup> See Bryna Goodman, “The Locality as Microcosm of the Nation?: Native Place Networks and Early Urban Regionalism in China,” *Modern China* 21.4 (1995): 387–419.

<sup>36</sup> Wang Liqi 王利器, *Yuan Ming Qing sandai jinhui xiaoshuo xiqu shiliao* 元明請三代禁毀小說戲曲史料 (Historical material on banned fiction and plays in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties; Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1981), p. 146.

<sup>37</sup> Han Bangqing 韓邦慶, *Haishang hua liezhuan* 海上花列傳 (Biographies of outstanding courtesans of Shanghai; Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1982), p. 55.

in his record of Suzhou song booklets available in street stalls. This text included an episode known as “Rocking Boat.” It related the story of Li Junfu 李君甫 and appears to be much the same as the Ningbo *tanhuang* discussed here. Gu notes the broad popularity of this song but added, “however, in the song are several very obscene sections so publishers delete these and insert other material.”<sup>38</sup> Zhu Hengfu 朱恒夫 notes an advertisement for a performance of “Rocking Boat” in Suzhou by a practiced male performer, Fei Xileng 費西冷, in 1929.<sup>39</sup> “Rocking Boat” was also a popular item in the festivals of the rural population, where it was performed as a type of dry-land dancing within a constructed paper boat. In 1990 Antoinet Schimmelpenninck recorded these words from *shan’ge* singer, Zhao Yongming 趙永明 (b. 1922) about performances of “Rocking Boat” during village festivals in the Republican era: “Those boat rocking songs were dancing songs. Four people were clad in a paper boat and held oars, another person sat on top, and they rocked their bodies and sang songs like ‘Shiba mo’ [Eighteen Strokes]. It was marvelous.”<sup>40</sup>

The *Su wenxue* collection contains many different versions of this title, comprising manuscripts, woodblock imprints, and lithographic imprints.<sup>41</sup> In this study I will examine an edition in the Ningbo *tanhuang* series published in Shanghai.<sup>42</sup> This booklet comprises ten half-folios preceded by a half-folio illustration. Above the title, “Rocking Boat,” are listed the names of the performers, Xiao Baoyu 筱寶玉 and Ying Rengui 應仁貴, with the term “perform together” (*beyan*) in a white circular cartouche. The top register states this is a “Newly printed Ningbo *Tanhuang*.” The name of the publisher, Renhexiang zhuang 仁和翔莊, and the address in Shanghai is listed in smaller size characters in the bottom register. The text is undated, but from other evidence this publishing house was clearly active in the 1920s (see discussion of the third example below). Following the frontispiece and immediately preceding the text proper one finds a half folio illustration. In this illustration (fig. 1) we see the ferry woman dressed up in elaborate traditional costume vigorously sweeping the sculling oar and an obviously older, bearded man holding the rudder. The “rocking boat” refers to a common type of boat in the water lands of the lower Yangzi delta that rocked from side to side as it was propelled forward using a single oar. The oar is secured to a pivot into the stern of the boat and stabilized with a rope that connects the tip of the oar to the mid-deck of the boat. The oar or paddle is known as a *lu* 櫓 and the motion of sculling as *yao lu* 搖櫓, from which is derived the English term yuloh.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Gu Jiegang and Wu Limu 吳立模, “Suzhou changben yulu” 蘇州唱本余錄 (Supplementary record of Suzhou song booklets), *Geyao zhoukan* 歌謠周刊 60 (1924), included in Gu et al., *Wuge. Wuge xiaoshi*, p. 686.

<sup>39</sup> Zhu Hengfu 朱恒夫, “Minguo shiba nian yiyue qiri ‘Shenbao’ shang de tanhuang xinxi de jiazhi” 民國十八年一月七日‘申報’上的灘簧資訊的價值 (The value of the information on *tanhuang* in the *Shenbao* report of January 7 1929), *Dongnan daxue xuebao* 東南大學學報 9.1 (2007): 117.

<sup>40</sup> Antoinet Schimmelpenninck, *Chinese Folk Songs and Folk Singers: Shan’ge Traditions in Southern Jiangsu* (Leiden: CHIME Foundation, 1997), p. 97.

<sup>41</sup> As noted in the online catalogue for *Su wenxue congkan*. The same tale is sometimes known as *Wenzi shan’ge* 蚊子山歌 (Song about mosquitos).

<sup>42</sup> Huang et al., *Su wenxue congkan*, vol. 276, pp. 487–99.

<sup>43</sup> Sir Frederick Maze, “Notes on the Chinese ‘Yuloh,’” *The Mariner’s Mirror* 36.1 (1950): 55–57.



FIG. 1. Rocking Boat frontispiece

This *tanhuang* follows the usual format of division into operatic character roles. The male and female leads are referred to only as *sheng* and *dan* and their voiced presentation is either song (*chang* 唱) or prose (*bai* 白). The opening *chang* section, sung by the male lead, consists of lines of uneven length, with most lines either seven or ten syllables.<sup>44</sup> The male lead announces himself as Li Junfu from Changshu. He tells us that he used to run three pawn shops, but ultimately

<sup>44</sup> According to Li Jiarui, who viewed *tanhuang* in the 1930s, *tanhuang* comprised a number of different styles of songs (fast, slow, falling, and so on). Li, "Tanhuang"; see Wang, *Li Jiarui xian-sheng*, p. 65.

became bankrupt and then decided to go to Suzhou to seek assistance from a cousin. He is now so poor he has had to pawn his jacket for 3000 pieces of copper to pay for the boat trip. His relative offered funds for him to set up a business selling bolts of cloth. He recounts that he came across a young woman with a baby and offered her cloth to make diapers for the infant in return for allowing him to caress her. As he is doing this a tough man appeared and assaulted him. Li then fled, leaving behind his bundle of possessions. He then hires a rocking boat (yuloh) operated by a young woman. She names her price as 2800 copper cash. The two engage in ribald banter as the ferry woman teaches him how to place the upright rudder firmly in its anchoring hole on the boat while she sweeps the sculling paddle. Li Junfu calls on the woman to sing songs to pass the time. She urges him to sing first. He begins: "I will sing about how a lady had a love affair with two suitors" 我唱一个姐呢結識两个郎.<sup>45</sup> Next they sing a duo based on the Five Watches of the Night (*Wu geng* 五更 pattern). The woman sings the first line and the man responds: "The *dan* sings: At the first watch the lady is full of love-longing, it's time to go to sleep" / The *sheng* responds: Then you may as well sleep with me!" 旦唱: 一更裡个相思, 正好来的眠呀 / 生接唱: 正好陪我眠呀.<sup>46</sup> In this song the mother wakes up and wants to know about the racket in the chamber. The daughter tells her it is just the mosquitos. Songs about mosquitos biting a young woman's flesh on a hot summer's night were also popular at this time. A song booklet called *Wenchong shange* 蚊蟲山歌 was sold on the stalls of Suzhou in the early twentieth century.<sup>47</sup> Then Li Junfu enjoins her to sing the "The Eighteen Gropes." This is a verbal strip-tease where the singer describes at length female body parts from top to toe.<sup>48</sup> One surprise is that her feet are unbound and hence "civilized" or

<sup>45</sup> Huang et al., *Su wenxue congkan*, vol. 276, p. 494. Note that in the case of all citations from *tanhuang* in this article, I preserve the original character forms of the characters. *Tanhuang* texts commonly contain a mixture of alternative and conventional characters.

<sup>46</sup> Huang et al., *Su wenxue congkan*, vol. 276, p. 494.

<sup>47</sup> "By day it lingered behind the gauze curtains / By night it hid deep in the lady's bosom. / Even though the lady used her ten finger-tips to squash it to death / The mosquito thought it was worth it!" 日裡裏躲在青紗帳, 夜轉躲在姐胸膛, 被那姐姐十指尖尖來拍死, 蚊子死了也風光。Chong Jiu 重九, "Suzhou changben" 蘇州唱本 (Suzhou songbook; 1924). See Gu et al., *Wuge. Wuge xiaoshi*, p. 705.

<sup>48</sup> "The Eighteen Gropes" could be accompanied by actual groping. An illustration to another song booklet has a picture entitled "Li Junfu sings 'The Eighteen Gropes.'" This performance takes place inside a room (or possibly on a stage). There are screens to the rear. The illustration depicts the male player half-kneeling on the floor with his right hand on the lower back of the female player. In his left hand he holds upright a phallic-looking prop standing in for the rudder. The young woman, clothed in a waist-length striped jacket with a mandarin-collar and calf-length striped trousers, is stepping forward wielding a curved paddle as if on a boat. She appears to have unbound feet. See the *Shan'ge* category, *Shidiao daguan* 時調大觀 (Compendium of popular songs), opening illustrations, p. 2; viewed in the Academia Sinica Fu Ssu-nien Library, TC19-233. The costume the woman is shown wearing is said to be characteristic of that worn by women from the late 1910s to early 1920s; see Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 124, 139. For another example of an image of the rocking boat story see the New Year print from Suzhou in Wang Shucun 王樹村, *Xichu nianhua* 戲齣年畫 (Theatrical new year prints), 2 Vols. (Taipei: Yingwen Hansheng, 1990), 1: 76-77. This rendition features two costumed ladies on the boat and is entitled "Rocking Boat Duo" ("Shuang dang huchuan" 雙蕩湖船). The male, sporting a moustache and glasses, is groping the back of the beautifully costumed lady wielding the sculling oar. In this version, a

“modern” (文明 *wenming*) in conformity with the Heavenly [Natural] Foot Association (Tianzu hui 天足會), a popular association that sought to ban foot-binding<sup>49</sup>:

My hand reaches out to the lady’s small feet,

The lady’s feet are civilized,

Jige jige yang

Ai ai yo, ai ai yo

Ai yo ai yo ai ai yo

The feet in line with the Tianzu hui.

Ai ai yo.

伸手摸到姐妮小脚边呀

姐妮脚兒是文明，

嚟咯嚟咯样

哎哎唷 哎哎唷

哎唷哎唷哎哎唷

脚兒天足會

哎哎唷.<sup>50</sup>

By the time the singer has described the lady’s “three-cornered field” (*sanjiao tian* 三角田), the boat has reached its destination. The ferry woman calls for her money. Li tells her he has no money but will pay her next time. There is nothing she can do but call on a female friend to accompany her on the return route. This time they sing a different song, about how an old codger called for a boat and was entertained with songs, including the Five Watches and the Eighteen Groves. The singer sang till she became hoarse, but the old man failed to pay the fees at the end of the trip.

man from outside the region who is observing the scene from the bank accepts the loan of binoculars from a helpful onlooker. He is so engrossed in the spectacle of the Eighteen Groves that the helpful onlooker manages to steal his money.

<sup>49</sup> The Tianzu hui was an association set up in Shanghai in 1895 by Chinese reformers to discourage foot-binding. See Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 40. Ko points out that the term first came to public notice in 1875 when the Reverend John McGowan tried to set up an association of that name in Amoy (p. 14). She also notes that *tianzu* was a neologism of the era (p. 17).

<sup>50</sup> Huang et al., *Su wenxue congkan*, vol. 276, p. 499.



This imprint is a good example of how *tanhuang* authors could draw from folk material and courtesan entertainment in common circulation across the delta. The author of this text borrowed from a pre-existing reservoir of manuscript and earlier imprints as well as the staged rendition of “Rocking Boat” and the oral traditions of the Shanghai hinterland. The text contains abundant Wu language idiom, particularly the use of kinship terms such as 唔 (I/me), 侬子 (son), 儂 (you) and so on. The sonic effect is enhanced by the addition of common exclamations such as *ai ai yo* 哎哎唷. It would have been a simple matter for the author to recreate this familiar song material as an entertainment text designed primarily for fans of Ningbo *tanhuang*. The unknown author has “modernized” the text by drawing attention to the woman’s natural feet. However, this does not detract from her charms. The feet are still described as “small” (*xiaojiao*) and the motif “natural feet” (*tianzu*) adds to rather than detracts from the sexual tension. In other contexts of folk performance in the delta, natural feet are described as “large feet” (*dajiao* 大脚) and regarded as a sign of poverty and low social status.<sup>51</sup> The feet are also described as *wenming* 文明 or unbound, an attribute of the New Woman. *Wenming* is an old Chinese term that through reverse borrowing from Meiji-era Japanese was now used to refer to enlightened Western practices.<sup>52</sup> By the late imperial era, *wenming* had become a key term in Chinese notions of historical development. According to Andrew F. Jones,

[B]y the late Qing, *wenming* came to serve as an emblem of all that was advanced, standing as a synecdoche for the power and prestige of the West, and marking the geographical and historical rupture between here and there, old and new.<sup>53</sup>

However, what would the audience and readership of “Rocking Boat” make of the reference to *wenming* here? It is used as a descriptor for feet, not as an abstract notion of a new enlightened practice. It appears that the term “civilized” is used here for comical effect, to poke fun at the woman and her seeming pretensions at modernity. In this rendition of the story, the ferry woman is left hoarse, duped and bereft of payment, while the man escapes into the night. Her “civilized” feet are just another attribute of her charms and do not change her condition in any other way. One could conclude that this *tanhuang* is an example of the insertion of iconic motifs of modernity to add an element of farce to the erotic entertainment.

### THE CIVILIZED WAY OF GIVING BIRTH TO A CHILD (WENMING CHAN ZI 文明產子)

This is another in the Ningbo “new *tanhuang*” series published by the Renhexiang publishers. The title page has the same format as “Rocking Boat.” It is also

<sup>51</sup> The bride lamenting in coastal Nanhai, south of Shanghai, would bewail her “large” [natural] feet, a sure sign of poverty and unworthiness for marriage. See Anne E. McLaren, *Performing Grief: Bridal Laments in Rural China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008), p. 56.

<sup>52</sup> Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity, China 1900–1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 308.

<sup>53</sup> *Developmental Fairy Tales: Evolutionary Thinking and Modern Chinese Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 17.

undated. The two performers are listed as Xiao Baoxin 筱宝新 and Jin Cuiyu 金翠玉. In this story, a young woman is betrayed by her betrothed and left to cope with the consequences of pregnancy. The young couple are not identified by name, so this tale does not seem to relate to an actual scandal as in the case of the third *tanhuang*, discussed below.<sup>54</sup>

The story begins with the woman doing her toilette. She describes herself as “dressed in the height of fashion” 打扮好來多時髦. She describes her tiny feet, which we understand are bound feet, as “a pair of small feet only three inches” 一双小足三寸大. Her feet are so exquisite that they “can be compared to the water chestnut floating on top of a lake” 有可比, 水上紅菱湖上漂.<sup>55</sup> The male role comes onstage and exclaims in a long song monologue that he is seeking “a truly fashionable young lady / With a pair of flirtatious eyes” 一位姑娘真時髦 / 二只眼睛膀子吊. He is a student who has a secret relationship with a woman. He has asked her to marry him but she refuses to do so unless he exchanges vows and love tokens. He has given her a single ingot of silver as betrothal gift and she offers him a silk scarf in return. After the exchange of gifts she considered herself betrothed and had given herself to him. He had promised to return soon but his mother had hired a teacher and he had been locked up like a bird in a cage. After seven months he has managed to get away and has rushed to see her. She questions him severely for not coming to see her for seven months and tells him that she is pregnant. Already local gossips have accused her of illicit relations. Her paternal uncle is calling on her to commit suicide; her maternal uncle says she has ruined the family’s reputation and should have her hands and feet nailed down. She tells her lover the decision is in his hands. The couple then discuss whether they should marry and give birth to the child or have an abortion. In the end, the male decides to search for something to effect an abortion. In the next scene we see him procuring an abortifacient from an “adopted aunt.” He returns to his distressed lover and tells her: “Little sister, all you have to do is let little brother put the plaster on your stomach” 阿妹, 只要將膏药的歇阿哥與你貼好.<sup>56</sup> He then departs through the back gate, promising to return, but secretly tells the audience/reader that he plans to run away because, “Looking after her would be like a tiger trying to swallow [a stone lion]—impossible! / I’d best just run away!” 管他是个老虎吞 / 快跑啊.<sup>57</sup> The word “the end” (*wan* 完) makes it clear this is the true end of the narrative. Immediately following the story appears a song in a traditional folk melody: “Longing for One’s Lover Through the Five Watches of the Night” (“Deng lang wugeng” 等郎五更).<sup>58</sup> In this song the young woman sings of her desperation and longing throughout the

<sup>54</sup> The male refers to his lover as Amei 阿妹 (little sister) and the woman to her lover (*qinglang* 情郎) as Age 阿哥 (older brother). These terms of address are commonplace between lovers in folk performance genres.

<sup>55</sup> Huang et al., *Su wenxue congkan*, vol. 276, p. 462.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 471.

<sup>57</sup> This is an apparent reference to a two-part allegorical saying where the real message is left unspoken (*xiehouyu* 歇後語): “like a tiger trying to swallow a stone lion—impossible to swallow” 老虎吞石獅—吃不消. Note that this text does not use the feminized version of *ta* 她 to refer to “she/her.” The feminized *ta* was first adopted by certain writers in the 1920s (see Liu, *Translingual Practice*, pp. 36–37).

<sup>58</sup> Huang et al., *Su wenxue congkan*, vol. 276, p. 471.

stages of the night. She cannot go out looking for her lover because, “My feet are tiny and exquisite, there is no lantern in my hand” 脚小令丁手無紅燈.<sup>59</sup>

The underlying story here is a familiar one and can be found in regional folk songs, both in oral transmission and in textual form. Zheng Tuyou divides the narrative *shan’ge* songs of the delta into five main types. His category C concerns a betrothed woman who has a love affair and subsequently seeks either to have an abortion or to abandon the infant. An example is the story of Sixth Sister Bai (Bai liujie 白六姐).<sup>60</sup> Sister is already betrothed but has a secret affair with another man. She gives birth to a son and casts the infant into a river, where he is found alive. The local magistrate enforces her original betrothal and she is forced to give up her lover. A variant on this tale has the lover going to Hangzhou to purchase an abortifacient but nonetheless she gives birth to a live infant who is flung into a pond and later rescued by a passer-by.<sup>61</sup> Other *tanhuang* in the *Su wenxue* collection relate similar tales. For example, “As you like it” (“Ru he shan’ge” 如河山歌) contains a scene where a woman engaged in an illicit love affair seeks to abort her child.<sup>62</sup> Another *tanhuang* text, “The Glamorous Girl” (*Fengliu jie* 風流姐) relates a similar story. A young woman is betrothed but has a secret affair with another man. She is an avid watcher of traditional plays such as the *Western Chamber*, which feature a young woman pursuing an amorous relationship in defiance of social norms. The glamorous girl falls pregnant and her lover helps to abort the baby. However, as her family comes to learn of her pregnancy she is forced to hang herself.<sup>63</sup>

The protagonist of “The Civilized Way of Giving Birth to a Child” wears traditional Chinese dress and has small bound feet. This is apparent both in her self-description and in the illustration. This presents a surprising contrast with the singer-courtesan of the contemporaneous *tanhuang* “Rocking Boat,” which highlights the natural feet of the woman concerned. Foot-binding was gradually less practiced in the early twentieth century<sup>64</sup> and it is perplexing that this *tanhuang* of the 1920s still has a foot-bound female lead. However, the bound feet reinforce the young woman’s vulnerability and reliance on males to provide support. In spite of her bound feet, she is declared to be “fashionable” and *wenming* in the sense of “modern,” or “civilized”. However, her traditional costume and hair style do not fit the role of either the Modern Girl or the New Woman, new terms that emerged in the early twentieth century.<sup>65</sup> The term *wenming* was also applied to

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 472.

<sup>60</sup> Zheng, *Wuyu xushi shan’ge*, p. 80.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 60–61.

<sup>62</sup> Viewed at the Fu Ssu-nien Library. This text is A Sg4-065 in the catalogue. It is undated and contains an illustration of a male figure in prison, his hands in a cangue and his feet manacled. A tearful woman is depicted visiting him.

<sup>63</sup> Huang et al., *Su wenxue congkan*, vol. 275, pp. 238–45.

<sup>64</sup> Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters*, pp. 38–68. Ko also notes the “misogyny” with which women with bound feet were treated in the opening decades of the twentieth century, *ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>65</sup> For definitions of these terms see Sarah E. Stevens, “Figuring Modernity: The New Woman and the Modern Girl in Republican China,” *NWSA Journal* 15.3 (Autumn 2003): 82–103. Both the so-called New Woman and the Modern Girl had short bobbed hair and modern attire. However, the New Woman was associated with the politically-aware educated woman and the Modern Girl appears as either “a female character actively seeking romance” or “as a sinister and dangerous figure” (p. 89).

Western-style “spoken plays” (that is, non-operatic theater). “The Civilized Way of Giving Birth to a Child” is presented in traditional operatic style with players enacting the roles of *sheng* and *dan* (male and female leads), so *wenming* does not seem to apply to the mode of performance adopted here. One can only assume that *wenming* refers to civilized or enlightened practice as enacted in this *tanhuang*. But what did *wenming* mean to its audience and readership? The single illustration in the text also provides a clue (fig. 2). We see the pregnant woman sitting on an old-fashioned sofa in her boudoir and her lover arriving with the toxic liquid spilling out of a flask. On the wall is a scroll with this script: “The most civilized in the world” 世界最文明. Is this term meant ironically? *Tanhuang* are not sophisticated literary works. They are known for vulgar farce rather than irony. To the modern reader, the general message does not appear at all “civilized” or “modern,” with its emphasis on betrayal, a dangerous abortion, and abandonment. Could *wenming* refer to the use of an abortion in the case of pregnancy out of marriage? However, abortifacients such as drugs, internal suppositories, and abdominal plasters were not new and had been in use for centuries across the delta region. Abortions were prohibited during the Qing and Republican periods, as was the procuring of abortifacients.<sup>66</sup> In spite of this, Chinese women commonly resorted to herbal and insect abortifacients that were often lethal to both the woman and the fetus. It is hard to see the use of an abdominal plaster from an “adopted aunt” (folk healer) as a signifier of enlightened practice.

Another possibility is that the term *wenming* is intended to ridicule the central protagonists or even to intimate that choosing to live one’s life in line with *wenming* modernist discourse of individual choice and personal fulfilment might well lead to calamity.<sup>67</sup> There is no specific moral given in this *tanhuang* tale, although we are left in no doubt from the male’s final lines that he is intent on betrayal. The audience/reader is thus left to conclude that if young women follow their inclinations towards free love, in line with imported ideas of what is fashionable, then they will face terrible consequences.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, women’s behavior was of particular concern to the nationalist and revolutionary movements in China. Reformist discourse on the role of women was dominated by male intellectuals, possibly because they sought the role of moral guardian in an era when the intellectual class as a whole had lost its traditional access to privilege and government positions.<sup>68</sup> Many of these intellectuals called for women to be educated in order to serve the nation as “mothers of citizens.” Those with a more radical agenda,

<sup>66</sup> See Matthew H. Sommer, “Abortion in Late Imperial China: Routine Birth Control or Crisis Intervention?” *Late Imperial China* 31.2 (2010): 97–165. Traditional Chinese medicine used poisonous beetles and other toxic material such as musk. Particularly common was striped blister beetle (*mylabris* or *banmao*). These were highly toxic. Fei Xiaotong mentions folk remedies used by villagers of the Yangzi delta such as snails, fish, and birds eggs. Shanghai prostitutes ate tadpoles. None of this worked but frequently injured or killed the woman. See discussion in Sommer.

<sup>67</sup> The term *wenming* was associated with “free marriage,” that is, free choice of partners, anathema to conservative forces. It could be applied to female students in a derogatory way; see Joan Judge, *The Precious Raft of History: The Past, the West, and the Woman Question in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 73.

<sup>68</sup> See discussion in Louise Edwards, “Policing the Modern Woman in Republican China.” *Modern China* 26.2 (2000): 124 and passim.



FIG. 2. The civilized way of giving birth

including many women, called for gender equality and women's full participation in political life.<sup>69</sup> New journals and fictional works emerged at this time to address issues of romance, personal choice, subjectivity and sexuality.<sup>70</sup> As women increasingly sought emancipation from the home and personal choice in marriage they confronted conservative sentiment as well as the usual problems of unwanted pregnancies and lack of independent means. In the early stage of the modernist movement, women had been portrayed as victims of the Confucian hierarchies

<sup>69</sup> On the emergence of notions of gender equality in China see Louise Edwards, *Gender, Politics, and Democracy: Women's Suffrage in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 35–38. For a succinct history of these issues see Gail Hershtatter, *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 79–88.

<sup>70</sup> For a discussion of a "scandalous" magazine directed at women readers see Michael Hockx, "Raising Eyebrows: The Journal *Eyebrow Talk* and the Regulation of 'Harmful Fiction' in Modern China," in Hockx et al., *Women and the Periodical Press*, pp. 74–92.

and practices; however, once women started moving out into society and claiming their rights a sense of moral panic gripped many sectors of society, fueled by the popular press.<sup>71</sup> Paul Bailey argues that “the newspaper and periodical press began to pay increasing attention to perceived transgressive behavior amongst women (young and old), rather than portraying them principally as the helpless victims of crime or passive casualties of fate as had been the case during the first decades of the modern press in the late nineteenth century.”<sup>72</sup> As well, amongst many women authors of the era one can sense disillusionment with the new order, as imported notions of gender equality confronted deeply ingrained social customs and the economic realities of trying to earn an independent living.<sup>73</sup> One can perhaps conclude that “Wenming chan zi” was formulated as a cautionary tale in “reformed” *tanhuang* style about the dangers for a woman of actively pursuing “free love” in her personal life. As in “Rocking Boat,” we see the male taking advantage of this situation and leaving the woman in her predicament. If this is indeed a cautionary tale, then it does not apply to the male protagonist.

### THE STORY OF HUANG HUIRU AND LU GENRONG

The third case to be discussed here is the only one to deal with historical individuals. The story of Huang Huiru 黃慧如 and Lu Genrong 陸根榮 scandalized the city of Shanghai in the late 1920s. He Qiliang has provided three studies of this case so only a brief summary will be provided here.<sup>74</sup> Huang Huiru was the granddaughter of a wealthy silk manufacturer who came to fall in love and elope with her man servant. Originally she was betrothed by her brother to a young man in a wealthy family but this met with opposition from the grandmother. Considering herself betrothed, Huiru was on the point of suicide, but was saved by her man servant, Lu Genrong. She develops feelings for Lu, becomes pregnant to him and then willingly elopes with him, travelling first to Songjiang and then further inland to Suzhou.<sup>75</sup> On their travels they were duped of their money by unscrupulous acquaintances who also informed the family of their whereabouts. The mother then sued Lu Genrong for raping and kidnapping her daughter. In August 1929 the magistrate of Wuxian sentenced Lu Genrong to two years in jail on charges of

<sup>71</sup> Edwards, “Policing the Modern Woman in Republican China.” The moral status of women suffragettes came under attack, Edwards, *Gender, Politics, and Democracy*, p. 105.

<sup>72</sup> “‘Women Behaving Badly’: Crime, Transgressive Behaviour and Gender in Early Twentieth Century China,” *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 8.1 (2006): 159.

<sup>73</sup> According to Amy D. Dooling, leading women writers of the early twentieth century “expressed deep ambivalence about the contemporary realities of modern sexual relations,” *Women’s Literary Feminism in Twentieth Century China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 79–80. She adds that women who followed notions of free love “typically end up disappointed, if not utterly devastated, by what they find instead” (p. 80).

<sup>74</sup> He Qiliang, “Scandal and the New Woman: Identities and Mass Culture in 1920s China,” *Studies on Asia*, 4th series, 1.1 (2010): 1–28; “Between Sensationalism and Didacticism: News Coverage of the Huang-Lu affair and the Chinese Press in the Late 1920s,” *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 12.1 (2012): 19–40; and *Feminism, Women’s Agency, and Communication in Early Twentieth-Century China: The Case of the Huang-Lu Elopement* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>75</sup> According to He, the elopement was first reported in the press (*Suzhou mingbao*) on August 10 1928, see “Scandal and the New Woman,” p. 6 n 15.



seduction and theft. A remarkable aspect of the case was the way that Huang Huiru supported her lover, both in court and subsequently when he was sent to jail.<sup>76</sup> Lu then appealed to the Higher Court of Suzhou; however, the magistrate increased Lu's sentence to four years. Huiru, having severed her relationship with her family, stayed at the rural home of Lu Genrong's family, where she endured much hardship. When visited by journalists she explained that she was not in fact in love with Genrong. He Qiliang discusses Huang's resistance to the label of "new woman" and the complex motivations, including guilt, that led to her sustained support for Lu Genrong.<sup>77</sup> Her son was born in March 1929 but sadly, two weeks later, Huang died of post-partum complications. From May to June 1929 Lu Genrong's lawyer pursued his case with the Higher Court of Jiangsu Province. The charge of rape and kidnapping was removed, but Lu was still charged with stealing goods from the household and sentenced to two years jail. Lu made a further appeal against this sentence. Influenced by modern notions of freedom in marriage and the dignity of the working man, public opinion swung towards the side of Lu Genrong. After two years of litigation, all cases against Lu were dismissed and he was set free in July 1930.

This sensational case was bruited in print media, theater, and film. He Qiliang describes various *tanhuang* performances in his monograph but does not include the text discussed here.<sup>78</sup> The *tanhuang* on the elopement of the young couple was performed as early as 1929, when the litigation was still going on. In that year the paper, *Shenbao*, advertised a performance of *Shenqu* (a more dignified name for *tanhuang*) called "Huang Huiru and Lu Genrong."<sup>79</sup> This performance may be the basis for the content of the *tanhuang* under discussion. According to the report of Zhu Hengfu, the court case is greatly simplified in the play. Huiru makes a spirited plea for justice for her lover. A lawyer volunteers his services, mounts an eloquent argument in court, and Lu Genrong is set free.<sup>80</sup> It is important to note that the historical Lu Genrong was not set free until July of 1930, so the *tanhuang* performers were "jumping the gun" in anticipating the liberation of the man servant. To capitalize on the *tanhuang* performance, the Shanghai-based Renhe-xiang brought out a rendition entitled "Huang Huiru and Lu Genrong," with "Newly Compiled *tanhuang*" in the *banxin* 版心 (centerfold). The tale is divided into six parts (*ji* 集), each section with its own title page and half-folio illustration.<sup>81</sup> An additional three half-folio illustrations can be found at the beginning. The text is undated but one can assume it was produced in instalments more or less contemporaneously with the staged *tanhuang* in 1929. As discussed below, the text extant today is not complete and appears to date from around 1929. As Lu Genrong was not set free until August of 1930, one would expect that there were further (non-extant) instalments published in that year.

<sup>76</sup> She even made an appeal to the Shanghai press using the discourse of "freedom" and "romantic love," terms she apparently borrowed from news articles she had read the previous week. For this she was hailed in the Shanghai press as a brave revolutionary woman. Her gifts of winter clothing to the imprisoned Lu Genrong were likened to the actions of a paragon of the faithful wife, Meng Jiangnǚ. See discussion in He, *Feminism, Women's Agency*, pp. 51–53.

<sup>77</sup> See He, "Scandal and the New Woman," p. 13.

<sup>78</sup> He, *Feminism, Women's Agency*, pp. 185–87.

<sup>79</sup> Zhu, "Minguo shiba nian," pp. 117–18.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>81</sup> Huang et al., *Su wenxue congkan*, vol. 275, pp. 59–142.

The unknown author made great efforts to lend a performance quality to the printed text. Each individual title page records the names of the stage performers, Xiao Daiyu 筱黛玉 and Lin Shengsheng 林生生. In an unusual feature, the illustrations imitate comic-book style as characters are named, commentary given, and key lines of dialogue written out in speech bubbles. The first illustration, for example, has this comment written above the two characters gesticulating in a bedroom: “This is where their loving sentiments began” 從此發生愛的情性.<sup>82</sup> The second illustration has a villainous-looking Lu Genrong guffawing as Huiru speaks to him, “Brother Genrong, why do I feel something stirring in my stomach?” 根榮哥哥，怎么腹中有覺動作 (see fig. 3).<sup>83</sup> The third illustration depicts Genrong dissuading her from committing suicide: “Missie, you are so beautiful, why do you want to take your own life?” 小姐，你有這等漂亮，何意要自走末路呢。She responds: “I am suffering the pangs of love. Genrong, you don’t understand what is in my heart!” 為的愛的苦呀，得我的心事我你那裡曉，根榮呀。<sup>84</sup>

The illustrations are of considerable interest. They portray the remarkable sartorial transformation of Lu Genrong from a man servant with coarse facial features and traditional garb (fig. 3) to a handsome gentleman with fashionable clothes and bowler hat. In the final illustration (fig. 4) we see him carrying a portmanteau, eloping with his beloved. The latter is sporting a trim *qipao* 旗袍 (cheongsam) and western-style leather shoes.<sup>85</sup>

The story itself is told in dramatic voice, with stage instructions in small characters such as “the woman now sings” (女唱). The line length is the standard seven syllables to a line, with occasional additions of three or more syllables. This *tanhuang* broadly follows the performance of 1929 described earlier but displays a strong ambivalence about the motives and integrity of Lu Genrong. The mother disapproves of her earlier match, thinking it beyond the reach of her daughter; the older brother then informs the matchmaker that Huiru suffers mental illness. To Huiru’s consternation, the matchmaker breaks off the betrothal. At first appearance, Lu Genrong announces himself as someone who loves the good life, including gambling and whoring, and who is not leery of taking advantage of vulnerable women. When asked by Huiru if he is married, he deceives her by saying he has no wife. He is reluctant to marry her until she brings out foreign silver dollars and a ring as token of her love. This treatment of the character of Lu Genrong is in line with the case made by Huang’s family in court.<sup>86</sup> The older brother notices his sister’s ring on the servant’s

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>85</sup> The illustration is in line with the actual costume worn by Huang in court in October 1928; see He, *Feminism, Women’s Agency*, p. 54. In 1927 the cheongsam was endorsed by government authorities and quickly became the height of fashion; see Ellen Johnston Laing, “Visual Evidence for the Evolution of ‘Politically Correct’ Dress for Women in Early Twentieth Century Shanghai,” *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in Early and Imperial China* 5.1 (2003): 69–114, see especially pp. 97, 102. Antonia Finnane observes of the *qipao* that it gained “absolute ascendancy” in the 1930s, *Changing Clothes in China*, p. 141.

<sup>86</sup> In *Suzhou mingbao*, August 10 and 11, 1928, Lu Genrong is said to be “an evil servant” who seduced and kidnapped Huang Huiru “out of his desire for sex and wealth” and an “evil bond slave,” summarized in He, “Scandal and the New Woman,” p. 7. Two films (both 1929) on the affair also portrayed Lu Genrong as a villain; see He, “Between Sensationalism and Didacticism,” p. 33. As He points out, the issue was Lu’s lower class status, particularly, his “lack of proper



FIG. 3. Huang Huiru and Lu Genrong.  
 "Brother Genrong, why do I find something  
 stirring in my stomach?"

hand and sends him packing. Lu goes to bid farewell to Huiru, but this then prompts her to elope with him. An illustration shows them fleeing the Huang household with possessions in a cloth bundle. They wind up in the hands of an acquaintance of Lu Genrong, who turns out to be a scoundrel with designs on their cash. This brings the *tanhuang* tale to an end.

The printed rendition is thus a complex mix of traditional prejudices and modern aspirations. The man servant appears initially as a typical lower-class wastrel with ideas above his station. However, the illustrations depict his physical and potentially moral transformation as he sheds his servant's clothes for the garb of a gentleman. The attempted suicide of the historical Huang Huiru could possibly be interpreted as a continuation of the centuries-old tradition where a betrothed young woman takes her own life in cases where the male dies before the wedding or the family thwarts

education" (p. 33). He Qiliang further notes that in a 1930 farce drama Lu Genrong is depicted as deliberately using feminist discourse to seduce the young woman (see his *Feminism, Women's Agency*, p. 188).



FIG. 4. Huang Huiru and Lu Genrong Go Together to Suzhou

the marriage.<sup>87</sup> In the early twentieth century, unmarried women were still committing suicide when subject to slander about their lack of feminine propriety.<sup>88</sup> A number of high-profile female suicide cases were widely sensationalized in print media in the early Republican era. These media stories contributed to public debate about the extent to which the “modern” Chinese woman could come out into society, become self-reliant economically, and pursue her own romantic inclinations.<sup>89</sup> What is really intriguing in this apparently conventional story is the injection of the discourse of gender equality into the *tanhuang* rendition of the tale. In the suicide scene, the man servant dissuades Huiru from doing the act by declaring, “Missie, in the present world, it is an era when men and woman are equal” 小姐呀, 现在格世界浪, 是男女平等格晨光.<sup>90</sup> Huiru echoes these same sentiments when

<sup>87</sup> Weijing Lu observes that suicides of betrothed women continued to be commended by the state and celebrated in literati writings well into the early twentieth century; see *True to Her Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 252–53.

<sup>88</sup> Judge, *The Precious Raft of History*, pp. 29–31.

<sup>89</sup> Peter Carroll notes that the Shanghai press, in particular, had “a fascination with the self-murder of the ‘New Woman,’” “Fate-Bound Mandarin Ducks: Newspaper Coverage of the ‘Fashion’ for Suicide in 1931 Suzhou,” *Twentieth Century China* 31.1 (2006): 74. See also Bryna Goodman, “The New Woman Commits Suicide: The Press, Cultural Memory, and the New Republic,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 64.1 (2005): 67–101.

<sup>90</sup> Huang et al., *Su wenxue*, vol. 275, p. 68. The expression *nannü pingdeng* emerged at least as early as 1907, see *Beijing nübao* 592 (April 27, 1907), cited in Bailey, “Women Behaving Badly,”

she tells her mother, “In the world today it is a time when men and women have equal rights, it is an era of freedom” 現在格世界浪, 是男女平權格時候, 自由主權格晨光.<sup>91</sup> Foreign-derived terms like “world”, “equality” “freedom” and “rights” have now entered the *tanhuang* repertoire and become key elements of the unfolding story, influencing our assessment of the characters and driving the plot in ways unknown to the traditional folk form. In this version, the young lady learns the language of feminism from her male servant. While this is not necessarily historically accurate, it tapped into the deep anxiety of the intellectuals and upper classes that the modernist discourse of equality could empower not just women but also the servile classes.<sup>92</sup>

We do not know how the narrative would have continued in this particular *tanhuang*. The six-section text extant today is apparently the first of an anticipated series. We know this because in the final scene, a man called Zhu explains how he and his wife plan to extract money from the young couple. Immediately following this is inserted a couplet in interlinear small characters: “The husband and wife set a cunning plot / The seventh section will relate how Genrong was deceived” 夫妻二人設巧計/根榮受騙七本裡.<sup>93</sup> Unfortunately no installments beyond the sixth are extant, so we are left unable to judge whether the author would have pursued the revolutionary implications of gender equality and freedom of choice in marriage, nor how he would have handled the historical vindication of the servant, which inverted traditional class relations. In the first six installments, the author has paved the way for a story of this type: a young lady from a good home is taken advantage of by a lower class scoundrel and comes to a bad end, a familiar story line in *shan’ge* and *tanhuang* from the region. It is thus unclear how the author would have handled both the actual historical event and the onstage rendition, both of which saw the liberation of the servant and a seeming victory for the values of modernity. One is left wondering just how far this conventional plot type could be stretched to accommodate new codes of morality and class status thrown up in the tumultuous decade of 1920s Shanghai.

## CONCLUSION

This study has explored a little-known niche in Chinese regional publishing in order to better understand how traditional performance genres were adapted and recreated in the burgeoning print culture of the lower Yangzi delta in the early twentieth century. *Tanhuang* texts present a vibrant example of the performance culture of Wu-speaking communities. They are also a living reminder that Wu speakers had a lengthy tradition of recording their cultural forms in a character script that reflected their own idiom.<sup>94</sup>

p. 177 n. 68. Lydia Liu does not list *pingdeng* in her appendices but includes the term *pingquan* 平權 (Liu, *Translingual Practice*, Appendix B, p. 288). This is a loan word from the Japanese to translate the English word “equal rights.” *Ziyou*, used to translate the Western notion of “freedom,” appeared quite early (see *ibid.*, p. 37). *Quanli* 權利 (rights) was used as early as the 1860s (*ibid.*, p. 279).

<sup>91</sup> Huang et al., *Su wenxue congkan*, vol. 275, p. 92.

<sup>92</sup> For further discussion see He, *Feminism, Women’s Agency*, p. 19.

<sup>93</sup> Huang et al., *Su wenxue congkan*, vol. 275, p. 142.

<sup>94</sup> A dictionary of Wu regional speech cites the use of Wu expressions going back to the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 of Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–444 CE); see Wu Liansheng 吳連生 et al., *Wu fangyan cidian* 吳方言詞典 (Dictionary of Wu regional language; Shanghai: Hanyu da cidian, 1995), p. 605. The earliest extant example of a recorded song in Wu idiom is the victory song sung by the first king of the Wu-Yue kingdom, Qian Liu 錢鏐 (852–932), on his return

Wu-language scripts circulated predominantly in manuscript form, with only a few printed texts extant from before the late nineteenth century. (A well-known example of the latter is the *Shan'ge* 山歌 [Mountain Songs] compiled by Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 [1574–1646]). The reliance on regional topolects (*tuyin* 土音) stigmatized these texts as rural and vulgar.<sup>95</sup> From the point of view of those advocating progressive thinking, the *tanhuang* song booklets, with their scandalous and “obscene” content were clearly on the “wrong” side of history. Their ongoing popularity in the new era was an embarrassment to those who sought to promote foreign notions of what was enlightened or civilized. The status of women was a touchstone of Chinese modernity. The transgressive female protagonists of *tanhuang*, with their violation of proprieties, their improper relations, messy abortions, infanticide, and suicide, did not measure up to the standards of the new independent woman of the age. People of the time assumed that this type of performance text belonged irretrievably to the past and was incapable of adapting to the demands of modernity.

In the examples discussed here, publishers and authors of *tanhuang* inserted the imported language of reform and “civilized” behavior into their traditional plot lines and song material in order to engage with the new discourse of modernity. This analysis shows the dilemmas faced by authors and publishers in inserting the new language of “enlightened” practice into the conventional matrix of tales about the illicit passion that still held sway in the imaginary of delta populations. While to the modern reader the resulting collision of values appears incongruous or even farcical, Chinese *tanhuang* fans of the 1920s were encouraged to appropriate the new language of free love and gender equality within the context of the familiar story line of illicit love and attendant dire consequences.<sup>96</sup> In this line of interpretation, songs where a girl expresses love-longing, the flirtatious banter between the sexes,

home from battle, included in Gu et al., *Wuge*. *Wuge xiaoshi*, p. 608. Zhang Xiumin 張秀民 notes that lute ballads (*tanci* 彈詞) of the late imperial era could be published in either the lingua franca (Mandarin, *Guoyin* 國音) or in Wu language (*Wuyin* 吳音), *Zhongguo yinshua shi* 中國印刷史 (The history of Chinese printing), illustrated expanded edition edited by Han Qi 韓琦 2 vols. (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji, 2006), 2: 482. Apart from Wu literature, there existed rich Minnanese and Cantonese performance text cultures in the last centuries of the imperial era. Authors of nineteenth-century fiction exploited the existence of regional script forms to highlight the rural or regional identity of their characters. Paize Keulemans discusses how Beijing-based fiction “mimicked” an array of regional dialects for literary effect; see “Printing the Sound of Cosmopolitan Beijing: Dialect Accents in Nineteenth-Century Martial Arts Fiction,” in Brokaw and Reed, *From Woodblocks to the Internet*, pp. 159–84. Regional script forms played a role in the advocacy for China’s national language; see Jin Liu, *Signifying the Local: Media Productions Rendered in Local Languages in Mainland China in the New Millennium* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2013), pp. 19–57. In the late twentieth century, folklorists of the Shanghai hinterland returned to the by now well-established character forms used to record Wu idiom in producing their own transcripts of *shan'ge* and similar folk forms.

<sup>95</sup> Edward M. Gunn, *Rendering the Regional: Local Language in Contemporary Chinese Media* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), p. 4, has observed of Chinese regional languages that they have been stereotyped as “the signifier of the historical past, the intimate and domestic, the humorous, the mundane and philistine, the uncultured, crude emotions, and primitive behavior.” When Beijing University intellectuals first began collecting folk songs in the 1920s they met with derision from conservative quarters; see Wang Xuhua, preface to *Wuge*. *Wuge xiaoshi*, p. 4.

<sup>96</sup> Lydia Liu observes that when foreign concepts were translated into Chinese, often through the medium of post-Meiji Japanese, this often led to a novel interpretation of the term “within the local environment” of the host language (*Translingual Practice*, p. 26).



and the explicit enactment of erotic desire, all long familiar to both *shan'ge* and *tanhuang* performance, are here marshalled in pursuit of “enlightened” practices of love, romance, and gender equality. However, the insertion of a new language into the familiar stories of illicit passion did not lead to emancipation from the consequences of “transgressive” behavior, at least within the confines of the *tanhuang* genre. One could conclude that the authors of the “reformed” *tanhuang* problematized new ideas of modernity, gender equality, and personal freedom by demonstrating the often disastrous consequences of pursuing these very ideals.

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## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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