

*The Idea of a Theater in Sixteenth-Century China:
Xu Wei's (1521-1593) Nanci xulu*

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Introduction

Xu Wei was not the first to write about theater: before him others had written about the life of actors, the authors and their works, about music and prosody, singing methods, the function and style of drama and the composition of plays. The birth of drama was already understood as a by-product of leisure, and so was its potential as a popular instrument for improving, expounding and disseminating social values.¹ But Xu Wei's essay, *A Record of Southern Drama Song* written in 1559, is the first and only "defense" of southern drama (*nanxi*) we have.² It is also an apology that reflects and responds to current concerns with the genre and how this genre had to be understood. This paper will explore how Xu Wei attempted to establish the reputation of southern theater on the basis of contemporary values of naturalness and authenticity, and how he modified and honed these values to fit his defense. It will show that Xu's advocacy of natural language and authentic music in Southern Drama implied standards that had long since departed the popular milieu he claimed conceived them and became instead the aesthetic values of an educated class wed to distinctive regional and ethnic alliances.

¹ For example, Xia Tingzhi 夏庭芝 (ca.1300), *Qinglou ji* 青樓集 [*Green Bower Collection*], in *Zhongguo gudian xiqu lunzhi jicheng* 中國古典戲曲論著集成 [A Collection of Theories of Classical Chinese Drama], (Beijing: Zhongguo xiqu chubanshe, 1959), Hereafter LZJC, vol. 2, on the life of actors; Zhong Sicheng 鍾嗣成 (?-c.1360), *Lugui bu* 錄鬼簿 [*A Register of Ghosts*], LZJC, vol. 2, on playwrights; Zhou Deqing 周德清 (1277-1365), *Zhongyuan yinyun* 中原音韻 [*Rhymes of the Central Plain*], LZJC, vol.1, and Zhu Quan 朱權 (1378-1448), *Taihe zhengyin pu* 太和正音譜 [*Correct Tones of an Era of Peace*], LZJC, vol.3, for prosody; Yan'nan Zhi'an 燕南芝庵 (n.d.), *Changlun* 唱論 [*A Discussion on Singing*], LZJC, vol.1, for singing methods; the preface to Gao Ming (1306?-1359) 高明, *Pipa ji* 琵琶記 [*The Lute*], for the function of theater (Qiang Nanyang 錢南揚 ed., (Taipei: Liren, 1998), pp.1-5, and Li Kaixian 李開先 (1501-1568), "Xiye chunyou ci xu" 西野春游詞序 ["Preface to the Ci Poem Spring Travel with Xiye"], in Chen Duo 陳多 and Ye Changhai 葉長海 (eds), *Zhongguo lidai julun xuanzhu* 中國歷代劇論選注 [*A Selection and Annotation of Early Chinese Theories of Drama*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), pp. 116-118, for the need for leisure. Xiye was the style name for the poet Yuan Chongmian 袁崇冕 (1487-?).

² Xu's essay is short, consisting of the essay proper, a list of key terms, and a valuable register of plays. Xu Wei 徐渭, *Nanci xulu* 南詞敘錄 [*A Record of Southern Drama Song*], LZJC, vol.3.

The Context

As a defense of southern drama, the *Record* appears very late, one hundred and fifty years after the first manuscripts of southern plays were included in the imperial *Yongle Collectanea*, and a century after plays like the *White Rabbit* and the *Golden Hairpin* were printed and buried with aficionados to be enjoyed in the afterlife.³ It also appears at a time when Gao Ming's celebrated *Lute* had already been canonized as one of the representative works of the southern tradition. Further, the *Record* was produced when the gentle southern *Kunshan* musical style reformed by Wei Liangfu (1522-1566) was in full swing; the Suzhou native, Liang Chenyu (1519-1591) had already set his play *Washing Silk* (*Huansha ji* 1558) to this musical style, much to the acclaim of the urban and educated elite,⁴ and the first prosodic manual for southern songs, by Jiang Xiao (ca.1544), had already been composed.⁵ Even northerners like the Shandong official and aficionado Li Kaixian (1501-1568) were attempting to write in the southern style. In short, in the second half of the sixteenth century, when Xu Wei set out to defend southern theater, an evolution of the form had already captured the interest and appreciation of the literati.

Xu Wei's *Record* also appeared at the time when a heated disputation raged on the merits of one northern play – *The Western Wing* – and two southern plays, *The Lute* and *The Pavilion for Praying to the Moon*.⁶ This debate, initiated by He Liangjun (1506-1573), and focused on the language, contents, prosody and music of these plays, polarized authors into two camps: those in favor of the *Lute*, and those in favor of the other two plays. In his very short critical text, He compared the three plays, and observed that the *Western Wing* was a romance that followed on a long tradition of love poetry, easy to compose and easy to listen to. *The Lute* on the other hand, was a play with a clear moral message, but so suffused with erudition that it had effaced all trace of “natural language,” one of the essential ingredients of a good play.⁷ He's critique directly

³ *Chenghua xinbian Liu Zhiyuan huanxiang Baitu ji* 成化新編劉知遠還鄉白兔記 [The Newly Edited Chenghua (1465-1488) edition of Liu Zhiyuan Returning to his Village: The White Rabbit](Yangzhou: Jiangsu guangling guji keyinshe, 1980). This play was discovered in 1964. For *The Golden Hairpin* see Liu Nianzi 劉念茲 ed., *Xuande xieben Jinchai ji* 宣德寫本金釵記 [Xuende [Reign] Manuscript of the Golden Hairpin,1432](Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1981).

⁴ Shen Chongsui 沈崇綏 (fl.1639), *Duqu xuzhi* 度曲須知 [A Guide to Correct Singing], LZJC, vol.5, p.198.

⁵ Li Huimian 李惠綿, *Xiqu yaojie jieti* 戲曲要籍解題 [An Explanation of Important Works on Drama](Taiwan: Zhengzhong shuju, 1991), p. 82.

⁶ For a brief overview of this debate see Wang Ayling 王瓊玲, *Wan Ming Qing chu xiqu zhi shenmei gousi yu qi yishu chengxian* 晚明清初戲曲之審美構思與其藝術呈現 [Aesthetic Conception and Its Artistic Representation in Late Ming and Early Qing Drama] (Taipei: Zhongyanyuan wenzhisuo, 2005), pp. 31-55.

⁷ He Liangjun 和良俊, *Qulun* 曲論 [A Discussion on Theater], LZJC vol.4, p. 6.

addressed the shortcomings of both plays noting that *Western Wing* was easy to understand but bereft of moral meaning, while the *Lute* carried moral significance, but lacked the correct language, thus underlining two essential and interrelated functions of drama, to communicate and disseminate orthodox values and improve society. For He, it was the third play in the debate, *Pavilion* that retained the core element of theater: its capacity to convey meaning through simple and lucid language. Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526-1590), expanded the terms of dramatic criticism to include the assessment of the craft of the poet and the aims of theater, while contesting He's preferences. Wang argued that *Pavilion* did not manifest the proficiency of the poet, engage in romance, expound moral teachings or ultimately succeed in moving people, and championed the *Lute* instead. In response to both He and Wang's exchange, Xu Fuzuo (1560-1630), yet again expanding the critical boundaries, dismissed the need for poetic erudition and conversely praised the prosodic and musical perfection of *Pavilion*, observing that the play displayed, in addition to the correct linguistic register, great musical skill. In Xu Fuzuo's discussion, *Pavilion* was the preferred play not just for its language and meaning, but because it showed the expertise of the master musician, whose final aim was the entertainment of his audience. Thus, in the framework for the critical evaluation of drama during Xu Wei's time, critics and playwrights were concerned both with literary and performing aspects of drama, they discussed language as a poetic medium and aural medium, they addressed the function of theater as means of instruction and as entertainment, they considered the aims of theater as a means to elicit an emotional response from the audience, and they underlined the importance of the poet as aesthete and of the musician as entertainer.

Language

In the emergence of dramatic criticism, *bense* 本色 (lit. natural color) became a standard of critical valuation, often linked to "natural aptitude" (*danghang* 當行) referring to the poet's profound insight into all aspects of the genre.⁸ Thus, a poet came to be qualified as possessing

⁸ For a general discussion of *bense* see Gong Pengcheng 龔鵬程, *Shishi bense yu miaowu* 詩史本色與妙悟 [Narrative Poetry, "Authenticity" and "Wondrous Awakening"] (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1992), pp. 93-136; for *bense* in drama see Li Huimian 李惠綿, *Xiqu poping gainianshi kaolun* 戲曲批評概念史考論 [A Discussion of the History of Concepts in Dramatic Theory] (Taipei: Liren, 2002), pp. 79-146. These terms are also used in reference to northern drama. See Stephen H. West's appendix in this volume.

aptitude when his poetry possessed the quality of *bense*; conversely, if a piece of drama displayed the quality of *bense*, the poet was bound to be *danghang*. The critical concept of *bense* inherited from Song dynasty (907-1279) poetic criticism, was first applied to the “original” lyrical language⁹ – and by extension to the form – of a genre, but eventually was expanded to express critical appreciation of other parts of dramatic composition including the spoken language (a balance between crudeness and truth) prosody and music, finesse in plot construction or more generally the excellence of a play. It was also applied variously to language. *Danghang* too was expanded from a focus on the creative capacity of the poet to the troupes of actors and the audience. The greatest challenge in understanding these concepts, however, is accepting their indeterminateness. Just what a given critic meant by “natural color” or “natural aptitude” is often as elusive as it is central.

According to Xu Wei, Southern Drama was undervalued on two accounts: because drama aficionados considered the language of the plays ‘vulgar’ and because the songs of plays possessed no prosodic (or musical) rules. It is not that southern drama did not have its own circle of aficionados, but the language of their plays remained unrefined. Xu Wei concedes that their criticism is not entirely off the mark when he writes:

Southern [songs] are easy to compose, yet there are few excellent ones; northern [songs] are hard to write, yet there are some exquisite ones. Why is this so? It is because during Song times, prominent men were not willing to turn their attention to [southern songs]. 南易製，罕妙曲；北難製，乃有佳者。何也？宋時，名家未肯留心。¹⁰

The partiality of men of letters for northern theater and their assiduous endeavors to transform this genre into a legitimate and respectable literary form had led to neglect of the southern tradition. Thus Xu began his campaign to elevate the status of southern theater by emphasizing the aesthetic qualities that he believed distinguished “good” southern theater not from its northern rival, but from current practices by men of letters in the south: unlike the work of inferior writers, southern theater possessed the quality of *bense*. In order to limn this quality in a piece of dramatic work, Xu began by demonstrating what was not *bense* through the contrived

⁹ The question of the “original” language relates to when the form was first established, but this issue becomes increasingly complex as “original” is exemplified by a collection of texts which are not the original texts.

¹⁰ Xu Wei, *Nanci xulu*, pp. 242-243.

and elaborate work the *Perfume Satchel* (*Xiangnang ji*) by the erudite scholar Shao Can (d.ca.1495). This work, Xu argued, was everything that went counter to *bense* standards: it utilized very obscure language, made extensive use of parallelism, and employed classical allusions to excess.¹¹ Like most of his contemporaries, Xu dismissed *The Perfume Satchel* as too philosophical, a desiccated discussion of the Classics among erudite scholars. Drama was a popular genre and had to use language that could be popularly understood. Thus, the terse language of the classics and reliance on allusion demanded cultivated listeners steeped in classical lore, and was not *authentic* to the nature of the form. Pieces like the *Perfume Satchel*, while learned and even quite popular among the elite for their advocacy of orthodox Confucian morality, were the works of pretentious erudites attempting to mask their lack of creative talent. In fact, so popular was the work of Shao Can and so often copied by others, that Xu Wei remarked: “As for the making of the poor imitations of *The Perfumed Satchel*, they diligently and avidly [pursue them], but there is not a line that does not come from a former [work], there is not a place where there is not a literary allusion, and they cannot recover even the smallest hair of the Song and Yuan drama.” 至於效顰香囊而作者，一味孜孜汲汲，無一句非前場語，無一處無故事，無復毛髮宋、元之舊。¹² The display of erudition disguised the dramatist’s lack of creative talent, and those that imitated these already mediocre plays were even further removed from fulfilling any of the requirements for a good piece of dramatic literature. Most damning of all, they lacked *bense*.

At the other end of the spectrum, Xu placed the already canonical work of southern drama, *The Lute*. This play was instrumental in formulating the principles underlying the function of drama as a moral paradigm designed to influence social popular customs. It established that a good play should expound moral teachings, and “move” the audience. Xu, following Gao, established that the ultimate aim of a play was to stir the audience: “Drama-songs at root are supposed to move the heart, and only when they can be understood by slaves,

¹¹ Xu Wei, *Nanci xulu*, p.243.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 242-43. That which was not genuine Xu called ‘likeness’ or imitation (*Xiangse* 相色). In his preface to the *Western Wing*, Xu wrote: The Matters of this world have natural color (*bense*) and they have a likeness color (*xiangse*). *Bense* is what in common language is called the main body, *xiangse* is the substitute body.” Xu explains that what he calls the ‘substitute body’ is the equivalent of “the maid servant taking on the appearance of a lady,” referring to imitations. He further states that in the work under analysis, he likes *bense* and despises *xiangse*. Xu Wei, Preface to *Xixiang ji* 西廂記, in *Zhongguo gudian xiqu xupa huibian* 中國古典戲曲序跋彙編 [*A Compilation of Prefaces and Postscripts in Classical Chinese Drama*], Cai Yi 蔡毅 ed., (Shandong: Jilu shushe, 1989), vol.1. pp. 647-648.

children, women, and young girls do they find their proper form.”¹³ 夫曲本取於感發人心，歌者使奴、童、婦、女皆喻，乃為得體。The means to carry out this task was through language: if the language was unintelligible, theater could not perform its highest function. As an example of this language, Xu presented the *Eighteen Replies* (*shiba da*) in scene thirty of the *Lute*, where in a dialog full of popular expressions on the duty of a wife, Mistress Niu, the daughter of the dotting prime minister, rebukes her father for not allowing her to travel to her husband’s village to fulfill her wifely obligations to her parents-in-law. Of these exchanges, Xu gushes: “every line is everyday common language turned into song, like touching iron and turning it into gold.” 句句是常言俗語，扭作曲子，點鐵成金。¹⁴ In other words, it was not just the choice of words, but the meaning language generated that was also *bense*. In sum, a song that was *bense* possessed just the right measure of artifice, close enough to colloquial language so as to be understood without effort. Neither vulgar (*su* 俗) nor base (*lou* 陋), the quasi-vernacular language of effective drama must convey its subject-matter in a way that is accessible yet learned, stripped of allusion and excessive erudition, and poetic enough to move the heart.¹⁵

Music

When Xu Wei wrote his essay in defense of southern drama, although over two and a half centuries had elapsed since southern “drama” was first recorded, the lack of musical norms and tonal rules remained an obstacle to the acceptance of the genre as a legitimate literati pursuit. Zhu Yuming (1460-1527) noted with irritation that the music of southern drama had become so popular that its singing style and musical norms had “already lost all tonal norms or musical modes.” 蓋已略無音律腔調。¹⁶ Exactly what norms Zhu refers to we do not know, but for Xu, the opposite was true. Xu claimed the what made southern music compelling was precisely its lack of modal norms: “[...It was] made up of small songs from the villages; it did not make use of modes and had almost no regular pattern (*jiezou*). The [songs] were merely gathered from what the peasants remaining in the fields or the girls in the market could sing offhand, that is all.”

¹³ Gao Ming, *Pipa ji*, pp. 1-5.

¹⁴ Xu Wei, *Nanci xulu*, p.243.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.243.

¹⁶ Zhu Yunming 祝允明 (1460-1526), “*Gequ*” 歌曲 [“Songs”] in *Wei Tan* 猥談 [*Trivial Deliberations*] in *Guang baichuan xuehai*, compiled by Feng Kebin (*Jinshi*, 1622) and completed ca.1642 (repr. Taipei: Xinxin shuju, 1970), pp. 1353-54.

[...則又] 即村坊小曲而為之，本無宮調，亦罕節奏，徒取其畸農、市女順口可歌而已。¹⁷

Establishing the origins of southern drama in popular song allowed Xu to legitimize this new tradition within the parameters of traditional Chinese poetic song-lore (like, for example, the canonical *Book of Songs*) as its generating source, and at the same time underlined its genuine and uncorrupted nature.

Xu repeatedly criticized the various attempts by the music academy to force a modal structure onto southern dramatic music in an attempt to show that this was not “of its nature” or authentic: “I do not know who conceived the nine modes. I expect it must have been someone from the Music Bureau at the beginning of this dynasty; they are most nonsensical and ridiculous.” 今南九宮不知出於何人，意亦國初教坊人所為，最為無稽可笑。¹⁸ But just as in the concept of *bense* dramatic perfection lay not in a *raw* natural form, but in a “poetic” balance between the vulgar and the overly elaborate, in prosody and music, Xu also sought a balance. To avoid the charge of vulgarity, Xu required that the music of theater possess some modal organization, and underlined that southern music had a “kind or harmony,” but this was not the same fitting it into modes. A mode is a musical term that indicates the pitch on which a basic scale is constructed. Modes were considered important in determining the emotional context of a piece of music, and may originally have been instrumental for musicians in clarifying pitch (in wind and string instruments) and perhaps also for singers.¹⁹ But by Xu’s time, modes had lost their musical function and become a category for tune titles, the matrixes of these tunes and possibly the moods. This meant that part of the charm of southern music was in its freedom of musical organization and by extension, its potential for innovation.

Xu’s position on musical norms can perhaps be better illustrated through two anecdotes. In his *Record on Southern Drama*, Xu describes how Gao Ming, author of the *Lute*, retired to a tower for three years where he devoted his time to measuring the rhythm of his songs by tapping the beat with his foot until he made a “hole on the wooden board where his foot beat the rhythm.” 其足按拍處，板皆為穿。²⁰ The sole purpose of this possibly spurious anecdote was to highlight Gao’s musical knowledge and the rhythm inherent in southern song-drama. In a later anecdote,

¹⁷ Xu Wei, *Nanci xulu*, p.240.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.240.

¹⁹ Rulan Chao Pian, *Song Dynasty Musical Sources and Their Interpretation*, (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2003), pp. 43-50; Yang Yingliu 楊蔭瀏, *Zhongguo gudai yinyue shigao* 中國古代音樂史稿 [A History of Chinese Classical Music](Taipei: Dahong, 1997), section 3 p. 117 &ff.

²⁰ Xu Wei, *Nanci xulu*, p. 239.

Xu described a scene where the first Ming emperor, Hongwu (1328-1398), after seeing for the first time a performance of the *Lute*, compared it to the classics and praised its singularity: “Gao Ming’s *Lute* is like the most exquisite delicacies from the mountains or the sea, that the noble and rich households cannot do without.” 高明《琵琶記》，如山珍、海錯，貴賓家不可無。²¹ However, the emperor, apparently not favoring the sound of southern music, ordered the Music Bureau to set it to strings.²² Anyone reading this anecdote at the time would have immediately noticed the exceptional request of the emperor to set southern music to strings, and some must have lamented the emperor’s ignorance. Shen Defu (1578-1642), a contemporary of Xu Wei, disapproved of this practice as it showed the lack of concern for the authentic nature of the form, a practice he likened to ‘putting a straw rain cape over a brocade gown.’ 錦襖上著蓑衣。²³

That the Ming emperor was incapable of appreciating the music without setting it to strings is best understood as a form of indirect criticism, not just of the emperor’s lack of understanding of musical propriety but also of the stubborn preference of the elite for northern music. Xu himself was not entirely against the practice of adding strings to southern drama, but why he should accept these modifications should be seen in the light of his search for a balance between the authentic nature of southern music and his own refined aesthetic experience.

Xu Wei’s praise of the music after its adaptation to strings reflects the same search for balance he employs when using the term *bense* with regard to the linguistic register of plays. While adaptations to strings were appropriate reforms, the idea of fitting southern tunes to the prosodic strictures of “modes” was a step too far, risking the loss of the natural quality that made southern theater compelling.²⁴

Ethnicity

One final aim in Xu Wei’s defense of southern drama was musical but phrased in ethnic terms. Xu positioned southern drama as the true inheritor of the ancient Han dynasty (202 bC-

²¹ Ibid., p.240.

²² Ibid., p. 240. For the significance of this anecdote in the Chinese dramatic canon formation see Sieber’s article in this volume.

²³ Some scholars argue that the practice marked the beginning of the “northification” of southern music. An emphasis on the tonal composition of words as well as the use of strings in marking the rhythm, are two aspects of this phenomena. Once the music of *Kun* song-drama was established, it became the predominant musical style of southern drama.

²⁴ Yu Weimin 俞為民, *Nanxi tonglun* 南戲通論, (Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 2008), pp. 102 and 254.

220 ad) Chinese tradition and observed that the cultured elite had a particular attachment to northern literary forms that diluted a vibrant Chinese tradition. He complained that since the Tang dynasty (618-907), the imperial foreign music office had enjoyed a higher prestige, making use of music manuals from the northwestern, foreign kingdom of Kucha rather than more traditional music and exclaimed: “Today’s northern song-drama still ranks higher than southern music.” 今日北曲，宜其高於南曲。²⁵ Xu attributed this enduring fashion for northern music to the ignorance of fools intent on indulging the pleasures of the political and intellectual elite’s preference for northern culture. While Xu did praise the writing of Yuan dynasty (1269 – 1368) authors and conceded that northern music was superior in terms of modal organization, he concluded that contemporary northern music was essentially the remnant “barbarian” war sounds of the invading Liao (907-1125) and Jin (1115-1234) dynasties which had been adapted by northerners after the music of the Song-lyric (*ci*) could no longer be played.²⁶ Southern music, on the other hand, had a traceable *Chinese* lineage, which made it free from these foreign cultural influences: “How can one sincerely say that northern songs are the legacy of the famous Tang and Song poets? They merely stem from the border regions and are forgeries of the descendants of the Yi people.” 北曲豈誠唐宋名家之遺？不過出於邊鄙裔夷之偽造耳。²⁷ Instead, Xu attempted to establish a genealogical claim to the earlier Tang dynasty *ci* song-lyrics and ethnic Han literary and musical models.²⁸ Not only had the earlier northern tradition been corrupted by the Liao and Jin invaders, but they had also transformed the language, evidence of which was the loss of the so called entering tone (*rushen* 入聲) in northern dialects.²⁹ On the other hand, as an indication of the Southeast’s greater cultural proximity to Tang models, southern dialects had kept the entering tone. This dichotomy between north and south is still expressed in the concluding paragraph to Xu’s essay where he describes the emotional reaction of listening to northern and southern music:

²⁵ Xu Wei, *Nanci xulu*, p. 241.

²⁶ Aoki Masaru 青木正兒, *Nan Bei xiqu yuanliu kao* 南北戲曲源流考 [A Study on the Origin and Development of Northern and Southern Drama] (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1965), p. 36.

²⁷ Xu Wei, *Nanci xulu*, p. 241. While Wang Guowei noted that the entry of central Asian music during the Sui and Tang dynasties produced a revolution in Chinese music, there is no evidence that this was the case during the Liao, Jin and Yuan dynasties. On the contrary, it seems that they follow Song dynasty music conventions. In Aoki Masaru, *Nanbei xiqu yuanliu kao*, p. 36.

²⁸ Xu Wei, *Nanci xulu*, p.241.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.243.

Listening to northern tunes makes one feel imposing and powerful and causes one's hair to quiver. It's enough to build one's determination to proceed with courage. Truly, "barbarians" excelled at rousing anger. The expression: "Its sounds are pressing and inhibited in order to manifest their resentment" exemplifies this. Southern tunes are slow paced and leisurely, flowing and meandering, elating people who thoughtlessly abandon their composure. Truly, this is the gentle charm of the South. It is exemplified by the phrase "The sounds of the fallen state induce thoughts of sorrow." 聽北曲使人神氣鷹揚, 毛髮洒淅, 足以作人勇往之志, 信胡人之善於鼓怒也, 所謂「其聲噍殺以立怨」是已。南曲則紆徐綿眇, 流麗婉轉, 使人飄飄然喪其所守而不自覺, 信南方的柔媚也, 所謂「亡國之音哀以思」是也³⁰

Xu's north-south comparison contrasts the fierce "barbarian" with the sorrowful sounds of a fallen decadent south and condemns both the brutality of northern culture as well as an excessive self-indulgence of the southern one. Music was one cultural manifestation of the socio-political world, and Xu Wei used it beyond its immediate expression of emotion as a means to legitimate a dramatic genre and define regional (Han) identity. As a reflection of historical fact, it can be read as a metaphorical condemnation of the moral and political degradation of society, which resulted in the intrusion of northern "artificial" musical forms into Chinese culture. Xu Wei's sixteenth-century defense of the pedigree of a southern theater that he believed originated in the twelfth century was shaped by his sense of identity with the south. But regardless of the accuracy of his specific claims, the themes that dominate this essay reflect concerns that run throughout the history of Chinese theater: regional identity, ethnicity, and its relation to music and language. The search for the origins of southern theater was in the final analysis in service to these concerns.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, for the sixteenth-century champion of *bense*, Xu Wei, there was a discrepancy between text and performance. In order to establish drama as a reputable genre of literati endeavor, he was limited by the conventionally accepted cultural domains of poetry and

³⁰ Ibid., p. 245.

music. Thus, while trying to institute the literary value of drama, he was forced to focus on the language of the text, and this language had to *reflect* the oral requirements of the stage. But whether these requirements underscored the practice of theater or simply referred to the language on the page, we cannot know. The final aim of establishing *bense* as a critical standard, however, went beyond the demands of drama whether creative, receptive or critical; it was a means of establishing a value for a neglected but burgeoning genre in order to position it in the larger framework of Chinese literary history. In a similar manner, Xu insisted on the unstructured nature of southern drama, singling out for praise what many aficionados had identified as flaws. Whether this musical freedom was ultimately desirable was questioned even by Xu, but it was certainly proof of the genesis of the form and of its authenticity.

By 1616, a little over two decades after Xu's death, the terms of the debate that were to establish southern drama as a legitimate vehicle of elite expression were firmly in place. Theater was evaluated not just for what it was, but for what it had been, as critics speculated on the origins of southern theater. But when they did, Xu Wei and other critics brought to the table their own agendas: their defense of regional identity through references to a nobler, earlier pedigree, the claim that at its origins southern theater was unaffected and natural and, related to these two previous issues, attention to aspects of theater they valued most, music and language. Only later did scholars emphasize narrative, comedy and dialog. But that is another story.