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SECTION XII

Southern Plays of Ethics

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TOP GRADUATE ZHANG XIE

Regina Llamas

Top Graduate Zhang Xie (hereafter *Top Graduate*) is the earliest play we have in the southern tradition. It was discovered by chance when the scholar Ye Gongchuo (1881–1968) found a lost volume of the Ming *Yongle Collectanea* in a secondhand bookstore in London. The *Yongle* was a monumental collection of full-length ancient and modern texts gathered from throughout the empire and compiled by imperial commission in 1403. Completed in 1408, it was preserved in two manuscript editions, one kept in Beijing, and the other in Nanjing. The *Yongle* volume Ye found, which is now preserved in the Rare Book Room of the National Taiwan Library, was not an original one but a copy made during the Jiajing era (1521–1567) to restore a lost volume. This volume includes the only three remaining dramatic texts of the thirty-three that were originally included in the collectanea. Of the three, *Top Graduate* is considered the earliest extant play genuinely representative of a southern theatrical tradition. The other two, *Little Butcher Sun* (*Xiao Sun tu*) and *A Playboy from a Noble House Opts for the Wrong Career* (*Huanmen zidi cuolishen*), are adaptations of northern *zaju* plays. All three of these plays can almost certainly be dated to the late Yuan dynasty and perhaps even earlier, making them among the earliest extant Chinese plays.[1]

When the manuscript of *Top Graduate* first appears in the early fifteenth century, early southern drama (*nanxi*), is already a fully formed dramatic genre. It has a distinctive musical style and a clear narrative structure organized into acts and scenes. It makes use of a set of roles distinctive to Chinese theater, and all roles can sing.[2] By the time *Top Graduate* is included in the *Yongle*, the dramatic conventions of this form were well understood: this is evident not just from its dramatic structure but also from its playful use of self-referential allusions to the actor's art (as when a character tells another not to disclose their artistic secrets to the audience) or through the disruption of established acting conventions, such as the use of a subordinate comic role to perform the character of a high-level official. In short, although *Top Graduate* is the earliest extant southern drama, it was likely preceded by many other plays that did not survive.

We know very little about early southern drama before this play. The totality of the sources we have before the appearance of *Top Graduate* amount to a smattering of facts drawn from off-hand remarks (*biji*) written by thirteenth- and fourteenth-century scholar aficionados. These notes suggest a type of regional musical performance from the area of Wenzhou (in modern-day Zhejiang) that was popular among local youth. It included declaimed or spoken parts, incorporated some form of narrative storytelling, and required a certain amount of musical specialization. These earlier

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sources tell us nothing concrete about the structure or mode of the performance: if they were actual plays performed in the first person voice of characters or if they made use of roles, if actors wore makeup and costume, or what setting these performances used. By the time Ming aficionados and playwrights begin to pay attention to the origins of this southern tradition in the late fifteenth century, they are already far removed from their alleged sources, and *Top Graduate* had been incorporated into the *Yongle Collectanea* for over half a century.

Authorship, Preludes, and Plot

Top Graduate is the work of a collective author, *The Nine Mountain Society* (*Jiushan shuhui*), a Southern Song association of writers from Wenzhou first mentioned in a thirteenth-century memoir of the city of Lin'an (modern-day Hangzhou). Writing societies were urban writing clubs composed of educated members of society; clerks; entry-level licentiates; or perhaps simply men with artistic ambitions, time on their hands and an interest in popular entertainment. The members of these societies were known as men of talent (*cairen*), or more generally "poets," and were presumed to work in close relation with performers. But we cannot be sure if literary societies really wrote for these troupes or if troupes were simply trying to elevate their cultural status by associating themselves with men of talent. The authors of these societies seem to have composed plays collectively, as is the case of *Top Graduate's* Nine Mountain Society.

Top Graduate begins with two declaimed song-lyrics (*ci*) expressing the author's outlook on life and summarizing the play. Before these two poems, there is a quatrain outlining the main events of the story called the Title (*timu*), but which is not read by any role. *Top Graduate's* prologue represents our first instance of the two song-lyrics convention utilized by later southern drama, and perhaps one of the most memorable and original examples of this practice. The introduction is composed *as if* it were a marketing ploy for a performance of amateurs in a public competition with other troupes. The first lyric, *Shuidiao getou,* begins with a reminder to the audience of the ineluctable passage of time and the need to enjoy moments of leisure and pleasure. The second lyric, *Manting fang*, reinforces the troupe's abilities, praising their innovative comic and musical prowess, and informing us that they will put on an innovative rendition of what is already a familiar and well-known piece: *The Story of Zhang Xie.* As the role of the *fumo*—who introduces the play—begins to hush the crowd in preparation for the inception of the play, it insinuates a raucous audience gathered for the performance and full of expectation.

These two lyrics are followed by an All Keys *chantefable* (*zhugongdiao*) on the story of *Top Graduate Zhang Xie*. The All Keys is a type of story, alternating prose and song passages, generally written to different tunes and ascribed to different keys (*gongdiao*). However, *Top Graduate's* All Keys is considered a "southern" All Keys, which makes use of the form but with no indication of the actual keys or music. Since the musical element in the All Keys was essential for its performance, what happens when one of its main features, the music, disappears? In this All Keys there are only five expressive songs of one single stanza each, describing either the natural scene or Zhang Xie's emotions, but none of these songs reappears in the play. The end of the second introductory poem announces the summary of the story in the form of an All Keys, and the conclusion of the All Keys announces the theatrical performance of the play. Here we find a second introduction with two poems (also song-lyrics *ci*) that repeat the attributes and standards of the first one with some variation. Both poems establish the same benchmark of the first prologue: the comic acumen of the actors, the excellence of their makeup and costume, and the proficiency of their music with standards on a par with the Imperial Music Bureau. Why the writers or perhaps later editors felt a need to include two very similar prologues and twice inform the audience of the

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troupe's skills is a mystery. But by the time *Top Graduate* was edited to be inserted in the *Yongle collectanea*, this format, which was clearly intentional and well woven together, may have been kept intact because of its creative nature and its aesthetic value. Its originality can be appreciated to this day.

Top Graduate tells the story of a talented scholar who leaves his home to go to the capital and sit for the imperial examinations. On the way to the capital, he is robbed and beaten by a bandit and is forced to spend some time in a village temple to recover. Here, he meets Poorlass (*Pinnü*), who takes care of him and restores him back to health. Poorlass is a girl from a local wealthy family who was orphaned at a young age and, having lost all her property, now lives alone in the temple. She survives through the generosity of a well-to-do landholding village couple, Grandma and Grandpa Li, and by helping them and other villagers with odd jobs.

When Zhang Xie recovers from his wounds, to show gratitude—and possibly to preserve her reputation—he asks Poorlass to marry him. Soon after, Zhang Xie leaves for the capital to sit for the exams. To cover his traveling expenses, Poorlass sells her hair. Zhang Xie leaves the village promising to come back and take her home to his parents in Sichuan. Once on the road, however, Zhang Xie berates himself for his impetuosity and explains that marriage was not part of his original plan.

When Zhang Xie reaches the capital, he passes the exams as Top Graduate and soon becomes the chosen candidate to marry Shenghua, the young daughter of Wang Deyong, the military affairs commissioner, who has just come of age. Zhang Xie declines the offer, claiming that to accept this marriage without being able to inform his parents would be unfilial, but never mentions his former marriage to Poorlass. This unexpected nugget of information on the pressure licentiates bore from high officials to marry their daughters may reflect, to a degree, a popular sentiment at the time, but it was not a felicitous decision. When Shenghua, who has led a cushioned and comfortable life and is wholeheartedly anticipating the match, is met with Zhang Xie's rejection, her humiliation is so profound it saps her strength and leads to her death. Her enraged father, the military affairs commissioner, swears to avenge his daughter and asks to be reappointed as a senior official to Zizhou, where Zhang Xie has been posted.

In the meantime, Poorlass, back in the village, has had no news from Zhang Xie. She asks Xiao'er, the clownish son of the Lis who is on his way to town, to buy the booklet where the results of the metropolitan examinees are posted. When she finds out that Zhang Xie has taken first place in the exams, she decides to travel to the capital and look for him. After a harrowing, long trip, Poorlass reaches the *yamen* where Zhang Xie resides, but she is not allowed in. On the contrary, as he realizes that the destitute and ragged woman at his door is Poorlass, he disavows her and asks the guards to turn her out. Exhausted and penniless, she is forced to beg her way back to her village. When she arrives, she informs the Lis she could not find Zhang Xie and says nothing of the outcome of her trip.

After Poorlass leaves the *yamen*, Zhang Xie, humiliated by her poverty, resolves to stop by the village temple on his way to take up his post and to "pull up the trouble by the roots." One spring day, when Poorlass is picking tea leaves and waiting for Grandma Li to arrive, Zhang Xie arrives in the village, slashes her with his sword, and leaves, thinking her dead. However, Poorlass does not die. She is soon found by the Lis and taken back to the temple, where she slowly recovers under their care. Once again, she tells them nothing of what has passed between herself and Zhang Xie.

On the way to Zizhou, Military Affairs Commissioner Wang Deyong and his wife spend a night at the local temple, where they find Poorlass. Astonished at the striking resemblance to their recently deceased daughter, the commissioner and his wife decide to adopt the young girl and take her with

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them to his new post. Hereafter, the story sets in motion a series of turns that lead to a surprising conclusion. If the summary of the plot points to a heart-rending story of ungratefulness and retribution, the reader is in for a surprise, since this play is primarily a farce destined for a happy ending.

Every harrowing moment is balanced out by the playful antics of the comic roles, so that every act is resolved in a midpoint between pathos and glee. For example, the loneliness expressed by Poorlass in recounting her fate is balanced out by the endless absurdities of Grandma Li; when Poorlass learns of Zhang Xie's success through Xiao'er, the Lis' son, and is distraught that he has not sent her a letter, Xiao'er makes up a witty song about Zhang Xie's ungratefulness; in ritual ceremonies, when gods are called for, the gods are more interested in the food and wine provided than in the protection of their constituents. Even after Shenghua dies, the ludicrous comments of her father Wang Deyong, the military affairs commissioner, immediately dispel any tragic sentiment incurred at that moment. The acts and scenes in Top Graduate Zhang Xie are organized as a succession of dramatic crises followed by a succession of comic skits that conclude with the reunion of Zhang Xie and Poorlass in a final fitting scene.

The Critique of the Ungrateful Scholar Story

Top Graduate belongs to a group of early drama stories—about one third of the totality of extant *nanxi* plays—that relate the story of a young and talented provincial scholar who leaves his newly wedded wife and ageing parents and goes to the capital to sit for the metropolitan exams. He passes the examination with high honors and is named top graduate, immediately acquiring fame and attaining a position. Like Zhang Xie, the scholar is sought after by the elites of the capital because of his talent, and he is soon persuaded to discard his earlier provincial wife for a daughter of the nobility. Thereupon, his former wife goes to the capital in search of her husband and finds him only to be disavowed. The denouement of these other stories generally culminates in divine retribution or female revenge.

Most of the ungrateful scholar stories exploit the tensions that accompany male ambitions for status and power, and the young scholar's quest for prestige and success that often leads to betrayal. The plays question the aims of education, the examination system, the misuse of position and power, and the consequent disruption and destabilization of harmonious social relations.

The imperial examination system is presented in the ungrateful scholar plays as the unquestionable legitimate means of access to power. Yet, at the same time, these texts call into question the motivation of scholars, reflecting one aspect of the neo-Confucian view on learning in which true worth was defined by one's success in realizing one's moral nature. Neo-Confucians viewed learning primarily as a means to improve one's mind for the sake of individual growth, not for social advancement. But these plays clearly stress the opposite: while it is true that the young scholars express a desire to apply their knowledge and serve the emperor, this is immediately qualified by the material aspect of their desires, "to sell" one's abilities in order to acquire rank and profit, and to improve the family's status. The Confucian ideal viewed education as an instrument of moral reinforcement, but these stories present the scholar's material quest for fame and power as a single-minded aim acquired at the expense of virtuous conduct. The scholar's quest was not just the result of personal ambition, but of the conflicting demands placed on him by state and family. The plays illustrate how familial aspirations for status and the economic security the imperial stipend provided, pressured these sons of flawless filial principles to make the pursuit of wealth their primary goal. They are a critique of the impossibility of education to fulfill its goals, and they draw attention to the gap that existed between the moral and ritual codes of behavior in the formative process of scholars and their implementation. In other words,

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whereas the moral code could perhaps be learned, study did not instill in the scholar an ethical conscience. By contrast, the stories place a premium on female virtue and endurance. The plays are not specific critiques of individual figures but rather use the characters as synecdochic figures—where scholars stand for a failed education system, and female characters stand for orthodox moral values.

Women are the scholar's match and are used as a contrast to their male counterparts to call attention to the moral qualities distinctive to both roles. Poorlass is the equivalent of the "three-day wife," so-called because she is separated from her husband a few days after she has been married. She is the archetype of female virtue and endurance, and it is always her cause we advocate throughout the story. Poorlass' plight is established from the beginning when she recounts how she came to live alone in the village temple. While the Lis protect her and minister to her needs, the one single medium of exchange and most important property she possesses is her virtue, which she has kept intact throughout Zhang Xie's recovery. Her anger at Zhang Xie when he proposes marriage to her further highlights her virtuous nature, and similarly, when Zhang Xie marries her, it seems to be on account of her virtue. But the demands made on the female character are superhuman: When Poorlass learns of Zhang Xie's success, yet gets no message from him, she determines to go to the capital, search for him, and cause him to honor his marriage contract. When she is repudiated outside his *yamen,* she bears this humiliation with strength of character and resolves to return to her village and bear her lot with dignity. And when Zhang Xie tries to kill her on his way to take up his post, she once again decides to keep the attack and her misfortunes to herself. Why, one asks, does she not tell the Lis? The import seems to be that should she denounce Zhang Xie, their difference in status and her gender would make no difference in the outcome—there is no law to protect her. Poorlass' predicament, which she bears with prodigious fortitude, underlines the remarkable endurance demanded of the main female role, and yet both her absolute virtue and strength of character are difficult, if not impossible, heroic models to emulate. Poorlass' innate moral compass is clearly established in contrast to the scholar's lack of ethics, which should have been shaped through his schooling in the Confucian classics. The female role's inborn understanding of right and wrong is the precise opposite of the male role's learned code of ethics, and this seems to be at the crux of the ideological discussion in this play—that a moral compass cannot be learned.

The second female role is generally the daughter of a powerful official. Rather than an object of desire, she is a means for the scholar to access power. In later plays, the scholar's rejection of his first wife is caused mostly by his personal ambition, but perhaps too, by a desire to repay his parents and change the family's status. When Zhang Xie rejects the military commissioner's offer of marriage to his daughter, her death trumps all expectations: Shenghua may have been his shortcut to power, but the humiliation he inflicts upon her family produces the opposite effect, projecting a bleak future for the ambitious scholar. Shenghua's demise is Poorlass' rise, and we soon understand the need to remove the commissioner's daughter from the play, since the developing demands of the plot must assure the play a "just" and happy ending (*datuanyuan*). In other plays, the first wife exacts retribution from Heaven or avenges herself, but in *Top Graduate*, possibly due to the exigencies of an urban commercial audience, someone who has suffered such opprobrium demands to be compensated with status plus material benefits, showing an evolving interpretation of female sacrifice. Thus the play concludes with an ingenious but disturbing finale: in an unexpected twist of the plot, Zhang Xie's despicable conduct and Poorlass' moral stamina culminate in a conventional denouement wherein Poorlass' social position is restituted, increasing her well-being and reducing the likelihood of more unnecessary suffering.

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Structure of the Play: Balance Scenes

The plays contained in the *Yongle* edition were not divided into scenes, and the distinction in script sizes generally employed from the mid- and late Ming editions to differentiate singing parts (large) from the spoken ones (small) is not used. This is possibly due to a premium placed on space in the collectanea, which was large and expensive to compile. Stage directions, however, are written in smaller script and indicated by leaving a blank space between the characters, and song titles are included in brackets. The modern editor of the play, Qian Nanyang (1899–1987), divided the play into acts according to the entrance and exit of roles, the plot of the story, and the musical organization of the play. In addition to the entrance and exit of roles, another fundamental criteria for the composers of the play was a balance between the comic acts, generally played by the comic roles, and the serious ones mostly sung by the main male and female roles.

Acts tend to begin with a role entering with a popular saying and leaving with a quatrain, sung by two or more roles. Qian's division is based on the complete exit of roles in an act, but within the act, the number of roles can also change, creating smaller units or scenes. For example, act sixteen consists of three parts: (1) the large marriage scene with Zhang Xie, Poorlass, Grandpa Li and his son Xiao'er, as well as the officiating god; (2) at the end of this scene, all roles leave the stage, but Zhang Xie and Poorlass stay and sing a song promising to honor each other forever. In the last scene of this act, (3) all roles come back to celebrate the marriage feast.[3] Although scenes within an act are bound by sequences of related events, there are cases where scenes are quasi-independent units unrelated to the main story. For example, act two is divided into three scenes: (1) Zhang Xie's introduction to the play, (2) Zhang Xie and friends, and (3) Zhang Xie and his father. The first scene is necessary because it introduces the play, but the second scene could be removed without affecting the inner coherence of the act or the overall plot of the story. This type of segmented assembly is a recurring constitutive particularity of this play: for example, the structure of scene 2 in act 2 is repeated (without Zhang Xie) in scene 2 of act 8. The first and last marriage scenes also mirror each other.

Like some scenes, acts are not seamlessly integrated but rather juxtaposed, following the needs of the action of the story and the characters. Each act functions like an autonomous unit of space and time that cannot be clearly linked to other acts. Thus, Zhang Xie's parting scene, which occurs in his hometown in Sichuan, is followed by a short lyrical act where Poorlass in her village sings of how she met with her present condition as a lonely and destitute young orphan living in the village temple. This structure, alternating serious and comic scenes, is the mechanism employed to balance the mood of the play, or the more woeful moments with the humorous ones.

The Role System and Music

The seven basic roles (*jiaose* or *juese*) of southern theater first appear in *Top Graduate*. At the end of act one, the *mo* role, who is about to exit after having introduced the play with an All Keys and Modes, states: "You performers (*juese)* backstage, boldly strike your drums to urge us on while the *moni* role (*se*) gives us a dance."[4] The *mo* is the role singing the All Keys and asking the main male role or *sheng* to enter the stage.

In general terms a role is a method of performance. It refers to a set of competences—gestures, a language register, a singing manner, a specific costume and face paint, gait, and a general temperament—that an actor needs to represent a character on stage. Roles mediate between the actor and the character, and their relationship is one of skill. The role indicates what type of character or characters the actor is playing, whether it is a comic or serious one, and its relationship to other

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roles and characters. Character is exemplified by human traits, and it informs the role with whatever gender (male or female), age (old or young), status (rich or old) and disposition (good or bad) it needs to depict. Because so much of the role is conveyed by technique, there are no gender or age restrictions for actors, and a young female role can be represented by a middle-aged actor or actress.

In *Top Graduate*, as in many of these early plays, characters are not well developed or concerned with psychological depth. They tend to reflect exemplary models of human conduct, displaying the most prominent and commonplace traits in a category of individuals. For example, Xiao'er, the middle-aged son of the Lis, is played by a *chou* role and consistently displays the human traits required of this role: gluttony, greed, laziness or meanness. Most *chou* roles, no matter their status, will perform their characters making ample use of these human flaws, which are what the role requires—thus, the robber, the military affairs commissioner, or the most insignificant of the mountain gods will play according to the norms of the role, exhibiting some or all of the same basic human traits. At this early stage, role norms predominate over the nuances of character, and character is generally played according to both the conventions of character delineation and the norms of the role. This may well be one reason why characters in the text are always introduced by their role type (e.g., *sheng*) rather than by their character name (e.g., Zhang Xie).

In this modular system, the seven roles can be divided into two large categories—serious and comic roles—but this distinction is not clear cut. The main male (*sheng*) and female (*dan*) roles are serious, gender-specific and restricted to performing only the characters they have been assigned. There is a second female role (*tie*) who can play more than one character but only female characters. By contrast, the two comics: the comic (*jing*) and the clown (*chou*), can perform a number of characters, both male and female, menial or of high status. The comic *jing*, for example, performs thirteen characters, of which four are female, and the clown *chou* performs nine, of which one is female. The *chou*, which is the lowliest of roles, also performs the character with the most status, the military affairs commissioner, and has an important part as the robber. Perhaps the least specific of the seven roles is the *mo*, often called the second male role. It can play any number of characters (fifteen in *Top Graduate*), is gender specific, and is both serious and comic: it introduces the play and plays medium neutral roles, but more often this role participates in the comics' routines, capping their jokes. The *mo* has a kind of omniscient position in the play, reining in the absurdities of the comics but also commenting on the actions of the main role. There is one other role, called the extra or *wai*, which can perform both male and female characters.

Comedy in *Top Graduate* is farcical, both verbally and physically, and it has an unusually dominant role in the play. Typically, the verbal repertoire makes use of the ambiguity of language, puns, homophones, riddles, onomatopoeia, and incongruity both in the form of absurd remarks and discordant replies. There is also much slapstick, carried out by the *jing* and the *chou* roles in the form of stage chases or through martial arts. Mime, too, is another effective physical form of comic performance: before Zhang Xie reaches the temple, the temple god orders the other two minor gods to pose as doors, substituting for the tattered former ones. Zhang Xie enters, closing the door, and when Poorlass arrives, she knocks forcefully on the door (the back of one of the gods), with the ensuing groaning and complaining of the god.[5] Farce mostly indulges the voracity of the sensual desires of the comics but also aims at the intersecting realms of the divine and the human, where the pleasure-seeking gods demand to satisfy their mundane desires in exchange for divine protection to the community. The mode also tangentially includes a political dimension, upending the status quo of figures in power.

Comic scenes are generally conducted by three roles: the clown *chou*, the comic *jing*, and the *mo* who acts as intermediary. There is a very specific dialogic routine carried out between the *mo* role

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and one of the two comic roles (*jing* or *chou*) where the *mo* is constantly responding or capping the jokes of one of them. These two comic roles (*jing* and *chou*) are the genuine taboo breakers—they embody the basest human inclinations and desires: gluttony, sex, greed, vulgarity, indolence, and so on—and deride social inhibitions and conventions. The role in charge of curbing and restraining the antics of these two comics is the *mo*, who continuously reminds the crowd of the comic roles' ill-judged and foolish actions. The superior wit of the *mo* exemplifies the detached voice of reason and authority and contributes to keeping the farce within permissible limits. The *mo*'s comments, generally directed at the audience, place the role at the threshold between the theater and its viewers, between drama's intended act of deception and the real world of the spectators, and most importantly between containment and release. His continuous commentary on the antics of the comics incorporates the audience into the role's viewpoint and compels it into assimilating his position. Thus, while the audience complicitly laughs at the tomfoolery of the comic's representation of human imperfection ––our collective imperfection—the *mo* at the threshold reminds the spectators that these actions are socially proscribed. The *mo* is the most orthodox of roles, the one that reins in the comedy and establishes and ensures reasonable moral standards in the theater.[6]

A final and important aspect of comedy in *Zhang Xie* is theatrical self-referentiality. Theater's allusion to itself is employed throughout the play as humor, often as a form of parody, for example, to upend status by making use of the lowliest role, the *chou*, to perform the character with the highest status, Military Commissioner Wang Deyong. Those moments of metatheatricality also underscore the fictional nature of the theater, where conventional gimmicks used in the theater are periodically disclosed, such as males playing female roles, by pointing to the large unbound feet under the female costume.

To conclude, I will add a final word on music. Studying the music of theater is plagued by the same problems of ephemerality and transmission that affect other aspects of performance, since music was transmitted orally, from master to student, and playwrights and musicians did not have an adequate means of notation. All we now have left from this medium are the song forms as they appear in the plays, anthologies, and song formularies. One look at *Top Graduate* or any later southern dramatic text will immediately inform us of the importance of music and of its structural organization: texts are largely a collection of single songs and song suites interspersed with dialogue and declamatory pieces written in parallel prose. Still, these texts reveal nothing of the aural nature of the song, rendering reconstructing what the music actually sounded like with any precision impossible. In fact, we are still not even sure in what language these songs were sung. For example, the late Ming scholar Gu Qiyuan (1565–1628) pointed out that the Haiyan style, one of the four dominant musical airs at the time, was popular in Zhejiang and was in large measure performed in the official Mandarin language, or a local modification thereof: "Haiyan makes use of an abundance of official language and it is used [in performance] by people in both capitals." (*Haiyan duo guanyu; liang jing ren yongzhi*).[7] Yiyang, on the other hand, was sung in a local language and was very popular among the local gentry and the people. Over time, aficionados have confirmed the use of local language in southeastern theater. Although southern theater is native to the southeast, and *Top Graduate* is its earliest extant play, *Top Graduate* is not written in local dialect and makes little use of local dialect even in the spoken and comic parts where it is later conventionally used.[8] One reason for this relative lack of dialect could be that our version of the play was edited to be included in an imperial encyclopedia, but it is also possible that this type of theater was produced in larger cities and intended for a literate and semi-literate group versed in a form of standardized vernacular.

The register of language both in the spoken and sung parts is very close to a spoken vernacular and is occasionally sprinkled with local dialect. But the dearth of sources on early southern has not even allowed scholars to determine whether early southern theater was accompanied by musical

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instrumentation or not. In *Top Graduate*, when the main male role enters the stage, he requests the troupe to play an overture. But, it seems, not all southern theater included instrumental accompaniment, and there is plenty of evidence to the contrary.

Notes

1 All citations of the Chinese text refer to Qian Nanyang (1899–1987), *Yongle dadian xiwen sanzhong jiaozhu* [Collated and Annotated Three Southern Plays from the Yongle Collectanea] (Taipei: Huazheng shuju, 1985). Qian's volume includes *Little Butcher Sun* and *A Playboy from a Noble House Opts for the Wrong Career*. For an English introduction and translation to *Top Graduate*, see Regina S. Llamas, *Top Graduate Zhang Xie: The Earliest Extant Chinese Southern Play* (Columbia University Press, 2021).
2 In addition to its designation as *nanxi*, other terms were used to label this tradition: play-songs (*xiqu*), Wenzhou drama (Wenzhou *zaju*) and play-texts (*xiwen*).
3 The exception is the god, which is played by a *jing* role. The role needs to leave in order for Grandma Li, who is also played by a *jing* role, to enter. See Qian, *Yongle dadian xiwen sanzhong jiaozhu*, act 16; Llamas, *Top Graduate Zhang Xie*, act 16.
4 Qian, *Yongle dadian xiwen sanzhong jiaozhu*, 4; Llamas, *Top Graduate Zhang Xie*, 94.
5 Qian, *Yongle dadian xiwen sanzhong jiaozhu*, 56–57; Llamas, *Top Graduate Zhang Xie*, 141–42.
6 See Llamas, *Top Graduate Zhang Xie*, 67.
7 See Gu Qiyuan, "*xiju*," in *Kezuo zhuiyu*, SKQS, 3rd ser. (Jinan: Qilu Shushe, 1995), *juan* 9, 243.343.
8 Although it does not make widespread use of local dialect, it does use some expressions repeatedly. See Guo Zuofei, "*Yongle dadian xiwen sanzhong* jiaozhu sanshili" [Three Edited and Annotated Southern Plays from the Yongle Collectanea: Thirty Examples], *Tushuguan zazhi* 24, no. 12 (2005): 77–80, 96.

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