



Free and Easy Wanderings: Lu Xun's Resurrecting the Dead and Its Precursors

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Free and Easy Wanderings

Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936), in the eyes of many the greatest writer of modern Chinese literature, held a highly ambivalent view of drama. On the one hand he remained fascinated throughout his life by the Mulian 目連 plays of Shaoxing Opera he had watched in his hometown as a child, but near the end of his life he was viscerally disgusted by the attempts to present the female impersonator Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 abroad as the embodiment of Chinese culture. He supported the introduction of the modern spoken drama (*huaju* 話劇) and the active borrowing from the west, but he also remained critical enough to spot the conspicuous weaknesses of many of the early experiments in this field. While he used most of his energy in writing short stories, prose poems and critical essays, he also spent considerable energy on the translation of foreign plays, both in the early twenties, and shortly before his death. It is probably no coincidence that his own two attempts to write in the manner of a play date from roughly these same two periods in his life. He included his *Guoke* 過客 (The passer-by) in his collection of prose poems *Yecao* 野草 (Wild grasses) of 1927, whereas his *Qisi* 起死 (Resurrecting the Dead), the topic of this paper, is his last piece of creative writing and the final text in his *Gushi xinbian* 故事新編 (Old Tales Retold), a collection of rewritings of ancient myths that was published in the year of his death.¹

The Playwright Lu Xun

The action of “Resurrecting the Dead” takes place on a stretch of desolate land strewn with grave mounds, not far from the capital of the ancient state of Chu. Enter the famous philosopher Master Zhuang 莊子, who is described in the following terms: “a dark and gaunt complexion, a few graying strands of beard, a Daoist cap, a linen gown.” Master Zhuang has been invited by the king of Chu and has been on the road for many days. As he passes through the area he discovers a skull, and decides to bring it back to life. When he calls on the Master of Fate, ghosts warn him of the consequences, as does the Master of Fate, who is described in the same terms as Master Zhuang. But the latter insists and recites a magical spell, made up from the four opening lines of the Thousand Character Text and the four opening lines of the One Hundred Surnames. The resurrected skeleton

¹ Lu Xun, *Lu Xun xiaoshuo ji* 魯迅小說集. Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1964, pp. 441-452. This story has been translated into French as “Le mort ressuscité” by Li Tche-houa in Lou Siun, *Contes anciens à notre manière*. Paris: Gallimard, 1959, pp. 162-174, and into English by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang as “Resurrecting the Dead” in Lu Hsun, *Old Tales Retold*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1961, 124-137. For a recent translation, see Lu Xun, *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China: The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun*, Trans. by Julia Lovell. New York: Penguin, 2009, pp. 393-402.

now enters as a stark naked peasant who had been on his way to visit his in-laws with a few modest gifts. The poor guy cannot make neither heads nor tails of the historical questions asked by Master Zhuang. While Master Zhuang is interested in academic information, the poor peasant wants some clothes to cover his nakedness. Master Zhuang tries to scare him off by invoking his reputation, but the peasant has never heard about the famous administrator of the Lacquer Garden. In exasperation, Master Zhuang tries to turn the peasant, with his permission, into a skeleton once again, but the magic that worked to bring the skeleton back to life now totally fails. When the peasant attacks him, Master Zhuang pulls out a police whistle, and as soon as he blows on it, an officer of the law appears. This police officer is described as a “big fellow from the state of Lu.” He first arrests Master Zhuang, but the latter soon convinces him that he has been the victim, whereupon he releases him. The police officer next tries to work out a compromise between Master Zhuang and the poor peasant, but while Master Zhuang happily admits that his own clothes have no intrinsic value, he refuses to let the peasant have either his upper garment or his lower garment as he needs both in order to appear before the king of Chu. The police officer agrees with Master Zhuang and eventually allows him to continue his journey. The peasant now appeals to the police officer for help, who not only refuses to do so but also refuses to arrest him. The piece ends when the peasant attacks the police officer, who in desperation starts to blow his whistle.

One way to read this piece is as an answer to Lu Xun’s conundrum of the iron house: should one wake up those who are soundly asleep in an air-tight iron house because they soon will suffocate even when one cannot offer them any possibility of escape?² Another way to read this piece is as yet another meditation on the existential gulf between intellectual and peasant, a topic that crops up in many of Lu Xun’s short stories.³ One may of course also read this piece as a fundamental satire of traditional society and thought. Master Zhuang stubbornly refuses to help out the poor guy he has brought back to life, because he has finally been invited by the king of Chu. His vaunted relativism turns out to be no better than the eagerness to serve the state of the “big fellow of Lu,” in whom we can easily recognize Confucius and his followers. Chinese scholars of modern literature read the piece in the context of the left wing political debates of 1935 and have combed the writings of Lu Xun for attacks on contemporary relativism.⁴ I am quite sure there are such topical references, but perhaps it makes more sense to read this piece as a much more general attack on all those intellectuals who try to raise the masses with a simplistic message but once they have done so fail to follow through and always will place their own interest above that of the masses.

² For a brief discussion of the “iron house” metaphor see Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, pp. 86-88. The inside of the new Lu Xun Museum in Shanghai has been designed as an “iron house.”

³ On Lu Xun’s attitude to peasants, see Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker, *Ideology, Power, Text: Self-Representation and the Peasant “Other” in Modern Chinese Literature*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, esp. Ch. 3, “Lu Xun and the Crisis of the Writing Self.”

⁴ For a recent criticism of this one-dimensional approach, see Wang Xueqian 王学谦, “Kuangren Zhuangzi dui yongsu Zhuangzi di dianfu Lu Xun ‘Qisi’ dui Zhuangzi jingshen di pipan yu jicheng” 狂人庄子对庸俗庄子的颠覆：鲁迅起死对庄子精神与继承, *Jilin daxue xuebao* 2011 No. 2:6-10.

Even scholars who are sympathetic to Lu Xun's involvement in drama will state that Lu Xun never wrote a play, and that his *Guoke* and *Qisi* "only imitate the form of a play."⁵ But it is clear that Lu Xun at least in his own mind had clearly envisioned the action of "Resurrecting the Dead." The stage directions are very detailed. What will have made "Resurrecting the Dead" a closet play in 1935 first of all will have been the repeated stage direction that the resurrected skeleton wears no clothes at all. Nowadays that cannot be an absolute impediment against performing this piece. Even if it still may be problematical to feature a naked actor prancing on the stage, I am quite sure that an inventive director can come up with a solution (for instance an over-sized fig-leaf to symbolize the peasant's condition). But it would appear that so far no attempt has been made to stage "Resurrecting the Dead," not even in Shenzhen by the Shenzhen daxue yishu xueyuan 深圳大学艺术学院, where three stories from *Old Tales Retold* have been adapted for the stage.⁶ I am convinced that "Resurrecting the Dead" is eminently stageable and that it would make a hilarious play.

All texts in *Old Tales Retold* are adaptations of ancient myths. Scholars of modern literature in discussing "Resurrecting the Dead" therefore dutifully point out the following anecdote in Chapter 18 of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 as the source of Lu Xun's text:

When Master Zhuang went to Chu, he saw an empty skull, clearly manifesting the shape of the bare bones. He touched it with his horse whip, and then questioned it as follows: "Did this come to pass because you made a mistake in your desire for life? Or did this come to pass because of the destruction of your state or an execution by the axe? Or did this come to pass because you committed some foul crime, a shameful scandal that made you abandon father and mother, wife and children? Or did this come to pass because you suffered from cold and hunger? Or did this come about because of the number of your years?" When he was finished speaking, he took the skull and went to sleep, using it as a cushion.

At midnight the skull appeared in his dream and said: "By your way of talking you seem to be a rhetorician. When I observe your words, they all concern the troubles of the living, but in death we are free of them. Would you like to hear a description of death?" "Certainly," Master Zhuang replied, and the skull said: "In death you have no lord above you and no servants under you. There's also not the business of the four seasons even if you have the age of heaven and earth. Even the pleasures of a southward-facing king cannot surpass this."

Master Zhuang was not convinced and said: "I will have the Master of Fate return you your shape, provide you with bones and flesh, tendons and skin, and bring back your father and mother, wife and children, neighbors and friends. Would you be interested?" The skull looked extremely sad and said: "How could I abandon the joys of a southward-facing King for the toil of a human existence?"

⁵ Zhuo Guangping 卓光平, "Lu Xun yu xiju' yanjiu shuping" 鲁迅与戏剧研究述评, *Wuyi daxue xuebao* 2010 No. 12: 78.

⁶ Iizuka Yutori 饭冢容, "Zhongguo xiandangdai huaju wutai shangdi Lu Xun zuopin" 中国现当代话剧舞台上的鲁迅作品, *Wenhua yishu yanjiu* Vol. 2 No. 5 (2009): 69-70.

Lu Xun knew his *Zhuangzi* quite well, and he clearly quotes from this passage as soon as his Master Zhuang opens his mouth. But Lu Xun would appear to have departed far more drastically from his source in this piece than in the other texts included in *Old Tales Retold*. His Master Zhuang never uses the skull as a cushion to take a nap, never has a discussion with the deceased in his dream, and never asks his permission to bring him back to life. Lu Xun himself hints, I believe, that this piece draws on a much wider range of materials when he has his Master Zhuang exclaim: “Well, it’s me who is muddleheaded here, I seem to be putting on a play!” immediately following his questioning of the skull, even if that hint may well be misleading. The play Lu Xun may have had in mind here probably was Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, in which at the beginning of Act 5 the title hero is inspired to a monologue by the skull of the former court jester Yorick. For most of his inspiration, however, Lu Xun will have relied on the traditional Chinese ballads and plays that had developed the meeting of Master Zhuang and a skull into a meeting of Master Zhuang and a skeleton.

The Skull and the Skeleton

No work of classical Chinese philosophy can hold a candle to the wit and fantasy of the *Zhuangzi*, which consists of an uninterrupted stream of anecdotes and fables and fictive dialogues. This has made it an inexhaustible treasure trove of allusions throughout Chinese literary history, but for all their vivid narrative, none of the many fables or anecdotes became in later centuries the basis for later narrative or dramatic adaptations, with the one exception of the anecdote of Master Zhuang’s meeting with a skull. From the seventeenth century and later we have a number of plays that go by the name of *Hudie meng* 蝴蝶夢 (Butterfly Dream), but their content is as a rule only tangentially related to the famous anecdote of Master Zhuang dreaming to be a butterfly and wondering on awakening whether he might be a butterfly dreaming to be Master Zhuang.⁷ The main content of these plays is the story of Master Zhuang’s meeting with a young widow who is fanning her husband’s grave so she may remarry as soon as possible—when his wife expresses her indignation at the widow’s behavior, Master Zhuang tests her constancy by feigning his own death and taking on the shape of a handsome young prince. As we all know, the wife fails the test miserably: she falls in love with the prince and is even willing to split Master Zhuang’s skull in order to save her new love—but when she has opened the coffin, Master Zhuang comes back to life and his wife commits suicide for shame.

This story, however, is not found in the *Zhuangzi*. It was first published by Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574-1646) in 1624 as the second text in his collection of forty

⁷ Helmut Wilhelm, “On Chuang-tzu Plays from the Yüan Store,” *Literature East and West* 17 No. 2-3-4 (1973): 244-249 briefly discusses a *zaju* play entitled *Zhuang Zhou meng* 莊周夢 attributed to Shi Jiu jingxian 史九敬仙 which turns the story of Master Zhuang’s butterfly dream into a more conventional deliverance play. Despite the attribution to Shi Jiu Jingxian, the play most likely was written at the imperial palace sometime during the first two centuries of the Ming. The play features at one moment a man-size butterfly. Most likely this play was never performed outside the palace and it would appear that it exerted no influence at all on later dramatic adaptations of the legends of Master Zhuang.

vernacular stories entitled *Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言 (Constant words to warn the world). Feng may well be the author of this misogynistic tale, which doesn't seem to have any clear precursor in the Chinese tradition, despite its obvious structural similarity to the stories of the Matron of Ephesus. The *Zhuangzi* does include in Chapter 18 an anecdote on the reaction of Master Zhuang to the death of his wife, but that tale does not contain any hint of infidelity on the part of his wife. The seventeenth-century authors of *chuanqi* 傳奇 plays who adapted Feng Menglong's vernacular story combined that story with anecdotes culled from the *Zhuangzi* and ancient history, but all such scenes were rejected by the stage as extraneous to the core of the play, and the modern Kunqu version of *Hudie meng* once again is limited to the tale of Master Zhuang and the young widow, and Master Zhuang's wife and the handsome young prince—but it opens with a scene of Master Zhuang lamenting the skull.⁸

The anecdote of Master Zhuang's meeting with the skull first enjoyed popularity with the poets of the second and third centuries. At least four writers are known to have composed either a *Dulou fu* 骷髏賦 (Rhapsody on the skull) or a *Dulou shuo* 骷髏說 (Exposition on the skull). The best-known (and best preserved) work in this category is the rhapsody attributed to the famous scholar, poet, and scientist Zhang Heng 張衡 (78-139). In the adaptation by Zhang Heng it is not Master Zhuang but Zhang Heng who comes across a skull, questions it as to its identity, and uses it as a headrest for a nap, while the soul who appears to him in his dream and rejects the offer to be brought back to life, vaunting the pleasures of untrammelled freedom in death, turns out to be the one of Master Zhuang in person!⁹ But the popularity of the topic did not survive beyond the third century. One reason may well have been the growing popularity of Buddhism from the fourth century onwards. Buddhism was obsessed with death and decay, but it did not see the skull or the skeleton as the final stage of decomposition of the corpse but only as one of the many stages towards annihilation.

The skull by the roadside, now grown into a full skeleton, once again became a major topic in literature in the twelfth century in the poems and lyrics of Wang Zhe 王雱 (Chongyang 重陽), the founder of Quanzhen 全真 Daoism.¹⁰ Wang Zhe devotes many poems and songs to his encounters with skeletons by the roadside, which occasion him to stress the ephemerality of human life and the necessity to timely pursue the life eternal. An example is the following lyric to the tune of *Moyu'er* 摸魚兒:

⁸ Lei Jingxuan 雷競璇, *Kunqu Hudiemeng: Yibu chuantongxi di zaixian* 崑劇蝴蝶夢一部傳統戲的再現. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press (China), 2005.

⁹ For a detailed discussion of this text and the *Zhuangzi* anecdote on which it was based, see Stephen Owen, *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1986, pp. 33-38.

¹⁰ For more detailed discussion of the popularity of the skull and the skeleton in poetry and painting of the Song-Yuan period, see Wilt L. Idema, "Skulls and Skeletons in Art and on Stage," in Leonard Blussé and Harriet T. Zurndorfer, Eds. *Conflict and Accommodation in Early Modern East Asia: Essays in Honour of Erik Zürcher*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993, pp. 191-215, and Yi Ruofen 衣若芬, "Kulou huanxi: Zhongguo wenxue yu tuxiang zhong de shengming yishi" 骷髏幻戲—中國文學與圖象中的生命意識, *Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiu jikan* 26 (2005): 73-125.

I lament the skeleton
 Lying in the open fields:
 So sad its white bones, so forlorn!
 A traveler from an unknown place,
 No way to know whether a woman or a man—
 No one took care of him
 Because he did not cultivate himself in former lives
 But fooled around as if a monkey,
 And in this life now he collapsed.
 Blown by the wind, drenched by the rain, bleached by the sun
 And beaten by the senseless herding boys.

I still would like to ask you for the reasons
 But sadness wounds my heart
 For how could you now speak?
 Your mouth is filled with mud, your eyes are full of sand—
 This is the way you will decay.
 Forever, day and night,
 You count the yearly change of autumn, winter,
 Of spring and summer too,
 Through all four seasons lonely and alone.
 Come to your senses, people old and young,
 Don't flaunt your smartness, flash your charms!¹¹

At the same time Wang Zhe described all living human beings who had not yet been converted to reject the world as “walking corpses, living skeletons.” In order to increase the impact of his message, he also made paintings of skeletons which he showed to his patrons and converts. The first generations of his disciples in the twelfth and thirteenth century continued this practice of using the image of a skeleton in their proselytizing activities. As an example of this use of the skeleton in I will limit myself here to the “Song of the Skeleton” (*Kulou ge* 骷髏歌) by Tan Chuduan 譚處端(1123-1185):

Skeleton oh skeleton, your face is oh so ugly,
 All because in life you loved women and wine.
 Cunningly smiling you took your fill of meats and furs,
 So your blood and flesh gradually wasted away.
 Gradually wasted away—but still you continued to lust,
 Lusting for riches, spending your semen you reaped no rewards.
 Your desires were without limit but your life had its term
 And now today you have become this skeleton.
 Become a skeleton—you now listen to me:
 It's not easy to acquire this precious human body.
 Understand that the life-force is like pulling strings,¹²
 So do not blindly follow your emotions.

¹¹ Wang Zhe, *Chongyang quanzhen ji* 重陽全真集(*Daozang* Vols. 793-796), 3:8

¹² The pulling strings of a marionette.

That's why I have painted his form to show to you,
To see whether today you will become enlightened!¹³

But at some later date the Daoist priest who encounters a skeleton by the roadside changes from a named Quanzhen master to Master Zhuang as a generic representative of the class of Daoist hermits. This change must have taken place by the middle of the thirteenth century because the first generation *zaju* 雜劇 playwright Li Shouqing 李壽卿 is credited with a play entitled “The Immortal of Southern Florescence Rejects the Invitation of the Zhao Son of Heaven; Drumming a Tub Master Zhuang Laments the Skeleton” (*Nanhuaxian buchao Zhao tianzi; Gupen ge Zhuangzi tan kulou* 南華仙不朝趙天子; 鼓盆歌莊子嘆骷髏). Only one set of songs of this play has been preserved, but that set must have provided the arias of the play's first act, in which Master Zhuang sings the praises of the hermit's life and refuses an invitation to come to court.¹⁴ To judge from the full title, the play probably devoted one act (most likely the second act) to Master Zhuang's perplexing reaction to the death of his wife by drumming a tub. If his wife's death set him free to roam the world, he probably would have met with the skeleton in the third act of the play. That would have provided him with an opportunity to question the skeleton as to his identity and manner of death in a series of songs to the tune of *Shuuhai'er*. Unfortunately, the title of Li Shouqing's lost play allows no conclusion whether or not Master Zhuang attempted to resurrect the skeleton.

From the early sixteenth century we have from the hands of a certain Lü Jingru 呂敬儒 a set of songs, built around a set of eleven songs to the tune of *Shuuhai'er* 耍孩兒, nine of which consist of questions to the skeleton as to his identity and manner of death. Here I quote only one of these songs:

You must have left your hometown to make a fortune,
You must have come to this place for merit and fame,
You must have had the bad luck to run into evil villains.

You must have been poisoned and bewitched beyond recovery,
You must have suffered from heat and cold without any medicine,
And who today can substitute for your own deeds?

As a result you cohabit in one busy crowd with ants during the day,
And shivering for cold sleep with foxes at night.

Lü Jingru's set is concluded by the following coda:

Skeleton,
All bamboo of the southern hills cannot fully describe your stupidity or wisdom;
All waves of the northern sea cannot wash away your rights and wrongs.
I now will dig a deep hole to bury you at the Yellow Sources,

¹³ Tan Chudian, *Shuiyun ji* 水雲集(*Daozang* Vol. 798), 2:18.

¹⁴ Zhao Jingshen 趙景深, Comp. *Yuanren zaju gouchen* 元人雜劇鉤沉 Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1956, pp. 35-39.

So freed from death and birth you'll be a free and easy ghost!¹⁵

Perhaps Li Shouqing had concluded his third act in a comparable manner, in this way allowing Master Zhuang in the final act all room to achieve immortality.

The Resurrected Skeleton and the Magistrate

We do not know when Master Zhuang's lament for the skeleton was expanded by his resurrection of the skeleton, but by the early seventeenth century that tale had become quite common. In the various versions of the tale as preserved from the seventeenth century, the resurrected skeleton (who goes under different names) turns out to have been a traveling merchant who accuses Master Zhuang of having stolen his luggage and his money. An indignant Master Zhuang who had expected some degree of gratitude denies any wrongdoing, whereupon the resurrected skeleton hauls Master Zhuang before the local judge. Following the statement by his accuser, Master Zhuang recounts how he resurrected the skeleton by replacing missing ribs with willow branches, and proves the truth of his deposition by turning his accuser into a skeleton once again. As a result the magistrate then decides to abandon his position and study the way of immortality. The earliest dated text of this legend is encountered in an act from the play *Pinang ji* 皮囊記 (Sack of Skin) which is included in *Zhaijin qiyin* 摘錦奇音 (Marvelous Sounds from Selected Brocades), an anonymous song and drama anthology printed in 1611.¹⁶ In this scene the extra (*wai* 外) who plays the part of Master Zhuang informs us in his first two songs that in his free and easy wanderings he has arrived outside the city of Luoyang, where he has discovered a skeleton by the side of the road. In the next eighteen songs to the tune of *Shuuhai'er* Master Zhuang proceeds to question the skeleton as to sex, name, origin, profession, morality, manner of death etc. The scene concludes in the following manner:

[(Master Zhuang:)] Come to think of it, to save the life of a single person is better than building a seven-story pagoda. I would like to deliver you. But what to do about the fact that you miss four bones? I will have to substitute them with willow branches. I put this immortal elixir in his mouth. Now wake up quickly! [(Sings:)]

[To the tune of *Langtao sha*]

¹⁵ Xie Boyang 謝伯陽, Comp. *Quan Ming sanqu* 全明散曲, 5 Vols. Jinan: Qi Lu shushe, 1993, p. 849.

¹⁶ *Zhaijin qiyin* 3: 17b-21a (pp. 160-167), in Wang Qiugui 王秋桂, Ed. *Shanben xiqu congkan* 善本戲曲叢刊. Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1984. On this play, see Wang Kui 王夔, "Mingkan xiqu sanchu Zhuangzi tan kulou xintan" 明刊戲曲散出周庄子叹骷髏新探, *Anhui daxue xuebao* 2005 No. 1:121-125. Buddhist homiletic poetry often describes the human body as sack made of skin and filled with pus and excrements. The *Yuefu wanxiangxin* 樂府萬象新 (1:1b-8b), yet another late Ming drama anthology from Jiangxi, also includes the same text, but lists the otherwise unknown play *Xizi ji* 西子記 as its source. See Li Fuqing 李福清 (Boris Riftin) and Li Ping 李平, Eds. *Haiwai guben wan-Ming xiju xuanji sanzong* 海外孤本晚明戲劇選集三種, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1993, pp. 90-104, upper register. *Xizi* is an alternative name for Xi Shi, the fifth century BCE woman who brought down the kingdom of Wu with her seductive charms.

In the Third Month this is Clear and Bright
 When one sacrifices at swept grave tombs.
 I see a pile of bleached bones lying in the dust:
 With one immortal pill I will deliver you
 So you can be reborn as a human being.

Suddenly I see that this skeleton has revived. Let me ask you: What is your name and where are you from?

Skeleton, now you have revived,
 Let me ask you what happened.
 What is your name and where are you from?
 Now out of compassion I have delivered you,
 Please don't forget the favor I've shown you.

(From backstage:) My name is Zhang Cong and I hail from Xiangyang. I was murdered and now you, Master, have been so kind as to revive me. I had some luggage and an umbrella with me. Please return them to me so I can set out on the way back home. If you refuse to return those goods, I will take you to the district office and lodge an accusation against you.

Master, you have been exceedingly kind to me
 In saving my poor life,
 But if you do not return to me
 The pack, and the umbrella and money I had with me,
 I will seek justice from the district magistrate!

[()] After District Magistrate Liang has accepted the deposition, he questions Master Zhuang. Master Zhuang declares:[] After I had shown him the favor of resurrecting him, he deployed his treacherous mind. I used willow branches to make up for his bones. Now let me use another magic pill and spit a mouthful of water on him, so his original shape will once again be turned into a skeleton.

This fellow has a criminal mind!

Let's forget my favor of saving his life!

He had to claim he had luggage and money
 And paid me back with enmity,
 So I had to suffer his deception.
 All my life I've loved to deliver people;
 You were beyond deliverance,
 So I had to display this supernatural power.
 (Repeat)
 As for his life, Zhang Cong is sent back to the shades;

Master Zhuang in broad daylight ascends on the clouds,
And once Magistrate Liang sees this, he bows down,
As he wants to abandon his job and practice religion!

A poem reads:

Human life is like a dream, passing through spring and fall;
With light and shade like an arrow one quickly turns white.
As long as you have three inches of breath, use it in a thousand ways,
But as soon as one day Impermanence arrives, all business is finished.

The summary way in which the resurrection of the skeleton, the lawsuit, and the execution of the skeleton are described strongly suggest that the story was widely known by the time this version for the stage was put on paper, quite possibly on the basis of a narrative version.¹⁷ One of the vernacular stories of Feng Menglong indicates that this legend provided the favorite materials for Daoist storytellers. (It may also be noted in passing that this stage version has chosen the simplest solution to deal with the vexing problem of the nakedness of the resurrected skeleton: he does not enter the stage but is represented by a disembodied backstage voice.¹⁸)

From the seventeenth century we have indeed two narrative adaptations of the legend as *daoqing* 道情. These two texts are clearly related: whereas one of these texts would appear to be an extended version of a shared precursor, the second text would appear to be an abbreviated version of that lost precursor text. The best known of these two versions is the second text which is included by Ding Yaokang 丁耀亢(1599-1661) in Ch. 48 of his novel *A Sequel to Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Xu Jinpingmei* 續金瓶梅).¹⁹ This abbreviated but sill

¹⁷ The story of Master Zhuang first resurrecting the skeleton and eventually killing him off may well be indebted to the legend of Xu Jia 徐甲, the ungrateful servant of the Old Master. In the earliest version of the legend Xu Jia is an ungrateful servant who is seduced by his wife-to-be to demand his back pay which runs into millions. When the Old Master takes away a talisman he had give to him, Xu Jia collapses as a pile of bones and is only revived after others plead for mercy. By the tenth century the legend had come to include the detail that Xu Jia had become the Old Master's servant after the Old Master had found him as a pile of bones and revived him. See Livia Kohn, "Xu Jia," in Fabrizio Pregadio, Ed., *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, Vol. 2, pp. 1122-1123.

¹⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the stage directions for the staging of the resurrection of the skeleton in various plays, see Wilt Idema, "Skulls and Skeletons in Art and on Stage," pp. 199-200.

¹⁹ Ding Yaokang, *Xi Jinpingmei*, original woodblock edition, in *Guben xiaoshuo jicheng* 43:1-4, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990, Vol. 3, pp. 1302-15. For a typeset and annotated edition of Ding Yaokang's *Master Zhuang Laments the Skeleton*, see Liu Guangming 刘光民, *Gudai shuochang bianti xipian* 古代说唱辨体析篇, Beijing: Shoudu shifan daxue chubanshe, 1996, pp. 136-41. This text is retained in the two abbreviated versions of Ding's novel, *Gelien huaying* 隔簾花影 (Flower shadows behind a screen) and *Jinwu meng* 金屋夢 (Golden house dream). Like some other seventeenth-century Shandong intellectuals, Ding Yaokang showed an active interest in prosimetric literature. He not only included descriptions of performances in his novel, but also is credited with the authorship of some prosimetric texts himself. On Ding Yaokang and his novel, see Siao-chen Hu, "In the Name of Correctness: Ding Yaokang's *Xu Jin Ping Mei* as a Reading of *Jin Ping Mei*," in Martin W. Huang, Ed. *Snakes' Legs: Sequels, Continuations, Rewritings, and Chinese Fiction*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004, pp.

quite extensive narrative version of the legend is presented in the novel as told by a Daoist priest. The *Shuahai'er* songs sung by Master Zhuang in this version derive from the same sets as we discussed above. In contrast to other adaptations, however, Ding Yaokang's version allows the resurrected skeleton too to sing a number of songs to the tune of *Shuahai'er* when arguing his case before the district magistrate—he uses the opportunity to accuse Master Zhuang of being a heretic monk who employs black magic. A much more extensive version of the legend entitled *Xinbian zengbu pinglin: Zhuangzi tan kulou nanbei ciqu* 新編增補評林莊子嘆骷髏南北詞曲 (Newly composed, enlarged and expanded, with a forest of appreciative comments: Master Zhuang Sighs over the Skeleton in Northern and Southern Lyrics and Songs) was provided by a certain Du Hui 杜蕙 from Changshu, who treats Master Zhuang's resurrection of the skeleton as a preconceived trick to convert the local magistrate. The Institute of Oriental Culture at Tokyo University preserves not only an incomplete copy of the printed text (originally in the possession of Professor Kuraishi) but also a complete copy of the text in manuscript. This manuscript copy, which originates from the private collection of the famous bibliophile and bibliographer Nagasawa Kikuya (1902-1980), has been made fully available on the website of Tokyo University Library. In this version the number of *Shuahai'er* songs, still building on the original set of Lü Jingru, has been expanded from 18 in the scene from *Pinang ji* to its double: 36! Once the skeleton has been resurrected and turned into a pile of bones once again, this version spends considerable space on Master Zhuang's instructions to the converted magistrate.

By far the most original adaptation of the legend of Master Zhuang's resurrection of the skeleton is Wang Yinglin's 王應遴 (d. 1644) *Xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊 (Free and Easy Roamings). In its first printing Wang's play on the philosopher and the skeleton was entitled *Yan Zhuang xindiao* 衍莊新調 (Master Zhuang on Stage: A New Tune). This title is a clear reference to an earlier play simply entitled *Yan Zhuang* 衍莊 (Master Zhuang on Stage) by a certain Yecheng laoren 冶城老人. The contents of this lost play were described as follows by the Ming critic Qi Biaojia 祁彪佳 (1602-1645) in his *Yuanshantang jupin* 遠山堂劇品 (Distant Hills Hall's Ranking of Plays): "The many songs of its long lament would appear to have seen through the conundrum of life and death, but where is the Way of escape? For that one has to consult Yunlai daoren 雲來道人 (i.e. Wang Yinglin)."²⁰ Qi Biaojia's characterization might suggest that Yecheng laoren's adaptation very much resembled the one act from *Pinang ji*. Wang Yinglin, however, did completely away with the long set of *Shuahai'er* songs questioning the skeleton as to his identity and lamenting his fate. When at one point the district magistrate asks Master Zhuang for more background information on the skeleton, Master Zhuang curtly replies: "The skeleton's occupation and sex have been exhaustively dealt with by those texts in the world that lament the skeleton."

75-97. On Ding Yaokang as a creative writer of prosimetric literature, see Ding Yaokang, "Southern Window Dream," Trans. by Wilt L. Idema, *Renditions* 69 (2008):20-33.

²⁰ Qi Biaojia, *Yuanshan tang Ming qupin jupin jiaolu* 遠山堂明曲品劇品校錄. Ed. by Huang Shang 黃裳. Shanghai: Shanghai chubun gongsi, 1955, p. 208.

In Wang Yinglin's adaptation, it is not the resurrected skeleton anymore who is the main butt of satire because of his greed and ingratitude.²¹ The skeleton's role is very much reduced as the emphasis shifts to Master Zhuang's acolyte and the district magistrate. The acolyte who in other versions only has a very minor role now plays a major part as he becomes the embodiment of the obsession with money—not only will he go to any length to get his hands on the coin between the clenched jaws of the skull, he also lectures his master on the ways money rules the world. The district magistrate who in other versions often is an exceedingly bland character now is shown as obsessed by his desire for fame—without a spectacular law case on his record he will not be able to obtain a promotion in rank when his three-year term of office comes to an end! The play was highly praised by Qi Biaoqia: "In the space of one square feet of silk [the author] delivers us from samsara, and has us transcend fame and profit. This is the enthusiasm of the author's enlightenment. He even manages to outdo Master Zhuang himself!"²² Modern scholars, however, have expressed some disappointment over the ending of the play in which the acolyte and the magistrate question Master Zhuang about the internal contradictions of his rejection of fame and profit and force him to admit that the Buddhist notion of emptiness surpasses the Daoist ideal of longevity.

Wang Yinglin's play was first entitled *Xiaoyao you* when it was included by Shen Tai 沈泰 in his *Sheng Ming zaju erji* 盛明雜劇二集 (A Second Collection of Short Plays of the Glorious Ming) of 1641.²³ Even though the play is called a *zaju*, it does not follow the formal rules of the genre in its early days, when plays were made up of four suites of songs. By the last century of the Ming *zaju* had to come to designate any kind of short play (in contrast to *chuanqi*, the popular plays of the day which could have up to over forty scenes). *Zaju* from the last century of the Ming show a remarkable propensity to experimentation in formal matters, and Wang Yinglin's play is no exception. Even though it is presented as a one-act play, it opens with a short introductory scene in the manner of *chuanqi*. The main action of the play clearly falls apart in three sections: Master Zhuang's discussion with his acolyte who tries to pry a coin from the skull's clenched jaws; following the resurrection of the skeleton, Master Zhuang's encounter with the district magistrate who is obsessed about his fame; and a final section in which Master Zhuang is put in a tight spot by the questions put to him by his two disciples. The songs in this play do not constitute a formal suite made up of different tunes. In contrast, the songs in the first section are all sung to the tune of *Langtaosha* 浪淘沙, the songs in the second section are all sung to the tune of *Huangying'er* 黃鶯兒, and the final section contains eight songs to the tune of *Shuahai'er*.²⁴

Conclusion

²¹ Wang Yinglin has Master Zhuang order his acolyte to cover the skeleton with his gown before he performs his magic of resurrecting the skeleton.

²² Qi Biaoqia, *Yuanshan tang Ming qupin jupin jiaolu*. Ed. by Huang Shang. Shanghai: Shanghai chubanshe, 1955, pp. 184-185.

²³ Shen Tai, Ed. *Sheng Ming zaju erji*, reprint Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1958.

²⁴ These exceptional formal features were already noted by Zeng Yongyi 曾永義 in his *Ming zaju gailun* 明雜劇概論. Taipei: Xuehai chubanshe, 1979, 374-375.

Once Feng Menglong published his vernacular story on the meeting of Master Zhuang with the young widow fanning her husband's grave and its consequences, that story very quickly became far more popular than the tale of Master Zhuang's encounter with a skeleton and its aftermath. But that tale too continued to circulate throughout the Qing. We encounter the legend for instance even in the nineteenth-century *Shancai Longnü baojuan* 善才龍女寶卷 (Precious Scroll of Shancai and Dragon Daughter). When the young and inexperienced Shancai has saved a starving snake from a bottle and the latter wants to devour him, he accuses her of ingratitude, but she insists that ingratitude is the way of the world. Eventually they agree to submit their quarrel to three judges. The first of these judges is a buffalo, who bitterly complains his owners had slaughtered him after he had plowed their fields all his life. The second judge is Master Zhuang, who recounts his experiences with the revived skeleton who accused him of theft.²⁵ A very much simplified version of the meeting of Master Zhuang and the skeleton is at present part of the repertoire of the popular *xiangsheng* 相聲 performer Guo Degang 郭德綱.

There are many ways through which Lu Xun may have known the late-imperial legend of Master Zhuang's meeting with the skeleton. We can be certain that he must have read the abbreviated *daoqing* version included by Ding Yaokang in his *Xu Jinpingmei* as he discussed that novel at great length in his *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe* 中國小說史略 (A brief history of Chinese fiction).²⁶ It is also quite likely that he had read Wang Yinglin's *Xiaoyao you* as *Shengming zaju* had been reprinted in 1925. Most likely he knew the legend through a number of oral and written versions.²⁷ While these versions, as we have seen, displayed great differences among themselves, Lu Xun gave the tale his own twist. In the pre-modern versions the object of satire may shift from the resurrected skeleton to the Master Zhuang's acolyte and the magistrate, but Master Zhuang is always portrayed as the embodiment of wisdom who transcends the cares of this world. In Lu Xun's version, however, it is Master Zhuang who has become the butt of satire. He is not wandering at ease, but hurrying to the capital of Chu because he has been invited by a king. Whereas in almost all earlier versions it is the resurrected skeleton who hauls Master Zhuang before a judge, it is now Master Zhuang who carries a police whistle and is quite willing to use it. The resurrected skeleton, who used to embody ingratitude and greed, now becomes the object of our pity as the poor peasant tries to cover his shame with some piece of clothing and regain his simple luggage. Whereas the magistrate in premodern versions becomes

²⁵ For an English translation of this text, see Wilt L. Idema, *Personal Salvation and Filial Piety: Two Precious Scroll Narratives of Guanyin and her Acolytes*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008, esp. pp. 174-179. Shancai is saved by the intervention of the bodhisattva Guanyin, who later also converts the snake.

²⁶ See Lu Hsun, *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*. Trans. by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1959, pp. 240-244.

²⁷ Lu Xun's indebtedness in writing "Qisi" to the legend of Master Zhuang's meeting with the skeleton has been pointed out most recently by Jiang Kebin 姜克濱, "Shilun Zhuangzi tan kulou gushi zhi shanbian" 试论庄子叹骷髅故事之嬗变, *Beijing huagong daxue xuebao (shehui kexueban)* 2010 No. 2:29. Jiang Kebin, "Huangdan yu yinyu di chonggou—lun Gushi xinbian 'Qisi'" 荒诞与隐喻的重构—论股市新编起死, *Shenyang shifan daxue xuebao* 2010 No. 4: 84-87 provides a more detailed discussion of the relation between Lu Xun's story and the version of the legend provided in the *Xu Jinpingmei*.

enlightened and decides to abandon the world of fame and profit, he is now replaced by a much more humble police officer, who is soon convinced to side with a self-serving sophist against a destitute peasant. Lu Xun's version of course was relevant to the situation of the mid-1930s, but it hasn't lost much of its relevance for our time either. But to fully understand the extent of Lu Xun's originality and creativity, we should not only know his ultimate sources, but also the later and popular adaptations of the old tale he retold.