Introduction

I CELEBRATE myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
—Walt Whitman “Song of Myself”

If you want to know the heartbreaking cry of the gibbon,
You must make yourself into a gibbon.
—Xu Wei

Even if I could by gradual degrees be transformed into a bat, nothing in my present constitution enables me to imagine what the experiences of such a future stage of myself thus metamorphosed would be like. The best evidence would come from the experiences of bats, if we only knew what they were like. So if extrapolation from our own case is involved in the idea of what it is like to be a bat, the extrapolation must be incompletable. We cannot form more than a schematic conception of what it is like.
—Thomas Nagel

Spontaneous. Unbridled. Direct. Such adjectives describe the work of Ming dynasty artist Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521–93). The paintings and calligraphy he left arrest our attention. Grapes bend boughs with their pregnant weight. Spiky bamboo leaves and paddles of lotus pads bloom outward in ink washes of the darkest of blacks and the most transparent of grays. One cannot help but imagine his hand at work: the brush strokes are simultaneously so specific and individual, yet they project an image both immediate and familiar. The artist transmits what is in his mind through spontaneous expression (xìe yì 写意). His pseudonyms and sobriquets—Xu Wenchang (需文長), Mountain Man of the Heavenly Pond (Tianchi shanren 天池山人), Heaven Water Moon (Tianshuiyue
天水月), and the Mountain Man of the Green Vines (Qingteng shanren 清藤山人) are among the variations—although not uncommonly numerous for a Ming dynasty (1368–1644) man of letters, carry great significance because of the way that they reflect his incredibly productive and varied life. Not only was he an artist, but he was also a poet, an essayist, a dramatist, a drama critic, and a calligrapher. In a historical period replete with exceptional figures and iconoclasts, Xu Wei stood out among them all.2

Xu Wei’s influence has been so lasting that by the early decades of the twentieth century, he had become identified as one of three popular archetypes in folklore. Known by his style, “Xu Wenchang” became interchangeable with the “clever male,” even as the other two archetypes, “foolish son-in-law” and “clever-tongued wife,” were represented solely by their generic descriptions.3 This cleverness and demonstrations of quick wit separate the man of letters, Xu Wei, from the legendary figure “Xu Wenchang” in the popular imagination.4 Upheld as a sort of patron saint of the unbridled eccentric in the late imperial period, he asserted a near-supernatural anxiety of influence on successive generations of Chinese would-be iconoclasts. Because they sought to emulate his individualism and freedom from style constraints, they were also haunted by the possibility that this emulation might become yet another form of imitation. One of Zhang Dai’s 张岱 (1597?–1684) early literary efforts was to publish an edition of Xu Wei’s uncollected works. Later, however, he ruefully burned poems of his that he thought too similar to Xu’s.5 Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568–1610) jubilantly champions Xu Wei’s work in a preface that reveals his personal, very physical, discovery of and engagement with Xu Wei’s text. Although the subject is literary, Xu Wei’s poems, Yuan Hongdao evokes the theater with his description in the preface of the actual scene of reading that attracts a crowd of servants.6 Yuan thus stages his joyous scene of discovery:

One evening, while sitting upstairs at Grand Scribe T’ao’s, I randomly pulled out something from his bookshelves and found it to be a portfolio of several volumes of poetry entitled A Collection of Scraps. The paper was of poor quality, the calligraphy was slipshod, and soot had dimmed the printing, so the text was barely legible. I had to get closer to the lamp to read it. But after reading a few poems, I jumped up in surprise and cried out to Wang-ling, “Who’s the author of this Collection of Scraps? Is he dead or alive?” Wang-ling replied, “This book was by Mr. [Xu Wei], a fellow townsman of mine.” We both bounded up and down. We read and yelled, yelled and read in the lamplight, and all the servant boys who had fallen asleep were roused from their sleep.7
Yuan’s compulsion to uncover the name of the man responsible for the kinds of poems that could cause one to jump up and down and shout is palpable.8

A woodcut portrait printed in Zhang Dai’s own *Xu Wenchang yigao* shows a world-weary whiskered man with heavily rimmed eyes.9 Another likeness is the anonymous painting, now in the collection of the Nanjing museum, showing a somewhat younger, slightly fuller-cheeked, thinner-browed version of the artist. They are a reminder of the corporeal presence of Xu, of a man who made things, of the hands that put intent into words and shape. And yet that body, that physical person, is quite remote from the words and shapes we see now. As Xu Wei himself observes, he was already distant from his own physical representation even then. Observing his own portrait, he once remarked:

> At birth I was fat. When I was twenty, I was so skinny that my clothes overwhelmed me. By the time I was thirty, I had gradually fattened up again. Now we have this idiotic fellow pictured here: the years have rushed me along to fifty. Now how can we know that this idiot of today will not become skinny again, just like the mountain marshes that dry up? Trying to grasp me through this picture would be like notching the side of your boat where the sword is dropped, or watching the tree stump for another hare to dash against it. Is he a dragon? Is he a crane? Is he a flitting butterfly? Is he a weighty Zhuang Zhou? Who can know his beginnings?10

This is a sentiment that most can readily understand. Carving a mark on the outside of a boat is like capturing a likeness. The mark remains on the side of the boat, but the boat has moved on in the water: the sword is no longer there. The passage of time, the gradual shifting of an object’s shape, makes retrieval impossible. The obverse argument is that while the mark may only indicate a fixed and irretrievable moment, the very act of indicating is important, too. It does not gesture merely at emptiness. It gestures to memory.

Xu Wei’s biographies are in many ways like fixed portraits of him: each represents a version of the artist at a specific moment in time. In Xu Wei’s case, those specific moments are distinct and indelible. He was a military strategist. Yet he was a lifelong failed scholar. When he was a boy, his family became so impoverished that they sold his biological mother.11 Xu Wei attempted to commit suicide in particularly gruesome ways; according to various biographies, there were awls in ears and crushed testicles. He beat his wife to death in a murderous rage, and he would
have met with execution if not for the intercession of Zhang Dai’s great-grandfather, Zhang Yuanbian 張元忭 (1525–90), on his behalf. These few wildly disparate examples alone suggest the impossibility of fully capturing a complete picture of a person.

Xu Wei’s prose and poetry reflect these preoccupations. He muses on the blurred space between reality and non-reality, maintaining that to get to the authentic, one has to be able to inhabit another reality. That claim is less a statement about the impossibility of knowing others than it is a statement about the manipulation of one’s perspective. In a poem, he refers to the mournful lament of the gibbon cry, saying that the only way to know why the gibbon cries as it does is to become a gibbon oneself. This is the same argument that he makes in his “Foreword to Ye Zisu’s Poetry” (“Ye Zisu shixu” 葉子肅詩序). He describes the sound of birds trying to mimic humans, and that of humans trying to mimic bird calls. Though each may perfectly imitate the sounds made by the other, they can never become the other:

There are people who study how to make bird sounds; their sound is that of a bird, but their nature is still human. There are birds that study how to make human sounds; their sound is that of a human, but their nature is still bird. From this can we take the measure of bird and man? Now, this is no different from writing poetry. If it does not come from one’s own self and is instead stolen from what others have already said, if we ask whether a particular text is in a certain style, that particular text is not the poet’s own; if we ask whether a particular sentence is like a certain person’s, that sentence is not the poet’s own. Thus, though one may work to excess to near a likeness, one’s self cannot help but be like a bird making human sounds.12

Xu Wei’s preface was written in response to the kind of poetry that measured its success by imitation of earlier styles, a strategy that someone who subscribes to an authentic (bense 本色) way of writing would naturally decry. An imitation can never fully convey another being, nor can it truly convey one’s self. A human ear hearing the gibbon cry will not understand its despair; a human voice imitating the sound of a bird will not truly be a bird’s. The only true way that one can have access to another is to become the other, and to speak directly from that experience. One must inhabit rather than imitate. The emphasis here, however, is not so much on achieving an internal, static self, but on the sincerity of one’s outward show.

Duncan Campbell, comparing Yuan Hongdao’s biography of Xu Wei to an act of autobiographical writing, notes that Yuan took care to limit
his discussion of Xu Wei’s literary works to his poetry and prose. Even though in his biography Yuan mentions that his earlier encounter with Xu Wei’s work was with the four-play cycle, collectively known as *Four Cries of a Gibbon* (*Si sheng yuan* 四聲猿), he goes on to rhapsodize about the singularity of Xu Wei’s efforts in what were considered the worthier form of literary expression of Yuan’s time: poetry.\(^{13}\) Xu Wei was an important figure in the field of drama, generally considered the author of the play *Singing in Place of Screaming* (*Ge dai xiao* 歌代嘩) and of the treatise on southern drama entitled *Nanci xulu* (南詞敘錄).\(^{14}\) *Four Cries of a Gibbon* is Xu Wei’s most famous dramatic masterpiece, deliberately taking up the same themes introduced in his essays and verse in each of its plays: *The Mad Drummer Plays the Yuyang Triple Rolls* (*Mi Heng* 狂鼓史漁陽三弄), *Zen Master Yu Has a Dream of Cuixiang* (*Yü chanshi cuixiang yimeng* 玉禪師翠鄉一夢), *The Female Mulan Joins the Army in Place of Her Father* (*Ci Mulan tifu congjun* 女扮男裝替父從軍), and *The Girl Graduate Rejects the Female Phoenix and Gains the Male Phoenix* (*Nü zhuangyuan cihuang defeng* 女狀元辭凰得鳳). Discussions of inhabiting instead of imitating are of course already somewhat accessible in poetry and prose, but they find their fullest expression in drama. On stage, the bodies of actors and actresses are, quite literally, occupied by characters. Even when it is only read silently, drama proceeds within this logical frame of the expectations created by outward show. *Four Cries of a Gibbon*, especially, exploits this aspect of the staged world, repeatedly drawing attention to moments where one person transforms into another “self” right before our eyes. In Yuan Hongdao’s time, drama was too unorthodox a genre to be taken seriously as a literary form. This is a pity, because *Four Cries of a Gibbon*, as Yuan Hongdao most surely must have observed, overflows with these questions: What are our authentic and true selves? How can they be accessed? This book returns the focus to *Four Cries of a Gibbon*.

*Four Cries of a Gibbon* comprises four distinct *zaju* (雜劇), or short plays. Drama reached its “golden age” in the Yuan in the form of *zaju*, the short plays that were typically four acts long, although they occasionally stretched to five acts. The Yuan *zaju* was characteristically marked by the use of rigid rhyme and song tune schemes, and the restriction of one singing role per act.\(^{15}\) The *zaju* form lost its dominance with the emergence of a second golden age of drama, flowering in the late imperial period of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, of the
much longer and elegant southern-style chuanqi (傳奇) plays that were not only distinguished by their length (often consisting of fifty or more acts), but by their use of southern song tunes, languorous and filigreed singing style, and a greater flexibility regarding the distribution of singing roles and rhymes. By the end of the Ming dynasty, distinctions between zaju and chuanqi could sometimes be reduced to a shorthand for describing length or musical style. Certainly Xu Wei did not himself abide by the strict rules of the Yuan zaju style, although the more workman-like zaju form over the sophisticated and embellished chuanqi form allowed him to explore the fantastic situations available to drama in a more immediate manner.

The efflorescence of playwriting in late imperial China dovetailed with discussions of questions of identity that typified this period of China’s history and were encapsulated in masterpieces of the form, like Tang Xianzu’s 湯顯祖 (1550–1616) masterpiece Peony Pavilion (Mudan ting 牡丹亭), first performed in 1598, a few years after Xu Wei’s death. Tina Lu notes how two chuanqi plays, the late Ming dynasty Peony Pavilion and the early Qing dynasty (1644–1911) Peach Blossom Fan (Taohua shan 桃花扇) by Kong Shangren 孔尚任 (1648–1718), highlighted late imperial questions of how a person was defined:

Late Ming China was colored by a concern with the theatre, fascinated by the possibilities of costume and disguise both on and offstage. Theatre, a space that legitimated disguise, informed ostensibly non-theatrical spaces with its concerns. For costume and design were central to late Ming culture, not least in the realm of fashion…. Early Qing China had a distinctly political stake in the question of disguise. The Manchu conquerors mandated that all male subjects shave their pates, plait the hair at the back of their heads into a queue, and wear a style of clothing based on Manchu riding gear. [The state would read its citizens’ outward appearances as a direct confrontation of the new regime to the extent that] appearances matter and promise access to a person’s state of mind. But what about the many who obediently shaved their pates while secretly harboring sentiments of Ming loyalty? They surely felt that appearances—even a shaved head and the clothes to be worn every single day—were nothing but a disguise; but, of course, a fascination with disguise is another way of expressing interest in what a person might truly be.17

The performative aspect of theater—that of roles being played—happens to parallel exactly the issues of representation raised when a new regime claims its legitimacy and power over a reluctant populace. The transition was a period that curiously highlighted the tropes of drama through real experience; the dynastic struggle seen during the
early Qing, marked by attempts to resurrect the Ming in the south, underscored the significance of playing a role, even offstage. The cultural milieu of the Ming, in which the personal was defined by accumulations of commodity or displays of connoisseurship, also suggested new ways of thinking about what could constitute a person's life story. This period indeed marked a rising concern with issues of subjectivity, a concern insistently reflected in its fiction and drama.

Although Xu Wei’s historical circumstances may well have influenced the topics he chose to explore in his plays, the kinds of questions these plays ask are more generally universal ones that transcend the borders of their historical moment. How does a person know another? How can what one says affect how one is understood? How does clothing, or the removal of clothing, reveal who one is? Does it reveal the true person, or is the unclothed person distinct from the clothed one? A reader of this book might object that I am imposing my own modern preoccupations on to a five-hundred-year-old text, but the plays speak for themselves. Each of them transmits a quality of timelessness and universality that reflects less a cultural or historical anxiety than a certain kind of temperament. Xu Wei’s is an artistic temperament that insistently challenges the viewer to ask himself how he can be as he is, and yet be mistaken for someone else completely. Actors invest their roles with meaning, but their outer appearances dominate the audience’s perception of them. In other words, plays make the question of actual, physical, palpable bodies unavoidable. Xu Wei’s plays, in particular, focus the argument to specifically engage plots about characters wrestling with how they are perceived. Mi Heng restages a famous episode from Three Kingdoms lore, allowing Mi Heng to posthumously redeem himself and upbraid the warlord Cao Cao. Zen Master Yu depicts a monk who is seduced and ruined before he can reach Nirvana, is reborn as a prostitute in the second act, and is restored to his original identity by the end of the play. Mulan is the story of a young girl who goes to fight the invading barbarians in place of her elderly father, returning as a war hero and trading in the emoluments for a happy wedding. Finally, Girl Graduate shows in five acts how an impoverished orphan girl, through wisdom and hard work, disguises herself as a man to take part in the official examinations and earns the place of top graduate. Stretching the conventions of northern and southern drama, these four plays forecast the way that drama would flourish and develop in the century that followed, serving unofficially as a treatise on the
possibilities of drama. With their self-reflexive themes and motifs, they
directly confront the kinds of questions that would become highly fash-
ionable in the late Ming and early Qing periods and that are being asked
again in twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarship.

Four Cries of a Gibbon giddily stages multiplicities with such magical
qualities that they would be impossible in its audience’s world. Souls
transmigrate, spirits fight back, girls elude detection in exclusively
masculine trials. As a form of entertainment that explicitly challenges the
viewer to accept a person as who she says she is simply because she says
so, and then to accept her again as a different person because she has
changed her clothes and taken on a different name, drama holds up a
mirror to our world. This is, after all, the nature of drama: we witness
pretend actions in a pretend world, but that world contains its own
categories of true and false. The performers know that they are
performing. The audience knows that it is viewing. Roles are played by
people who are not actually who they are.

The reader of Four Cries of a Gibbon will see moments in the text
suggesting that these plays were written to be performed: physical acts
such as costume changes and pantomime are integral to the plots, and
action is interrupted with interludes of singing or courtroom trials that
are inserted for entertainment. Such scenes are not crucial to the move-
ment of the plot, although it can be argued, as I do in the following
chapters, that they are crucial to the meaning of the play. Stage directions
that directly affect the plot—and sometimes, more notably, don’t affect
the plot at all—abound in Xu Wei’s plays. The literary merit of the plays
is not the reason for their popularity; indeed, their lack of refinement
is often mentioned, and sometimes even criticized. Wilt Idema has
suggested that their great popularity in sixteenth-century Jiangnan was
due to the performative aspects, especially the explicit sexual nature of
onstage dressing and undressing that naturally accompanied the plays
featuring female characters cross-dressing as men: Mulan and Girl
Graduate. Xu Wei’s plays are typically studied for their historical signi-
ficance, whether as evidence of a historical moment or of the author’s
allegorical protest of social or personal conditions, or for their literary
qualities. This book suggests a different way of looking at his works
that is neither dependent on their historical significance nor limited to a
critique of their literary merits. The philosophical question of identity is
incidental not to *Four Cries of a Gibbon*, but to its subject. This book explores the seeming paradox of reaching direct, spontaneous authenticity by engaging in an art form that is by nature false. By looking carefully at the way that each play presents a variation on the theme of one character’s revealing his or her true identity to another, in front of an audience that witnesses multiple roles played by one actor, *Four Cries of a Gibbon* demonstrates the theatrical nature of human interaction and proposes a way to live in a world that is governed by perceptions and necessary concealments. The characters in *Four Cries of a Gibbon* are contextually defined; they exist as a sum result of the version that they present and the version that the one who perceives them expects. The unifying theme of this quartet of plays is their exploration of the vigorous calibration required to reveal an authentic self: that is to say, revelation is itself a kind of presentation.

A characteristic shared by all four of these plays, incongruent with readings of the plays as forms of social protest or cries of grief, is simple “play” itself. *Four Cries of a Gibbon* capitalizes on the visual and aural aspects of theater; all of the plays make use of costume changes, some more risqué than others, as crucial plot devices. The emphasis is on how roles are played. Characters are called up to recreate favorite scenes for a viewing audience made up of underworld gods, or a character’s deceit results in another character’s becoming another person who can, in turn, only be redeemed through the motions of watching a play. Stage work is employed in such a way that would be irrelevant if the play had been written only as reading matter. *Mi Heng* finds a pretext to have two singing girls perform doltish songs; the monk in *Zen Master Yu* performs elaborate pantomimes that allow for comic misunderstandings; *Mulan* stages a woman turning herself into a man, and then effortlessly returning, many years later, as a woman; and *Girl Graduate* has an interlude of courtroom scenes where the heroine metes out justice in three cases unrelated to the play itself except to illustrate her wisdom. If these plays have been typically construed as Xu Wei’s allegories of social protest, they must also be much more than that. The plays are particularly significant because, through these expressions of play, they directly address the difficulty of depicting one’s real and true self.

In a preface to the great Yuan dynasty play *The Story of the Western Wing* (*Xixiang ji* 西廂記), Xu Wei complained:
In the affairs of the world there is the authentic and there is the imitative. In plain words, authentic is the real self; imitative is the substitute self. The substitute self is what is meant in the commentary “The maid acting as mistress ultimately feels embarrassed.” This means that the maid acting as mistress wants to make herself up to become the mistress and adds on more ornaments, but just covers up her simplicity. This is why in this book I think little of the imitative, and value the authentic; what everyone “oohs and aahs” about, I “ho-hum” about. How is it that among dramatists and writers not one of them is like this? Alas, who can I talk to? What everyone neglects, I alone savor; what everyone prioritizes, I alone spit out. Alas, who can I talk to?

This complaint gives voice to one of the most intriguing questions about drama. Xu Wei is speaking about the authentic self, using characters of a play to explain what it is. In his conceptual vision, the staged world is a real one, where distinctions exist to separate the authentic from the imitative, all within a form that is entirely imitative. Yet, the genre of drama, which ostensibly depends upon play-acting, substitution, and imitation, still manages to depict the authentic. The process of watching drama and contemplating how it works demonstrates that what we know is derived nearly exclusively from what we are told and shown as viewers of a staged work and, similarly, as participants in life.

The parallels of our “real” world with the world of the theater are apparent. “Dramatic irony” describes the state of an audience’s awareness of information unknown to characters onstage, as when Oedipus pronounces a death sentence on the person who has caused the plague in Thebes in Sophocles’ fifth-century BCE play. Although Oedipus is unaware that he is the one who has brought on the curse by killing his father and marrying his mother, the audience knows the facts, and their experience of the play is enhanced by their possession of this privileged knowledge. This sensation of being granted access to some shared privilege plays a large part in making the experience of theater so compelling. The theater audience, with its privileged access to authenticity, can witness a character realizing something that it already knows, an experience that is rare in our own world. Audiences thus rely on the knowledge they receive from the characters onstage to shape their understanding of events as they occur. In life, too, we glean information from what we are told, but our sources are not uniformly reliable; in drama, what we are told is our most reliable source of information—far more reliable, sometimes, than what we see with our eyes. A stage may contain a bedroom, or it may contain a whole world; a few men in battle may represent armies...
of thousands; an old male actor may really be a young girl; a man appearing on stage may actually be a ghost. In all of these cases, we the audience accept these scenarios because that is how the players describe them to us; the lines of the play help us decide whether the puppet on the stage is meant to be seen as a puppet or whether it is meant to be seen as a real boy.

Another particularity of drama is the unavoidable presence of the performing body. Questions about selfhood and subjectivity, expressed in contemplation of the interplay between one’s body and the self residing within it, were routinely raised in the poetry and prose of Xu Wei’s time. These questions find their best expression in drama, where they become directly accessible through the limitations of the actors’ bodies.

John Hay, writing about the body in Chinese art, notes that even in the sexually explicit novel *Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jinpingmei* 金瓶梅) “there is no image of a body as a whole object, least of all as a solid and well-shaped entity whose shapeliness is supported by the structure of a skeleton and defined in the exteriority of swelling muscle and enclosing flesh.” Garments or other inanimate objects may stand in for bodies quite easily in Chinese literary descriptions and even pictorial work, but drama requires an unmistakably physical presence, even as costume plays a crucial part.

Mark Elvin draws the distinction between the corporeal body (*shen* 身), which includes the sartorial in its definition, and the heart-mind (*xin* 心), and demonstrates how the two are intertwined. He writes of how “defects of character could lead to bodily deformity,” calling to mind the fluidity of boundaries and the way that the body, *shen*, does not simply contain but is the self. The interesting balance between what we see and what we are told is highlighted by this disparity, especially given the fact that Chinese drama lays special emphasis on what the costume tells us about the character because of his or her role type. From its inception in the Song dynasty through its dizzyingly varied and obsessively catalogued subdivisions by the time of Peking Opera (*jingju* 京剧), characters were played by role types that each already had its own constellation of referents. A character made up as a *dan* (旦 young female lead) could never be anything but what was expected of a *dan*, never to be confused with a clown (*chou* 卜), for example. The physical appearance, whether marked by makeup on the face, costume, or a combination, told the audience essential qualities about the character.

Xu Wei’s plays complicate the relationship between clothing and the
self-body in these plays, which all have a variation on a stripping scene, challenging the viewer’s assumptions about believing what he sees. Mi Heng, Liu Cui, and Auntie Huang (in *Mi Heng*, *Zen Master Yu*, and *Girl Graduate*, respectively) all remove their clothes to make a point: Mi Heng does it to express his outrage toward Cao Cao, Liu Cui does it to demonstrate her enlightenment as she changes to monks’ garb, and Auntie Huang does it to demonstrate that she is a woman. Mulan and Huang Chonggu (in *Mulan* and *Girl Graduate*, respectively) change into male clothes and back into female clothes again as the central subjects of each play. Eric Henry, shedding light on the emphasis on clothing and its relation to the characters’ expressions of self, suggests that clothing is tied to the very construction of humanity in China.27

Three chapters consider how gender is implicated within these negotiations of showing and telling. As the actual roles are more important than the gender of the actor or actress who plays them, costume and makeup stand in as gender markers. This is so much a part of the conventions of drama of the time that it should be unremarkable, and yet *Zen Master Yu*, *Mulan*, and *Girl Graduate* stand out because they specifically take up gender changing as their subject. Charlotte Furth, writing about cases of gender overlap in the late Ming, notes that “late Ming gender identity was not easily compromised by the sexually ‘strange.’ Social role normally overshadowed the sexual in gender construction, and the result for males was that mutability of bodies and diversity of objects of desire need not render male gender problematic.”28 Nor does it imply a change in the assessment of the role of women in society. In this book I consider how these plays instead use gender changes to emphasize how the sartorial can underscore the importance of maintaining a true, unaffected self.

The four chapters that follow provide a critical reading of each short play within *Four Cries of a Gibbon*. Although the plays do not share characters or specific plot elements, they are indisputably connected to each other by a shared preoccupation with the complications of defining oneself. Each play can be seen as a variation on the same model: a character sees clearly how he or she wishes to be, and then sets out to ensure that others will see things the same way. This is especially underscored in chapter 2’s reading of *Zen Master Yu*, as the Zen Master himself ends up reincarnated as a woman and unable to recognize himself; s/he needs to rely on evidence planted by his former self to establish and accept his
true identity. Yet, as I demonstrate in the three other chapters, the primary concern of the protagonist in each play is first to define him or herself, and then to secure agreement from everyone else of that identity. Although Mulan, Mi Heng, and Chonggu do not need a monk to awaken them to their true identity, they, too, spend a great deal of time onstage displaying themselves to others and musing aloud about it. The plays are appended at the end of this book in fully annotated English translation; the reader unfamiliar with these plays may wish to read the appendixes first, before turning to the critical analysis found within the four chapters. The shared themes of play and dress, of voicing sincerity in regard to one’s identity and seeking evidence to affirm that identity, recur insistently throughout the plays. When read together as a set, the variations on these themes harmonize and find greater resonance, demonstrating the cohesiveness of Four Cries of a Gibbon. By drawing our attention to the extreme measures taken by these characters to establish something so basic as their sense of self, Xu Wei brings to light the complex negotiations involved in our worldly interactions.

Drama has first and foremost always referred us to how we comprehend the world. It questions how we understand ourselves with respect to others, and how we understand others with respect to ourselves, a concern that enters into every social transaction, and cultural construct. These transactions, both in life and in entertainment, are made through the simultaneously crucial and untrustworthy medium of language. If language is important in the drama of Shakespeare or Sophocles, for example, then how much more so in Chinese theater, where characters are filled by set role types, known to every audience member through the tradition of symbolic gestures, costume, and face makeup. The stock characters necessitate the actor’s self-introductory speech upon entering the stage, as the audience would have no other way of knowing who a dan, a sheng, or any other familiar role type is playing without this statement of self. Each time a new play is performed, the same familiar faces and costumes take on new personalities, once again emphasizing how we depend on what we are told to make sense of what we see.

In spite of the peculiarities of Chinese drama performance that draw attention to the dominance of type and self-identification, this book’s argument extends beyond the drama of the Ming dynasty, beyond the drama of China even, to make a claim about the workings of a play itself. Whether or not it explicitly depicts a scene of acting on stage, which is
so often a feature in dramatic works of every period and culture, drama is grounded in assumptions about acting: the audience knows what is expected of it and complies by believing what is presented. Meaning is formulated situationally, alongside the narrative progression of the drama, and this is a pattern that we are enjoined to recognize in the world of our own experience. Each play resolutely focuses on situations where one entity encounters another, and the ways that the viewer’s perspective and the subject’s choices shift, sometimes sharply and sometimes subtly. It almost always requires modulations that disorient, sometimes even quite violently, and yet they are modulations from which, in the world of these plays, all parties recover a mutually acceptable understanding. This push and pull, this assuming one thing only to quickly assume quite the opposite, these plays reveal, is after all just a fact of everyday life. For all of its fascinating layers and bold and profound strokes, *Four Cries of a Gibbon*, like Xu Wei’s inky scrolls, projects a lightness of spirit both buoyant and refulgent. It is this buoyancy and refulgence that cause us to look closer, to learn a little bit more about the hand that crafted it. In the end, in our examination of the plays themselves, we find this to be patently clear: those strokes of wit, those plays of dark and light, are both the question and the answer. *Four Cries of a Gibbon* helps us to understand something of the nature of drama; this contemplation of the nature of drama challenges us to understand something of the nature of our world.