



The Protean World of *Sanqu* Songs

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Arguably, *sanqu* 散曲 songs may be the most misunderstood lyrical genre in the Chinese literary corpus. *Sanqu* is often thought of as a Yuan dynasty genre given to a witty world-weariness (*bishi wanshi* 避世玩世),¹ written by “frustrated souls” (*shiyizhe de ge* 失意者的歌)² who, alienated from the centers of power, wrote *sanqu* as thinly veiled critiques of contemporary affairs. Partly, such an emphasis on *sanqu* as a Yuan form is a legacy of how *sanqu* was incorporated into the literary mainstream in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Late Qing and early Republican critics and practicing songwriters—notably, Wu Mei 吳梅 (1884–1939), Ren Ne 任讷 (1894–1991), and Lu Qian 盧前 (1905–1951)—sought to wrest the genre from near oblivion through the creation of anthologies and monographs.³ While Ren Ne highlighted the songs of Yuan playwrights, Lu Qian insisted on the importance of song suites from both the Yuan and Ming periods.⁴ Meanwhile, May Fourth critics such as Xie Wuliang 謝無量 (1884–1964) and Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898–1958), preoccupied with breaking free from the yoke of foreign imperialism and with creating a literary genealogy for the modern vernacular, defined *sanqu* as a Yuan dynasty genre, the rich corpus of Ming *sanqu* notwithstanding.⁵ Whatever limitations such pioneering scholarship had, it nevertheless laid a philological foundation for further studies in the Chinese-speaking world and, to a lesser degree, in Japan and the West, while privileging a small corpus of both single stanza songs (*xiaoling* 小令) and song suites (*santao* 散套) as literary masterpieces and textbook classics destined for modern consumption. Thus, in contrast to many other orally connected genres of middle and late imperial times, *sanqu* succeeded in moving,

albeit in historiographically overdetermined ways, into the modern canon of traditional Chinese literature.

In North American sinology, James I. Crump and Wayne Schlepp, through studies and translations, began to draw the genre into the ambit of scholarly inquiry and, in the case of Crump, to train a new generation of scholars with interests in what we might call “mixed-register” forms of literature. In the *Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, Stephen H. West, one of these erstwhile students and now a doyen of middle imperial literature in his own right, authoritatively laid out some of the paradoxical attributes of *sanqu* songs. Calling *sanqu* “a new form of hybrid poetry,” West noted that as early as the Song dynasty, a writer observed the permeability of socioliterary boundaries when it came to songs: “My father once said that he was a visitor in the capital during the last days of the Northern Song, and the vulgar in the streets and alleyways often sang foreign songs. . . . The language was extremely coarse but all of the men of worth sang them.”⁶ As West observed, *sanqu* songs, their rapid social ascent during the late Jin and Yuan notwithstanding, typically retained their colloquial features—binomial expressions, long three- and four-syllable onomatopoeic phrases, and extrametrical phrases, to name a few—no matter who wrote them. In West’s view, this ability to “reach across many social boundaries” gave the songs “broad appeal to a wide literate audience both inside and outside elite circles.”⁷ It is in this spirit that this special issue aims to showcase a body of original research to expand our understanding of how *sanqu* traversed social, literary, religious, political, and historiographical terrains to bring the genre within the scholarly mainstream of Chinese literary studies.

In the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture*, I put forth the idea that *sanqu* songs were, *pace* Yuan critic Zhou Deqing 周德清 (1277–1365), “everybody’s song.”⁸ The articles gathered here do much to flesh out the many “everybodies” that accounted for the genre’s efflorescence in the Yuan and Ming periods. Furthermore, as many of these articles demonstrate, the genre not only reached many kinds of audiences but also, in the process, developed new functionalities. As the articles demonstrate, in doing so the genre often broke down boundaries between popular, ritual, court, and literati realms; between indigenous and foreign practitioners; between musical, literary, and communicative uses; and between different literary genres. To be sure, not every Yuan critic was equally sanguine about the intermixing of different kinds of *sanqu* and other literary forms, and some sought to delineate, as Shi-pe Wang has noted, divergent standards and different genre groupings for the most common Yuan term to reference *sanqu*, that is, the so-called *yuefu* 樂府.⁹ Importantly, no definitive agreement was reached, and as a result, as Ye Ye has observed, in the Ming dynasty *sanqu* songs continued to encroach on literary terrain previously

occupied by relatively more respected forms, such *ci* song-lyrics or ritual hymns (*yuezhang* 樂章).¹⁰ The articles in this issue are less interested in pursuing traditionalist questions of stylistics or Marxist approaches of social critique; instead, they seek to contextualize the prodigious uses of the form across many kinds of settings: the court, the circles of professional performers, the realm of scholar-officials and literati, the world of publishing venues, and religious institutions, to name some of the most salient.

In the first part of this special issue, the articles attend to one of the distinctive features of *sanqu* songs: their close relationship with the literary techniques of the theater, the contemporaneous corpus of plays, and the lives and afterlives of theater professionals and playwrights. All three articles in this section demonstrate that Yuan *sanqu* laid a foundation for approaches to theatrical narration, audience participation, and modalities of authorship that resonated through the late imperial period and beyond. Certain Yuan and early Ming *sanqu* songs became a platform for reflections on the newly constituted medium of mature *zaju* 雜劇 theater. Strikingly, such ruminations did not take the form of an evaluative ranking of the sort Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084–1150s) created for *ci* song-lyrics; instead, such appraisals were refracted through the prism of other literary genres thoroughly reworked and embedded within the songs themselves. Such modalities ranged from historical assessments (*zan* 讚)¹¹ and descriptive odes (*yongwu* 詠物) to parodical skits (*zaban* 雜扮), attesting to the protean nature of the *sanqu* song tradition and to its ability to assimilate genres high and low.

Wilt L. Idema's article in this issue shows that modern scholarly attention to the dramatic aspect of the *sanqu* songs owed much to Tanaka Kenji 田中謙二 (1912–2002), one of the towering figures of Japanese sinology in the realm of mixed-register literature. To highlight Tanaka's contribution, Idema's article focuses on an exceptionally long song suite, "The Complaint of the Ox" 牛訴冤 (Niu suyuan) by Yao Shouzhong 姚守中 (fl. ca. 1260/70–ca. 1320/30), a playwright, songwriter, and nephew of Yao Sui 姚燧 (1238–1313), one of the most prominent Yuan dynasty officials and a *sanqu* writer himself. In contrast to Chinese scholarship that had looked askance at this wordy oddity, Tanaka called it the "ultimate *sanqu* song." For one, Tanaka identified the "vernacular" and its associations with "the irreverent, the ironic, the vulgar, and the bawdy," on the one hand, and the use of impersonation of humble characters, on the other, as hallmarks of the form. Accordingly, Tanaka laid the foundation for us to recognize, in Idema's formulation, that "the liberty to assume any voice, female or male, high or low, . . . enabled the authors of *sanqu* to expand the thematic repertoire of *sanqu* far beyond that of *ci* and to explore linguistic registers that had been inaccessible to earlier poets." For another, in contrast to earlier *yongwu*

詠物 poetry, Tanaka also noted that *sanqu* not only bring the unpleasant aspects of life to the fore but also express them in the first person. Thus, in contrast to Tang *shi* poems that use the poet's voice to relay the plight of abused oxen in what was typically read as an allegory for the literatus's own predicament or in contradistinction to religious tales about oxen laying plaint before the Judge of the Underworld, "Niu suyuan" speaks directly in the oxen's voice throughout, a feature underlined, as Idema points out, by a rhyming category that evokes the mooing of cows. In its witty adoption of earlier forms of lament, such a song blurred the boundaries between allegory and morality tale.

Karin Myhre's article on one of the iconic song suites, Sui Jingchen's 睢景臣 (ca. 1257–ca. 1320) "Han Gaozu Returns to His Home Village" (Gaozu huanxiang 高祖還鄉), takes up the issue of impersonation and its epistemological consequences in detail. Myhre notes that, on account of its originality (*xinqi* 新奇), Sui's piece won a songwriting competition on the title theme. Resisting the dominant scholarly mode of treating the village narrator as a coherent, historically localizable voice, Myhre argues that the narration is subtly cued as that of an actor onstage. In Myhre's telling, Sui's originality hinged in part on the song's radical shift in how the emperor, the rituals of the royal progress, and the local populace were portrayed in a widely anthologized passage in *Shiji* 史記 (The Records of the Historian). Rather than describing the sort of heroic ritual compact where populace and emperor happily join in a festive celebration of their bond through enactment of a song the emperor wrote for the occasion, the song suite fractures the roles of audience and performers. Specifically, as Myhre shows, the song suite, while counting on the reader's knowledge of imperial practices and official historiography for maximum humorous effect, also relies on that same reader's familiarity with the argot of the stage. In contrast to other theatrical recognition scenes that bridge opposing points of view, the song's closing stanza sharpens the dissonance between royal pageant and bizarre imposture. In putting readers in the place of a dramatic audience that witnesses an extended exchange between an uncomprehending emperor and a plaintive peasant, the song suite forestalls the immersive pose of celebrants and instead ensconces the reader as a spectator of a theatrically mediated "social performance." In other words, we begin to see the intrusion of elements of theatricality that no longer resolve into the infinitely deferred experiences of "dreamers" but instead appear to open the kind of aporia between reader and the song's characters more commonly associated with spectatorship.¹²

Wenbo Chang's article also looks at the relationship between *sanqu* and theater but from the vantage point of *sanqu* songs about playwrights. Chang's article offers a comparative reading of two key sources for our understanding of

the world of songwriters and playwrights in the Yuan and the early Ming: Zhong Sicheng's 鍾嗣成 (ca. 1279–1360) *Lu gui bu* 錄鬼簿 (The Register of Ghosts) and Jia Zhongming's 賈仲明 (fl. 1343–1422) *Zengbu Lu gui bu* 增補錄鬼簿 (The Supplement to *The Register of Ghosts*, 1422), respectively. In particular, the author hones in on Zhong's and Jia's motivations for writing *sanqu* elegies for deceased songwriters and playwrights. In the original *Lu gui bu*, Zhong wrote eighteen commemorative odes for friends among Hangzhou songwriters and playwrights who predeceased him. Meanwhile, Jia, without access to any new information, added *sanqu* elegies for the early generations of Northern songwriters. Chang resists the common impulse to mine Jia's commemorative song elegies for playwrights and songwriters as sources for biographical information about men whose lives have proven frustratingly elusive to late imperial critics and modern scholars alike. Instead, her article examines Jia's songs as an attempt to reconcile the values of imperial and popular culture in the context of his own fraught position at the Ming court. Though much acclaimed for his songs and riddles by Ming princes and other courtiers, Jia was nevertheless keenly aware of his status as a practitioner of the "minor arts." Chang argues that, to address such a predicament, Jia's *sanqu* songs constructed a host of identities for an idealized image of a model playwright while giving an imperial twist to his posthumous appraisals of men ostensibly far removed from the centers of political power. For one, Jia shifted the geographic center of Zhong's *Lu gui bu* from Hangzhou to the newly instituted capital of Beijing, thus overlaying Zhong's localist perspective with an imperially centered one. For another, in quite a few cases Jia took liberties to endow the playwrights with historical as well as fictional attributes while presenting them as epigones of the splendor of imperial rule. In short, his *sanqu* songs straddled the boundaries between historiography and urban culture in an effort to blend urbane and courtly ideals in the figure of a new type of literatus: the sexually voracious, preternaturally talented, and culturally versatile playwright.

In the second part of this special issue, the articles explore how *sanqu* operated as a communicative medium in different public settings. Whenever literati gravitated toward a new literary form, the questions of why and how they adopted a new form arise; or, to put it another way, we may wonder what kinds of communicative potential the new form afforded. Jaehyuk Lee's article focuses on the literary and social practices of Zhang Kejiu 張可久 (ca. 1270–ca. 1350), whose oeuvre of over eight hundred songs accounts for roughly a fifth of all extant Yuan dynasty *sanqu*. In earlier scholarship, Zhang had often been characterized as the primary proponent of the style of "graceful beauty" (*qingli* 清麗), one of three aesthetic orientations of *sanqu* identified by Qing critic Liu Xizai 劉熙載 (1813–1881) and subsequently elaborated upon by Ren Ne, Liang

Yizhen 梁乙真, and a host of other modern scholars.¹³ Through a meticulous analysis of Zhang's prosodic practices, Lee shows how Zhang did not simply inherit a style from earlier *ci* poetry but incubated a new form of *sanqu* song Lee terms "regulated song." This type of song neatly blended the demands of the old and new poetics in such a way that Zhang could be recognized as a "zhiyin" 知音 (lit. "knower of sound," fig. member of the literati) within both traditionalist and experimentally minded literati communities. Specifically, Lee shows that Zhang's songs modified *sanqu*-style rhythms to conform to the rhythmic structures of *shi* poetry, used extrametrical words to create poetic lines typical of regulated verse in terms of both length and tonal pattern, avoided repetition of words in parallel lines, made use of opposing tonal patterns in conformity with the aesthetic of *shi* poetry, and used rhyming words in line with both *shi*-poetry and *qu*-song rhyme books. At the same time, the article addresses the question of why Zhang went to such great lengths to adopt *sanqu* as a form of poetic communication. Lee suggests that Zhang blended the notion of individual self-expression with *sanqu*'s social accessibility, as evidenced by the fact that over a hundred songs incorporate the names of his addressees from different social strata.

The theme adumbrated in Jaehyuk Lee's article, Zhang Kejiu's use of *sanqu* songs as a medium of social communication, is the subject of Ye Ye's article. Ye proposes that we give due consideration to what he terms a "genre-based typology of aesthetics." In his view, *sanqu* can be analyzed from the perspective of three different types of circulation: musical on-the-spot performance, literary composition, and broadly communicative functions. He proposes that the literary aspect remained relatively stable over time but that the musical and communicative functions changed considerably during the Yuan and Ming dynasties. In the ideal case, all three aesthetics were at play, but in many instances, one or the other predominated. In his telling, with authorcentric anthologies such as *Quan Yuan sanqu* 全元散曲 (The Complete Yuan *Sanqu* Songs, 1961, rev. 1989) and *Quan Ming sanqu* 全明散曲 (The Complete Ming *Sanqu* Songs, 2016) as its foundation, modern scholarship has tended to focus on the literary aspect of *sanqu* to the exclusion of the communicative functions. However, as he shows, as soon as we look beyond individual *sanqu* collections, general *sanqu* anthologies, or individual collected works and turn to sources such as genealogies, gazetteers, daily-use encyclopedias, Buddhist collections, and the Daoist canon, we find many *sanqu* designed for specific communicative purposes, what Ye Ye calls "communal texts" (*shehui wenben* 社會文本), thereby extending the public utility, reach, and visibility of *sanqu* songs. For instance, while metaphorical uses of "inner elixirs" in the *sanqu* of some elite writers have received some attention, a large body of highly technical Daoist

sanqu—some ascribed to known authors, many anonymous—has been overlooked. As potentially singable texts, such songs could be used by adepts and common people alike to gain access to knowledge on how to practice inner alchemy. Even in the absence of the prestige of authorial ascription or musical literacy on the part of readers, *sanqu* songs could thus penetrate into the realm of commoners (e.g., informational songs). Moreover, as both individual writings and gazetteers show, hymn-style *sanqu* (*yuezhang ti qu* 樂章體曲) also played an important role in the religious life of families and larger communities. One important clue for how such *sanqu* functioned rests in how they were anthologized. If the earliest *sanqu* anthologies typically were organized around musical modes, later ones often specified thematic subsections that allowed for ready use for appropriate occasions.

Tian Yuan Tan's article also tackles the communicative function of *sanqu* with a particular focus on the anthologizing practices at the Ming and Qing courts. In studies of *zaju*, detailed comparisons between different editions have become standard practice, especially as the intermediary role of agents associated with the Ming court—court agencies, members of the imperial family, and literati that enjoyed imperial patronage—have come fully into view.¹⁴ Tan's article shows that such philological rigor also benefits the study of *sanqu*, particularly since the Ming court was actively involved in the performative and textual transmission of *sanqu*, creating an unprecedented archive of textual and notated sources. Building on his own and other research on the Ming court as a nexus of songwriting culture,¹⁵ Tan shows that the court circles generated "courtly *sanqu* songs" and "ritual hymns" (*yuezhang* 樂章) while also incubating trends and countertrends among literati, commercial, and popular sectors of the world of song. Specifically, Tan compares how certain courtly *sanqu* were treated in three important sixteenth-century anthologies with ties to the court: *Shengshi xinsheng* 盛世新聲 (New Tunes from a Prosperous Age, 1517), *Cilin zhaiyan* 詞林摘艷 (Beauty Plucked from the Forest of Lyrics, 1525), and *Yongxi yuefu* 雍熙樂府 (Songs of Harmonious Peace, 1566). He notes that, first, the closer the ties to the world of the court, the greater the chances that the songs remain anonymous. Second, the positioning of courtly *sanqu* songs within these anthologies signaled something of the programmatic intent of the edition. Third, palace editions of *sanqu* anthologies that passed themselves off as reprints of an earlier title may contain substantial variations and include otherwise unknown songs. Fourth, over time and across dynasties, songs could be adapted for new purposes within the imperial culture of entertainment. And finally, such courtly songs entered the realms of literati, commercial, and popular culture. In short, the court emerges as a dynamic agent in the diffusion of *sanqu* within and beyond the court.

The third section of this issue is devoted to the question of translation. Specifically, this multiauthor contribution, “In Search of Pure Sound,” takes up the question of how to translate in another linguistic medium a song form whose music has been lost. As translation scholar Peter France has noted, literary translations into English often have to navigate between the Scylla of a slavish literalism cherished by foreign language teachers and the Charybdis of fluency at all costs required by commercial publishers.¹⁷ Moreover, the translation of poetry in particular has been dogged by a refrain of claims to untranslatability. Although Chinese poetry has nevertheless attracted a steady stream of scholar-poets to defy such claims, *sanqu* translations are rare among poetry renditions that seek to balance the rigors of the source with a desire for aesthetic pleasure in the translation. A notable exception is the oeuvre of James I. Crump, whose translations stand out for their thoroughgoing commitment to literary wit. In this spirit of literary experimentation, “In Search of Pure Sound” seeks to make *sanqu* come alive in English translation. The collaborative array of short essays and literary examples grew out of a Chinese translation workshop I taught at Ohio State University in Spring 2019. The combined essays seek to broaden the repertoire of translation tactics for *sanqu* songs in particular and for Chinese poetry more generally. Fully aware of the impossibility of duplicating certain features of the songs in English, these essays nevertheless attend to some of the signature features of *sanqu* songs—their musicality and rhymes, their tongue-in-check treatment of allusions, their playful admixture of different linguistic registers, to name a few. With creative strategies designed to reinvent the songs in a blended guise, these essays exemplify the notion that, in the words of Matthew Reynolds, the “strangeness” inherent in the nonalignment of languages “can be a source of poetry.”¹⁸

In the final section, I offer some theoretical reflections on the genre of Yuan *sanqu*. A few years ago Shang Wei challenged the field to think of new ways to come to terms with the fact that the term *vernacular* was not a very accurate way to characterize the plethora of new hybrid forms of literary expression that began to appear from the Song dynasty onward.¹⁹ His own solution for extended fictional narrative was the notion of an “encyclopedic novel” that mediates its narration through countless other imprints.²⁰ Taking its cue from Shang’s genre-based approach, my article approaches a sampling of *sanqu* through the issue of language registers and their potential effect on listeners and readers. Rather than seeing *sanqu* as a uniform genre, the article shows that great linguistic variability characterized the form, comprising songs written in a consistently colloquial tenor, those composed in a courtly idiom, and inventive pieces that unabashedly mixed registers. In their hypermediatized complexity, this last variety affords the greatest interpretive challenges since such songs

undermine stable reading positions; however, precisely in their potential indeterminacy, such songs also foreshadow the emerging heteroglossia of early modern literature.

As guest editor of this issue, I thank the general editors, Yuan Xingpei and Zong-qi Cai, for giving me the opportunity to put together this issue. I also thank the two anonymous peer reviewers for finding time to provide thoughtful and detailed comments and suggestions for the entire issue. Finally, I dedicate this special issue to Stephen H. West, my adviser during my graduate studies at the University of California, Berkeley. In February 2017, Steve hosted the conference “Voicing Alterity: East Asian Texts in the Languages of Others” at Arizona State University (ASU), where some of the ideas for this issue were incubated. In April 2019 we honored Steve’s many accomplishments during a career spanning half a century with another a conference held at ASU: “The Aesthetics of Embodiment: Drama, Ritual, and Food in Traditional Sinitic Culture.” In what seems the now lost and longed for world of in-person celebrations, that event featured spirited presentations and kindled friendships old and new. Papers delivered there on *sanqu*, drama, and other topics will be gathered in a Festschrift, for which plans are under way to publish it in Chinese under the title *Xiaodao keguan: Riyong meixue de nengliang* 小道可觀：日用美學的能量 (The Minor Arts Reconsidered: The Cultural Power of Everyday Aesthetics). With this dedication for an English-language counterpart with an entirely different lineup that features work by Steve’s longtime collaborator (Wilt L. Idema), students (Karin Myhre, Wenbo Chang, and myself), and colleagues (Tian Yuan Tan), among other scholars, we hope to pass on to future generations his delight in scholastic rigor and rambunctious wit. May the research gathered here inspire further work on what it means, in Pablo Neruda’s words, “to be of the earth and sing with words (de tierra soy y con palabras canto).”²¹



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Notes

1. Li Changji 李昌集, quoted in Ye, this issue.
2. Wang Xingqi 王星琦, quoted in Tan, this issue.
3. On the contributions of these three men, see Sieber, “Rethinking the History of Early *Sanqu* Songs,” 87–90.
4. On Lu Qian, a Nanjing native, and his attempts to build a localized Nanjing legacy through attention to Nanjing-based Ming dynasty songwriters, see Tan, “Emerging from Anonymity,” 163–64.

5. On Xie Wuliang, see Sieber, "Rethinking the History of Early *Sanqu*," 94–95; on the reinvention of *sanqu* as a Yuan dynasty genre, see Owen, "End of the Past," 186–87.
6. West, "Literature from the Late Jin to the Early Ming," 633.
7. *Ibid.*, 635.
8. Sieber, "Nobody's Genre, Everybody's Song," 29–64.
9. Wang, "Plays within Songs."
10. Ye, "Mingdai liyue zhidu yu yuezhangti ciqu."
11. Pu, "Qianqiu shibi, qujia zhiji." I thank Wenbo Chang for bringing this article to my attention.
12. On dreaming and spectatorship as audience modalities, see L. H. Lam, *Spatiality of Emotion in Early Modern China*.
13. On Liu Xizai, see West, "Literature from the Late Jin to the Early Ming," 645; on Liang Yizhen's *Yuan Ming sanqu xiaoshi*, see Idema, this issue.
14. See Sun, *Yeshiyuan gujin zaju kao*; Idema, "Why You Have Never Read a Yuan Drama"; West, "Text and Ideology"; and Tan, "Sovereign and the Theater."
15. Tan, "Emerging from Anonymity." This formulation is indebted to J. S. C. Lam, "Imperial Agency in Ming Music Culture," 271.
17. France, "Translation Studies and Translation Criticism," 3–9.
18. Reynolds, *Translation: A Very Short Introduction*, 4–5.
19. Shang, "Writing and Speech."
20. Shang, "*Jin Ping Mei* and Late Ming Print Culture."
21. Translation modified from Neruda, "Oda al diccionario/Ode to the Dictionary," 414.

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