One

The Play as Map of the Empire

In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitylessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.

Suárez Miranda, Viajes de varones prudentes, Libro IV, Cap. XLV, Lérida, 1658
(Jorge Luis Borges, “On Exactitude in Science,” from In the Maker, 1960)

What would it mean to map a premodern empire? The cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard takes this short story by Borges—quoted above in its entirety—and turns it into a meditation on representation, using the map as an example of a representation so all-encompassing that it can take the place of the original. I take Borges’s story (whose fictional date of 1658 places it almost dead center chronologically of the texts discussed in this book) to mean something else entirely—as a meditation on the difficulties of representing an early modern empire.

The sort of imperial map we imagine now—something like those marble inlaid maps installed by Mussolini to glorify the old Roman empire, with Rome a central mass coming to spread over more of the Mediterranean basin and Europe—is an artifact of a modern conception of imperial power; for all his lofty intentions, Mussolini’s Roman empire is still nothing but primus inter pares, one polity
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(admittedly the biggest and most powerful), surrounded by others. But contemporary Roman jurists and political thinkers had something grander in mind. Not only was Rome civilization itself, but, as the intellectual historian Anthony Pagden writes, part of the imperial project was “to include everyone there was in the world.” What borders would such a map have? How to depict it against the backdrop of the rest of the world, if it is the rest of the world? Mapping the reach of the Catholic Church, say, with its promise of universality, presents something of the same problem.

In some sense, the geopolitical map cannot represent such an empire, whose space is not normal space. The frustration of Borges’s cartographers—and the escalation of their efforts—is understandable: perhaps a map as large as the empire itself could avoid the pitfalls of imperial representation. Nonetheless, with the universal promise of the Spanish Empire, or the Catholic Church, or the Qing Empire, any map—no matter how vast—might seem Useless, inadvertently pointing to the Empire’s limitations. And what to do with the map then? It is a double of what cannot be doubled, and it can only be consigned to the Wilderness, an imaginary, entirely uncontented location, filled with the stateless, the “Animals and Beggars” of which Suárez Miranda writes.

Midway through Li Xuanyu’s Qingzhong pu (Registers of the pure and loyal), written around the time of the Ming dynasty’s fall (1644) about a popular uprising in 1626, it seems that the evil eunuch Wei Zhongxian and his supporters have won the day. The eunuch’s faction has killed or driven to death a number of its enemies, including our hero Zhou Shunchang, innocent of any crime except the choice of his friends. Zhou has already been murdered in prison, while his son (who has managed to sneak into his cell) watches. In Act 20, the ghosts of those killed gather together and head toward the capital to seek vengeance.

The angry ghosts make their way to Beijing in what seems to the modern reader like an airplane ride spanning a great swathe of the mighty empire. As they fly above Suzhou and head northward, they cross the Yangzi. Singing in chorus, the ghosts look down and describe the vista beneath them: “The Yangzi River rolls, its waves striking the heavens/But still unable to wash clear the enmity of
Yunyang.” And then looking downward, using ancient appellations for some of the locations, they name each of the regions between Suzhou and the capital: “In one gaze there is bustling Wei and Yang;/ The obscure Huai River and Anhui/ Tiny Qingdao and Qi/ And arid Mo and Yan.”

To arrive in the capital, the ghosts make a journey of eleven hundred kilometers or so as the crow (or spirit) flies—many more if on foot, horseback, or boat to take advantage of the roads, courier stations, and the Grand Canal that a terrestrial traveler would have to have used. Even under the most optimistic of conditions, such a journey in the seventeenth century would have taken a month. But the ghosts’ journey takes place in a moment; and unlike a trip in an airplane, the whole landscape beneath is taken in all at once, the whole mighty empire comprehended in “one gaze.”

There is a similar moment in Changsheng dian (Palace of everlasting life; 1688), one of the most famous plays in the canon. In it, the Qing playwright Hong Sheng presents his version of one of the most compelling episodes in Chinese history: the disastrous consequences of the love affair between the Tang emperor Xuanzong and his concubine Yang Yuhuan. Pining for her even after she has hanged herself at the behest of rebelling troops, the emperor orders her body disinterred, only to find the grave empty. In Act 43, a shaman seeks her out in the spirit world, leaving his body among the living while his soul soars to the immortals.

What the shaman sees as he begins his journey resembles the flight of the ghosts in Qingzhong pu. The actor playing the part of the shaman mimes the act of flying on the winds. He starts off in the known world: “Securely treading on the lightness of the white clouds,/ Opportunely taking advantage of the high winds’ convenience,/ I stride over the bowl-like blue sea./ When I gaze back, where does the realm appear?/ Pale and fading out, nine spots of floating mist.”

The “nine spots” are jiuzhou 九州, the nine lands that make up the emperor’s realm, here so reduced by distance that they—immense territories filled with great cities and populated by millions—almost fade to nothingness. In one glance, yiwang 一望, the ghosts can see the entire area between Suzhou and Beijing; the shaman outdoes them, seeing at once all of the nine lands.
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Still, the shaman’s journey has only begun: “In speaking I have already come to the eastern end of the sea, / With its peaks of ten thousand cubits. / These are the three islands and the ten islets each piercing through to the heavens. / I’ll just circle around the high and lofty garden of the immortals, / To the beautiful palaces.” The “three islands and the ten islets” refer to a mythical landscape, the island homes of the immortals. Carefully numbered and named just like the nine lands the shaman looked back on before, these “three islands and ten islets” are of a different order from the nine lands. If the ghosts’ journey could have been undertaken, albeit with more difficulty, on conventional modes of transportation, the shaman’s journey depends on the altered states of dreams, trance, and death with which Changsheng di an abounds.

Within the context of the late Ming and early Qing, these moments can surely not be detached from a late imperial interest in maps and mapmaking. The shaman of Changsheng di an and the ghosts of Qingzhong pu fly over landscapes that might as well be giant maps that gesture toward encompassing the whole of the mighty empire, or perhaps even the whole universe. These isolated moments conceive of all imperial space as a whole; more broadly, however, one might see the genre of chuanqi—long dramas based on southern performance traditions—in this light, since the very form of the genre represents imperial space.

Even though for centuries chuanqi have been experienced largely as excerpts, one structural feature all chuanqi plays share emerges only when one reads the plays in their entirety. All chuanqi are situated in a precise moment in historical time and are obliged to violate the Aristotelian unity of place. None can take place in a single locale; instead, at least some characters must move from one part of the empire to another, and actions taking place in one locale are shown to have an impact on others taking place at a great distance. Such a generic demand is remarkable, since in late imperial times travel itself was anomalous: women were expected to remain at home, and the vast majority of men traveled very little. Travel’s ubiquity in chuanqi reflects the genre’s close ties to the elite, since journeys of officials from post to post are not only a mainstay of the genre but also among the few perfectly sanctioned travels of the
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Every chuanqi creates an imagined empire. The stage turns into a window on the empire at large, with its many provinces, many spheres of human existence, and many simultaneous actions all adding up to a single play with a unified narrative arc.

Simultaneity across space not only characterizes the generic norms of the chuanqi drama but also serves as a fundamental way of conceiving of an empire connecting far-flung locations. In writing on nationalism, Benedict Anderson famously discusses the impact that the novel and the newspaper had on how time was imagined in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe and its colonies; both of these forms allowed readers to tie their own existences to those of others distant from them in space but inhabiting the same moment. For the same reason, calendars, which allowed for ritual action to be coordinated across space, were imperially sponsored projects. Consider, for example, Act 8 in Tang Xianzu’s Mudan ting (The peony pavilion; 1598), in which the local official Du Bao supervises the first planting of the season; that moment, just as much as the invasion of the barbarian prince that takes place later, is meant to invoke simultaneity of action across the sweep of the empire.

In chuanqi, events taking place at the same time also tie together the spheres of the political and the domestic, whose unity was the essence of the Confucian empire. What seems in its outlines to be a simple romantic comedy or a domestic drama cannot find full resolution in the confines of a household, or even the borders of a single county or a single province; instead, action inevitably spills out into the empire at large. Sometimes this is because local matters and great affairs of state are shown to be linked causally: in one of Changsheng dian’s most famous scenes, couriers hurrying lychees from the far south to the north to indulge Concubine Yang’s whims trample a blind fortuneteller to death. What happens at court affects even the humblest of countrypeople and vice versa.

But even more so, it is specifically the case that the domestic and the global are shown to be one. If romantic comedies and tragedies eventually turn political, plays concerned explicitly with history or court politics show how the forces that tear apart an empire eventually find their way into the fabric of personal life. In Ruan Dacheng’s
Yanzi jian (The swallow letter; 1645), for example, a love triangle involving a young man, a courtesan, and an official’s daughter requires no less an event than the An Lushan Rebellion to resolve. What might appear distant or lofty—factional struggles or a political quarrel—inevitably infiltrates the sphere of the family. How domestic can a play about the evil eunuch Wei Zhongxian’s downfall be? Qingzhong pu’s hero incurs the wrath of Wei through the most domestic of all actions, the arrangement of his daughter’s marriage. In betrothing her to the son of Wei’s enemy, he sets up a chain of actions that leads to his own death and ultimately that of Wei.

In the early Qing dynasty, the Kangxi emperor commissioned the Jesuit missionaries Joachim Bouvet and Jean-Baptiste Régis to head a surveying team, which would take twenty years to prepare a map of the entire empire, meticulously measuring distances both through travel and through state-of-the-art astronomical observations. The final product, the 1718 Huangyu quantu (Complete map of the empire), was of unprecedented size and detail and included not just all of present-day China but extended even to present-day Nepal’s Mount Everest, its height carefully surveyed. Like Suárez Miranda’s, the Jesuits’ map is an ideal form, more comprehensive and more encompassing than the debased reality of the empire itself.8

The next few generations witnessed other ambitious projects that also aimed at total comprehensiveness. In the 1730s, the Qianlong emperor commissioned the Daqing tongli (Complete Qing rituals), a collection prescribing proper ritual behavior for every milestone in life, from birth to death. The Siku quanshu (Complete library of the Four Treasuries), the Qianlong emperor’s project to gather together and classify all the writings of the Chinese tradition, also attempts to encompass the whole of the empire. Like the map representing the empire, which might be rolled up and stored away, which might be more real than what it showed, so too the two-thousand-year-old literary tradition might be fully comprised.

Although a number of scholars have studied the structure of ideas that buttressed the creation of empires in early modern Europe, historians of China have tended to assume (or even to argue) that such
a complex of ideas was unnecessary for the Chinese state. When territorial expansion was debated, as at the Kangxi court in the case of Taiwan, the focus was not theoretical—whether there was a point beyond which the empire should not expand—but instead purely expedient. No minister wondered whether the empire was exceeding its rights. Public debates like those that took place in Spain in 1551 between Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Bartolomé de las Casas regarding the moral justifiability of the Conquest would have been unimaginable. Just as the Qing dynasts claimed, the borders to a state governed by benevolent behavior might not exist at all, as the traditional appellation *wuwai* 無外 (without an outside) indicates. States defined by a shared language or a shared history have built-in limits. But the empire was different. Why should the whole world not fall under a single Confucian rule? All it would take would be allegiance to the emperor and adopting proper beliefs about the family. If the Empire is characterized not by a people, nor even a language, but an idea, then why should it not extend infinitely, covering all worlds and cultures?

We can consider plays in the context of imperial ideology—both as reinforcement and as challenge. If *chuanqi* dramas might be thought of as windows onto a doubled empire that always stands in complex relationship to the original, they are an ideal version, more whole, more encompassing, more certain, than the real empire ever was. The early Ming emperors carefully censored the presence of emperors in their stagings of *zaju* (or northern-style drama, which was very popular from the Yuan into the middle of the Ming); they recognized the challenges that a duplicated emperor could present to the singular one. A doubled empire might have a similarly threatening impact on absolute claims of singularity. In relating the final fall of the Song dynasty and the general Wen Tianxiang’s principled resistance to and death at the hands of the Mongol conquerors, the eighteenth-century playwright Jiang Shiquan’s *Dongqing shu* (The evergreen tree; 1781) thematizes the problem of the doubled empire, one half terrestrial and one half heavenly. Loyalty’s very essence is that it brooks no relativism and allows for no substitutes. Nonetheless, the scene of Wen Tianxiang’s execution is necessarily broken by a chiasmus in which two separate worlds are depicted, and the
The general’s place in both shown. The first half of the act shows his defiance up to the very moment when he is killed, and the second half, unseen by any of the characters in the first half, shows the Dragon Emperor’s commendation of him.

Wen Tianxiang’s ultimate apotheosis is beyond question—yet throughout the play, we have hints that his martyrdom is complicated: perhaps others who surrendered to the Mongols had good reason; perhaps Wen’s motivations have been selfish; and indisputably the mandate of heaven has passed from the Song. Wen’s last words even include a benediction to the new Mongol emperor, urging him to do his best, a tacit acknowledgment of the new monarch’s legitimacy. Nonetheless, Wen Tianxiang’s reward after death removes all such subtle moral shadings; the Dragon Emperor speaks from an absolutist, universalist position that is incontrovertible. In chuanqi, the immortal world present in each play bequeaths something of its own certainty to the imperial order, even when, as in Dongqing shu, the play otherwise explores the contingent, imperfect, morally ambiguous nature of imperial power.

The empire is more than the commingled spheres of domestic and global, or the world of men and that of gods. Modern readers have noted critically that chuanqi plots depend on coincidences that strain belief; virtually all demand accidental encounters in some strange location between characters who appear to each other to be strangers, but who are actually closely connected in some direct or indirect fashion. Friends, acquaintances, relations, friends of friends, run into each other. That these encounters can take place at all suggests that this empire, enormous though it might be, is not of infinite scope and utterly without borders.

In Xilou ji (The western tower; 1610), by Yuan Yuling (1592–1670), the young man Yu Juan accidentally encounters a friend at an inn on his way to the examinations. Yu Juan reveals that he has not died of lovesickness—but he also learns, incorrectly, that his beloved has been driven to suicide by the persistent attentions of a powerful official’s son. This conversation between the two friends is in turn overheard by a third man, a stranger who vows to avenge the
two lovers. Even though the play’s action takes place in cities across the Jiangnan region, we are expected to believe that an eavesdropper might know enough about all parties concerned to be able to put his plan into action; the play’s dénouement depends on not one but two vanishingly improbable encounters.

Here the world is imagined politically, as a finite network of acquaintances. By politics, I do not mean various authors’ associations with various contemporary political cliques, although much important scholarship has dealt with such matters. Instead, this book is concerned with politics in another sense. As the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai puts it, “what creates the link between exchange and value is politics, construed broadly.” Writers of late imperial fiction were, I propose, deeply engaged with profoundly political questions like: What ties individuals together? To what extent are these ties permanent, or do they remain contingent and circumstantial? What transforms individual families or couples into a society? These questions were often addressed, as Appadurai suggests, through the problem of exchange, specifically through the interface between commodities and persons.

The book that follows draws heavily on anthropological scholarship—some ethnographic description but especially theoretical explorations of kinship and exchange—because the drama and fiction of this period wrestle with very similar problems. I am not suggesting in any way that late imperial Chinese literature can be used as raw data for ethnographic description. Instead, obsessed with questions we consider anthropological and highly self-conscious in its discussion of economy and society, of exchange and kinship, the literature itself is actively engaged in staking out and exploring these questions. In effect, the authors are themselves the anthropologists of what they saw around them.

One might just as easily see things the other way; from my perspective, twentieth-century anthropologists seem deeply engaged in problems that engrossed Chinese writers of the late imperial period. Take, for example, the following position on one of the most important questions in Chinese philosophy: “what makes man really different from the animal is that, in mankind, a family could not
exist if there were no society: i.e., a plurality of families ready to acknowledge that there are other links than consanguineous ones, and that the natural process of filiation can only be carried on through the social process of affinity.” One could hardly come up with a better one-sentence summary of late imperial Confucianism, and yet the author of the above quotation is no premodern, nor a sinologist; rather, he is instead the twentieth-century French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, in an essay on the nature of the family.

In fact, this problem—the relationship between society and family—has been a hallmark of Chinese thought from its beginnings. How do the parallel structures of individual human families combine to form a society? The Daxue (Great learning), one of the Four Books studied by all participants in the examination system, presents one answer to Lévi-Strauss’s question about how the family might form a part of a greater human collective. According to the Daxue, the state is simply the family writ large; in both family and state, order is to be imposed and taught: “The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts” (1.3).

But the Daxue is only a jumping-off point to questions that reach a new level of sophistication and prominence in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Is it the case that, as Lévi-Strauss suggests (but the Daxue does not), the family is a more natural structure than a society? Many scholars have suggested that the place of ritual changed over the course of the Ming, with increasing numbers of thinkers arguing that it served to express emotion rather than create it. Perhaps that philosophical shift implies a belief that ultimately artificial institutions must somehow accommodate natural human sentiment. What, then, is the connection between those institutions and seemingly natural human relationships? How are the ties of the state related to familial relationships? Or more broadly, what is it that ties people together as a community beyond what connects two individuals to-
gether in a relationship? In late imperial China, writers of drama and fiction addressed these questions head on.

In Meng Chengshun’s enormously influential tragic romance Jiao-hong ji (translated by Cyril Birch as Mistress and Maid; ~1640), Wang Jiaoniang’s father initially refuses to permit a match between the girl and her first cousin. The father cites the commands of the state. When presented with the proposal, he sings angrily: “What you say is ignorant. / To make a good match / One must act according to the principles of human relations. Nowadays the court has established the law: / Maternal cousins are not allowed to marry. They call each other brother and sister / How can they become related by marriage?” Her father argues that marriage between the two cousins (who do not share the same surname) would offend renlun, “the principles of human relations,” first because it has been forbidden by the court, and second because, since the two cousins already stand in relation to each other as brother and sister, they cannot also be husband and wife.

Renlun consists of five relations: that between father and son, between ruler and subject, between husband and wife, between elder brother and younger brother, and between friends. Jiaoniang’s father sees a conflict between two of these ties, so that loyalty to the state stands in the way of the young people’s marriage. By allowing the match to take place, the father would at once sanction incest and disobey the strictures of the state—two offenses against renlun with one blow. Of all human relations, a love affair between cousins, since they in some sense belong to the same family, seems perhaps the most confined and the easiest to keep within the family’s walls. Why does this matter need to spread outside, much less to the state, as Wang Jiaoniang’s father suggests? He points to another way in which the empire is connected together. To her father, all five human relations are interrelated, to the point that there is no fulfilling the moral imperatives of one while ignoring the others. Far more than any dream of flying or of travel, variations on this notion of the empire as a network of relationships were extraordinarily powerful and pervasive throughout the late imperial period.
Dramatizations of the fundamental unity of the five relations had been part of the cultural repertoire for centuries. Qiu Jun’s didactic play *Wulun quanbei* (The Five Normative Relations perfected and completed; mid-fifteenth century) tells of a concubine captured by a barbarian invader and then commanded by her mother to kill herself. Katherine Carlitz writes of Yao Maoliang’s southern drama *Shuangzhong ji* (Two great loyalists; fifteenth century), which in enacting the unity of the *wulun* renders the state as natural as a family. In this play (a precursor to the *chuanqi* genre), a general whose troops are under siege comes up with the idea of feeding his loyal concubine (in the form of a soup) to his starving troops. Fortunately for him, the concubine volunteers her body, sparing him from having to commit murder. Her sacrifice, which demonstrates her commitment not only to her master but to the polity as a whole, inspires the troops to fight on. Immediately thereafter, his brother general’s young servant boy makes the same vow. Once they are eaten, the concubine and the servant are literally integrated, as much as anybody can be, into the body politic, which is shown to us to be a seemingly natural entity built on individual, incontrovertible loyalties: the love of a woman for her husband, the gratitude of a servant to his master.\(^{15}\)

Even though the equation between sexual love and loyalty—two of the *wulun*—dates back at least as far as the *Chuci*, the trope takes on a new urgency in the late imperial period and is made obliquely and explicitly in lyric poetry, as Kang-i Sun Chang explores, and in both fictional and nonfictional prose. In the wake of the Ming dynasty’s fall, it became a commonplace to draw complicated correlations and equivalences between love for a courtesan and loyalty toward the doomed state.\(^{16}\)

*Shuangzhong ji* is not the only late imperial text to propose an organic body constructed of filiality, loyalty, and chastity; other texts suggest that an individual might embody all the familial and political virtues. In an encomium to Shen Yunying, the daughter of a deceased Ming general, Mao Qiling (1623–1716) articulated the same fantasy. Once again, these virtues can be fully incorporated within a single body only through the sacrifice of a female body. After her
father's death in battle, Shen Yunying took over as general of his troops, killing numerous bandit soldiers and reclaiming her father's body for burial. Later on, after the Manchus defeated the Ming, she prepared to take her own life by drowning (but was stopped by her mother). Mao praises her: "Loyalty, filiality, chastity, and virtue—all gathered in one woman's person, this is something that since the ancients has not existed."17

At the same time, the female body also holds the promise of true debauchery. In Jingzhong qi (The banner of loyalty; seventeenth century), a Jurchen prince brags that his concubines now include the Song emperor's own ladies, as well as the captive wives and daughters of high ministers at the Song court. But the most notorious of his mistresses is none other than the traitor Qin Gui's own wife; the prince says, "His wife Ms Wang from the beginning has come in and out of my bed curtains, and we have often shared banquets."18 Capable of even worse than the infamous Qin Gui is his wife, precisely because she can embody adultery as well as treason.

Perhaps this fantasy—that all the virtues (or their equivalent vices) might be gathered together into the same body, never to be torn asunder again—is prevalent precisely because the potential fissures among the wulun are all too real. The community is always capable of dissolving into loving husbands who are not filial sons, inseparable brothers who do not see themselves as servants of the same state, and friends who are perfidious.

Jiaoniang’s father refuses to give the two young lovers permission to marry for two reasons: first, so they might act in accordance with the law, and also so they might continue as proper sister and brother. He does not give priority to either tie, but he does choose the conflation of two of the wulun—vassal and sibling—over that of two others—spouse and sibling. In other words, the fantasy that all normative relations might be expressed at once, variously articulated by so many writers of this period, is itself uncomfortably close to another nightmare, that of luannian, that all the relations might be gathered together, in a daughter who is also a wife, or brother and sister who are also husband and wife. One of the themes this book traces is the fear of incest, which, practiced collectively, allows for a
way to imagine the relation between each and every household in the empire, all equals in the same position. The imagined community in premodern China has much to do with imagining other families, all assiduously avoiding endogamy.

The movement of people, as they join new households, divide up inheritances, and engage in trade, can hardly be separated from the circulation of objects. The chapters that follow explore these two models, of people as members of interlocking families and as participants in the exchange of objects, in a variety of different fictional texts. Constant flux marks both the families and the ownership of the objects. Any family unit is temporary, constantly being destroyed that it might be perpetuated. And with objects—exchanged, traded, bought, and sold—it is not so much their static ownership that is important as their motion across time and space.

Among other historians, Craig Clunas has analyzed the late Ming craze for collection and the rise of the cult of the antique (and the concomitant rise of the forgery). One collector, the belle-lettrist Lu Shusheng (1509–1605), writes about his love for inkstones. How can it be, he wonders, that even the opinions of authorities differ so on the best inkstones? He muses:

Perhaps there is simply no fixed value for things, and their worth is to be decided only through the mouths of literati? In that case, how can anyone know whether those in my collection are superb, or not? If, in my hobby of collecting inkslabs, I'll take nothing but the very best ones, then among rare antiques in the world, aren’t there a myriad things other than inkslabs? As for rare antiques, men in power can surely acquire them, but often they have to snatch them from the possession of others.\(^\text{19}\)

Lu Shusheng rejects all notion of gentlemanly collectors of rarefied objects whose hobby allows them to escape the dusty struggles of the world. Instead, in the picture he paints, ownership of material possession is always tenuous, subject to the desires of others, whether those who determine value or those who determine ownership. Even more than inkstones, it is value that circulates: created by some, desired by all, seized by a few. The inkstones provide an arena for connection and competition among people.
Chuanqi titles suggest that one might read the plays in this context, of objects that are the center of competing desires. The plays feature not only the travels of people but also those of their objects, which must pass through the ownership of many before they find a final, proper resting place. These two interlocking sets of journeys can invite a form of mapping. Many chuanqi are named after the play’s emblematic object, and in some sense plays trace the tokens’ movements, as they circulate through various economies—whether powered by lust for sex, for profit, or for vengeance. For example, Wang Jide’s Tihong ji (Written on red; ~1623) hinges upon a maple leaf with a poem written on it that travels between lovers; Gao Lian’s Yuzan ji (Story of the jade hairpin; ~1575) tells of how an engaged couple—and their engagement gifts, a jade hairpin and a fan pendant—are reunited.

In Yipeng xue (A handful of snow; ~1640), Li Xuanyu introduces an object much like Lu Shusheng’s inkstones, whose ownership invites violence and even murder. The eponymous “handful of snow” is a priceless antique cup owned by the cultured, aristocratic Mo Huaigu. Yan Song, son of the real-life corrupt prime minister Yan Shifan, catches wind of this treasure and makes plans to seize it. Instead of giving it up, though, Mo Huaigu secretly has a copy made and turns it over to Yan Shifan instead of the original. When Yan Shifan finds out, he authorizes a search of Mo’s property; a loyal steward is able to sneak the cup out, and Mo Huaigu, his concubine, and the steward all flee to the protection of a friend stationed on the frontier. They are followed, and Yan Shifan authorizes Mo Huaigu’s beheading and the exile of all his family. But the same loyal steward takes his master’s place and is decapitated in his stead. Later, Mo Huaigu’s only son survives because his own manservant takes his place in going into exile. In other words, this play revolves around substitutions, sacrifices, and trades: a fake antique that passes for a real one; a steward who dies for his master, who in turn is said to have died for the sake of the cup; another servant who takes the name of the family’s single heir.

The cup is simply an outward manifestation of value that circulates; in this play, people and objects are alarmingly fungible. As
Appadurai writes, “commodities, by virtues of their exchange destinies and mutual commensurability, tend to dissolve the links between persons and things.” The play revolves around two scales of value, two precious invaluable objects whose continuity and existence are threatened, both characterized by extreme singularity: the antique cup, passed down within the Mo family for countless generations, and the aristocratic family itself, dwindled to the only son Mo Huaigu and his only son Mo Hao. And yet, although substitutes ultimately cannot be found for either of these and all the fakes are uncovered, both the cup (missing for much of the play) and the Mo lineage (whose last heir spends much of the play under a different surname) survive by investing their value elsewhere. As the anthropologist Igor Kopytoff suggests, biographies of things and those of people can never quite be sorted out properly; as we see with the cup and the Mo family, commodities dissolve the lines bounding people from things.

In fact, the presence of these objects is absolutely critical to maintaining the human community, as becomes obvious when people circulate in the absence of objects. The belles-lettrist Ji Yun (1724–1805) suggests one reason that chuanqi so often revolve around things. In one anecdote from Yuewei caotang biji (Random jottings from the Cottage of Close Scrutiny), he tells of a real-life girl whose experiences closely resemble those of a character from a play. After the girl’s dying parents sell her for the price of two coffins, she enters Ji Yun’s grandfather’s house as a servant. All that the little girl—renamed Liangui by the lady of the house—remembers of her origins is that she comes from Shandong; she cannot remember the name of her village or its county, only that it is near a postal route. Finally, she knows she is betrothed to a neighbor boy named Hu and that his family, too, had to flee to avoid starvation.

Some years later, when she is married, her groom—whose last name is Liu—turns out to have been adopted from a family whose surname is Hu. And, moreover, he hails from Xintai, in Shandong, right on the postal route. In other words, his story is a perfect fit for Liangui’s own, and the whole thing sounds as if comes right out of literature: “It seemed rather like the story of Princess Lechang’s mirror, in which a couple was first separated and then reunited.” Ji Yun
regrets, though, that the union does not measure up to a literary
one: “My late uncle Lifu said, ‘With a little embellishment, this in-
cident could be made into a chuanqi. Unfortunately, this girl was a
stupid hick who only cared about eating and sleeping and would be
unworthy of such embellishment. What a pity!’”

In other words, Liangui and her husband lack the signature object
which would certainly have played an important role in a drama
with the same plot. Ji Yun writes: “Hard evidence (xianzheng), how-
ever, was lacking.” He refers specifically to hard evidence, that
which manifests itself, here a material object to be used in exchange,
like a mirror, a fan, or a painting. Where the real Princess Lechang
was reunited with her husband because each carried half of a broken
mirror, Liangui lacks such a token, leaving her and her husband as
unmoored from their identities in marriage as they were before. Hu-
man beings, roaming around, joining and rejoining each other, are
insufficient unto themselves in forming a society or even a play;
without a token, Liangui is—in Ji Yun’s own words—not too much
more than an animal, interested only in the bodily functions of eat-
ing and sleep. The circulations of people must be accompanied by
the movement of objects, which must have the capacity to circulate
independently. Ji Yun is right that chuanqi dramas address these con-
cerns: how a mirror, or a fan, or a painting can return to its rightful
owner poses questions about the finitude of a population, how we
are moored to our own identities, and whether humans have places
where they properly belong.

In Writing and Authority in Early China, Mark Edward Lewis argues
that China’s great contribution to world history—the worldwide em-
pire, managed by classically trained bureaucrats—was above all else a
speech act, created by words. Rather than viewing texts as the means
by which the empire perpetuated itself, Lewis argues, we might turn
things around and see the empire as the means by which the texts
perpetuated themselves. Lewis concerns himself with origins, but
some of the critics of Writing and Authority in Early China ask whether
the argument does not in fact apply better to a period later than that
covered by most of the book. Lewis closes the book with a comment
about the future of the civilization whose beginnings his book traces:
that the empire's textual double—on stage—continues to survive even now, long after the demise of its offstage counterpart.  

This introduction has centered on that staged empire. The rest of this book moves on to the imagined spaces and communities in short narrative and then concludes with the long novel. The book as a whole examines three different kinds of text, and not just the empire they create, but other communities and institutions as well. This is, in short, a book largely about genre. Different genres—operating simultaneously, often the product of the same pens—allow for radically different arguments about the nature of society. (I hasten to add that in no way are all major genres of late imperial literature represented here. Among others, I have omitted lyric, tanci, and all sectarian literature; even though I am concerned with the literary theme of comprehensiveness, this book in no way makes the same claim.) I have begun with the chuanqi, the most totalizing form of late imperial literature and the one inseparable to its core from the imperial system. In the chapters that follow, I turn to short and then to long fiction.

Of course, our understanding of genre may not perfectly coincide with that of the late imperial period. For example, the following chapters juxtapose discussions of various short classical narratives with their counterparts in the vernacular, although the classical tale was in many ways an entirely separate form. Even within short classical narratives there existed multiple internal divisions as well: the more fictional chuanqi set against the less fictional zhiguai; long, complex narratives as opposed to short anecdotes. So even as this book turns on genre theory—which in itself was in many ways the centerpiece of late imperial literary criticism—I am myself guilty of sometimes muddying generic waters.

And a final stipulation: do not let these texts' sharing the same library shelf or the volumes of a single writer's oeuvre deceive you. To speak of genre seems to imply parallelism, but the three main forms I discuss in this book—chuanqi, short narrative, and long prose narrative—were not parallel forms of expression; instead, as scholarship makes increasingly clear, they occupied radically different positions within the culture. They varied wildly in the size of their readership. For the late Ming and the first decades of the Qing, in
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urbanized Jiangnan especially, but in urban areas elsewhere as well, chuanqi dominated cultural life in a virtually unprecedented way, with arias and plots part of the texture of life, not just for the elite, but for anyone with pretensions to literacy—and even some without. The status of these genres was reflected in their positions vis-à-vis the literary market: huaben were intended for sale; chuanqi, not; some long novels were, and others decidedly not. Chuanqi were written under the playwrights’ own name; fiction, under a pseudonym. The texts I discuss even differed in their relationship to the law (the novels were almost always banned).

Despite these differences, the critic Fredric Jameson’s point holds equally true for all three: “Genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact.”24 So much of the literary output of the late imperial period, and especially that of the late Ming, took place in the form of literary criticism, especially in collating, anthologizing, and editing earlier works. Literary criticism—and especially genre theory—could approach policing, with constant re-evaluations of the borders and careful scrutiny of the interiors to make sure that unworthy specimens had not infiltrated. One might even say that genres were constantly in the process of being created and recreated.25

In other words, I fully recognize that what follows is necessarily a simplification, a still photograph of the always dynamic process through which individual texts inhabit a genre. In each of the chapters that follows, individual texts sometimes chafe against generic constraints. Nonetheless, as a whole, these different genres invite radically different ways of conceiving the polity. The connections that structure chuanqi are deeply problematized in fiction, both short and long, and these are the subject of this book. When Ji Yun—in his zhiguai writings—reflects on how the real world differs from the world of chuanqi, this is a comment on his own chosen genre of zhiguai and even prose narrative more broadly.

In another anecdote, he tells of a married couple, driven apart by circumstance. Mr. Li’s mother falls ill after her son has been married for only one month; the young bride and groom care for her solicitously until her death seven or eight months later. After her death,
they obey the demands of ritual and do not share a bed for three years. Once the period of mourning concludes, husband and wife are driven by poverty to turn to her family, where the house is so cramped that the couple cannot share a room, and the wife sleeps with her mother. Finally, her brother takes the family to Jiangxi in an effort to make his fortune; Mr. Li plans on rejoining his wife at a later occasion but then receives word that his wife has died.

He gets a job as a scribe for a bandit with island headquarters. There, he frequently sees one of his boss’s concubines, who bears an astonishing resemblance to his own dead wife. Actually, it turns out that on the way to Jiangxi, the family had been waylaid by bandits and his wife kidnapped. To hide the shameful matter, her family then bought a cheap coffin and sent it home empty. In other words, she is alive—and is in fact the woman who so resembles his dead wife. These two gaze at each other longingly, but neither has any idea of the other’s true identity. After six or seven years, government troops approach. In hiding, Mr. Li sees the bandit chief’s concubines dragged off, weeping and trembling. Once he makes his way home, Mr. Li decides to buy a better coffin for his wife with the proceeds of his work for the bandit chief, but first he insists upon seeing the bones of his dead wife. His wife’s uncle is forced to confess the deception, and, heartbroken, Mr. Li realizes that the woman on the island must have been his wife. Despite all his efforts, he cannot track her down. He never remarries, and eventually he becomes a Buddhist monk.

As is always the case with Ji Yun’s writing, one cannot tell the extent to which the events described are fictional, but here he goes out of his way to make this account into a literary matter, as if life were an opera except for its lack of songs: “This matter could really be made into a chuanqi. It’s too bad that there’s no conclusion at the end, but it’s really the peer of Taohua shan [the seventeenth-century romance]. Though we never see the songs, [the rest]—the mountains and greenery on the river, the constant tenderness in the midst of unending lakes—it really can’t help but increase one’s sadness.”

Scholars from multiple disciplines have observed that the imperial state—lacking a modern infrastructure, with a staff that was minuscule—was nonetheless able, in an almost unparalleled way, to
penetrate fully all layers of lived culture, making it almost impossible to conceive of alternative cosmologies, much less political organizations. In this chapter, we have seen how this is the case with the long southern drama, whose very form argues the central tenets of the neo-Confucian state. In these plays, the domestic and the political are one, and both imperial state and family are utterly natural. The course of the play involves the repair of both; neither can be fixed without the other.

The relationship between the state and other forms of human community is much more complicated in the other texts I address in the chapters after this. In short and long fiction, the human community’s relationship to the state is neither natural nor immune from interrogation. For that matter, the human community itself often appears contorted and estranged from itself. The narratives in the chapters that follow treat superficially unusual situations that do not reflect the reality of late imperial life—perfect doubles who are strangers, accidental incestuous encounters, improbable family reunions. These hypothetical situations are a kind of seam in the faith that a family and the state are fundamentally at unity, a place where the two have obviously and perhaps clumsily been joined. In other words, the absence to which Ji Yun elliptically refers—that renders a reunion imperfect, that makes a round-trip journey different from simply staying still, that in short distinguishes fiction from the chuanqi drama—is much of the subject of this book.