

# THE SEDUCTION OF AUTHENTICITY: “THE STORY OF YINGYING”

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## *Abstract*

This paper explores the notion of authenticity and its implications in the Tang classical tale “The Story of Yingying” from the perspective of literati discourse formation. By constructing a problematic “authentic” romance and its public, the story succeeds in turning romance into a “reality.” Signifying the symbolic entry of romance into the domestic space, the story reveals sophisticated strategies for adapting, validating, and expanding the Tang literati discourse on romance.

“The Story of Yingying” (*Yingying zhuan* 鶯鶯傳), written during or after the Zhenyuan 貞元 period (785-804), tells of a young scholar named Zhang 張生 who meets the lovely Cui Yingying 崔鶯鶯, a maiden from a good family, when he finds himself in a position to protect her family from marauding soldiers. At first, Yingying resists Zhang’s advances, but then she voluntarily offers herself to him. Zhang then leaves her to go to the capital to sit for the examinations. He receives a moving letter from her in which she passionately declares her love. Zhang shows the letter to his friends, and then decides to end the relationship. Both Zhang and Yingying end up marrying other people. Zhang tries to meet with her again, but she refuses to see him. Zhang’s friends, along with the renowned poets of the time, express their great appreciation of the story and write poems about it. In the end, the consensus is that Zhang should be praised for having avoided being drawn into a relationship with such a passionate woman as Yingying.

The “Story of Yingying” became extremely popular and had lasting

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\* I wish to thank Dr. Robert E. Hegel, Dr. Beata Grant, and Dr. Letty Chen, whose comments, suggestions, and questions have helped me refine my arguments. I am also grateful for Dr. Glen Dudbridge’s constructive comments on the earlier draft of this article.

impact on later Chinese literature.<sup>1</sup> Its authorship has traditionally been attributed to the poet Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779-831; style name Weizhi 微之), who appears in the story as a close friend of Zhang. As early as the Song dynasty, Wang Zhi 王銍 (fl. 1130-43; style name Xingzhi 性之) made the case that the story was based on Yuan Zhen's own youthful affair with his cousin, a conclusion that most subsequent readers have been happy to accept.<sup>2</sup>

"The Story of Yingying" has posed great challenges for readers as a result of its gaps and inconsistencies. Interpretive difficulties stem from contradictions on the level of internal characters and that of the narrator and/or author. For example, Yingying writes an encouraging poem in response to Zhang's poems of seduction, but when Zhang climbs the wall to see her, he receives a severe scolding and is sent away. A few nights later, however, Yingying herself goes to Zhang and willingly spends the night with him. Why does Yingying act so inconsistently? Later in the story, when Zhang explains that the reason he abandoned Yingying was that she is too beautiful, his audience sighs deeply but without disagreeing. Nevertheless, Zhang apparently failed to convince all of the readers outside the story, many of whom could not help but speculate on Zhang's *real* motivation for abandoning Yingying.<sup>3</sup> Why is Zhang's explanation unsatisfying? Furthermore, although Zhang abandons Yingying, we are told that most of his contemporaries praise him. The first-person narrator states directly that he tells this story to his friends "so that they might avoid doing such a thing, or if they did, that they might not be led astray by it" (*fu shi zhi zhe bu wei, wei zhi zhe bu huo* 夫使知者不爲，爲之者不惑; 168).<sup>4</sup> If the narrator's reservations are tru-

<sup>1</sup> Alternative titles for the story include *Chuanqi* 傳奇 and *Huizhenji* 會真記. For a detailed discussion of the tale's textual history, see Li Jianguo 李劍國, *Tang Wudai zhiguai chuanqi xu lu* 唐五代志怪傳奇敘錄 (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 1993), 310-14. Up to the 1970s, the story had more than seventy adaptations extant in the form of drama or narrative. For a chronological outline of these adaptations, refer to Lorraine Dong, "The Creation and Life of Cui Yingying" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1978), 1-20.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Zhao Lingzhi 趙令時 (1061-1134; style name Delin 德麟), "Bian chuanqi Yingying shi" 辨傳奇鶯鶯事, in *Houqing lu* 侯鯖錄, Zhibuzuzhai congshu ed., 5.1a-7a.

<sup>3</sup> The most famous explanation of Zhang's real motivation may be Chen Yinke's argument that Yingying is a low-class girl, or even a courtesan, and thus Zhang (Yuan Zhen) chooses a more advantageous marriage. Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 (1892-1978), "Du Yingying zhuan" 讀鶯鶯傳, in *Chen Yinke xiansheng lunwen ji* 陳寅恪先生論文集 (下) (Taipei: Sanranxing chubanshe, 1974), 527-36.

<sup>4</sup> In this paper, the numbers in parentheses are the page numbers of "The Story of Yingying," in Wang Pijiang 汪辟疆 (1897-1966), ed., *Tangren xiaoshuo* 唐人小說 (Hong

ly moralistic, it is odd that in the story Yingying is described neither as a victim, nor as a negative exemplar of womanhood. Thus, despite the narrator's stated intent, the story seems to avoid simplified binary moral contrasts such as good versus bad. What is the significance of such moral ambiguities? The fact that we raise these questions at all stems, as Pauline Yu points out, from "our impulses to read a story like Yingying's as in some way mimetic of human behavior and/or as a document of Chinese culture."<sup>5</sup>

The tremendous influence of Wang Zhi's autobiographical reading of "The Story of Yingying" on modern scholars further testifies to the story's convincing effect of authenticity. Wang's conviction that Yuan is the disguised Zhang indicates that he tries to locate the origin of this "real" affair outside the text. The modern Chinese scholar Chen Yinke, who contends that the contemporary social milieu was one that would have endorsed or at least tolerated Yuan/Zhang's abandonment of Yingying, exemplifies an interpretive approach that resorts to the historical Yuan Zhen to explain the textual discrepancies.<sup>6</sup> Although Uchiyama Chinari 内山知也 does not agree that the story is Yuan's autobiography, his conclusion that it is a moral fable that Yuan wrote for other examinees shows his acceptance of Wang's assumption of the story's authorship.<sup>7</sup> And even James R. Hightower's effort to separate the fictional Zhang from the historical Yuan leads him back to postulate Yuan as the author.<sup>8</sup> Stephen Owen keeps the issue of authorship open, but concedes that the theory "is not unpersuasive."<sup>9</sup> The popularity of Wang's hypothesis among critics suggests an absence of critical attention to the intriguing question of how the story as a constructed narrative produces such a compelling effect of authenticity.

This paper aims to examine the story's effect of authenticity and its

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Kong: *Zhonghua shuju*, 1985), 162-68. I use James R. Hightower's translation with modifications. James R. Hightower, "Yuan Chen and 'The Story of Ying-ying,'" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 33 (1973): 90-123.

<sup>5</sup> Pauline Yu, "The Story of Yingying," in Pauline Yu, Peter Bol, Stephen Owen, and Willard Peterson, eds., *Ways with Words: Writing about Reading Texts from Early China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 182-85, 184.

<sup>6</sup> Chen Yinke, "Du Yingying zhuan," 527-36.

<sup>7</sup> Uchiyama Chinari, "Ōō den no kōzō to shudai ni tsuite" 鶯鶯傳の構造と主題について, *Nihon Chūgoku gakkaihō* 日本中國學會報 42 (1990): 156-68.

<sup>8</sup> James R. Hightower, "Yuan Chen and 'The Story of Ying-ying,'" 123.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Owen, "Conflicting Interpretations," in *The End of the Chinese 'Middle Ages': Essays in Mid-Tang Literary Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 149-73, 172.

implications from the perspective of discourse making. Thus, whether or not Yuan was really Zhang becomes less relevant than what intricate textual strategies the author of the story, be it Yuan or someone else, utilizes to produce the verisimilitude of reality. Inspired by Michel Foucault's concept of "discursive formation," I see "The Story of Yingying" as an integral component in the development of literati discourse on romance in Tang tales.<sup>10</sup> In my opinion, the emergence of sophisticated love stories in the Tang (618-907), traditionally considered to be representative of *chuanqi* 傳奇 (tales of the marvelous), reflects a new trend in the formation of the trope of romance in Chinese literature.<sup>11</sup> If the

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<sup>10</sup> Foucault argues that a "discursive formation will be individualized if one can define the system of formation of the different strategies that are deployed in it; in other words, if one can show how they all derive (in spite of their sometimes extreme diversity, and in spite of their dispersion in time) from the same set of relations." Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 68. In my study of Tang tales, this notion has inspired me to investigate the inherent connections among the seemingly random stories and their relationship to the contemporary literati community. I use "discourse formation" to capture the dynamics in the emergence of a new form of literati writing later characterized as *chuanqi* 傳奇 and its distinct textual strategies in expanding and transforming such existing literary tropes as romance. By unraveling the formation of literati discourses in Tang tales, I wish to shed new light on the development of *chuanqi* and its cultural significance. My use of "romance" was influenced by Owen's concept of the "culture of romance." Stephen Owen, "Romance," in *The End of the Chinese 'Middle Ages,'* 130-48. In my paper, "romance" refers to the romantic relationship of the protagonists when I discuss the story; it refers to the literary trope on love developed in literati writings when I address the issue of discourse formation.

<sup>11</sup> *Chuanqi* as a generic term can be traced to Hu Yinglin 胡應麟 (1551-1602). Laura Hua Wu, "From *Xiaoshuo* to Fiction: Hu Yinglin's Genre Study of *Xiaoshuo*." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 55.2 (1995): 339-71. Lu Xun 魯迅 used *chuanqi* to refer to the sophisticated Tang short stories that represent an important stage in the evolution of Chinese fiction. Lu Xun, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilue* 中國小說史略 (1930; reprint, Hong Kong: Jindai, 1964), Chs. 8-10. As a result of the disputes that the term raises as to what tales should be included, many scholars prefer *Tangdai xiaoshuo* 唐代小說 (Tang fiction) as a more encompassing category, while *chuanqi* often continues to serve as a minor grouping under it. For example, Cheng Yizhong 程毅中, *Tangdai xiaoshuo shihua* 唐代小說史話 (Beijing: Wenhua yishu, 1990), 16-19. Rania Huntington embraces the fluidity of the term's periphery; she argues that *zhiguai* 志怪 (records of the strange) and *chuanqi* are "useful as opposite ends of a spectrum." Rania Huntington, *Alien Kind: Foxes and Late Imperial Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 17-18. Since the tales I choose to study, including "Yingying zhuan," "Li Wa zhuan," and "Huo Xiaoyu zhuan," are regarded as exemplars of *chuanqi* tales in the critical tradition and because my interest lies in examining the phenomenal emergence of these tales that later became classics of Chinese literature, I adopt the term *chuanqi* as a critical category to refer to this new trend of writing, emphasizing the generic ambiguity of these tales in relation to existing forms of writing and their interconnections in the formation of literati discourses.

poetic tradition on love had up until then focused on articulating romantic sentiments, *chuanqi* tales during this period explored romance as a realistic possibility in the lives of men of letters. Nonetheless, the sexual freedom that romance requires of its heroes and heroines puts it in direct conflict with prevailing standards of social propriety. Romantic *chuanqi* tales seek to resolve this tension with different strategies: “Li Wa zhuan” 李娃傳 (The story of Li Wa) constructs a virtuous courtesan to enact a moral comedy that allows the couple to be integrated into the patriarchal family; “Huo Xiaoyu zhuan” 霍小玉傳 (The story of Huo Xiaoyu) sets up an idealized romantic space in the pleasure quarters to shield the couple temporarily from social pressures.<sup>12</sup> Featuring a girl from a respectable family rather than from a courtesan background, “The Story of Yingying” represents a bold literary move as romantic discourse moves in to claim a place in the domestic sphere.

In this respect, the textual complexities of “The Story of Yingying” reveal both the problematics of an “authentic” romance caught in conflict with social propriety and the author’s self-conscious containment of its disruptiveness. On the one hand, the author’s strategies of authentication confirm the overwhelming tendency of *chuanqi* writers to use “authenticity” to achieve their stories’ desired effects and to establish their own narrative authority. On the other hand, “authenticity” is the primary means by which the author is able to address the fundamental tension between romance and propriety: the “authentic” love affair between Yingying and Zhang enables him to shift the moral responsibility for romantic desire to his characters; the poetic affirmation of romance by the “real” internal audience allows him to maintain his own moralistic posturing. Ultimately, the effect of authenticity that the author painstakingly attempts to create reveals his strong efforts to present romance as a “reality,” an unsettling yet indisputable “presence” in the domestic space.

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<sup>12</sup> “Li Wa zhuan” tells of a young examinee named Zheng 鄭 who falls in love with Li Wa, a beautiful courtesan. The couple enjoy their happy life until he runs out of money. Li Wa and her mother abandon him; he who then sinks to the lowest stratum of society and is even disavowed by his father. Upon their second encounter, Li Wa restores his status. His father recognizes him and has him marry Li Wa. Bai Xingjian 白行簡 (776?-826), “Li Wa zhuan,” in *Tangren xiaoshuo*, 119-26. “Huo Xiaoyu zhuan” is about the love affair between a talented poet named Li Yi 李益 and a courtesan called Xiaoyu. Their happy union lasts until Li Yi leaves her to take an official post. He then marries another woman, as arranged by his mother. Waiting alone for him, Xiaoyu pines to death and becomes a vengeful ghost who makes his family life miserable. Jiang Fang 蔣防 (fl. 820-24), “Huo Xiaoyu zhuan,” in *Tangren xiaoshuo*, 92-98.

In the following pages, I will first discuss the author’s tactics for creating the effect of authenticity and how this authenticity becomes seductive as a result of his inclusion of gaps and contradictions, especially the contending stories within the story, those of Zhang and Yingying. I will then look into how the author manipulates the conflict between romance and propriety to validate his romantic discourse and the difficulties and implications of such a maneuver.

### *The Effect of Authenticity*

“The Story of Yingying” appears to be “real” because the author deploys systematic tactics of authentication on various layers of the story, including the narrator, the internal audience, and the protagonists, to create its captivating effects of authenticity.

“The Story of Yingying” consists of two levels of narration, the core story and the frame, the latter marked by the appearance of the “I” narrator to explain his motivation to tell and record this love story: “I have often mentioned it among friends so that...” (*yu chang yu peng-hui zhi zhong, wangwang ji ci yi zhe* 予嘗於朋會之中，往往及此意者; 168). The existence of such a narrative frame may be easy to miss because there is no clear indication of time nor any identification of the story’s source that signals the transition from the core story to the frame and distinguishes between the two.<sup>13</sup> The only time reference in the frame appears later on in the story and is rather ambiguous: the narrator specifies that he tells Li Gongchui 李公垂 the story in “the ninth month of a year in the Zhenyuan period (785-804)” (*Zhenyuan sui jiu yue* 貞元歲九月; 168). This, to a certain degree, explains readers’ tendency to ignore the existence of the frame. The love story of Zhang and Yingying is also set during the Zhenyuan reign period; thus this “I” narrator, presumably the self-identifying author who does not provide his own name and identity and who—according to his own account—wants to tell the story, should be a contemporary of the protagonists in

<sup>13</sup> A typical example would be the time shift in Chen Hong’s “An Account of ‘The Song of Eternal Sorrow’.” The story opens with “During the Kai-yuan reign” and when it moves to the section explaining the writing circumstances, it begins with “In winter of the first year of the Yuan-he reign.” Chen Hong 陳鴻 (fl. 785-830), “Chang hen ge zhuan” 長恨歌傳 (An Account of the ‘Song of Eternal Sorrow’), in *Tanren xiaoshuo*, 139-42.

his narrative.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the narrator never identifies his source of information. This may point to the wide circulation of the love story among the contemporary men of letters, as it is mentioned in the story that “many contemporaries heard about it” (*shiren duo wen zhi* 時人多聞之; 166). But it also suggests the firsthandness of the narrator’s telling. Thus the authenticity of the romance is already created in the narrator’s authoritative narrative stance. The lack of temporal distance and the anonymous narrator’s own narrative confidence contribute to readers’ impression of an intimate relationship between this “I” narrator and the love story he tells. This may explain most scholars’ belief that the narrator of this story is none other than Yuan Zhen and that it is an autobiographical account.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, the existence of the frame story, though perhaps not obvious enough, problematizes the simple identification of the “I” narrator with Yuan Zhen, which ignores the fact that they operate on different story levels. Yuan appears on the same level as the protagonist Zhang rather than that of the first-person narrator. This conflation also reveals two other levels of confusion by equating Yuan Zhen with the romantic hero Zhang, and Yuan Zhen as a character in the story with Yuan Zhen as a real historical person. Without convincing evidence justifying the blurring of these various levels, it is helpful to keep these distinctions in mind.

The sense of authenticity is not only conveyed by the narrator’s implied authoritative knowledge of the romance, but also strengthened by the narrator’s effort to maintain an objective narrative stance. Intriguingly, the “I” narrator does not adopt an omnipresent perspective when telling the story, which can be seen clearly from his refusal to fill in the gaps of Yingying’s inconsistent behavior as we have noted above. This indicates that the narrator positions himself as a reporter of a love story that becomes known to the public, for which Zhang is apparently the

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<sup>14</sup> I see the “I” narrator as the self-identified author and will delve into their subtle relations later. Throughout my analysis, I refer to “the narrator” when analyzing his relations to other characters in the story, but use “the author” when I talk about the overall construction of the story.

<sup>15</sup> Owen’s translation of the story is apparently influenced by such a conviction; he inserts “I” in front of “Yuan Zhen” and later replaces “Zhen” with “I.” “河南元稹亦續生會真詩三十韻” is rendered “I, Yuan Zhen of He-nan, completed Zhang’s “Meeting the Holy One” in sixty lines”; “稹特與張厚，因徵其詞” becomes “I was on particularly good terms with Zhang and asked him to explain.” Stephen Owen, trans., ed., *An Anthology of Chinese Literature* (New York: Norton, 1996), 547-48.

only source. The narrator's limited knowledge is meant to be realistic: Zhang may not have access to Yingying's inner thoughts if Yingying does not reveal them, and the narrator has no chance to verify details with Yingying herself. Thus the narrator does not appear to know more than Zhang; he records both the love affair recounted by Zhang and the reactions of the public to it with a matter-of-fact tone.

The author's "objective" narrative stance is confirmed by his inclusion of multiple perspectives on the romance in addition to his own: Zhang summarizes his affair with Yingying as an instance of dangerous encounters with *yowwu* 尤物 (creatures of extreme beauty); Zhang's friends are inspired to elaborate on the romantic and erotic aspects of the love affair; and the general public regards the affair from a moralistic point of view. This creates the "reality" of social milieu and greatly contributes to the sense of authenticity, strengthened by the fact that Zhang's friends, Yang Juyuan 楊巨源 (775-?) and Yuan Zhen, and the narrator's friend Li Gongchui are real historical people.<sup>16</sup>

On the level of the story line, the romance appears realistic because the romantic protagonists' behavior makes it seem like a real-life love affair. The most significant example is the love story's anticlimactic and realistic ending, which is replaced in many of the later rewritings with a grand happy ending. The two lovers break up and then marry other people. Yingying does not pine to death for love like Huo Xiaoyu does in "The Story of Huo Xiaoyu." Life moves on despite its pitfalls. And this ending also reflects the author's effort to tell an authentic story. The love story could have ended with Zhang's decision to abandon Yingying. The addition of this ending shows that the author felt obliged to tell readers the whereabouts of the couple after the end of their romance. Real people do not disappear into the air after the major events in their lives; they have to end up somewhere beyond the story.

In this, too, the story reveals its internal concern for authenticity. When Zhang reveals his love affair to his friends, he shows them Yingying's letter. Zhang proves to be worried about the authenticity of his narration by using Yingying's letter as the physical evidence; he manages to show that he is not just making up a fascinating story for his friends. With its feminine voice and probably its feminine handwriting as well, the letter demonstrates the authenticity of Yingying and of Zhang's adventure in love. The narrator appears to share the same

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<sup>16</sup> Li Shen 李紳 (772-846), style name Gongchui 公垂, a famous writer and official. Yang Juyuan, style name Jingshan 景山, was a lesser-known poet.



concern as Zhang by roughly reproducing Yingying's letter for readers since he apparently is not among those who are lucky enough to have their hands on the original. As he tells us that "Cui's reply read roughly as follows" (*Cuishijian bao zhi ci, cu zai yu ci* 崔氏緘報之詞，粗載於此; 165), the narrator is not bothered at all that a reproduction is not the same as the original. On the contrary, authenticity is not hurt but guaranteed by the rough rendition of the acclaimed authentic original. This also explains why the love story is clearly presented as the narrator's reformulation of Zhang's account, but it is not supposed to be treated as the narrator's creation but as a real story. By the same token, the narrator's inclusion of Yingying's poems also functions to prove that Yingying is not a fabricated character.

By including Yingying's letter and poems as the proof of her existence, the narrator/author in fact conflates her body, her subjectivity, and her text. Yingying's works successfully convey the rich inner feelings of a woman in the different stages of a love affair. With the pleasant images of the moon, the breeze, and the gently moving flowers, the first poem in response to Zhang's seduction vividly conveys the state of mind of an innocent girl who has not yet experienced love and is full of positive expectations for this first rendezvous. With its strong emotional impact on readers of a moving appeal from the position of weakness, Yingying's letter shows her understanding of Zhang's choice of giving her up for a more proper woman, but still earnestly hopes Zhang will change his mind and marry her. In a pitiful and tender voice, the second poem depicts an abandoned woman suffering for love and yet too traumatized to meet her beloved again. Contrasting the past to the present, the last poem conveys her resentment, her blessing, and her resolution to put her romantic escapade behind her and move on. Yingying's writings thus provide a fairly complete picture of a woman going through the tragic demise of a romantic relationship. With the coherent female subjectivity in Yingying's texts, the narrator/author authenticates not only her physicality, but also the love affair and even the whole story, indicating that authenticity is not just a central concern of the story, but also its intended effect.

The overlapping interest of Zhang and the narrator in the authenticity of Yingying may be another reason for readers' tendency to confuse them. At the same time, the narrator's treatment of Yingying's letter helps us to understand better how the effect of objectivity can be achieved with his retelling of Zhang's account. As in his summary of Yingying's letter, the narrator's presumed objectivity is not realized

through his maintaining of a critical and ironic narrative distance from Zhang's story, but through his faithful rendition of Zhang's account. As a result, when the narration comes to the description of the couple's private sexual encounters, of which Zhang is the authentic and the only witness, the narrator's point of view yields to Zhang's. The narrator's "factual" tone becomes dubious because of such an easy merging of his voice with Zhang's. Thus although the narrator's effort at objectivity ironically lends itself to a blurring of Zhang, the narrator/author, and Yuan Zhen, the confusion does not necessarily weaken the effect of authenticity, but demonstrates its effectiveness.

Furthermore, the inclusion of an internal audience in the story serves to exemplify the ready reception of the authenticity of Yingying and the love story. Although it is not clear what exactly makes Zhang's friends marvel, we are told that Li Gongchui finds the love story "most extraordinary and composes a 'Song of Yingying' to commemorate it" (*zhuoran cheng yi, sui wei "Yingying ge" yi zhuan zhi* 卓然稱異，遂為鶯鶯歌以傳之; 168). The title of Li's song indicates that Yingying occupies the center of his attention; she in fact is the source of his amazement, undamaged by the inconsistency of her character. Thus in the light of Yingying's authenticity, her frequent change of mind can be seen as the indicator of how she as a real person is torn between her strong romantic passion and her equally compelling sense of moral righteousness. Yuan Zhen's poem already provides an exemplary reading of such a conflict: "His dalliance she rejects a bit at first, / But her yielding love already is disclosed" (*xi tiao chu wei ju, rou qing yi an tong* 戲調初微拒，柔情已暗通; 167). At the same time, Yingying's inconsistency shows her enigmatic personality, which adds to her attractiveness and uniqueness and stimulates male writers' poetic responses. Thus the internal audience's reactions show that the authenticity of Yingying is not incompatible with her enigmatic character.

Most importantly, by focusing on the authenticity of Yingying, the author successfully diverts our attention away from that of Zhang so that Zhang's existence can be taken for granted. Although the author has never given any verifiable personal information about Zhang, Zhang seems to be a self-evidently real person. This effect of Zhang's authenticity is achieved by the author's identifying Zhang as the authentic witness and authoritative narrator of the love affair, from whom he derives his own narrative authority, and inserting Zhang into a literati community comprised of real historical people whose existence is beyond doubt. It is also strengthened by the story's intensive attention to

the authenticity of Yingying. When we are encouraged to worry about whether Zhang tells us of a real love affair, we are induced to accept Zhang's existence. This may explain why the author carefully includes Yingying's works but omits Zhang's, although Zhang is said to have used his poems successfully in seducing Yingying. With the authenticity of Zhang taken for granted and that of Yingying proven, the author effectively establishes that of the whole story.

The effect of authenticity in "The Story of Yingying" points to the larger issue of the importance of authenticity in many Tang and earlier stories that are traditionally termed *chuanqi* or *zhiguai*. A story's unusualness can achieve its marvelous or strange effect precisely because it is also "real." If the story were assumed to be a fabrication, then its outlandishness would be unsurprising. Authenticity also naturalizes the narrator's authority. Because what he tells us is presented as "true," his narration is endowed with the authoritative power of knowledge and truth. Thus authenticity as a narrative device serves to enhance the story's effect and to justify the narration of the story; it often builds upon a certain "factuality," either in the form of a reliable or verifiable source of information, such as the narrator in "The Story of Li Wa," who claims his familial connection to and thus his privileged knowledge of the hero, or in the form of physical evidence, such as the ant holes that the protagonist of "Nanke taishou zhuan" 南柯太守傳 (Governor of the Southern Branch Commandery) revisits.<sup>17</sup> In "The Story of Yingying," authenticity is worked out in more complicated ways: a subtle combination of the heroine's writings, the hero's narration, "real" people's participation, and the narrator's "objective" tone.

Authenticity proves so central and successful in "The Story of Yingying" that it becomes seductive. The seduction does not just lie in readers' inclination to identify the characters as historical people, but, more importantly, in the interpretive indeterminacy created by the story's gaps and contradictions.

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<sup>17</sup> "Nanke taishou zhuan" is a story about a young man named Chunyu Fen 淳于棼, who has married a princess and enjoyed a successful life for more than twenty years, only to find out later that what he had is not only a dream, but a dream in an ant kingdom. Li Gongzuo 李公佐 (ca. 778-848), "Nanke taishou zhuan", in *Tangren xiaoshuo*, 101-8.

*The Seduction of Authenticity*

On the one hand, the author effectively creates the illusion of real life with his sophisticated strategies of authentication; on the other hand, his inclusion of gaps and contradictions destabilizes readers' coherent understanding of the story. As part of the effect of authenticity, readers are seduced into endless speculations on the motivations and motives of the protagonists, which further perpetuate the seduction of authenticity.

The interpretive labyrinth in the story results from the story's authentic appearance, its underlying inconsistencies, and the author's dissociation of himself from them. Since everything in the story is "true," he as a storyteller should not be held responsible for readers' perplexities. In other words, by trying to make his role in constructing the story invisible, he slyly excuses himself from resolving the gaps and contradictions and encourages readers to seek a coherent understanding of the story from his protagonists. And since these characters are supposedly "real" people, it is only one step further to try to match them with historical people to explain textual discrepancies.

The author's refusal to provide adequate information makes a coherent reading of the romance difficult. For instance, after they have married other people, Zhang pays Yingying a visit. Yingying refuses to see him in person but sends him two poems, expressing her lingering love and her resentment. Since Zhang has abandoned Yingying on the grounds of her potential evil influence as a *yowwu*,<sup>18</sup> why does he go back to see her? Does he do it out of love or out of guilt? Since Yingying decides not to see Zhang, why does she still send him poems? Which of her poems tells more truth about her inner feeling toward Zhang? Since Yingying never comes out to see him, we never know whether she is really as emaciated from pining for Zhang as she claims in her first poem. This could well be a rhetorical description, comforting Zhang with its message of her unchanged love and/or her blaming him for the damaging impact of his heartless abandonment. Interpretive indeterminacy arises because the "objective" narrator does not smooth out these gaps; readers are left wondering about numerous possible explanations.

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<sup>18</sup> Zhang's designation of Yingying as a *yowwu* echoes a famous statement in *Zuo zhuan* 左傳: "Extreme beauty entails extreme evil" (*Shen mei bi you shen e* 甚美必有甚惡). Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 ed., *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), Zhao 28.2.

Furthermore, the author's "faithful" enclosure of contradictory points of view, especially those of Zhang and Yingying, makes the "truth" of the romance even more elusive to readers. As we have noted above, the "authenticity" of Yingying's own words, her letter and poems, is crucial for the story's overall effect of authenticity. Representing her own voice, Yingying's writings, especially her letter, turn into a contending version that destabilizes Zhang's narrative. These two stories compete fiercely in their efforts to place responsibility for the affair on the other party.

Zhang's story tries to demonstrate his innocence throughout the affair. Zhang first of all presents himself as a passive reactor rather than an active initiator of their love affair. At the beginning of the story Zhang is reportedly famous for his self-restraint. But Yingying's beauty so infatuates him that he cannot even wait for an appropriate way of approaching her. On these grounds he declines Hongniang's 紅娘 suggestion that he seek Yingying's hand in marriage but manages to "seduce her," *luan zhi* 亂之, far more expeditiously. Moreover, Zhang emphasizes the fact that he gives up several times in his efforts to seduce Yingying but is pressed on by others. It is Hongniang's deliberately divulging Yingying's fatal weakness that motivates Zhang to compose two *chunci* 春詞 (spring verses) for Yingying. The apparently positive reply from Yingying leads him to climb over the wall into her chambers. Although she gives him a severe upbraiding there, a few nights later, she goes to his room voluntarily. In complete contrast to the previous Yingying "in formal dress, with a serious face" (*duan fu yan rong* 端服嚴容; 164), this time she "was shy and yielding, and appeared almost not to have the strength to move her limbs" (*jiao xiu rong ye, li bu neng yun zhi ti* 嬌羞融洽, 力不能運肢體; 164). Although the sudden change of Yingying's persona is perplexing, it is clear that Yingying takes the decisive step to deepen their relationship. If Zhang can be blamed for his initial effort to seduce Yingying, he certainly has no responsibility for her change of mind. It is Yingying herself who decides to transgress propriety, and thus she, rather than Zhang, should be held responsible for her own morally inappropriate actions.

In addition to demonstrating his own innocence, Zhang's story also manages to prove that Yingying manipulated him. According to Zhang, Yingying often, if not always, refuses to do what Zhang wishes her to do and thus dominates their relationship. Yingying's power results from her independence. She writes poetry and plays zither very well. Presumably, as an idealistic romance such as "The Story of

Huo Xiaoyu" would suggest, Yingying's beauty, poetry, and music all need an audience, ideally a talented male scholar. Her intrinsic need for such a young man would make her dependent upon him, and her status as mere object of male gaze would render her powerless. However, Yingying gains agency by withholding her beauty, poetry, and music as she wishes. Thus she is able to control male desire and turn it into the object of her own whim; she decides whether and when to sustain the male gaze or to deny it. The clichéd power relationship between the viewer and the viewed, the entertained and the entertainer, is thus reversed here to convey successfully the danger inherent in Yingying's manipulation.

In this light, Zhang's final decision to abandon Yingying is a logical, even necessary, development of his complaints about her. Zhang's rationale for his decision focuses on the bewitching beauty of Yingying as a *youwu*, who can bring destruction to men. By comparing her to the notorious historical femmes fatales such as Da Ji 妲己 and Bao Si 褒姒,<sup>19</sup> Zhang establishes himself as a potential victim. Moreover, Zhang's theory about *youwu* echoes the beginning of the story when he claims his special fondness for *youwu*. This makes a completed story of a young man's moral development, beginning with his overconfidence in dealing with *youwu* and ending with his final realization of the *youwu*'s dangers.<sup>20</sup> By presenting his abandonment of Yingying as an escape from her potentially vicious clutches, Zhang carefully colors his retreat from their love relationship with moral righteousness. Thus, Zhang's story not only proves his innocence as he falls from grace as a result of Yingying's seductive beauty, it also demonstrates his moral courage as he barely escapes from her evil influence.

Nonetheless, Zhang's story is made problematic by the presence of another contending voice in the story: Yingying's version of their love affair. As Owen rightly comments, "Yingying's letter is a beautiful example of Tang eloquence, in which feeling, rhetoric, and gracious deference are held in a delicate balance."<sup>21</sup> More importantly, it provides

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<sup>19</sup> Da Ji was the favorite consort of King Zhou 紂王 (ca. eleventh century BCE), the last king of the Shang dynasty. Bao Si was the favorite consort of King You of the Zhou dynasty 周幽王 (?-771 BCE). Both women allegedly caused the death of their kings and the fall of the kingdom.

<sup>20</sup> Owen, "Conflicting Interpretations," 151-52.

<sup>21</sup> Owen, "Conflicting Interpretations," 165.

a perspective on the love affair totally different from Zhang's version. Yingying reflects upon their relationship in her letter:

*Bi xi zhongbiao xiang yin, huo tong yan chu. Bipu jian you, sui zhi si cheng. Ermu zhi xin, bu neng zi gu. Junzi you yuan qin zhi tiao, biren wu tou suo zhi ju. Ji jian qinxi, yi sheng yi shen. Yulou zhi qing, yong wei zhong tuo. Qi qi ji jian junzi, er bu neng ding qing. Zhi you zi xian zhi xiu, bu fu ming shi junze. Mo shen yong hen, han tan he yan. Tang ren ren yong xin, fu sui you miao, sui si zhi ri, you sheng zhi nian. Ru huo dashi lue qing, she xiao cong da, yi xian pei wei chou xing, yi yao meng wei ke qi, ze dang gu hua xing xiao, dan cheng bu min, yin feng wei lu, you tuo qing chen. Cun mo zhi cheng, yan jin yu ci. Lin zhi wuye, qing bu neng shen.*

鄙昔中表相因，或同宴處。婢僕見誘，遂致私誠。兒女之心，不能自固。君子有援琴之挑，鄙人無投梭之拒。及薦寢席，義盛意深。愚陋之情，永謂終託。豈期既見君子，而不能定情。致有自獻之羞，不復明侍巾幘。沒身永恨，含嘆何言。倘仁人用心，俯遂幽眇，雖死之日，猶生之年。如或達士略情，捨小從大，以先配爲醜行，以要盟爲可欺，則當骨化形銷，丹誠不泯，因風委露，猶託清塵。存沒之誠，言盡於此。臨紙嗚咽，情不能申。

Our first meeting was at the banquet, as cousins. Then you persuaded my maid to inform me of your love, and I was unable to keep my childish heart firm. You made advances, like that other poet, Sima Xiangru; I failed to repulse them as the girl did who threw her shuttle. When I offered myself in your bed, you treated me with the greatest kindness, and I supposed, in my innocence, that I could always depend on you. How could I have foreseen that our encounter could not possibly lead to something definite, that having disgraced myself by coming to you, there was no further chance of serving you openly as wife? To the end of my days this will be a lasting regret—I must hide my sighs and be silent. If you, out of kindness, would condescend to fulfill my selfish wish, though it came on my dying day it would seem a new lease on life. But if, as a man of the world, you curtail your feelings, sacrificing the lesser to the more important, and look on this connection as shameful, so that your solemn vow becomes dispensable, still my true love will not vanish though my bones decay and my frame dissolve: in wind and dew it will seek out the ground you walk on. My love in life and death is told in this. I weep as I write, for feelings I cannot express. (166)

Yingying's story is similar to Zhang's in how their love affair begins; they are maternal cousins who met at a banquet. The maid acts as an intermediary. According to Yingying, it is Zhang who manages to seduce her, and she does not harden her heart to resist his advances. Thus Yingying claims her own innocence because it is Zhang whose seduction leads to her fall from purity. By expressing her worry about Zhang's potential betrayal and reminding him of his own pledge of devotion, Yingying indirectly charges Zhang with irresponsibility. If Zhang had failed to be responsible, she suggests, he would have doubly victimized her by first seducing her and then abandoning her, which of course he does.

Just as Zhang interprets his own story as a young man's moral lesson, so Yingying regards hers as an innocent girl's disastrous lesson in romance. Yingying makes it clear that she innocently believes that she can from then on depend on Zhang when she devotes herself emotionally and sexually to him. It turns out that she is overly confident of Zhang's love and her own capacity to sustain it. Thus she ends up in a tragic situation in which she has deviated from propriety and sees no hope of recovering it in decent ways. Because the only way she can be saved from disgrace is to have Zhang marry her, she is in effect at Zhang's mercy. As Zhang ends his story as a positive lesson, Yingying is forced to close hers as a negative one.

Zhang's story and Yingying's undermine each other's credibility by revealing the nature of the other party's story as representation. Zhang's story tries to foster a distrust of Yingying's words by conveying a consistent image of Yingying's inconsistency from the beginning of his narrative. The most powerful example that Zhang provides is Yingying's continuous self-subversion of the superficial meanings of her own inviting love poem and moralistic speech. Zhang ultimately concludes his presentation of an untrustworthy Yingying with his exemplary reading; that is to say, he asserts the existence of a manipulative Yingying under her seductive and confusing surface through his theory of *you-wu*. At the same time, Yingying's story also forcefully weakens Zhang's version by offering missing pieces of the picture. Yingying's letter highlights Zhang's vows of lifelong devotion, which he plausibly made to win and sustain Yingying's sexual favors. But Zhang never mentions his promises to Yingying in his own story. The absence of his pledges speaks eloquently of his avoidance of any responsibility toward Yingying, which echoes well with his evasion of marrying her. This not only raises doubts about his seriousness in his relationship with Yingying; it also effectively subverts the innocent image he constructs for himself and even the honesty of his story. Thus by revealing what Zhang's story skips, Yingying's story demonstrates that Zhang does not give readers the full picture of their relationship and that his representation of it is carefully tailored to his own interest.

The competition of these two stories lures readers into actively formulating their own visions of a coherent story; at the same time, it also proclaims the necessary failure of such efforts. To borrow the words of Owen, the "destabilization of the authority of discourse is infectious."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Owen, "Conflicting Interpretations," 159. Owen refers to multiple possibilities



The revelation of the two stories as mere representations makes visible the potential distance between characters' performances and their motives. This may contribute to readers' sense of the characters as real people, but it also destroys the reliability of the textual surface. "Truth" becomes the core of an onion that seduces us into endless distrust of the surface by implying something beyond it. Readers' skeptical responses toward Zhang's lofty reasons for abandoning Yingying are a good example. And Yingying's self-justification for having sent Zhang a romantic poem reasonably arouses Owen's suspicion of her motives.<sup>23</sup> He also speculates that Yingying's mother has the practical purpose of "put[ting] Yingying on display in order to whet Zhang's appetite for a marriage proposal" when she orders her children out to honor Zhang's extraordinary help.<sup>24</sup> The suspicions even extend to the author himself, whose claim for a moralistic intention behind his telling the love story often raises readers' doubts about his sincerity.<sup>25</sup>

To find a way out of this interpretive labyrinth, we need to examine carefully the connections among the story's effect of authenticity, its textual inconsistencies, and its central concerns about the ethical difficulty of romance.

### *The Moral Dilemma of Romance*

"The Story of Yingying" reveals its author's preoccupation with the inherent tension between romance and social propriety. The author's strategic manipulation of the conflict to establish and publicize an authenticated love affair, in particular, a "real" romantic heroine, shows his interest in negotiating a problematic space within social conventions for romance. The effect of authenticity that he painstakingly creates works to prove the "factual" existence of romance despite its moral stigma.

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to explain the lovers' behavior. He recognizes that the conflicting elements of the story lead to the questioning of the characters' motives, and he explores specifically what those motives are.

<sup>23</sup> Owen, "Conflicting Interpretations," 158-59.

<sup>24</sup> Owen, "Conflicting Interpretations," 162.

<sup>25</sup> Tatsumi Morota has a succinct summary of the scholarly disputes on this problem. Some scholars believe that the author's moralistic claim is sincere; some argue it is only a hypocritical statement. Tatsumi Morota 諸田龍美, "Ōyō Sen jiken kara mita Ōō den no shin kaishaku—chūtō no yūbutsu ron o megutte 「歐陽詹」事件から見た「鶯鶯傳」の新解釈——中唐の「尤物論」を巡って——." *Nihon Chūgoku gakkaihō* 49 (1997): 90-104, 90-92.

The tension between romance and propriety actually originates from the author’s grounding of romance within the realistic dimension. As an “authentic” and thus “realistic” romance, his story is very different from those about the sexual encounters between a goddess and a mortal man; his protagonists are young people from good families, and they have to confront the uncompromising demands of both romance and propriety. Romance requires that the hero and heroine form a romantic—hence sexual—bond voluntarily and freely, while propriety clearly forbids them to do so without formal parental blessing of their union. Mencius’s 孟子 (ca. 372 BCE-289 BCE) comments seem most relevant here.

*Zhangfu sheng er yuan wei zhi you shi, nüzi sheng er yuan wei zhi you jia. Fumu zhi xin, ren jie you zhi. Bu dai fumu zhi ming, meishuo zhi yan, zuan xue xi xiang kui, yu qiang xiang cong, ze fumu guoren jie jian zhi.*

丈夫生而願爲之有室，女子生而願爲之有家。父母之心，人皆有之。不待父母之命，媒妁之言，鑽穴隙相窺，逾牆相從，則父母國人皆賤之。

When a son is born, what is desired for him is that he may have a wife; when a daughter is born, what is desired for her is that she may have a husband. This feeling of the parents is possessed by all. (Therefore) if the young people, without waiting for the order of their parents and the arrangement of the go-betweens, shall bore holes to steal a sight of each other, or get over the wall to be with each other, then their parents and all other people will despise them.<sup>26</sup>

Mencius’s words indicate his belief that free choice in sexual relationships should be prohibited. Even in the Tang, nearly 1,200 years later, it was still true that a socially sanctioned sexual relationship of a young couple was the one properly arranged by their parents and the matchmakers.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, since it is risky to assume that people in Tang China uniformly behaved according to the moral standards of the day, I will not discuss the story from the perspective of social reality, but from that of discourse making; the author’s strong anxiety about the illicit nature of his protagonists’ romantic liaison reveals his conception of proper sexual conduct, a vision that affirms Mencius’s principle. In other words, the characters’ moral struggles and the narrator’s self-imposed moralistic stance in the story clearly indicate that the author perceives an in-

<sup>26</sup> *Mengzi* 孟子 3.2c.; James Legge, trans., *The Four Books: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean, and The Works of Mencius* (Shanghai: Chinese Book Company, 1933), 655-56.

<sup>27</sup> For a historical overview of the social status of Tang women, see Duan Tali 段塔麗, *Tangdai funü dixue yanjiu* 唐代婦女地位研究 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2000), 71-116, 188-210.

compatibility between romance and propriety.<sup>28</sup> To understand better the author's intensive attention to the ethical difficulty of romance, we need to investigate how the conflict informs his construction of the story and his tactful approach to it.

The author foregrounds the uneasy tension between romance and propriety in his presentation of Zhang and Yingying's liaison. When he introduces his protagonists, he emphasizes both the young people's virtue and their romantic inclinations. We are told that Zhang is "firm and self-contained, and capable of no improper act" (*nei bing jian gu, fei li bu ke ru* 內秉堅孤，非禮不可入; 162). But he also says to his friends, "Deng Tuzi was no lover, but a lecher. I am the true lover—I just never happened to meet the right girl. How do I know that? It's because all things of outstanding beauty never fail to make a permanent impression on me. That shows I am not without feelings" (*Dengtuzi fei hao se zhe, shi you xiong xing. Yu zhen hao se zhe, er shi bu wo zhi. He yi yan zhi? Da fan wu zhi you zhe, wei chang bu liulian yu xin, shi zhi qi fei wang qing zhe ye* 登徒子非好色者，是有兇行。余真好色者，而適不我值。何以言之？大凡物之尤者，未嘗不留連於心，是知其非忘情者也; 162). By distinguishing himself from Deng Tuzi, who is famous for his indulgence in sexual excess with his ugly wife, Zhang establishes himself as one who has a very refined taste for female beauty. Logically, this poses a serious problem: if Zhang encounters "the right girl," will he still be capable of self-restraint? Similarly, Yingying is said to be "so very strict that not even her elders could suggest anything improper to her" (*Zhen shen zi bao, sui suo zun bu ke yi feiyu fan zhi* 貞慎自保，雖所尊不可以非語犯之; 163). Nevertheless, her maid notices that "she writes a lot" and she "is always reciting poetry to herself and is moved by it for a long time after" (*Shan zhu wen, wangwang chen yin zhang ju, yuan mu zhe jiu zhi* 善屬文，往往沉吟章句，怨慕者久之; 163). Thus poetry is an obvious weakness of the virtuous Yingying. And in the story, it turns out that she falls from innocence because of the two seductive "spring verses" that Zhang writes for her. The author thus emphasizes that the romantic hero and heroine are both righteous people, but they happen to possess fatal roman-

<sup>28</sup> Many scholars have observed this tension between romance and social propriety, although they often put it in different terms. For example, Hou Zhongyi sees Yingying's contradictory behavior in response to Zhang's seduction as the conflict between *qing* 情 (love, passion) and *li* 禮 (ritual, propriety). Hou Zhongyi 侯忠義, *Sui Tang Wudai xiaoshuo shi* 隋唐五代小說史 (Hongzhou: Zhejiang guji, 1997), 80-81. Glen Dudbridge contends that the story has a "fine balance between sentiment and moralism." Glen Dudbridge, *The Tale of Li Wa* (London: Ithaca, 1983), 70-72.

tic weaknesses: Zhang's desire for beauty and Yingying's appreciation of literary talent. This bond of female beauty and male talent betrays its author's self-flattering expectation of romance as a man of letters. By projecting the couple's romantic inclinations as personal weaknesses that pose threats to the propriety they espouse, the author adumbrates the intense conflict between romance and social propriety that is about to unfold in the story.

Moreover, the author's design of the story's settings serves to enhance the likelihood of Zhang and Yingying's deviations from propriety. We are told that Zhang travels alone, which means his family must be somewhere else. Yingying's family is also in the middle of a journey to the capital and thus separated from its extended family, if they have any. Her father is dead and her mother does not seem to be a powerful controlling figure; this can be seen from Yingying's thinly veiled defiance of her mother when she is ordered to meet Zhang. And the romance takes place in a Buddhist temple, which is located outside of the city 蒲. The removed location of the temple reinforces the sense of ineffective patriarchal control. In light of the weakness of social propriety in its various forms as a barrier to romance, it is not surprising that the young couple fall prey to their personal desires.

Furthermore, the author makes visible his romantic hero and heroine's moral struggle upon entering into romance. Zhang justifies his choice of romance instead of marriage with the urgency of his passion; his life is jeopardized by his strong desire, and he thus cannot wait for the time-consuming process of marriage arrangements. Whether this is a convincing justification is open to question, but it reveals Zhang's own conception of marriage as more proper than romance in that his rhetoric centers upon why he has to dismiss marriage in favor of an illicit union. By emphasizing that his life is in extreme danger, Zhang avoids confronting the immorality of romance and slyly displaces his interest in sexual satisfaction with that of saving his own life. The moral stigma of romance is ostensibly diminished when sex is turned into life-saving medicine and its tension alleviated when social impropriety is thereby evaded.

In contrast to Zhang's moral struggle, Yingying's is much more painful and intense. Although the author does not tell us how Yingying persuades herself to enter into the affair, her radical vacillation between a passionate persona and a virtuous one testifies to the strong pressure of romance and propriety on the romantic heroine and to their incompatibility. To be involved in romance, she has to break away from propriety;

the two cannot coexist. But paradoxically, she also has to accomplish both. Without romantic passions, the virtuous Yingying would not step into romance, and romance would not be possible without its heroine; without virtue, the romantic Yingying cannot be distinguished from a licentious woman, and she would turn into a negative example of womanhood. Not as fortunate as the heroine in “Li hun ji” 離魂記 (The story of a detached soul), whose separation of soul from her body enables her to pursue romance and observe propriety at the same time,<sup>29</sup> Yingying is painfully caught in the dilemma of simultaneously being romantic and being virtuous. The tension between romance and propriety is so strong that the shift of Yingying’s persona causes her to appear as a completely different person. In this light, the author’s leaving out Yingying’s self-justification for her choice of romance is no coincidence; it is in fact impossible to justify. The silence of Yingying in her first sexual union with Zhang signifies precisely this difficult transition.

Zhang and Yingying’s different degrees of difficulty in embracing romance bring to light that the strong tension between romance and propriety centers specifically upon their struggle for control of the heroine’s sexual body. Both romance and propriety require the physical presence of the romantic heroine. James J. Y. Liu rightly points out that the “Chinese attitude toward love is sensible and realistic,” and love in Chinese poetry is “seldom, if ever, Platonic.”<sup>30</sup> Love in Tang tales is no exception; romance always aims at and moves toward the sexual union of the couple. The availability of the female body becomes the focus of tension. “The Story of a Detached Soul” shows a similar concern with the moral dilemma of romance but offers a fanciful example of resolution. The story not only splits the romantic heroine’s soul and body to meet the uncompromising demands of romance and propriety, but also corporealizes her soul so that sexual union, the goal of romance, is rendered possible. Yingying’s dilemma originates from the painful reality that she has only one body—that both romance and propriety want to claim. Her rejection of Zhang’s request for a meeting after her marriage confirms this predicament: as a wife, she now belongs to her husband, no longer accessible to romance.

<sup>29</sup> “Li hun ji” is a story about a girl whose soul elopes with her beloved while her body remains sick at home. The soul produces two sons, and her lover never realizes that she is only a soul until they go back to her home. The girl’s soul and body merge into one and the couple marry and live happily after. Chen Xuanyou 陳玄祐 (fl. 766-780), “Li hun ji,” in *Tangren xiaoshuo*, 59-60.

<sup>30</sup> James J. Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 57-58.

In this light, the moral dilemma of romance is in fact Yingying's dilemma, not Zhang's. Yingying's plight is not resolved by her final decision to enter into a relationship, but rather intensified by it. In her letter, Yingying says painfully to Zhang, "Having disgraced myself by coming to you, there was no further chance of serving you openly as a wife." Yingying's words clearly show her recognition that she is trapped by the irresolvable conflict between romance and propriety. Since her voluntary choice of romance is at the same time her willing deviation from propriety, a decent return to propriety becomes difficult, if not impossible. To be a good wife is to observe the rules of propriety, but she has only proved that she is able to transgress them. Zhang's excuse for abandoning Yingying focuses precisely on this potential power to override proper rules and hierarchy. The fact that Yingying's husband does not seem to realize her unusual relationship with Zhang when Zhang pays a visit to the couple suggests that Yingying's romance has been carefully kept secret from her husband, which again testifies to the incompatibility between romance and propriety.

The author's construction of a seemingly equal romantic bond thus turns out to be unequal to his romantic hero and heroine. The inequality can be seen not just in the different moral pressures upon their entry into the romance, but also in Yingying's dependence on Zhang to legitimize their relationship. The illicit love affair lacks the legitimacy and the binding power of institutionalized marriage. Zhang can walk out of their relationship whenever he likes, as indeed he eventually does. By contrast, Yingying is in effect trapped in the romance. Only when Zhang agrees to initiate the proper procedures of "the exchange of betrothal presents and names and birthdates" (*na cai wen ming* 納采問名; 163) through a matchmaker can Yingying achieve a smooth transition from romantic heroine to wife. The sophisticated rhetoric of Yingying's letter aims to persuade Zhang to marry her; her painstaking yet futile effort to direct romance toward her favored ending, marriage, points to the tragic fact of her powerlessness as a romantic heroine.

Zhang's abandonment of Yingying not only illustrates his advantageous position as a romantic hero, but also reveals his self-serving interest in romance. His perception of beautiful women as *youwu* indicates his strong male-centered consciousness. To him, beautiful women are simply objects, *wu* 物, that invite male appreciation and possession. And his emphasis on beauty, the optimum form of female sexuality, reveals his expectation of extraordinary sexual experiences from romance. Moreover, Zhang's divulging of his affair with Yingying to his friends and his

concern for the authenticity of his story indicate that his telling constitutes an act of showing off his sexual prowess. Zhang has the final word as whether to abandon Yingying or to marry her; even if he chooses to desert her, he apparently does not have to go so far as to publicize their affair. With her letter as the trophy of his sexual conquest, Zhang impresses and flatters his male literati audience; he has successfully used poetry to cause a good and beautiful girl to fall for him. This explains the odd sequence of his acts: he obtains Yingying's letter first, tells his friends about the love affair, and finally decides to give it an ending, his ending, of course. Zhang's strong desire to tell his story is in fact consistent with his refusal to marry Yingying because to him, romance is only a remarkable erotic experience, about which he can brag and which does not necessitate any long-term commitment. By introducing Yingying to the public as his lover rather than as his wife, Zhang decisively keeps romance intact by, paradoxically, terminating it to prevent it from evolving into marriage. Even after Yingying gets married, she still remains a romantic heroine in relation to Zhang; in her last poems to him, she continues to address him as her lover and yet reminds him of his duty toward his own wife.

Although the author's manipulation of the tension between romance and propriety succeeds in initiating and retaining Yingying as romantic heroine, he is also caught by it. His interest in fulfilling and publicizing the romance subjects him to the conflicting demands of romance and propriety; he has to adopt a paradoxical position of affirming both of them. In terms of characterization, he inadvertently creates gaps and inconsistencies, the best known of which is the curious rupture between Yingying's moralistic and romantic personae. The gap in Yingying's image bespeaks the author's effort to make Yingying's voluntary entry into romance possible. To form the presumably "equal" romantic bonding, she has to be given the initiative to choose romance: with Yingying's repudiation of Zhang's advances, the author eliminates her passive status in initiating the relationship; it is clearly her own will that she changes her mind and offers herself to him, knowing the full consequence of her audacious act.

Similarly, Zhang is presented as a contradictory figure. As a seducer, he serves to set off the romance by disregarding the proper way of seeking Yingying's hand. As the most authoritative witness of the romance, he has to betray his bonding with Yingying so that the author can present a convincing case of their illicit liaison to the public. In this sense, Zhang's moralistic speech is more than a convenient excuse for

deserting Yingying. It shows the pressure of social propriety on Zhang when he is giving public testimony of the illegitimate affair; his denunciation of romance is his condemnation of Yingying in that as he himself embraces propriety, she is the one left to carry the moral stigma of romance. Moreover, Zhang's revisiting Yingying at her husband's house functions to mitigate his earlier negation of romance; Zhang clearly shows his lingering attachment to Yingying, and more importantly, she is given the counter voice to denounce his disloyalty to romance. Although modern readers' overwhelming tendency to criticize Zhang may be explained by their moral biases,<sup>31</sup> it also results from the damaging effect of his contradictory roles, which allow the author to affirm propriety without discrediting romance.

By the same token, the author also tries to strike a balance between the moralistic and romantic perspectives in constructing the public reception of the romance in the story, an effort that betrays his own hypocrisy. After quoting the poetic reactions to the love affair by Zhang's friends, the author ends the story by identifying his own moralistic narrative stance.

*Shiren duo xu Zhang wei shan bu guo zhe. Yu chang yu penghui zhi zhong, wangwang ji ci yi zhe, fu shi zhi zhe bu wei, wei zhi zhe bu huo. Zhenyuan sui jinyue, zhishi Li Gongchui su yu yu Jing'anli di, yu ji yu shi, Gongchui zhuoran cheng yi, sui wei "Yingying ge" yi zhuan zhi. Cuishu xiaoming Yingying, Gongchui yi ming pian.*

時人多許張爲善補過者。予嘗於朋會之中，往往及此意者，夫使知者不爲，爲之者不惑。貞元歲九月，執事李公垂宿於予靖安里第，語及於是，公垂卓然稱異，遂爲鶯鶯歌以傳之。崔氏小名鶯鶯，公垂以命篇。

His contemporaries for the most part conceded that Zhang had done well to rectify his mistake. I have often mentioned it among friends so that, forewarned, they might avoid doing such a thing, or if they did, that they might not be led astray by it. In the ninth month of a year in the Zhenyuan period [785-804] when an official, Li Gongchui, was passing the night in my house in Jing'an Street, the conversation touched on the subject. He found it most extraordinary and composed a "Song of Yingying" to commemorate the affair. Cui's child-name was Yingying, and Li Gongchui used it for his poem. (168)

The passage shows conflicting responses to Zhang and Yingying's liaison: many, including the narrator, believe that it is a "mistake," but prominent poets of the day find it "extraordinary" and worth devoting their poetic efforts to commemorating it. Nonetheless, when the narra-

<sup>31</sup> For instance, Wang Jisi believes that Zhang is a philander who victimizes the innocent girl Yingying. Wang Jisi 王季思, *Cong Yingying zhuan dao Xixiang ji* 從鶯鶯傳到西廂記 (Shanghai: Shanghai gudian wenxue, 1955), 7-10.



tor tells us in a matter-of-fact tone that his narration of the love story as a moral lesson only stimulates his friend Li Gongchui to write a “Song of Yingying,” presumably a romantic rendition judging from the poem’s interest in the extraordinariness of Yingying, he shows no sense of irony. We might have to conclude that the author does not see any tension between a poetic reaction that his audience actually has and a moralistic one that he desires from it, or we might be led to question the seriousness of his moralistic stance. To solve this problem, we need to examine in detail the subtle relations between the poetic and didactic readings presented in the story.

At first glance, these two approaches to the romance appear compatible and even complementary with each other in the story in that poetic responses are characterized by their avoidance of moral evaluations. Yang Juyuan’s poem, “Young Miss Cui,” describes Zhang’s attractive appearance and his extraordinary feelings as a romantic hero.

*Qing run Panlang yu bu ru, zhong ting huicao xue xiao chu.  
Fengliu cai zi duo chun si, chang duan Xiaoniang yi zhi shu.*

清潤潘郎玉不如，中庭蕙草雪銷初。  
風流才子多春思，腸斷蕭娘一紙書。

For clear purity jade cannot equal his complexion,  
On the iris in the inner court snow begins to melt.  
A romantic young man filled with thoughts of love,  
A letter from the Xiao girl, brokenhearted. (166)

The poem envisions Zhang alone in a poetic scene reading Yingying’s letter and displaying his strong emotional reactions to it. The fact that the contents of Yingying’s letter are unrevealed and the letter itself is turned into a prop for the hero’s romantic performance reveals the strategy of the poetic reading to make itself amoral. Yang’s poem is only interested in the letter as the symbol of the romance, but never in its specific contents that point to the tensions of the love affair; a poetic sentimental surface is thus created by the careful suppression of underlying tensions.

Similarly, Yuan Zhen’s long poem, a continuation of Zhang’s “Hui zhen shi” 會真詩 (An encounter with an immortal), evades any moral judgment of the romance. Since Zhang did not complete this poem, as the story tells us, it is unclear here whether Yuan Zhen completes Zhang’s original poem or writes a new one in imitation of Zhang’s. Even if the poem is written by Zhang and Yuan Zhen together, the collaboration denotes that the poem is less a faithful description of the couple’s sex-

ual encounter than a poetic rendition of it, because it does not seem to matter that an outsider who does not have actual experience with Yingying can take on Zhang's perspective and write about it. Regardless, the poem projects the couple's meeting in the conventional mode of a mortal man encountering an immortal lady, which focuses on the building up to the climactic sexual intercourse and the sad separation that follows. Centering on the sentimental and amorous aspects of the sexual encounter, the poem avoids addressing its moral significance. Thus Yang and Yuan's poems both position the love affair not in its moral dimensions, but in the poetic tradition of love, sex, and feelings.

Nevertheless, a closer examination of the amoral and moral approaches reveals that their compatibility is an illusion. We have to notice that the poetic reading focuses almost exclusively on Yingying. Yuan Zhen's poem lavishes attention on Yingying from her arrival to her departure. Yang Juyuan does not directly depict Yingying, but his poem is entitled "Cuiniang shi" 崔娘詩 (On Miss Cui), an unmistakable indicator of his poetic focus. By contrast, the moralistic reading targets Zhang rather than Yingying. The story tells us that Zhang's contemporaries praise him for his rectification of his mistake. And the narrator's own didactic intention is apparently directed toward his (male) friends, who may end up being in Zhang's situation. The public and the narrator's evaluation of Zhang may indicate male concerns about how a man should behave in romance, but the subtle omission of any explicit criticism of Yingying suggests an intentional avoidance. The omission bespeaks the author's consciousness of the subversive nature of Yingying's romantic actions and his effort to avoid spelling out a necessarily negative moral judgment of her. It also indicates that he is much more interested in Yingying as a romantic heroine than as a negative example of womanhood. The contradiction between a didactic reading of Yingying and a poetic appreciation of her again confirms that she is the locus of tension between romance and propriety.

In this light, there is in fact a distance between the narrator as a self-styled moralist and the author, which reflects the struggle of the author to deal with the immorality of romance. To give romance positive credit would be encouraging acts that violate social propriety, but a negative projection of romance would also make its appreciation problematic, if not impossible. The only way out is to tell the love story as a moral lesson—that is to say, to argue that the telling of a potentially subversive story is helpful in preventing any similar subversion. The narrator's self-censoring gesture reflects the capacity of romantic discourse to

reconcile its conflict effectively with the social norms by disguising itself in the ways acceptable by the latter. This is probably why the narrator identifies the general public's moralistic response before he claims his own didactic intention; he skillfully shows that in telling the romance, he is actually confirming public moral sensibility, rather than subverting the existing ethical rules.

Both the moralistic and poetic approaches to romance are thus the author's negative and positive strategies to effectively validate his romantic discourse as narrative within social conventions. The moralistic approach justifies the narration of romance with its self-containing "anti-romance" stance. Cast in the conventional modes of love poetry, the romantic approach conveniently claims its own moral neutrality to avoid confronting the moral stigma of romance; the longstanding poetic tradition has endorsed an independent hyperbolic space for linguistic indulgence in love, sex, and desire.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, such an attempt to accommodate both stances necessarily puts the author in a dilemma as a result of the incompatibility between romance and propriety. On the one hand, he has to demonstrate that he is serious about his didactic intention. This is why he has to present the two approaches to romance as different personal opinions, by adopting the moral stance himself while having the prominent poets of the time react romantically. And he has to hide his own strong interest in romance, or emphasize that he is only interested in its didactic function. On the other hand, he also has to show that he is not too serious about his moralistic agenda. His revelation that his telling of the romance results in his friend's poetic response clearly deconstructs his own moralistic claim. The self-subversion calls attention to the potential distance between the narrator and the author and undermines the author's self-projection as a moralist.

The dilemma of the author as a storyteller further exemplifies the

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<sup>32</sup> Bai Juyi's 白居易 (772-846) "Cheng hen ge" 長恨歌 and Chen Hong's "Chang hen ge zhuan," the dual treatment of Emperor Xuanzong's 唐玄宗 (685-762; r. 712-56) liaison with Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (719-56), exemplify Tang writers' conscious utilization of generic conventions to accommodate their romantic and didactic approaches to the same subject. If Li Gongchui's "Song of Yingying" had survived in its entirety, it would have illustrated the same practice in relation to "The Story of Yingying." Unlike these dual representations of the same topic, which are generally regarded as independent works, however, the poems included in "The Story of Yingying" are integral parts of the story, and I thus consider them in the context of the author's overall construction of the story.

tension between romance and propriety; it also reveals that the negative and positive strategies of his romantic discourse are necessarily built upon a certain degree of hypocrisy. Just as the author does not allow himself to show any sense of irony when he tells us that his morally intended narration leads to his audience's romantic response, the romantic discourse reveals its own self-deception in that its self-policing gesture can well dissolve the threat of romance to propriety and transform the tension between them into harmony. In this sense, the "authenticity" of the story that the author painstakingly establishes proves crucial for him as a rhetorical refuge. By adopting a morally correct narrative stance himself and telling the "truth" of other people's experiences, the author claims his innocence in facilitating the circulation of a dangerous narrative: he is responsible neither for the young couple's romantic desires nor for the sympathetic reactions of his internal audience to it. He is only an "objective" recorder of the romance and its repercussions.

Although the author's project of resolving the ethical difficulty of romance is inevitably hypocritical as well as paradoxical, by undertaking it, the author's romantic discourse succeeds in asserting its own ambivalent presence. The birth of the romantic Yingying signifies the entry of romance into the domestic space: even a chaste maiden, presumably secluded safely in the domestic sphere, cannot escape the infectious power of romance. Yet the magnitude of this success is immediately downplayed: the domestic sphere that romance tries to claim is actually displaced in that the love affair takes place in a Buddhist temple where the heroine's family stays. By conflating the domestic space with the religious space, the author skillfully displaces the threat of romance to domesticity with the irony of indulging romantic desires in a Buddhist temple. Even though he fails to resolve the moral dilemma of romance, the author succeeds in turning romance into a "reality": despite its controversies, an "authentic" liaison not only has happened, but also has been circulated as a story and even has become the center of public discourse. In this respect, romance attains its own legitimacy, a right that does not originate from the sanctioning of social propriety, but from the mere fact of existence.

### *Romance: Becoming a (Textual) Reality*

The significance of "The Story of Yingying" does not just lie in the symbolic entry of romance into the domestic sphere, but in its success-

ful creation of a textual reality of romance. The author's authentication of Yingying, and hence, his story, serves to conceal the romance as a textual construction that creates the convincing illusion of real life; more importantly, it functions to authenticate the romantic tradition. The story further demonstrates its author's vision of and confidence in the significant role that romance as a textual reality is about to play in the cultural life of his literati community.

The author's emphasis on the "authenticity" of Yingying works to validate the origin of romance in the poetic tradition. A close examination of the author's conflation of Yingying's body, her subjectivity, and her texts indicates that Yingying's "self-representation" coincides with conventional images of women in poetry. Yingying's writings, supposedly representing the authentic voice of a real woman, constitute the chronicle of a romantic heroine: from an innocent girl anticipating love to a pathetic young woman worrying about her insecure status and eventually to a nostalgic and resentful abandoned woman. Wai-ye Li points out that Yingying has "the plaintive voice of the abandoned woman" available "from the literary tradition."<sup>33</sup> In light of the author's tactics of authentication, the coincidence between Yingying's voices and the traditional feminine personae in poetry bespeaks less her choice of self-representation than the author's substantiation of poetic conventions. It is the context of this "authentic" romance that precludes alternative readings of Yingying's texts and assumes coherence among her writings, her subjectivity, and her physicality. Otherwise, given the flexibility of pronouns in traditional Chinese poetry and a different context, the "I" in "I await the moon in the western chamber" can well become "She," "He," a male "I," or even a man impersonating a woman.<sup>34</sup> Yingying's fall from innocence after reading Zhang's erotic poems confirms further that poetic discourse initiates this "authentic" romance. It can be said that Zhang's "spring verses" set the romance in motion by seducing Yingying into acting it out. Although Owen is right in stating that "Yingying is a young woman performing an image of romantic passion,"<sup>35</sup> it is in fact the *male* expectation of fe-

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<sup>33</sup> Wai-ye Li, "Mixture of Genres and Motives for Fiction in 'Yingying's Story,'" in Yu et al., eds., *Ways with Words*, 190.

<sup>34</sup> Owen contends that this verse "contains a variation on the lines attributed to Li Yi that so attracted Huo Xiaoyu" in the "Story of Huo Xiaoyu." Owen, "Conflicting Interpretations," 157.

<sup>35</sup> Owen, "Conflicting Interpretations," 153.

male passion that she tries to fulfill. The author's construction of an "authentic" Yingying thus turns out to be an integration and authentication of earlier poetic imaginings of romantic heroines.

Furthermore, the author's detailed descriptions of the internal audience's poetic responses to the love affair show his perception of how this "authentic" liaison between Yingying and Zhang can serve to propel romantic discourse. The "authenticity" of Yingying in particular underlies the amplification of romantic discourse, or how the circulation of the romance incites further production, consumption, and distribution of male writings on it. Wai-ye Li notes that Yuan Zhen's poem incorporates images of women from "the erotic tradition in Chinese poetry," including goddesses in *fu* 賦 (rhapsody) and women in *gongti shi* 宮體詩 (palace style poetry).<sup>36</sup> But this immortal Yingying differs from earlier images of women because of her "authentic" origin. However fanciful these writings may become, it is the "authenticity" of Yingying and hence that of the romance that sustains male authors' active rewriting of the romance. Yuan Zhen's poem in fact illustrates how this authenticity invigorates and intensifies the conventional imagining of erotic women.

Yingying's "authenticity" is also the condition for the male pleasure of reading. Zhang's exposure of their love affair is in effect the double betrayal of Yingying: he not only betrays Yingying in their love relationship, but also turns her into a public lover for vicarious enjoyment by his literati audience. Since all her writings are ostensibly intended only for Zhang to read, the addressee is always absent, self-evidently referring to Zhang. Zhang's showing off thus allows other male readers to become the absent beloved and engage themselves in an intimate relationship with Yingying as a "real" rather than fictitious beauty. In addition, the eroticism in Yuan Zhen's poem exemplifies what the re-writings of the romance entail for their audience. The poem is a gradual revelation of Yingying's eroticized body. Yuan first introduces the heroine from afar, then shows the details of her clothing, her hairdressing, and her shoes, before providing a glimpse of her beautiful face. She is brought even closer when she overcomes her reservations and moves into the bed.

*Mei dai xiu pian ju, chun zhu nuan geng rong.*  
*Qi qing lan rui fu, fu ren yu ji feng.*

<sup>36</sup> Wai-ye Li, "Mixture of Genres and Motives for Fiction in 'Yingying's Story,'" 188.

*Wu li yong yi wan, duo jiao ai lian gong.  
Han liu zhu diandian, fa luan li congcong.*

眉黛羞偏聚，唇朱暖更融。  
氣清蘭蕊馥，膚潤玉肌豐。  
無力慵移腕，多嬌愛斂躬。  
汗流珠點點，髮亂綠蔥蔥。

Eyebrows, out of shyness, contracted;  
Lip rouge, from the warmth, melted.  
Her breath is pure: fragrance of orchid buds;  
Her skin is smooth: richness of jade flesh.  
No strength, too limp to lift a wrist;  
Many charms, she likes to draw herself together.  
Sweat runs: pearls drop by drop;  
Hair in disorder: black luxuriance. (167)

The sensual details of her eyebrows and lips, the smell of her breath, her perspiration and disorderly hair, and even the sense of touching her skin all invite a caressing gaze and even touch. This beautiful body that the poet carefully unveils in his text is not presented as his fabrication, but that of the “authentic” Yingying.

This “authentic” romance of Yingying thus brings together male literati as readers and writers. The telling, reading, writing, and rewriting of the love affair demonstrate a communal interest in the romance, especially in the romantic heroine. Yuan Zhen’s poem as a continuation of Zhang’s illustrates the collaboration of the literati community that enables the romantic discourse to grow and proliferate. By envisioning a literati community that is amazed by and excited about the romance, the author confidently projects his understanding of this community’s needs and predicts the fate of his romantic tale in it. This is a prophecy that has come true; the long list of the adaptations of the story alone testifies to its lasting impact on Chinese literature and culture. In this sense, the emergence of romance as a (textual) reality in “The Story of Yingying” does not just point to a problematic liaison whose verisimilitude signifies the expansion of the territory of romance into the domestic space; it also denotes this *chuanqi* tale’s capacity to mobilize the romantic discourse by stimulating further writings on and rewritings of it across time. The canonical status of this story shows the crucial role it played in the development of romance as an essential trope in Chinese literature; “The Story of Yingying” thus demonstrates that discourse can and does create reality.

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