THE REPRESENTATION OF SOVEREIGNTY IN CHINESE VERNACULAR FICTION

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Like all literatures with long traditions, Chinese narrative literature has, in the course of millennia, developed a range of set characterizations. It is particularly easy to recognize such characterizations in the genre of drama, as traditional Chinese theater has a variety of fixed role types that are visually marked by different facial make-up and costumes, each in keeping with the characteristics of the role type being represented. On the Chinese stage each character has a fixed place in relation to all other characters and no one is supposed to act out of character—and as a general rule no one does. In this sense Chinese drama is the most Confucian of all literary genres, insofar as Confucianism, always a social ideal rather than a social reality, requires that each and every member of society act according to their prescribed role: "A ruler acts as a ruler should, and a subject acts as a subject should; a father acts as a father should, and a son acts as a son should" (*jun jun, chen chen, fu fu, zi zi* 君君，臣臣，父父，子子).[1] Notably, these roles exist interdependently: a king is a king in relation to his subjects, a son is a son in relation to his father. In this social system the individual disappears into his prescribed role, and each role is only meaningful in relation to the other roles; and women have no place in this web of roles except as subsidiaries of their fathers, husbands and sons.

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

[1] *Lunyu zhushu* 論語注疏 (The Analects with Annotations and Commentaries), in Ruan Yuan 阮元, ed., *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (The Thirteen Classics with Annotations and Commentaries) (Taibei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1955 reprint), *juan* 12, 108b.

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

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

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

Fan), one of the truly great classic Chinese plays, is successful not because it goes beyond traditional roles, but merely because it shows how the characters *become* their roles.[2] The world of Chinese drama is one of wish-fulfillment, not in the sense that it almost always ends happily with the proverbial grand reunion (*da tuanyuan* 大團圓), but because it realizes on stage what Confucianism, the "state religion" for many a dynasty, cannot accomplish in real life: each person staying in one's proper social role and acting according to it.

Vernacular fiction likewise developed fixed role types: the macho stalwart hero, the loyal or treacherous friend, the handsome and talented young man in love with a beautiful maiden, the beautiful maiden remaining constant to her lover and ultimately being reunited with him, the good wife and the shrew. Unlike drama, however, fiction lacks the visual cues of make-up and costume; as a result, there is more room for fuzziness in the boundaries of role types. This is particularly true of novels, as short stories, perhaps too limited in scope to offer complex portrayals of characters, must largely rely on role types to advance the plot and on the plot to highlight role types. In contrast, great novels such as the anonymous sixteenth-century masterpiece *Jinping mei* 金瓶梅 (The Plum in the Golden Vase) and Cao Xueqin's 曹雪芹 (1715–1764) *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢(The Dream of the Red Chamber) stand out exactly because they go beyond role types, sometimes subverting them or combining several in the portrayal of a single character, and often simply transcending them: a number of characters in these two novels, such as Li Ping'er, Wang Liu'er, and Hua Xiren, do not belong to any easily distinguishable role type.

In this essay I will focus on the sovereign in seventeenth-century vernacular fiction as one of the roles, and on the various role types associated with it. I hope this will throw some light on the representation of character in Chinese literature as well as on the concept of sovereignty in the late imperial period, which, as we shall see, changed dramatically from earlier times.

[2] See Stephen Owen's discussion of this point in "'I Don't Want to Act as Emperor Any More': Finding the Genuine in *Peach Blossom Fan*," in *Trauma and Transcendence in Early Qing Literature*, ed. Wilt L. Idema, Wai-yee Li and Ellen B. Widmer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center Press, 2006), 489–509.

Preserving the Purity of Role Type

Because of the absolute power concentrated in the person of the emperor, sovereignty tends to be an all-consuming role. The historical personality of the man playing the sovereign can be easily lost in the dominant typology of the role. In other words, being an emperor condemns a man to a stereotype: good emperor or bad emperor. Traditional Chinese fiction favors the first and last rulers of a dynasty because they represent good and bad rulers respectively, much in the same way that "popular fiction does not speak of nondescript fathers and sons, but of 'good' and 'bad' fathers and 'filial' and 'ungrateful' sons," in Robert Rhulmann's words.[3] While the cruelty and sexual decadence of what Arthur Wright terms the "bad last ruler" offer endless fascination to fiction writers and readers alike, the portrayal of the first ruler or dynasty-founder almost invariably focuses on the period before the ruler ascends the throne, a time when the emperor-to-be is still a commoner and his rise to power proves to be full of dramatic twists and turns.[4] Rhulmann suggests that the "typical prince" in popular fiction is a "helpless" and "weak" person;[5] this generalization, however, turns out to be inaccurate if we consider the image of the dynasty-founder in vernacular fiction. In a number of vernacular stories by Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646), the earliest well-known literati writer of vernacular fiction, rulers-to-be are almost invariably portrayed as stalwart heroes (*haohan* 好漢) reminiscent of the Robin Hood-type bandits in longer fictional narratives such as *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (The Water Margin), attributed to Shi Nai'an 施耐庵 (ca. 1296–1372). In *Gujin xiaoshuo* 古今小說 (*Stories Old and New*), Feng Menglong's first story collection, published in 1620, two stories that belong to the traditional theme of the rise to power and prosperity (*faji biantai* 發跡變泰) have future rulers as their protagonists. "Shi Hongzhao longhu junchen hui" 史弘肇龍虎君臣會 (The Dragon-and-Tiger Encounter of Shi Hongzhao the Minister and His King), is about Guo Wei 郭威 (904–954), the founder of the Latter Zhou dynasty; "Lin'an li Qian Poliu faji" 臨安里錢婆留發跡 (Qian

[3] Robert Rhulmann, "Traditional Heroes in Chinese Popular Fiction," in *The Confucian Persuasion*, ed. Arthur Wright (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960), 148.

[4] Arthur Wright, "Sui Yang-Ti: Personality and Stereotype," in *The Confucian Persuasion*, 47–76.

[5] Rhulmann, "Traditional Heroes," 160–161.

Poliu Begins His Career in Lin'an), is about Qian Liu 錢鏐 (852–932), the founder of the Kingdom of Wu-Yue.[6] Both are depicted as stout-hearted men with martial prowess engaged in gambling, drinking, theft and robbery in their youth. Guo Wei and his friend wreak such havoc on the neighborhood that they are hated and feared by the local people. Qian Liu gambles his parents' money away and defies their attempts to control him; if they reproach him, he simply leaves the house and does not return for days. This is hardly the behavior of a good son, but the story makes it clear that the future king is not to be bound by petty rules of moral conduct; what deserves note—and this is deliberately stressed in the stories—is the fact that both heroes possess a basic sense of decency, goodness and righteousness. Guo Wei beats up a corrupted military officer who bullies a peddler in the marketplace; Qian Liu risks his own neck to save the fellow members of his gang from being arrested.

Unlike the bad last ruler and yet true to the role type of a stalwart hero, none of these dynasty-founders is sexually self-indulgent or even expresses any interest in the opposite sex. This point is important, not because it is a crucial character trait in the role type of dynasty-founder, but because it highlights the purity of role type and the entire ideological discourse it represents. In other words, a stalwart hero cannot be a romantic lover, who is usually a talented scholar (*caizi* 才子); one is reserved for the martial sphere while the other is reserved for the literary sphere, just as the concepts of the martial (*wu* 武) and the civil / cultural / literary (*wen* 文) form a binary in traditional political philosophy, and the concepts of *yang* and *yin*, in cosmology. The martial and the civil / cultural / literary complement each other and sometimes are even allowed to coexist in the same person, but they do not mix to produce a third category. It is all about relation and balance of power. When there is a third category, the balance of power is often upset.

Take for example the story entitled "Zhao Taizu qianli song Jingniang" 趙太祖千里送京娘 (Emperor Taizu Escorts Jingniang on a One-Thousand-*li* Journey) in Feng Menglong's second story collection, *Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言 (Common Words to Caution the World),

[6] For these two stories, see Xu Zhengyang 許政揚, ed., *Gujin xiaoshuo* 古今小說 (Stories Old and New) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1984), 225–254, 317–347. For their English translations, see Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang, trans., *Stories Old and New: A Ming Dynasty Collection* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 252–278, 349–382.

which has a preface dated 1624.[7] Zhao Kuangyin 趙匡胤 (927–976), the founding emperor of the Song dynasty, is depicted as a chivalrous knight-errant who takes it upon himself to rescue a damsel in distress. He saves a young woman named Jingniang from bandits and then goes on a long journey on foot to escort her back to her family, yielding the only horse to Jingniang. During the trip she declares romantic feelings for him; he rejects her sternly.

> You and I met each other by accident. I rescued you out of compassion, not because I coveted your beauty. Besides, we have the same surname; we cannot marry each other. We have become sworn brother and sister; how could we not observe propriety? I am Liuxia Hui, who did not succumb to temptation even when he had a girl sitting in his lap; how then can you emulate Wu Mengzi, who indulged in desire and violated proper rites?[8] Don't talk nonsense, or you'll make a fool of yourself.[9]

That Zhao Kuangyin acknowledges Jingniang's beauty shows that he is not blind to her charm, but he appeals to the ancient decree—those with the same family name do not marry each other—as his main reason for spurning Jingniang. Jingniang makes a second attempt by saying that she does not aspire to become his wife but will be quite content to be a concubine or a maid. Zhao Kuangyin reacts furiously:

> I am a man who stands upright between heaven and earth and have been honest and direct all my life; there is nothing wicked in me. Why is it that you regard me as a small-minded person who expects to be repaid for doing a favor and an evil-doer who makes use of the public good for private purpose? If you persist in your devious intention, I will immediately leave you alone and drop this whole matter, and in that case you cannot blame me for failing to end something I have begun!

She finally gives up and begs his forgiveness. At this point he softens up a little:

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[7] For this story, see Yan Dunyi 嚴敦易, ed. *Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言 (Common Words to Caution the World) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1984), 297–316. For a full English translation, see Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang, trans., *Stories to Caution the World: A Ming Dynasty Collection* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 319–340. The translations in this paper are my own.

[8] Liuxia Hui 柳下惠 was a chaste man. Wu Mengzi 吳孟子 was the wife of Duke Zhao of Lu, who had the same family name as she did.

[9] For this and the following two citations from the story, see Yan, ed. *Jingshi tongyan*, 313.

> My good sister, this is not me being inflexible and stubborn, like trying to play a stringed instrument after fixing the tuning pegs with glue. I have decided to walk all the way to escort you home for the sake of righteousness and chivalry. If today I indulge in private passions, what difference would there be between me and those two bandits? My genuine concern for you would be turned into feigned sentiments, and I would become the laughing stock of all the heroes in the world.

Even Zhao Kuangyin himself knows that he is being "inflexible and stubborn, like trying to play a stringed instrument after fixing the tuning pegs with glue" (*jiaozhu guse* 膠柱鼓瑟), meaning that he is sticking to old ways even though circumstances have changed. That is, his adherence to the ancient imperative that two people of the same family name cannot marry is outdated behavior. One may argue that Zhao Kuangyin's real motive for rejecting Jingniang is his fear of public opinion ("I would become the laughing stock of all the heroes in the world"), not any innate sense of moral propriety. This may be so, but it is irrelevant to the issue at hand. The point is the conflict of two sets of values considered incompatible with each other. Zhao Kuangyin cannot conceivably become a romantic lover without compromising his identity as a stalwart hero. In the universe of the story, private passions and public good are shown to occupy two totally different worlds that cannot be reconciled. The hero must play his role with the utmost purity of intention and of deed.

This story is almost a mirror opposite of Wang Shifu's famous play, *The Story of the Western Chamber*, with which early seventeenth-century readers must have been familiar. In *The Story of the Western Chamber*, Cui Yingying is betrothed to her maternal cousin since childhood. When a general-turned-bandit hears of Yingying's beauty and demands her hand in marriage, Yingying's mother promises that she will marry Yingying off to anyone who can save her from falling into the hands of the rebel. Scholar Zhang, who is smitten with Yingying after meeting her by chance in a Buddhist temple, devises a plan to crush the rebel army. Yingying's mother, however, changes her mind. Using Yingying's betrothal to another man as an excuse, she asks Scholar Zhang and Yingying to become sworn brother and sister instead. After many vicissitudes, Scholar Zhang and Yingying are finally wedded and live happily thereafter.

Although *The Story of the Western Chamber* is a play, a number of its narrative elements are remarkably similar to those of Feng Menglong's

story. Zhao Kuangyin also meets Jingniang in a temple, albeit a Daoist establishment rather than a Buddhist monastery. Jingniang is also trapped by bandits who are enticed by her beauty. Zhao Kuangyin and Jingniang also become sworn brother and sister, but this is used by Zhao Kuangyin as a further obstacle to having any romantic involvement with her. In *The Story of the Western Chamber*, Scholar Zhang does not find it improper to marry his sworn sister Yingying after saving her—in fact, he saves her not out of pure "compassion" for her plight but exactly because he "covets her beauty," the very thing vehemently denied by Zhao Kuangyin in his encounter with Jingniang. Neither Scholar Zhang nor Yingying finds it improper that Yingying should discard her childhood betrothal sanctioned by her late father, something that would have been certainly condemned by a stalwart hero like Zhao Kuangyin in a different fictional universe. Scholar Zhang and Yingying are squarely portrayed as a pair of star-crossed lovers who demand the full sympathy of the audience. We must not suppose that Scholar Zhang should be regarded as morally imperfect, or that Wang Shifu's moral standards differed from Feng Menglong's. Rather we should recognize that Zhao Kuangyin and Scholar Zhang are less full individuals than embodiments of two sets of values and discourses; each man subordinates his private existence to a role type—such as talented scholar or stalwart hero—and to a particular mode of narration and a particular order of things—such as a romance or a story of the rise to power and prosperity.

Of the many stalwart heroes in *The Water Margin*, there is one, Wang Aihu, who is obsessed with women, but he is the exception that proves the rule, and he is no future king or emperor.[10] Interest in sexual pleasures—not the legitimate conjugal affection for one's wife—is a major element in differentiating the bad last ruler from the heroic dynasty-founder; but romantic love is equally banished from the heroic discourse. In the story of Zhao Kuangyin and Jingniang, Zhao feels no attraction at all toward Jingniang despite her beauty and her repeated attempts at physical seduction. The absence of any emotional conflict or turmoil in him ensures the single-dimensional purity of the role type.

[10] In Chapter 31, Song Jiang comments on Wang Aihu: "I see that Brother Wang Ying covets women—this is not like a 'stalwart hero'." *Guben Shuihu zhuan* 古本水滸傳 (The Old Edition of *The Water Margin*) (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1985), 338.

A role, however, exists in relation to other roles. Feng Menglong's story entitled "Zhao Bosheng chasi yu Renzong" 趙伯昇茶肆遇仁宗 (Zhao Bosheng Meets with Emperor Renzong in a Teahouse) is an ingenious exploration of the complicated interaction of role types.[11] In the story, Emperor Renzong 仁宗 (1010–1063) of the Northern Song admires the examination essay of a Sichuan scholar but points out that it contains a miswritten character; the scholar replies that the character he writes is interchangeable with the correct character that the Emperor has in mind. Displeased by this act of challenge to imperial authority, the emperor asks the scholar to solve a character riddle; when the scholar fails to come up with an answer, the emperor tells him to go back to his studies. When the list of successful candidates for the exam is posted, the scholar's name is not there. Then, after a year or so, the emperor has a dream about nine suns; the character for "nine" and that for "sun" together form the character for "dawn" (*xu* 旭). This prompts the emperor to search for a person with "Xu" as given name. He finds Zhao Xu, none other than the scholar dismissed from court a year ago, and Zhao is made governor in his home region.

The emperor's personal search for Zhao Xu on the streets of the capital is an interesting episode. Since the emperor is in disguise, Zhao Xu has no idea that he is speaking with His Majesty. When the emperor asks Zhao Xu why he failed the examination, and when Zhao tells him the story, the emperor says, "His Majesty lacks discernment." At this Zhao vigorously defends the emperor, explaining that he himself is the only person to blame: "It was not the fault of our sagely emperor." Although failing the examination, Zhao Xu passes the test by not showing any resentment toward the emperor but taking full responsibility for his failure. As Zhao Xu finally defers to imperial authority, imperial power works to his favor as a reward for his submission.

One may argue that the emperor acts capriciously, guided by emotion (i.e. his wounded pride and later on, his soothed vanity) and dream rather than reason. But by surrendering to the emperor's judgment, Zhao Xu transforms the imperial act of caprice into an act of wisdom. Not knowing that he is speaking to the emperor himself, he saves Emperor Renzong from erring by attributing all the mistakes to himself in front of what he believes to be a third party, a bystander whose point of view—"His Majesty lacks discernment"—represents

[11] For this story, see Xu, ed. *Gujin xiaoshuo*, 175–186. For its English translation, see Yang and Yang, trans., *Stories Old and New*, 194–205.

public opinion as well as the opinion of the reader. An emperor in disguise: what could be a better figure for the reading public?

By saving the emperor from being a muddle-headed ruler (*hunjun* 昏君) Zhao Xu turns himself from the victim of a bad emperor into the subject of a wise and benign emperor. He is, in fact, a subject in the full sense of the word because he takes responsibility for his action, and so is no longer a passive object of the emperor's displeasure. Zhao Xu is the true hero of the story because he propels Emperor Renzong into the role of a good emperor by harboring no bitterness and resentment, as a good subject should. The eunuch who accompanies the emperor on his search for Zhao Xu composes a poem to commemorate the occasion, which ends with the line, "Your brocade clothes will bring glory to the clan of Zhao." Since Zhao Xu shares the same surname with the emperor, "the clan of Zhao," quite fittingly, refers both to Zhao Xu's family and the imperial clan.

Conflicting Role Types and the Undermining of Sovereignty

The Confucian decree—"A ruler acts as a ruler should, and a subject acts as a subject should; a father acts as a father should, and a son acts as a son should"—stresses the relational aspect of role playing. A ruler, however, is also a father and a son at the same time. This poses a special problem for sovereignty: what if there is conflict between the various roles played by the same person? Such a conflict potentially undermines the power of the sovereign and affects not only the emperor himself but also his family, his people, and the state, for he is the head and heart of the entire political body. This is as much a socio-political problematic as a literary one.

Again, one of Feng Menglong's stories is a case in point. "Yu Zhongju tishi yu shanghuang" 俞仲舉題詩遇上皇 (Yu Zhongju Writes Poetry and Wins Recognition from the Retired Emperor) depicts the conflict of roles in the imperial person.[12] This story in many ways parallels the story of Zhao Xu and his lucky encounter with Emperor Renzong. Yu Liang, courtesy name (*zi* 字) Zhongju, is also a scholar from Sichuan. Just like in the Zhao Xu story, the protagonist travels to the capital to

[12] For this story, see Yan, ed. *Jingshi tongyan*, 65–82. For a full English translation, see Yang and Yang, trans., *Stories to Caution the World*, 79–97.

participate in the examination and fails; he is stranded in the capital, lacking money to return home, and writes a poem on the wall of a restaurant to vent his sorrow and frustration; and the poem arouses the admiration of the emperor, who is walking on the street in disguise in search of a "worthy man" because of a dream he has had the previous night.

There is, however, one significant difference. The emperor in Yu Zhongju's story is retired: he is the father of the current emperor. Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (1107–1187) of the Southern Song, who had ruled south China for thirty-two years, abdicated in favor of his adopted son, Emperor Xiaozong 孝宗 (1127–1194), in his old age. In Feng Menglong's story, it is Gaozong, the retired emperor, who picks up Yu Zhongju on the street of the capital and recommends him to his son, Xiaozong.

Before narrating Emperor Gaozong's encounter with Yu Zhongju, the story-teller relates another incident. One day the retired emperor, who often disguises himself as a commoner and walks around the West Lake, runs into an acolyte in a Buddhist temple with impressive physique and manners. The retired emperor becomes curious and inquires into his background. It turns out that the acolyte is a magistrate dismissed from office because, according to himself, he was falsely accused of corruption. The retired emperor feels sorry for him and promises that he will intervene on his behalf. Upon returning to the palace the retired emperor sends a message to the current emperor about the matter. A few days later, the retired emperor visits the temple again, and finds that the acolyte has not been restored to his former office. The retired emperor is greatly upset. It so happens that the next day the current emperor invites his parents to a party, at which the retired emperor wears a sullen look.

> The retired emperor neither spoke nor smiled but looked resentful and angry. Emperor Xiaozong said, "The weather is so nice and balmy today; I wish this would please Your Grace." The retired emperor did not utter a word. The empress dowager said, "Our child wants to give this old couple a good time; what's the matter with you, getting all upset over nothing?" At this the retired emperor gave a sigh: "An old tree attracts wind; an old man attracts contempt. I am an old man now, and my words mean nothing any more." Emperor Xiaozong was shocked. Not understanding what happened, he kowtowed and begged for an explanation. The retired emperor said, "The other day I intervened on behalf of Li Zhi, the Magistrate of Nanjian, all to no

> avail. Yesterday I saw him again in the temple. It was terribly embarrassing." Emperor Xiaozong replied, "I told the prime minister about Li Zhi the very next day after I received Your Grace's instruction. The prime minister said, 'Li Zhi is corrupt and took bribes. He should not be reinstated.' But since he is favored by Your Grace, this is a trivial matter and will be dealt with tomorrow. Please do enjoy yourself today." Only then did the retired emperor cheer up and drink until he was tipsy.[13]

This is a vividly portrayed family scene: an aging but controlling father, a son who is caught between filial piety and good sense, and a mother who tries to smooth over the wrinkles in the father-son relationship but is completely in the dark about what is going on. Her function in this passage is the colloquial and folksy style of her remark and her emphatic reference to the emperor as "our child" and to herself and the retired emperor as "this old couple." All this is designed to accentuate the domestic atmosphere and to make it look like the outing of an ordinary family. It only serves, however, to bring out the particularity of this family and the potential conflict between the interest of this family and that of the state. What makes this family special is the fact that the son is the emperor, who is, in theory and practice, the highest authority of the state. When the emperor submits to another authority figure, this creates chaos in the body politic. But chaos further intensifies when one realizes that the other authority figure is not a powerful minister but the emperor's own father. In the case of the emperor submitting to a powerful minister, the emperor may be in trouble, but the ideological order of the empire is not, for the injustice of the situation, i.e. a ruler being dominated by a minister, is apparent to everyone. In the case of the emperor submitting to the father, the structure of power is itself thrown into question, for two equally valid sets of values—sovereign and subject, father and son, state and family—are pitched against each other. In other words, the role of a filial son directly contradicts the role of a sovereign, and when Emperor Xiaozong is caught between the two roles, shock is the only possible reaction on his part. His posthumous temple name, Xiaozong, which is used to refer to him throughout the story, literally means "Filial Ancestor." It captures the greatest dilemma of his rule.

[13] Yan, ed. *Jingshi tongyan*, 77–78.

The conflict of filial piety and loyalty to one's ruler may befall any person, but has extremely serious and troubling implications when it happens to the imperial person of the sovereign.

> The next day, Emperor Xiaozong again told the Prime Minister to reinstate Li Zhi and the Prime Minister again tried to refuse. Emperor Xiaozong said, "This is the idea of the Grand Sire. Yesterday His Grace was so angry with Us that We wished to vanish through a crack in the floor. Even if this man is guilty of high treason and rebellion, you have to let him go." Thereupon Li Zhi was restored to his former office.[14]

Wanting to "vanish through a crack in the floor" describes embarrassment. When the retired emperor discovers the dismissed official is still there as acolyte, he is embarrassed by the current emperor's failure to heed his wishes, and the embarrassment of the father must pass back to the son. By becoming a filial son, however, Xiaozong compromises his role as emperor. The emperor *does* vanish through the crack in the floor: into the Filial Son, so much so that the Son is willing to condone treason and rebellion against the body politic in order to please the Father.

The Problematic of Role Types

Feng Menglong's six stories with emperors and kings as their main protagonists—not those about Zhao Xu and Yu Zhongju, in which the emperor is not the leading actor—are neatly divided between dynasty-founders and bad last rulers.[15] There is one exception: the story about Emperor Wu 武 (464–549) of the Liang dynasty in *Stories Old and New*, entitled "Liang Wudi leixiu gui Jile" 梁武帝累修歸極樂 (Emperor Wu of the Liang Returns to the Land of Extreme Bliss

[14] *Ibid*., 78.

[15] The two stories about the bad last rulers are from Feng Menglong's third story collection, *Xingshi hengyan* 醒世恒言 (Constant Words to Awaken the World), which has a preface dated 1627. They are "Jin Hailing zongyu wangshen" 金海陵縱欲亡身 (How Prince Hailing of the Jin Indulged in Desire and Destroyed Himself) and "Sui Yangdi yiyou zhaoqian" 隋煬帝逸游召譴 (How Emperor Yang of the Sui Brought Punishment on Himself by Carefree Roaming). See Zhang Minggao 張明高, ed. *Xingshi hengyan xinzhu quanben* 醒世恒言新注全本 (A Newly Annotated Complete Edition of *Constant Words to Awaken the World*) (Beijing: Shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 1994), 498–559.

through Ceaseless Cultivation).[16] Like the other sovereigns discussed in this essay, Emperor Wu of the Liang is a real historical figure, but he turns out to be a problematic fictional character because the historical person does not fit easily in any of the stereotypes of the sovereign. Emperor Wu was the founder of the Liang dynasty, but he was also the one who led to its eventual downfall. He was an exemplary Confucian monarch in many respects, but he was also well known for his Buddhist belief, which would become the reason for his condemnation by Confucian moralists in later times *and* for his immense popularity in mass culture; his influence on Chinese Buddhism is felt even today.[17] If character in classical Chinese literature is by and large represented by conventional typologies, what happens in the case of someone like Emperor Wu of the Liang, a complicated, controversial individual who occupies a number of conflicting social roles? This creates an interesting problem for fiction writers, and it sheds light on the workings of narrative and on the development of the concept of sovereignty from early medieval to late imperial times.

Emperor Wu (r. 502–549) was born Xiao Yan 蕭衍. His reign was one of the longest in Chinese history, a miracle at a time when court intrigues, uprisings and bloodshed were the norm. During Emperor Wu's rule, the Liang was prosperous and largely peaceful, and the Liang court was "the most catholic and sophisticated intellectual milieu of pre-Tang China," in the words of Glen Dudbridge.[18] In his last years, Emperor Wu made the strategic mistake of accepting the surrender of the northern general Hou Jing侯景 (d. 552), who subsequently rebelled in the fall of 548 and besieged the Palace City for nearly five months. Emperor Wu died shortly after the Palace City fell. Although Hou Jing was eventually vanquished, his rebellion brought large-scale destruction to the south, led to the downfall of the Liang, and was a key factor in the conquest of the south forty years later.

On the whole, however, the emperor was a conscientious and energetic ruler. He was also a patron of literature and the arts, and a prolific writer who authored commentaries on Confucian and Daoist classics

[16] Xu, ed., *Gujin xiaoshuo*, 585–606. Yang and Yang, trans., *Stories Old and New*, 643–667.

[17] See Chapter One, "Emperor Wu's Rule," in Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502–557)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center Press, 2007).

[18] Glen Dudbridge, *Lost Books of Medieval China* (London: British Library, 2000), 69.

as well as on Buddhist scriptures, in addition to numerous literary writings. He did what an ideal Confucian ruler was expected to do: restore the National University, reinstate the examination system, and perfect court rituals and music. Emperor Wu's vision of kingship was, however, fundamentally Buddhist: like the Northern Dynasties rulers, his counterparts in north China, Emperor Wu aspired to be the highest secular *and* spiritual authority of the state, a "Wheel-Turning Sage King" (Sanskrit *cakravarti-raja*) who nurtured, protected and guided his people. He himself was a devout Buddhist believer, practicing strict vegetarianism and sexual abstinence since his fifties, lecturing regularly on Buddhist scriptures, and engaged in the creation of Buddhist rituals as well as other spectacular religious activities. However, while such a concept of sovereignty had been acceptable in early medieval times, it was no longer so in late imperial China. The conflict of role types in the fictional representation of Emperor Wu in vernacular fiction—dynasty-founder, failed last ruler, Confucian sage, enlightened defender of the Buddhist faith, or foolish old man who deviates from the Confucian way and becomes obsessed with Buddhist heresy—is therefore a manifestation of the conflict of two ideologies, namely the Confucian and Buddhist discourses, just as it is a manifestation of friction between the rigidity of role types and the complexity of a multifaceted individual. In the last analysis, what sets the fictionalized Emperor Wu apart from other sovereigns portrayed in Chinese narrative literature is that Emperor Wu is treated as an individual separated from his function as a ruler; the tension between the individual and the sovereignty he assumes provides the very motivation of the fictionalized accounts of his life.

Feng Menglong's story uses reincarnation as a central narrative device, and gives a careful account of karma, retribution, and *yinguo* 因果 (cause and effect). The story begins by recounting the emperor's three former lives. He is born as an earthworm in his first life, a sentient being, though rather low on the ladder of existence, who listens to recitations of the *Lotus Sutra* every day. After being accidentally killed by a novice monk, the earthworm obtains human form in its next life thanks to the power of the sutra. He is reborn as an illiterate kitchen worker in a Buddhist temple, who unsurprisingly knows the *Lotus Sutra* well. After the kitchen worker dies, he is first reborn as a little snake because of some impure thought in his mind, but is fortunately rescued from this fate by the abbot of his temple, and reincarnated as the only son

of a rich man surnamed Huang. When he grows up, he is married to the daughter of Grand Marshal Tong, who is a reincarnation of the maid servant of Buddha's disciple Mahakasyapa. Instead of consummating their marriage, the couple decides to practice religion together. One lustful thought on the part of the young Master Huang, however, causes him to be reborn again, this time as the Liang emperor. During this life as emperor, Xiao Yan accomplishes a series of good deeds. The only act of killing described in the story is his accidental execution of a Master Kowtow, who turns out to be the reincarnation of the novice monk who killed the earthworm in the emperor's previous lifetime. The emperor's death at the old age of eighty-five is portrayed as his final delivery from the world of desire and suffering. Toward the end of the story, a Liang general has a vision of the emperor, who makes it clear that he has finished the process of cultivation and is "on the way to the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss."

Reincarnation, though a convenient narrative device, can create problems, for it is cyclical and may go on forever. Feng Menglong solves the problem by delineating a linear process in the emperor's reincarnations: from earthworm to illiterate kitchen worker (briefly transformed into a snake) to well-educated son of a rich landlord to emperor and finally to Buddha, we see a clear ascension in terms of perceived natural order and social hierarchy. Mahayana Buddhism preaches that all sentient beings are equal, but this is certainly not the case in the moral universe of the late Ming story-teller. The noteworthy thing about this story is the portrayal of sovereignty as a stage in a sentient being's progress toward Buddhahood, not an end in itself. Unlike Feng Menglong's other stories about dynasty-founders, Xiao Yan's story does not stop with his ascension to the throne. His role as a ruler is thus separated from his characterization.

The characterization of Emperor Wu is more complicated in the anonymous novel of forty chapters called *Liang Wudi xilai yanyi* 梁武帝西來演義 (The Romance of Emperor Wu of the Liang Coming from the West), also known as *Liang Wudi yanyi* 梁武帝演義 (The Romance of Emperor Wu of the Liang) or *Liang Wudi zhuan* 梁武帝傳 (The Story of Emperor Wu of the Liang). This novel was first printed in 1673 and reprinted in 1819 and 1851.[19] It is attributed to Tianhuazang

[19] The 1673 edition was printed by Yongqingtang 永慶堂 and reprinted in *Guben xiaoshuo jicheng* 古本小說集成 (A Collection of Old Editions of Novels), vols. 12–13. The 1819 edition was printed by Baoqingge 抱青閣 and the 1851 edition by Yuguotang 裕國堂. The modern edition I have used for this essay, *Liang Wudi yanyi* 梁武帝演義

zhuren 天花藏主人, a prominent pseudonym associated with more than a dozen of novels in the seventeenth century whose true identity remains unknown. Stylistically, *The Romance of Liang Wudi* is much cruder than some of the romantic novels attributed to Tianhuazang zhuren. It describes Emperor Wu as the incarnation of Arhat Calamus and his wife, Empress Chi Hui 郗徽 (468–499), as that of the Bright Monarch of Narcissus; both are born into the human world to cultivate their Buddha nature and fulfill their destinies. The empress possesses a jealous disposition and has many palace ladies killed; as a consequence, she is turned into a giant python after death. She is finally redeemed by a confession text and deliverance ritual created by the emperor on her behalf.[20] The emperor himself oscillates between worldly cravings and spiritual aspirations. It is only in the last moments of his life that he is truly enlightened, obtains Buddhahood, and ascends to heaven.

While the short story uses karma and reincarnation to account for the emperor's attainment of Buddhahood with relative smoothness, a novel, being a much longer literary form, must engage in a more detailed account of its protagonists' psychological or physical actions. As a result, change is clearly detectable in the emperor's character, so much so that the novel can be read as a narrative of one person's spiritual growth from youth to old age. Before he ascends the throne, Xiao Yan fits well in the role type of dynasty-founder and stalwart hero. After taking the throne, he is depicted as a sagely emperor who governs the state with wisdom and kindliness. In his old age, he becomes increasingly preoccupied with spiritual pursuits, especially after his wife's premature death. Finally, in the last days before his death, as the rebel Hou Jing forbids anyone to present food and drink to the emperor, he concentrates on prayer and meditation for fourteen days and nights until he achieves complete enlightenment:

> As his thoughts reached into the most subtle principles of things, a thread of spiritual light suddenly flooded and illuminated his entire being. Only then did he understand why he had encountered the monks Yunguang, Zhigong, and Damo. He also understood everything about his previous life, his after life, all losses and gains, and all effects and retributions.[21]

(Liaoning: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1987), collated by Han Xiduo 韓錫鐸, Yang Hua 揚華 and Bu Weiyi 卜維義, is based on the 1819 edition.

[20] This confession text, known as *Liang huang chan*梁皇懺 (The Liang Emperor's Confession), is still a popular text used in Buddhist rituals today.

[21] Chapter 40, *Liang Wudi yanyi*, 486.

At this moment the emperor laughs joyfully and passes away while sitting upright in meditation: this, as hagiographies repeatedly tell us, is how eminent monks are supposed to die.

It seems that the only way typological conventions of Chinese vernacular fiction can deal with a sovereign as complicated as the historical Emperor Wu of the Liang is to produce a character who changes over time. Such a clearly detectable change in a character does not occur in portrayals of sovereigns in other historical romances from the same period. The character of Emperor Yang of the Sui in *Sui Yangdi yanshi* 隋煬帝艷史 (The Romantic History of Emperor Yang of the Sui), for instance, remains more or less the same, despite the disasters he brings on the state and on himself. In Feng Menglong's short story "Sui Yangdi yiyou zhaoqian" 隋煬帝逸游召譴 (How Emperor Yang of the Sui Brought Punishment on Himself by Carefree Roaming), when the rebel army surrounds the palace, he still thinks it is a coup planned by one of his sons and is unaware of the extent of the people's resentment toward him.[22] By contrast, the Buddhist narrative template of conversion, spiritual growth and enlightenment provides a ready-made model for describing the process of personal transformation. This model was familiar in early medieval China. The historical Emperor Wu himself once wrote a poem about the experience of religious conversion, "Hui san jiao shi" 會三教詩 (A Poem Bringing Together the Three Doctrines).[23] The poem begins with his youthful study of Confucian teachings, proceeds to his reading of Daoist writings in mid-life, and ends with his conversion in old age:

> In my old age I open the Buddhist scrolls:
> They are like the moon shining forth amidst stars.

There are other stories about conversion and enlightenment, but the fictional character of Emperor Wu is unique in his self-conscious, persistent pursuit of the spiritual path.[24] Indeed his status as emperor is

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[22] See note 15.

[23] In Lu Qinli 逯欽立, *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩 (Pre-Qin, Han, Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties Poetry) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995), 1531. For a translation and discussion of the entire poem, see Tian, *Beacon Fire*, 56–58.

[24] For instance, the character of the Tang poet Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) in the novel *Han Xiangzi quanzhuan* 韓湘子全傳 (The Full Story of Han Xiangzi), first printed in 1623. At first stubbornly adherent to Confucian values and hostile to Buddhism and Daoism, Han Yu is disillusioned by his failure in public life and eventually, reluctantly, becomes enlightened through religious teachings about the vanity of the mortal realm,

seen as the greatest obstacle to achieving enlightenment, and ultimate enlightenment keeps eluding him:

> After he entered the imperial palace and became the supreme sovereign, music touched his ears, beautiful women met his eye, and delicacies suited his taste . . . Although his heart and mind were constantly focused on the Buddha, he sometimes had perfect comprehension but then would lapse into darkness.[25]

The task facing the story-teller, however, is more complicated than offering a linear narrative of a character's spiritual growth. He has to struggle with narrative conventions and role types throughout. "Change" works well in reconciling the role of stalwart hero played by youthful Emperor Wu with that of the middle-aged man whose griefs over the loss of his wife makes him embark on a spiritual journey, and finally with that of the old man increasingly absorbed in the well-being of his soul; the sagely emperor who treats his ministers with generosity and loves his people can also be easily related to the self-styled identity of "emperor bodhisattva." One key question, however, is how to reconcile the sovereign's responsibility for the fall of the dynasty with the religious calling and spiritual cultivation of an individual. The former is intensely public, the latter intensely private. In Confucian terms the emperor is guilty because he is a failed sovereign. In Buddhist terms, however, the loss of empire would be the price that an emperor has to pay for his ultimate enlightenment.

Even the emperor's love for his wife is potentially threatening to the image of an ideal Confucian ruler, who is supposed to be impartial in his affections and not too deeply attached to any one person, female or male. In the novel, when the emperor is engaged in battle with the Northern Wei army on the frontier, he receives the news that the empress is seriously ill. He immediately leaves the army behind and heads back to the capital, saying: "That I should have abandoned conjugal love for the sake of one inch of land! This is all my fault!"[26] And yet, his compassion for the empress's sufferings in her afterlife is but an extension of a Buddhist's mercy for all sinful souls tormented in hell,

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thanks to his nephew Han Xiangzi's continual efforts to save him from the world of desire and suffering. The novel has been translated into English by Philip Clart as *The Story of Han Xiangzi: The Alchemical Adventures of a Daoist Immortal* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

[25] *Liang Wudi yanyi*, 429.

[26] *Ibid*., 332.

and his lasting grief over her death moves him to feeling empathy for all his people. After the empress's death he decides to accept the peace treaty proposed by the Northern Wei rather than continuing the war. He tells his ministers:

> Ever since the Empress deserted this world, husband and wife are separated forever, and We are constantly plagued by sorrow. I have been thinking: soldiers all have parents and wives as well; if a soldier dies for the state, his wife will miss her husband, and his father will miss his son—their sadness will be just the same as Ours.[27]

Later, the emperor creates the Confession text with the help of the monk Bao Zhi 寶志 (418?-514) to redeem the soul of the empress; shortly afterwards, touched by the empress's deliverance from suffering, he also issues an edict permitting prisoners to redeem themselves, which pleases the people immensely.[28] In a Confucian context, however, such a gesture of compassion can be easily construed as too lax in applying law and punishments. A tone of criticism sets in even as the narrator has just confirmed the divine manifestation of karma and the positive value of the emperor's mercifulness:

> Seeing Empress Chi ascend into heaven in broad daylight and realizing the truth of retribution, the emperor applied his entire mind to Buddhism and thought of nothing but doing good deeds. He was single-mindedly lenient in governing, and gave a general amnesty . . . prisons became empty and officials lost their power. Innocent people who were freed from wrongful imprisonment shouted their gratitude to the emperor; wicked people, on the other hand, did not appreciate the kindness of the emperor but felt contempt for the law of the state instead. They fearlessly engaged in all sorts of illegal activities, and robbed gold and silver to redeem themselves if they ever got caught. Thieves and bandits in the mountains and on the lakes became more numerous by the day, but the officials did not try very hard to hunt them down.[29]

Even without considering the obviously adverse effects of the emperor's clemency, we are struck by the narrator's subtle choice of words that imply a value judgment: "single-mindedly lenient" (*yiwei renci* 一味仁慈), and "officials lost their power" (*guanli wu quan* 官吏無權). Such rhetorical maneuvers appear throughout the novel. Just as the

[27] *Ibid.*, 334.
[28] *Ibid.*, 378–379.
[29] *Ibid.*, 378–379.

narrator vacillates between different sets of equally valid values and discourses, the reader is constantly pulled in the opposite directions of approving or disapproving of the emperor's actions and choices. In the religious context Emperor Wu is certainly a Buddhist hero: what befits a Buddhist more than regarding the imperial throne—the symbol of ultimate power and glory on earth—as a "worn shoe to be discarded"? In the secular context, however, he is a ruler who has failed to uphold his duty to preserve the dynasty. Emperor Wu's life and career prove to be full of irreconcilable contradictions in late imperial China, when sovereignty had become more narrowly defined in strict Confucian terms than more catholic conceptions of kingship in early medieval times. Depending on one's perspective, Emperor Wu's life is either a divine comedy of a man who gains ultimate enlightenment and salvation, or a tragedy of a fallen king. It is a conflict of role types, ideologies, and genres. This is both why the novel fails as a unified work of art and why it is so fascinating.

The crux of the matter is the occupation of conflicting role types by one individual, and the problem of how to deal with this in traditional vernacular fiction. This problem is particularly striking in stories with sovereigns as protagonists, because these usually present historical fiction based on the lives and careers of historical persons whose complexity as individuals is clearly discernible in sources such as dynastic histories, and defies any simple role typology. And yet, the boundary between historical romance and dynastic history can be blurry, situated as it is on the intricate, dynamic interface of history and literature; and the problem of role types in characterization is by no means confined to historical romances.

In Feng Menglong's short story, history and Buddhism find common ground in the quest for causality, but in the anonymous novel this common ground turns out to be more precarious than one might suppose. While *The Romance of Emperor Wu* may not count as a masterwork of Chinese fiction, it has considerable literary-historical significance in that it throws a single character into conflicting stereotypical roles: dynasty-founder, failed last emperor, and Buddhist who finally achieves enlightenment or, in the variant title of Feng Menglong's story, becomes a Buddha.