snakes' legs
Sequels, Continuations, Rewritings,
and Chinese Fiction
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Rewriting the Tang

Humor, Heroics, and Imaginative Reading

Beginning in the sixteenth century, China’s readers were treated to a series of full-length novels, each recounting adventures and events from the Sui, Tang, and Five Dynasties periods, roughly the four centuries from 580 to 970. Several re-wrote one or more predecessors to varying degrees; others were striking in the originality with which they developed convincing characters for historical figures from those periods. Most of these novels concentrated on political events, at court and on the battlefield. Martial heroes dominate a relatively late sequence of continuations produced during the Qing period that are sequels in the narrow sense of that term. Two among this series of novels have consistently delighted readers through the years; they have been reprinted numerous times since they first appeared. My concern here is with the second of this pair, a unique mid-Qing popular novel originally titled Shuo Tang quanzhuan (Stories about the Tang, complete; or, more literally, Telling stories about the Tang, 1736) that re-wrote, revised, and thereby substantially subverted the narrative material of its predecessors, the older favorite Sui Tang yanyi (The romance of the Sui and the Tang, 1695) in particular.

My purpose in this chapter is to explore the ways that the Shuo Tang author, known only as Yuanhu Yusou (Old Fisherman of Mandarin Duck Lake), radically re-interpreted earlier texts. In short, by incorporating relatively raw material from the storytelling or theatrical traditions into elements of earlier written fiction, he took his novel in particular and the vernacular novel in general to new levels of entertainment writing. I conclude that Shuo Tang was intended, at least in part, to be an outrageous parody of seventeenth-century literati fiction, a literary game meant to amuse those readers who could appreciate his
play. Furthermore, the artistic complexity involved in this parody suggests that this "Old Fisherman" must have been a writer of some sophistication who was intimately familiar with oral renditions of tales about late Sui-period warriors. Behind this pen name must have hidden a wenren (literatus) novelist similar in training to several of his predecessors, not the mere scribe for professional storytellers he has previously been made out to be.1

By parody I do not mean only the self-conscious imitation of an earlier writer's style. Instead I refer to the appropriation of characters and action from the source texts, deliberately misread and combined with elements probably exaggerated from their origins in professional oral presentations to degrees that surprise and amuse the sophisticated reader, in order to emphasize its differences from the older version. This cynical subversion of widely known narrative material produces expectations among readers that are explicitly left unfulfilled in the new text. Indeed, the derivative version frequently presents material that violently— and humorously—contradicts what the reader might be familiar with from the earlier fictional sources, while ironically undercutting the oral materials as well. Of course, I can only speculate on what any individual original reader or group of readers might have anticipated as they read this novel for the first time; presumably a range of responses greeted this work. Even so, because Shuo Tang can be read successfully as the vehicle for literary play, this suggests that the ideal intended reader for the work was sophisticated and that he (or she) was familiar with earlier works in the Sui-Tang sequence of novels. This perspective alone makes full sense of Shuo Tang as a deliberate parody rather than merely the jerky novel of exaggerated martial adventures replete with violence and trickery that it seems to be when read superficially. It also allows properly identifying the work as a sequel in the special sense of a thorough reinterpretation, even a comic deconstruction, of identifiable predecessor texts. In this, Shuo Tang may well be unique.2

OLDER NOVELS ABOUT THE TANG

Although it is not possible here to survey all extant novels in the Sui and Tang series (most are long and some are now quite rare), to understand the literary context of Shuo Tang requires a brief introduction to the range of narratives available to its author. The earliest of the series include Tang shu zhizhuan tongshu yanyi (Chronicles from The History of the Tang: A popular romance, preface dated 1553) and Sui Tang liangchao zhizhuan (Chronicles from the two courts, Sui and Tang, ca. 1600; extant edition 1619). Both explicitly acknowledge in their titles that they rewrite in chronic form biographical information found in standard histories of the Sui and the Tang (not that these orthodox accounts are necessarily devoid of fictional, even fantastic, episodes, of course). The earlier of these texts is attributed to a Jinling (Nanjing) author and was published in Fujian by the printing house of Xiong Zhonggu (fl. 1570?); Xiong also penned a number of low-quality works of historical fiction, perhaps including this one. The Sentaiguian (Fujian) edition attributes authorship to Yu Ying'a'o, probably a relative of Yu Xiangdou (ca. 1560–ca. 1637) of the famous Jianyang, Fujian family of printers.3

The second of these Ming novels may have been the first to inspire a sequel in the narrow sense of that term. Sui Tang liangchao zhizhuan rushes through 295 years of events until the year 878, part way through the reign of Xizong, without completing its coverage of the Tang. Yet its publisher's colophon urges readers to read the "complete text" (quanshu) as it continues in the novel Can Tang Wudai zhizhuan (Chronicles of the decline of the Tang and of the Five dynasties, ca. 1610). The first, very brief and synoptic, chapter of the sequel—now titled Can Tang Wudai shi yanyi zhuans (Historical romance and chronicles of the decline of the Tang and of the Five dynasties)—summarizes Tang history, and the second chapter begins at the first year of Xizong's reign. The rest of Can Tang is devoted to the decline of Tang power and the ensuing struggles for political stability that conclude, in its final chapter, with the founding of the Song.4 In their entirety, then, the second is clearly a sequel to the first.

A different direction in novelistic fiction is exemplified by a prosimetric work attributed to an obscure scholar named Zhu Shenglin (fl. 1580–1600?), Da Tang Qinwang cihu (Poem tale of the great Tang's Prince of Qin). Zhu, according to the novel's preface (written early in the seventeenth century), developed his narrative on the basis of a narrative guci (drum song) then in circulation. Such comments confirm the hypothesis of May Fourth-era scholars (still accepted uncritically by some specialists) about the origins of the Chinese novel. With little supporting evidence, that generation asserted positivistically that vernacular fiction developed as a result of literati reliance on the creative imagination of China's working masses. They also speculated that these oral stories circulated in the form of diben (promptbooks)—even though none of these alleged sources has ever been found. Regardless of its varied relationships with written and oral traditions, Da Tang Qinwang cihu—like the popular chronicle Tang shu zhizhuan tongshu yanyi—narrates in detail the exploits of a single protagonist, here Li Shimin, who became the Tang emperor Taizong. It also develops characters essential to the later works in the series, the military heroes Qin Shubao, Shan Xiongxin, and Cheng Yaojin. It also introduces Luo Cheng, who was to become so important in Qing-period works in the series.5

The more noteworthy Ming novels in this series are Sui Yangdi yanyi (The merry adventures of the Sui emperor Yang, 1631) and Sui shi yiwen (The forgotten tales of the Sui, 1633). Both are elaborate recreations of historical figures introduced in Tang shu zhizhuan tongshu yanyi and Sui Tang liangchao zhizhuan. The first of these novels is anonymous, presumably because certain passages are erotic and others admit being read as an allegorical condemnation of the late Ming regime. The second, a fictional biography of the military hero Qin Shubao, was written by the poet, playwright, and (during the early Qing) civil administrator Yuan Yuling (Yuan Jin, 1599–1674). The central characters of these novels develop and progress, but in opposite directions: the Sui emperor generally becomes more widely reviled for his burgeoning excesses, while Qin Shubao develops from awkward youth to capable commander in
the Tang armies. Neither protagonist is woodenly consistent, however; both express complex and conflicting motivations. The best known of the series, at least until the middle of the Qing period, was undoubtedly the still popular "Sui Tang yanyi", compiled from a great number of earlier written sources by literatus Chu Jenhoo (ca. 1630–ca. 1705). Essentially this historical romance rewrites, reinterprets, and ameliorates "Sui Tang liangchao zhizhuan" by incorporating other written fiction. 6

A NEW KIND OF SEQUEL

"Shuo Tang" is a sequel in the sense that it came after important and widely appreciated novels in the sequence and dramatically, even radically, reinterprets much of the material it adapts from its sources. As such, it contrasts dramatically with subsequent works in the series of novels concerning events and figures of the Sui and Tang periods. A few years after the first "Shuo Tang" was published, a continuation appeared with the title "Shuo Tang houzhuan" (Stories about the Tang, later collection) (perhaps as early as 1738) that picks up chronologically where "Shuo Tang quanzhuan" left off. The earlier novel was thereupon renamed "Shuo Tang qianzhuan" (Stories about the Tang, former collection). "Shuo Tang houzhuan" in turn inspired further continuations, one of which was titled "Shuo Tang sanzhuan" (Third collection).

Both "Shuo Tang houzhuan" and "Shuo Tang sanzhuan" begin with characters introduced in "Shuo Tang quanzhuan"; both narrate further military campaigns led by Li Shimin and his commanders against challenges on the Tang frontiers posed by border peoples. "Shuo Tang houzhuan" is divided into two parts, "Luo Tong sao bei" (Luo Tong’s northern sweep, fifteen chapters) and "Xue Rengui zhengdong" (Xue Rengui’s eastern campaign, forty chapters). In the first part, the Tang ruler Li Shimin, with Qin Shubao as his commander, leads an expeditionary force northward, only to be entraped by the northern commander Princess Tuhu. Luo Tong, the young officer who comes to rescue them, falls in love with the princess, and their liaison brings hostilities to an end. In the second, Li Shimin has a premonitory dream of the only warrior with the skills required for victory in their difficult campaign against the state of Liao in the east. This is Xue Rengui, whose efforts are central to pacifying the enemy in the second part, despite attempts by jealous rivals to take all the credit. Both of these "Shuo Tang" sequels also incorporate material from the oral and performing traditions. 7

The title "Shuo Tang" (by which this middle Qing-period series is known) is apt: the degree of reference to the formally reliable historical record (as opposed to other intertextual relations) is far lower here for characters and incidents than in the earlier, and generally more historical, novels concerning the Sui and the Tang. "Shuo Tang" and its sequels are self-consciously fictional, and their purpose appears clearly more to be entertainment rather than pretended education for their readers. Their authors seemingly felt neither any compunction to accommodate all the figures mentioned in standard historical references nor even to base the exploits of their protagonists on recorded fact. Thus they freely adapted fantastic and romantic elements from theatrical and storytelling traditions (about their sources, more below). They also created new heroes and offspring for heroes from the parent novels to people successive generations in warrior families that could continue loyalties, and vendettas, through decades or even centuries. In the process of creation their authors also freely conjured up new rivalries and conflicts, new battles, and especially new weapons, new scenes of treachery, combat, victory, despair.

"Shuo Tang" and its sequels differ widely from earlier novels concerning Sui and Tang figures. Their models, in terms of structure and characterization, are older works of warrior fiction having sets of related characters dating from the middle Ming, when tales of the Yang family of generals first became popular. But their authors chose not to conform to earlier generic guidelines, either. These middle Qing-period novels range freely into established traditions of heroic, fantastic or demonic, and romantic fiction; their models seemingly included such works as "Shuifu zhuan" (known in English as "Oultaws of the Marsh" or "Water Margin"). "Fengshen yanyi" (The investiture of the gods. ca. 1600), and even "Haoqiu zhuan" (The fortunate union, ca. 1670) in these three categories.

Like Ming and early Qing novels concerning the Sui and the Tang, titles in the smaller "Shuo Tang" series quite obviously refer to their dependence on earlier narrative works, probably for legitimacy but perhaps only because it was conventional to do so. As Martin Huang has suggested in the introduction to this volume, sequels (including the interpretive "Shuo Tang") may have been elicited by the “openness” of earlier historical fiction. Several having a chronologically lengthy sweep of narrative, such as "Sui Tang liangchao zhizhuan" and "Sui Tang yanyi", end inconclusively, or, in these cases, with the suggestion that a continuation might be forthcoming.

But the approach of the "Shuo Tang" novels was quite unlike that of Chu Jenhoo, who slavishly copied major portions of earlier novels into his well-known and widely reprinted "Sui Tang yanyi". The first "Shuo Tang" author, the “Old Fisherman,” forged a new path away from all precedents to create a new, and in some ways more entertaining, work of fiction. In this regard he seems to have innovated, following the precedent of Yuan Yuling, the playwright who created an elaborate "Bildungsroman" for the historical general Qin Shubao. Yuan’s novel "Sui shi yiwen" thus self-consciously demonstrated disregard for the generic conventions of the episodic and loosely organized historical romance. Yuan’s character is psychologically and morally more complex, more likely to make mistakes, and more prone to introspection than his forerunners in earlier fiction. 8 "Shuo Tang" rewrote Qin Shubao and other protagonists to make them unsympathetic, unsophisticated, and considerably more violent. The Old Fisherman turned Yuan Yuling’s literati practice of refining fiction on its head.

Reading for parody, seeking out narrative incongruities between early and later texts, can be justified by references to textual and reading practices of the early eighteenth century. My approach is based on several observations made in regard to other types of writing and other novels; it necessitates several assumptions, given the paucity of information concerning the "Shuo Tang"
author. Specifically, the author must have been conversant with literary practices that included appropriation of earlier texts through quotation, paraphrase, or parallel construction and comment. In the realm of poetic composition, intertextual practices generally promoted emotional and aesthetic identification between the author and the reader, both of them poets. Readers of fiction, as Zhang Zhupu (1670–1698) suggested in his commentary to the novel Jin Ping Mei (The plum in the golden vase; also known in English as The golden lotus), should seek a degree of imaginative identification with the author that allowed the reader to fancy himself the author of the text. Both practices involved very close textual readings, a broad familiarity with a variety of classical and popular writings, and the active engagement of the creative imagination on the part of the reader. For the reader of poetry, this experience was considered uplifting both aesthetically and morally; for the consumer of fiction, reading could be an entertaining, ongoing game of detection with lots of anticipation: could the reader predict what would happen next in the narrative? Could he imagine how this situation might be resolved (when the author is attempting to outwit the reader)? Could he catch the writer at his tricks?§

MODELS OF NARRATIVE APPROPRIATION

The sequence of novels concerning events of the Sui and the Tang began with some of the earliest examples of the form, written in the middle of the sixteenth century; the latest appeared in the nineteenth.¹⁰ The first and, to my knowledge, only book devoted to the study of this series is Qi Yukun’s Sui Tang yanyi xilie xiaoshuo (Novels in the Romance of the Sui and the Tang series), published in 1993. This is a book intended for general rather than scholarly readers; for the most part Qi’s comments confirm standard interpretations about the development of vernacular fiction in China.¹¹ Although I disagree with Professor Qi’s periodization and even some of his analyses, his comments can serve as a useful starting place for this investigation.

Qi Yukun sees the Sui-Tang series as having evolved through several stages. He groups these works into lishi yanyi xiaoshuo (historical novels) followed developmentally and chronologically by yingxiong chuanqi xiaoshuo (heroic romances). His first group ostensibly relies heavily on the relevant historical sources; in contrast, these narratives took Sanguo zhi tongsu yanyi (Romance of the Three Kingdoms, 1522) as their model and are commonly characterized as qishi sanxu (70 percent fact and 30 percent fantasy). One novel so characterized in the Sui-Tang lineage is Sui Tang liangchao zhizhu. It has a preface dated 1508, but there is no reason to accept as authentic either its attributed authorship or dating. In fact, it might have been compiled nearly a century later. Its preface attributes its “original version” to the reputed author of Sanguo, the playwright Luo Guanzhong (fourteenth century)? Sui Tang liangchao zhizhu reads like a chronicle, with many figures and dates piled up in a dreary procession, having little of the moral seriousness of its precursor.

Another of the “historical novel” type is Tang shu zhizhu tongsu yanyi, bearing a preface that is more likely to be accurately dated at 1553. Despite Qi’s classification, to a great extent this novel fictionalizes events in the life of its central figure, Li Shimin. Just because these novels are presumably older than others does not necessarily make them any more historically accurate, and of course Tang shu zhizhu tongsu yanyi may be around fifty years older than Sui Tang liangchao zhizhu—during which time the novel was evolving rapidly. Zhu Shenglin’s Da Tang Qinwang cihua may have been an experiment in adapting the materials of oral storytellers for readers, but it is more romantic than historical.

Two late-Ming novels that focus on the lives of single protagonists, Sui Yangdi yanshi and Sui shi yiyen, seem to have taken the opposite direction in cultural terms. The first relates with noteworthy sensitivity the inevitable downfall of a hedonistic and self-deluding monarch. In many ways Sui shi yiyen is artistically the most refined novel in the Sui-Tang series. Although it does refer to incidents of historical record, its purpose is to craft an incongruous background, the adventures of an awkward but promising teenager, for its central character, the mighty historical Tang general Qin Shubao. Yuan Yuling made his purpose clear in his preface and at the beginning of the first chapter: to fill in what most stories of individuals leave out, the early life of his hero.¹² Both of these works are literati novels. Their characterization is subtle; Yuan’s hero is at one time or another foolish, lazy, filial, decisive, loyal, and courageous. Only when the central characters act in the public realm do these novelists revert to the outlines of recorded history to define their protagonist’s activities. The complexity of both protagonists here distinguishes them from the more static characters straitjacketed by historical accuracy in earlier novels in the series.¹³

Clearly Chu Renhuo was impressed by Yuan Yuling’s creativity; with only small modifications he appropriated the bulk of Sui shi yiyen for his own Sui Tang yanyi. He alsografted in major portions of Sui Yangdi yanshi and adapted numerous shorter narratives as well to create a highly derivative work that seems to have met popular tastes for more than three centuries, given the frequency with which it has been reissued.¹⁴ In format and in focus, Sui Tang yanyi, like the middle Ming historical romances, seeks to chronicle the major events of a long period of time, nearly two hundred years. It, too, uses the reigns of monarchs to constitute its chronological backbone. In this, Chu’s work contrasts with the first half of Sui shi, where events in its protagonist’s life serve to structure the narrative. All three of these literati novels might separately be considered sequels to the extent that each refines and reinterprets its source texts. Even so, only Chu’s work might be said to depend on familiarity with its predecessors for fullest aesthetic appreciation of its intertextual indebtedness.

Shuo Tang, a novel of sixty-eight chapters, appeared early in the Qianlong reign; its preface was signed by Rulian jushi (Layman Transcendent Lotus) dated during the first year of the period, 1736. This unidentifiable writer praises the work for clarifying distinctions between virtuous acts and their opposites in ways that are easily comprehended by all. This preface is correct: motivations of characters here are far more straightforward than in Sui Tang yanyi or the other literati novels. Partially this may be a function of having compressed most received material into fewer words, but scholars conclude that this was the Old
Fisherman’s intention. Shuo Tang is less engaged with authentic records than are the historical romances; like Shuihu zhuan, its narrative framework is not the chronological development of a dynastic house, but instead the linked adventures of a series of individuals. These links interconnect as characters come in contact with one another, but the sequence of the novel’s sections are not chronologically contingent upon each other.

Shuo Tang also introduces a new category of military figures, the Sui chao haohan (doughty warriors of the Sui), with a numerical rank assigned to each. (Not all of the sequence appear in the novel, leaving gaps that confuse Qi Yukun and other critics.) The basis for this ranking, to the extent that it is consistent, seems to be pure physical strength; those having the highest ranking swing weapons weighing hundreds of pounds each—and can defeat in battle every one lower than himself on the list. This ranking functions as a record, often predictive, of the pecking order among these grotesque fighters. Some characters, such as the evil commander Yang Lin and virtuous warriors Li Yuanba (the number-one doughty warrior) and Wu Yunshao (the fifth of this group) are totally fictitious. Important historical figures, including the rebel leader Zhai Rang, do not appear at all. Internal contradictions are numerous, and the distances between places with real names seem irrelevant to the movements of the characters; all journeys take buzhi yiri (more than just a day). Scenes of fighting abound, complete with detailed descriptions of armor, comments by the combatants, movements of their weapons (some of which also have names), number of clashes between the antagonists, and responses of their magnificent—and named—mounts. These exciting conflicts may have been the primary reason that the novel has been constantly in print since its first appearance.

It seems incontrollable that the “Old Fisherman” drew most of his material from the popular Sui Tang yanyi rather than the already rare Sui shi yiweng or other texts. In Shuo Tang, the dramatic and blatantly obvious inversion of major figures and events from literati fiction, especially given the continuing popularity of Sui Tang yanyi throughout the Qing period, reveals a close relationship between these two novels, given the writing and reading practices outlined above. Shuo Tang’s appropriation of oral story material also suggests literati writing practices. One might even read this novel superficially, “for the plot” only, as it were, and never be aware of its highly derivative nature and its use of irony. This could produce an enjoyable reading (to which I will return at the end), but it would miss much of what Shuo Tang truly has to offer, especially its crude humor.

**READING AGAINST THE SOURCE TEXTS**

It has been common practice among Chinese critics to see the novel as having greater value as entertainment than as didactic fiction. Qi Yukun echoes previous scholars who assess Shuo Tang as fundamentally “popular” in contrast to novels catering more to the tastes of the educated, such as Sui shi yiweng and even Sui Tang yanyi. He declares,

Shuo Tang quanzhuan is fiction in the storyteller’s format (shuoshui xiaoashuo). In order to attract listening and reading audiences, its plot is discontinuous and active and its language is popular and brisk; the book embodies strength and roughness. In a classic way it embodies the classic vulgar literary style that matches the psychology and tastes of China’s working masses. Consequently it has been widely welcomed by readers.

For the most part, it was compiled from stories “current among the masses” (minjian gushi), Qi concludes. At first glance, such sources might seem impossible to trace, by their very definition: what was exclusively transmitted orally ceased to exist, except in memory, the moment the tale was concluded. This may be why Qi makes no attempt to do so. But certain features of oral performance can still be seen in the text, in particular the characteristics of its heroes and the burlesqued interactions between them. Likewise, given the great amount of story material shared between the oral and written traditions of late imperial China, virtually every story has left some sort of textual trail. The obvious area to search for possible Shuo Tang performance sources are plays about the Sui and the Tang current in the burgeoning popular theater during the Qing. This approach is facilitated by the names given some sections of the novel.

A case in point is the play first known in its Yuan-Ming zaju (variety play) version by the title Laojun tang (The Laozi temple). In this play, and in chapter 42 of Shuo Tang, during a moonlit ride the Tang prince Li Shimin spies a white stag and shoots it. The deer runs away carrying the arrow, with the prince in pursuit. Soon the prince discovers himself at the gate of a great fortification. This turns out to be the stronghold of his rival Li Mi, self-styled prince of Wei. Two of Li Mi’s generals, Qin Shubao and Cheng Yaojin, are patrolling the perimeter; they hear the jingling of Li Shimin’s harness bells and give chase, thinking that he is a spy. Upon hearing their bells, the Tang prince dashes away into the mountains. When Cheng catches up and challenges him, Li Shimin gives his name and begs to be released. This makes Cheng furious: the warrior is adamant about seeking vengeance for the beating he suffered at the hands of Li Shimin’s younger brother Li Yuanba. Li Shimin gallops away at top speed, only to find that his path ends at a temple dedicated to the Daoist saint Laozi. Quickly he takes refuge within, but Cheng easily discovers his hiding place and aims a great blow of his mighty hammer directly at the prince. Only because Qin Shubao deflects the blow is Li Shimin’s life spared. Qin does so, he reports, because he saw a golden dragon circling protectively above the prince’s head; surely he is mandated by heaven to be emperor and they must ultimately serve him. Cheng acquiesces, taking Li Shimin to be incarcerated in the Wei fortress. The Tang prince is freed only later when Li Mi decrees a pardon for all prisoners, with the explicit exception of Li Shimin. Military adviser Wei Zheng hits upon the idea of changing the decree from “I do not pardon” to “I first pardon” Li Shimin by adding a stroke to the negative “bu” to create “ben.” On the authority of this falsified document Wei and strategist Xu Maogong send Li Shimin on his way back to the Tang.

Later, when Xu Maogong, Qin Shubao, and Cheng Yaojin discuss shifting
allegiance to the Tang, the happy Cheng shouts out, “If we go swear allegiance over there, that will make sure we have a great future!” It will be fine for the two of them, Qin observes, but he cautions Cheng about his own prospects: “How can it be that you don’t remember

Taking an Ax to the Laozi Temple,
Pursuing the Prince of Qin in the Moonlight?”

These two lines (Fu bi Laojuntang: Yuexia gan Qinwang) rhyme, of course, making them a couplet that stands out from its prose context. Phrasing it this way is a clearly self-conscious hint to the reader about how the author views his material—as discontinuous segments, separate stories—that the reader (and, incongruously, the relevant characters as well) should keep in mind as the novel progresses.18

By contrast, the dispositions of the armies are far more complicated in Sui Tang yanyi, and the scene lasts much longer: on entering the temple, Li Shimin prays for aid; because he is the destined True Ruler the god blows up a wind to obliterate the prince’s tracks and covers the gate with a spiderweb to make it appear that no one had entered. The golden dragon visible to Qin Shubao in Shuo Tang here restrains Cheng’s deadly blow, however, but Qin must explain the significance of this ominous event to the ignorant Cheng. In Shuo Tang it is foolish Cheng who reminds Li Mi to exclude Li Shimin from the pardon; Wei Zheng has to explain how he will change the character to make the alteration harder to recognize. In Sui Tang the jailer observes, correctly, that changing this word would make the line read awkwardly and the falsification would be instantly detected. Better to let him spirit Li Shimin away as he goes to his next post. All the heroes agree with the jaller, and so the escape is accomplished by a more plausible means.19

Throughout this episode the Old Fisherman of Shuo Tang has avoided the carefully rational Confucian turns of events of Sui Tang in preference for the simpler, even illogical, version given in texts more closely related to the popular oral tradition. His choices must have been deliberate, given his summaries of Sui Tang events for other sections of his novel (such as those concerning Qin Shubao in chaps. 1–10); Shuo Tang revises Sui Tang “backward” and thus away from orthodox rationalism, to use the developmental model proposed by May Fourth–era literary historians. As with the impressively strong Sui chao haoian, the Old Fisherman calls into question the neat narrative linkages of his literary fiction source by annihilating contingency in favor of arbitrary events and impossible feats.

The “game” the Old Fisherman is playing here with his sources is rendered yet more amusing by the fact that the doggerel couplet cited above comes soon after another story familiar to theater audiences, the surrender to the Tang and subsequent rebellion of the Wei ruler Li Mi. In Shuo Tang he sends Luo Cheng and Qin Shubao to capture Wei Zheng and Xu Machong for their treasonous act; they fail to do so, and Li Mi orders them executed. When Cheng Yaojin pleads for their lives, Li Mi dismisses all three of them from his presence, and ultimately they all join the Tang. In addition to these losses, Li Mi’s food supplies have been carried away by strange winged creatures resembling large rats. He has no alternative; Li Mi must follow the suggestion of his close friend and adviser Wang Bodang to throw himself at the mercy of Li Shimin. But he still wants to be independent; thus when Li Shimin posts him away from the capital, Li Mi makes plans to rebel. His new wife, a member of the Tang royal house given him by its founder Li Yuan, objects, and he slays her. He and Wang Bodang flee, only to fall in a rain of Tang arrows. Appropriately, the text had long before identified this as a dishonorable death.

The northern play titled Shuang tou Tang (A pair cast their lot with the Tang) presents the background for this situation in considerably more simple terms. There, Wang Bodang has failed to capture the generals who released Li Shimin, but Li Mi cannot doubt his loyalty. “If I misjudge your good heart, may I die in a hail of arrows!” he declares ominously. Using the retrieval of a goose Li Shimin has shot as an incongruously lame introduction, Li Mi and Wang Bodang give themselves up. When he rebels, Li Mi kills his royal wife, blaming it all on destiny. For his part, Wang bewails his fate to a servant who betrays his commitments. In contrast to these rather mechanical justifications for actions in the play, the Old Fisherman has woven other references to these events into the fabric of his Shuo Tang. The stolen Wei grain stores, for example, reappear magically—and utterly incongruously—in chapter 65 to stave off starvation for General Yuchi Gong and his men when they are marooned on a city wall surrounded by water. Furthermore, Cheng Yaojin is also incorporated here as a means to develop his character further.20

Qi Yukun and other scholars have explained the obvious connections between the novel and popular plays by suggesting that Shuo Tang served as their source, but I conclude that the opposite relationship is the case. That is, this novel, like at least one of its predecessors in the Sui-Tang series, refers frequently—and explicitly, by identifying the names of popular plays—to the theater, rewriting plays to produce a consistent parodic distance. Regardless of its sources, this novel presents all major characters in a low mimetic light, as worthy, at least part of the time, of ridicule. In effect, the Shuo Tang text both fantastical romanticizes its protagonists and reduces them to a level of foolishness that evokes the reader’s laughter. To me, and I am certain to any reader familiar with the Sui Tang yanyi versions of these stories (i.e., the more widely read and most likely better-educated reader), Shuo Tang can only come across as a parody, glittering with wit and ironic reversals of characters’ personalities, their motivations for action, and their dilemmas.21 This is effected by the ironic manipulation of materials apparently originating in the oral tradition. Scenes involving two major characters, Cheng Yaojin and Shan Xiongxin, demonstrate this reading with particular clarity.

CHENG YAOJIN: BLUNT RUSTIC BECOMES SMUG RUFFIAN

Perhaps the clearest example of these ironic transgressions of the earlier, more somber, and morally complicated material is in the characterization of Cheng Yaojin. In both novels he is introduced as the son of the woman who sheltered
the infant Qin Shubao and his mother when Qin’s father, a general, was killed during the Sui conquest. After that brief scene, Cheng disappears from Sui Tang yangyi until much later in Qin’s adventures, when Qin has taken an important position in military administration and is lying low because he has slain the sadistic rapist Yuwen Huiji in the capital. In the parent novel, Cheng reappears as a grown man, but he has become a rough and tough character. Even so, he is generally referred to by his formal name, Cheng Zhijie (which suggests moral steadfastness rather than the brute strength of Yaojin, literally “Metal Biter.”) And in truth, the character as he appears in Sui shi yiwen and Sui Tang yangyi is to a noteworthy degree a man of simple virtue in addition to being a powerful warrior.

By contrast, in Shuo Tang Cheng Yaojin makes a yet more dramatic reappearance as a pardoned murderer who refuses to give up his imprisonment, and thus the story veers wildly away from the historical record. This is how he is introduced:

Once the amnesty was announced, it pardoned a parasite. This fellow was extraordinary. He was a salt smuggler, feared by everyone for his utter ruthlessness. He was physically tall and strong and undaunted in his courage. While a salt smuggler he had beaten a salt inspector to death, but the examining official had taken pity on him for a doubtful warrior (haohan) and determined that it was a case of accidental homicide. He had been sentenced to exile, and was waiting in prison. So when the amnesty was received there, he was pardoned and released. This fellow had raised havoc in Shandong and knew no restraint. He had lived in a rural village named Pigeon Shop Market under the jurisdiction of Licheng County in the Jinan District. His surname was Cheng, and his formal name was Zhijie. He was eight feet tall, with a tiger’s body and a dragon’s waist, his face was like green mud, and his hair the color of cinnabar. His strength was extraordinary, and he was terribly fierce.

His father Cheng Youde had died when the child was only seven, leaving him with just his mother for support. Who would have thought that when Emperor Wen’s armies destroyed the Northern Qi the fires set by the soldiers would reach to them, leaving Mrs. Cheng to earn a living for the two of them as best she could. At nine he studied together with Qin Shubao, but as he grew he never learned a single character, and by the time he was an adult they went their separate ways. His mother then sent him out to do a little business. Yet because they had no capital he and a group of ne’er-do-wells began trading in illegal salt, so it turned out that he did earn some money to give to his mother. Since one way or another he would get into fights and because he was utterly ruthless, everyone feared him and all called him “Tiger Cheng.”

Who would have thought that suddenly one day he would get into a fight with a newly appointed salt inspector he happened to bump into. Cheng’s anger flared and in no time he had beaten this supervisor of the Salt Patrol to death. Two local constables were sent to arrest him. Fearing that the others might be implicated as well, he turned himself in to the county court, admitted his guilt, and was sentenced to death. The county magistrate who tried the case, an upright man, remanded him to prison, where he had remained for three years. By that time Emperor Yang had ascended the throne, and he was covered by the amnesty.

When Cheng Yaojin heard this news, he thought it over half the night. “If I get out, I won’t be able to eat my fill,” he mused. “What’ll I do?” You might ask why this Cheng Yaojin would not want to get out of prison. After all, it was because there he had everything he wanted to eat, everything he needed to use, and whenever a new prisoner came in he shared their wine and food. It was just like he was the head of the prison. But after a few days, seeing that the prison gate was wide open, one after another the prisoners all left and the jail was deserted. Only Cheng Yaojin sat there stupidly, not making a move. The warden came in to him, saying, “Master Cheng, the Imperial Court has demonstrated its benevolence by granting a general amnesty. All the other criminals are gone; what are you lazing around in here for?” Hearing the words “lazing around,” a storm arose in his heart, and he flew into a rage. He rushed forward spreading his five fingers to strike as if with an iron fan. Knowing how fierce he was, all the jailers came forward to calm him down.

“Motherfuckers!” (runiang zei) Cheng Yaojin said. “If you want me to leave, you’d better invite me to drink, and when I’m good and drunk, then I’ll see.” Being conscientious jailers, they knew it was no good to provoke him. Fearful that he’d fly into a rage, they had no choice but to buy him half a keg of wine and even more pure water to warm it in while he watched; they also bought some chatterlings and invited him to eat as a way to redeem themselves for insulting him.

By then that Cheng Yaojin was parched: with nary a care that three sevens might be twenty-one, he straightened his throat and began to eat like a whirlwind. Standing up, he said, “Well, the wine’s all gone, and the meat’s all gone, so I’m leaving. If you’ve got any clothes and a hat, bring them here and lend them to me. If you won’t lend them to me, my privates will be all hanging out, so how can I face anybody on the outside?” Alarmed, the warden said, “Now that’s no easy task.” Aloud he could only say, “Master Cheng, you know that all we have are the clothes on our backs. We’re on duty every day; so when would we have time to get anything else?” Yaojin glared at him and was just about to beat him up, but having no choice, the warden said, “All I have that I’m not using is a funeral robe made out of plain cotton and a funeral hat made of rough hem. Master Cheng, you take them.”

“You motherfucker!” Yaojin said. “You’d try to fob off funeral clothes on me? Well, it doesn’t matter. Bring them here.”

Even from this brief passage, several important features of Shuo Tang can be discerned. First, of course, is its use of the vernacular language, even vulgar slang, to enliven the scene. Cheng is the character to whom the most colloquial
style is allotted, often with humorous effect when he substitutes slang for the formal terminology used by other characters. Dialogue is lively, and the characterization is made more vivid thereby.

Although some consider this style of language evidence of the novel’s origins in the oral tradition, other elements of the scene are far more reliable guides to this conclusion. As Ong has pointed out, oral storytelling across cultures relies on monumental or “heavy” characters, memorable figures who serve as a focus for organizing experience in ways that can be easily remembered, or constructed, and presented effectively to listening audiences. Such characters are generally agonistic, pursuing struggle at every turn, engaging in name calling and quickly resorting to gross physical violence when thwarted.24

For our purposes here, the more important feature of this characterization is the absurdity with which it imbeds the whole scene. The fellow who is too stupid to learn a single character after years of study becomes the bully who is clever enough to boss around the local law enforcement personnel and bend them to his will. Those constables, we must infer, are yet more benighted than he. All Cheng does is sit around in prison, and yet he has worn out his clothes to the extent that they are all in tatters, apparently without his even noticing. He spends the whole night contemplating his options and produces no more long-range plans than how to bully the guards into giving him a good meal and something to cover his nakedness. All of these elements of characterization make this Cheng Yaojin the fictional equivalent of the chou (clown) characters on the popular stage. Such characters, also termed “sanxualian,” stood out from the other figures on stage because they wore comic facial paint, and although most were fools, some were very clever. All were people of low status. Unquestionably, the scene is amusing even when viewed totally out of literary context for its spectacular bathos that is reminiscent of, if not simply borrowed from, the popular theater.

The bathos intensifies as the scene continues, piling absurdity upon absurdity. This Cheng is a giant; as a haohan, he is of course much bigger in stature than the warden from whom he borrows the clothing. This means that when the funeral robe is pulled down in front, it rides up in back. Worse yet, “On his lower body, his one pair of pants were worn out over the three years, and all that was left of them was a piece of tattered cloth. If he covered his testicles, he exposed his butt; if he covered his butt then he exposed his gonads.” Even so, thinking only of seeing his mother again, he covers himself as best he can and rushes away.25

Once at home he and his starving mother try to make ends meet: she weaves baskets, which he sells in the nearby Pigeon Shop market town. But his appearance is so frightening that potential customers avoid him; Cheng succeeds in his business only when he bullies potential customers into buying his wares. Incidents of this sort soon force both shoppers and all the other merchants to abandon the market, and Cheng is left with no income at all. In his frustration he runs amok, beating those who refuse to buy and demanding food and wine without paying for them. Before long he is located by the underworld imperial coffers. The boss tries, unsuccessfully, to teach him the techniques of fighting with the ax; alas, Cheng is too stupid to remember them. It takes the local god to teach him in a dream before Cheng is able to master most—but not all—of the sixty-four moves of ax fighting. When he awakens, he is so excited that he rides a stool around the courtyard like a hobbyhorse practicing what he has just learned.26

In Sui Tang yanyi Cheng is simple-minded and only occasionally rash. But he is not the malicious fool the Old Fisherman made him into. Of the events narrated above, only his recruitment into banditry is borrowed from earlier fiction. His introduction in chapter 21 of Sui Tang yanyi is accomplished through indirect narrative. When the underworld boss seeks an accomplice for this major heist, his retainers mention the name of Cheng Yaojin. Cheng had been involved in salt smuggling, they tell him, but he had been arrested and sent into exile at the frontier. He had returned after the amnesty was announced. You Junda finds him in a tavern, where the narrator describes him in verse: indeed, Cheng is a ferocious-looking character. However, in contrast to the Old Fisherman’s version, this Cheng Yaojin initially is given no distinctive personality; readers see him from a distance, as it were, through the mock-heroic lens of poetic description. Not surprisingly, his actions are generally colorless as well.27

Qi Yukun has observed that Chu Renhuan emphasized the heroic and democratic qualities of Cheng Yaojin. In Sui Tang yanyi his great strength makes him a successful bandit, and he handily assembles a large force of highwaymen. But the incipient fall of the Sui court makes all such outlaws potential contenders for the throne. Cheng is unwilling to merge his bandit gang with the powerful rebel force at Wagang. Instead, he observes that with Qin Shubao in his own lair, all they need is to recruit Shan Xiongxin and their combined abilities would allow them to pose a serious challenge to the Wagang band itself. “If brother Zhai [Rang] has been able to become an emperor [in the Wagang camp], how could it be that brother Qin and second brother Shan could not also become emperors?” To Qi Yukun, this negates the idea of a heavenly mandated ruler and supports the egalitarian idea that anyone could become an emperor.28 From Qi’s perspective, this is a progressive political stance on Chu Renhuan’s part, likely to enhance the stature of the character in the eyes of his readers. Yet Sui Tang yanyi adheres comparatively closely to the historical record concerning Cheng and his political allegiances; thus it is Shuo Tang that comes closer to popular values in its rewriting of the character, Qi concludes.29

Perceiving Chu’s novel as intended to be entertainment for the educated casts this character in a different light, however. Every serious student of Chinese history, whether now or during the early Qing, is painfully aware that virtually anyone could become an emperor, whether by conquest or by inheritance. China had had its share of rulers who were mentally or morally incompetent or were derelict in their duties; royal families and even dynastic founders included those who were rude, hedonistic, and violent. It is hard to imagine that any knowledgeable and reflective Chinese reader of history—or of historical fiction—might believe that heaven had chosen all of China’s monarchs. In the context of Sui Tang yanyi, Cheng Yaojin’s comment is not extreme to
this point in the narrative both Qin Shubao and Shan Xiongxin have been presented as conscientious, moral, and courageous men quite worthy of great responsibilities.

Cheng’s Sui Tang yanyi comment is literalized in Shuo Tang quanzhuan for comic effect: in the later novel Cheng himself becomes an emperor, albeit temporarily. The stage for this is set when his partner in crime You Junda reports on how corrupt the Sui emperor Yang has become. “Ah, ya ya!” Cheng declares. “If that dog’s head is so unloyal, unfilial, unvirtuous, and unjust as all of that and is still Emperor, why don’t we just kill him and have somebody else be Emperor?” Later, when Cheng and his men take over the Wagang fortress, a curious earthquake opens a great cavern in the parade ground. Xu Maogong identifies it as a divine cave; only the appointed may enter. The rebel leaders draw lots to see which it is. Cheng gets the short stick, and so he descends. There he finds wondrous armor and regal robes; quickly he puts them on. Cheng also witnesses a battle between a green dragon and a bizarre beast that has a dragon’s tail but the head of a boar. These creatures represent Li Yuan, future emperor of the Tang, and the Sui emperor Yang. A sheet of paper with writing on it (which Cheng cannot read) that he discovers in this cavern predicts that he will rule for three years with the title Demon King who Rules the World (Hunshi Mowang). And so his followers recognize him as emperor. Appropriately, and absurdly, he adopts the attitudes, even the first-person pronoun, commonly assumed by historical emperors.39

Because Cheng regularly plays the fool in Shuo Tang quanzhuan, his adviser Xu Maogong is amused by his gullibility and plays tricks on him. Later, however, Cheng tires of the duties that accrue to his exalted position. One morning at court he declares,

“Please, brothers, do not bow to me. I can’t bear the trouble of being your Emperor any more—I have to get up so early in the morning, and late at night I still can’t go to sleep. How hard that is! I’ll give the throne to any one of you who is willing to take it. Now hurry up, hurry up!”

He removes his crown and robe and throws them to the floor, insisting, “I won’t do it any more, I won’t. I really won’t!” Soon thereafter he explains to Li Mi, whom he has just freed from an imperial prison cart, “I don’t want to be an emperor; you’re a lot more honest than I am.” Cheng thereby happily relinquishes his title to Li Mi, who becomes the (short-lived) prince of Wei. Not only is this episode silly enough to be amusing in its own right, but it is even more so when the reader knows how this text distorts its source. The reader is to learn, however, that Cheng is not only the object of mirth in Shuo Tang: he can also be a malicious prankster.31

SHAN XIONGXIN: GENEROSITY DISPLACED BY OBSESSION

Cheng Yaojin is not the only major character to have been appropriated from the popular tradition and twisted by the Old Fisherman into a caricature of his former identity. Through his development in these several Sui-Tang novels, Shan Xiongxin comes to embody the virtue yi (brotherly generosity), a characteristic of the Shihu zhuan heroes. Time and again Shan provides shelter as well as financial and emotional support for heroes in difficulty—and for their families. Yet like the other martial heroes of Shuo Tang, Shan’s single-minded charity becomes warped into something quite bizarre in the Old Fisherman’s hands.

The Shan Xiongxin of Shuo Tang suggests the morally shallow but showy jing (villain) role from the theater rather than the man of powerful passions and deep commitments in Chu Renhuo’s more literary novel. This Shan is not just a wealthy landowner who is generous to men of valor; he is the center of all bandit activity in a vast region. Every highwayman for miles around must give him half of their take, and all knights-errant in the region must respond to his summons. Shan’s generosity serves only to buy their loyalty, his “gifts” more arbitrary largesse than selfless contributions to the less fortunate. An enormous man of ugly mien, this Shan has a voice like thunder. In earlier novels he was quick to lend a hand; here he is exceedingly quick to anger. A doughty warrior in his own right, Shan is ranked as eighteenth (and last) among the Sui-period haohan. Here he is the incarnation of a green dragon from the celestial realm (shangjie qinglong) instead of his former presentation as a man of strong, but convincing, passions.

The Old Fisherman’s Shan Xiongxin is also extremely vulgar in his speech, nearly as much so as Cheng Yaojin, and inveterately suspicious of his fellows. Thinking he has been robbed of some imperial loot he desires, he charges the offender, Luo Cheng, brandishing his weapon and shouting, “You donkey-fucker, Luo, I’ll fuck your jailbird mother!” (Lügu ru: Luo Zi ru niü quai quanliang!) Later, when commiserating with Qin Shubao about being beaten because he has failed to apprehend two robbers, he says, “Truly they have no sense of honor, fuck their mothers, the whores!” (Zhengpeng mei tianli de. Ru ta jia liange langqi!) Thus in contrast to the modest benefactor at the celebration for the sixtieth birthday of Qin’s mother in the literati novels, here Shan gets in his cups and allows himself to be deeply offended by one of Cheng Yaojin’s pranks.

In the earlier novels, haohan from near and far assemble in a local stalwart’s home the day before the celebration. There Cheng admits to the robbery that has caused Qin so much trouble: because Qin is in charge of the investigation, he was severely punished when he failed to locate the culprits. Shan suggests various ways to extricate Qin from this perilous situation, but Qin burns the warrant, refusing to sacrifice his childhood friend to save himself. For his part, Cheng offers to take sole responsibility for the theft, leaving the mastermind You Junda to care for his mother. Other stalwarts leap forward to help: in the end, the stolen silver is repaid, liberal bribes facilitate Qin’s transfer to other duties without having solved the robbery, and Cheng remains free. Qin’s burning of the warrant is seen as an extraordinarily magnanimous act, but Cheng also receives respect for his quick response. At the birthday celebration itself, held at the Qin residence, various among the assembled stalwarts offer congratulatory comments and drink to the old lady’s health. Unable to come up
with a flowery statement, Cheng simply downs three penalty drinks in her honor, to the amusement of all present. Then Mother Qin retires, to allow the men to drink to their satisfaction without needing to stand on ceremony. They do, and the following morning all go their separate ways.\textsuperscript{33}

In \textit{Shuo Tang}, these scenes move more quickly, with considerably less dialogue and with very significant plot changes. When Qin refuses to arrest his childhood friend, Xu Maogong questions whether he is in earnest. “From ancient times it has been said that a man should die for his friend, and that he should die without regret,” Qin declares, as he burns the warrant. This act so impresses the assembled stalwarts that all thirty-nine of them swear brotherhood with each other on the spot. The ceremony involvesmixing a bit of each brother’s blood into the wine shared by all. But when it is Shan’s turn, all he can squeeze from his arm is green water, which Xu calculates as proof of his true identity as the green dragon star. (Since Shan never swears allegiance to the Tang, it is appropriate that he cannot join his blood with the others, the narrator confides to the reader.)\textsuperscript{34}

Since the birthday guests are so numerous and so physically large in \textit{Shuo Tang}, they cannot all fit comfortably in the Qin residence; Qin arranges with the caretaker of the local earth-god temple to have them convene there. The birthday celebration concluded, which involved a number of gifts of precious metals and tangible symbols of longevity (rather than mere refined statements, as in \textit{Sui Tang yanyi}), the stalwarts repair to the temple for wine and conversation. There, Qin puts Cheng in charge of the wine before returning home with his mother.

Looking around at the assembly, Cheng says to himself, “It appears that of all these friends here, the only ones that are really tough (lihai) are that gang boss Shan Xiongxin and the young guy Luo Cheng. Why don’t I just get them into a fight with each other and see how they do.” To Shan, he whispers that Luo despises him because he is smug about his wealth and power and shows no respect for Luo’s own situation. “This is what I heard him say, and I tell you with the best of intentions: you should watch out for him.” Then Cheng confides to Luo, “Brother Luo, you know what? Shan Xiongxin wants to rip your nuts off” (louchu nide niaozi) because the younger man has shown him no respect. At first Luo laughs it off as a prank, but the more he thinks about it, the angrier he becomes—especially because Shan is now glaring at him. When the others go out for a walk, these two happen to bump into each other.

Luo Cheng was the stronger, and with a “boom” he knocked Shan Xiongxin backward, and he fell to the floor inside the temple. Everyone was startled, not knowing what was behind this. Enraged, Shan picked himself and cursed at Luo Cheng: “You son of a thief, how dare you knock me down?!” “You green-faced bandit,” Luo said, “So what if I hit you?” and charged up the slope toward him. Xiongxin’s foot flew out in a kick, but Luo Cheng grabbed it and, like a little child, with a “putong” tossed him into the air. Everyone rushed up to calm them down, but Cheng Yaojin shouted out, “Don’t stop them, let them fight!”

The conflict comes to an end when Qin races back to make peace between them. But when Qin scolds him, Luo gallops off in a rage—and Cheng volunteers to bring him back for Qin. Fortunately, Cheng runs into the villainous Sui official Yang Lin with another load of imperial treasure before he can exacerbate the friction between Luo and Shan. After a brief battle, Yang captures both Cheng and his accomplice You Junda, which absolves Qin from any consequences of having burned the warrant and delays the resolution of the quarrel until later in the narrative. This personal grudge also prevents Shan from joining the Tang because Luo is on that side, all because of the cruel prank played by Cheng.\textsuperscript{35}

Perhaps the most dramatic demonstration of Shan’s one-dimensional and obsessive personality—and of the Old Fisherman’s reconceptualization of the character—comes when Li Shimin, accompanied only by his adviser Xu Maogong, happens to wander into a deserted imperial pleasure garden not far from the Zheng headquarters in Luoyang. There Shan spies on them and charges the prince. Xu desperately grabs hold of Shan’s robe as he chases Li Shimin around an artificial hill. “Brother Shan, for my sake, spare my lord’s life!” he cries. “What are you saying, brother Maogong! They killed my older brother, and his death has not been avenged—it’s on my mind both day and night!” Xu holds on to Shan’s robe for dear life to slow him down, until Shan cries in exasperation, “Xu Ji! If I didn’t remember that day in Jia Liu’s shop when we swore brotherhood, I’d cleave you in two with my sword! Enough—I’ll just cut off my robe and consider this an end to my obligations to you!”\textsuperscript{36} Thus this irascible Shan can no longer even brook friendship—if it comes between him and the object of his vengeance.

The several versions of Shan’s death demonstrate just how the character is to be read differently in \textit{Shuo Tang} from the Shan Xiongxin of earlier novels. Generally following the same outline of events and motivations, Da Tang Qin-wang cihua narrates the scene in fewer than 100 characters; \textit{Tang shu zhizhuan tongsu yanyi} devotes around 350. Yuan Yuling (\textit{Sui shi yiyen}, chap. 59) developed the scene in around 1,500 characters, but Chu Renhuo narrated Shan’s end using about 3,400 characters.\textsuperscript{37}

The general outline of the event in the older novels is this: Li Shimin, the Tang prince of Qin, has been successively eliminating all Tang’s potential rivals for power, among them the state of Zheng to which Shan has sworn allegiance. He has become Zheng’s leading general. When Tang forces overrun their capital, Shan is imprisoned along with his ruler. Despite repeated attempts by a number of Shan’s friends and colleagues to dissuade him, Li Shimin insists that Shan is to be executed rather than recruited to the Tang. This is because the Tang ruler Li Yuan had mistakenly killed Shan’s brother, and Li Shimin fears that Shan is determined to get revenge. Thus the state of Tang must be rid of this implacable enemy. In chapter 60 of \textit{Sui Tang}, Shan waits impatiently for the decision on his fate. All doubts are dispelled when his erstwhile comrades, now all Tang generals, arrive with parting draughts of wine. Cheng Yaojin and Qin Shubao cannot swallow for weeping; Shan alone downs three large bowls
ies of the other prisoners removed and the area put in order. Shan strides on to the execution ground holding Cheng’s hand. Once there, Qin’s mother thanks him for saving her son so many years before, and then Shan takes leave of his wife and daughter. However, Shan nearly loses his composure before the women, and, to preserve his heroic demeanor, he has them sent away. As a final gesture of friendship, Cheng, Qin, and Xu Maogong slice pieces of their own flesh, roast them over a fire, and offer them to Shan to eat. If we fail to care for your family, let us be consumed like these slices of flesh, they vow. Then Qin has his son come forward to bow to Shan as his father-in-law; the boy has been betrothed to Shan’s daughter. With a laugh, Shan stretches out his neck to receive the executioner’s ax. The blow falls; thereafter his friends sew his head back on to his body and bury the corpse with honor. 38

Thus Chu Renhuo’s character progresses through a range of emotions as Shan gradually admits to himself that there will be no reprieve and that his end is near. He had been determined to seek revenge throughout the struggle between Zheng and Tang, and yet the earlier texts suggest that, unlike Qin, Shan has found no convenient way to extricate himself from his commitment to the Zheng ruler Wang Shichong. For the literati novels’ Shan, therefore, revenge was at least in part a convenient excuse for him. In Sui Tang yangyi, for Qin, and for Cheng as well, joining the Tang could be justified in terms of filial obligation: both of their mothers had been given shelter and support by Li Shimin. But for Shan, family obligations militate against such a move: his only brother had been killed by the Tang prince. Thus he remains adamant when Li Shimin offers him a pardon in return for a change of allegiance. It is on its unswerving integrity, readers of Sui shi yiven and Sui Tang yangyi are led to believe, that Shan in this climactic scene pins his hopes for a last-minute reprieve. As his doom becomes clear, Shan plucks up his courage, despite his friends’ sorrow, only to have his determination undermined by the final gratitude of Qin’s mother and his own concerns for his daughter’s future. And again, family concerns complicate adherence to the simple heroic image Shan has cultivated. This is a powerful scene not only for the narrator’s description of the words and complex feelings of all concerned, but also because it draws to a climax Qin’s extended maturation. Thus Qin’s dreams of brotherly devotion cherished since his youth are sacrificed here to satisfy the overpowering interests of the state to which he now owes all loyalty. This conclusion is thus convincing on both personal and political levels.

The end of Shan Xiongxin is considerably more expeditious in Shuo Tang quanzhuans: it also begins, not surprisingly, with an emotional response rather than an act having overt political significance. In chapter 56 the state of Zheng, headquartered in Luoyang and headed by Wang Shichong, is clearly doomed. All efforts to recruit new warriors have been thwarted, and even Shan’s most trusted aide has been captured and beheaded. With resignation he takes leave of his wife. In a scene reminiscent of Xiang Yu’s final separation from his concubine Yu Ji in Sima Qian’s (145–186? B.C.E.) classic history Shiji (Records of the Grand Historian; recently immortalized in film), 39 Shan goes to his wife, a princess, to share a farewell cup of wine. “Princess! Today I drink this wine with you; hereafter, I fear, I will never again see your face. If we meet again, it will only be in the next life.” As he finished speaking, without realizing, tears rolled down his face.” Like her historical predecessor, she vows to protect her chastity should he fail. To that end he gives to her his sword with which to take her life if need be. Pushing her away, he strides off with never a backward glance. Shan hastily returns to his encampment, bids his ruler farewell, dons his armor, and rides off toward the enemy fortifications, declaring, “By heaven, this will be the day I take my revenge!”

Alone he charges into the Tang camp, slaying left and right like a madman, but Li Shimin cautions his generals to take Shan alive, in hope of winning his allegiance. Cheng confronts him.

“Hey, Little Shan you scrounging mutt, what kind of business are you up to that you break into our camp? Your old man Cheng is here.” In anger, Xiongxin shouted back, “Hey, Cheng Yaojin you mongrel, today I’m going to change that expression on your face!”

Then Shan attacks with his spear. Fearing for his own life, Cheng flees, only to lead Shan around and around the encampment and ultimately to the center of the fortress where Li Shimin is resting. Then Cheng runs away. By then Shan is exhausted, but knowing heaven’s will cannot be changed, he continues to fight. For their part, his many friends among the Tang generals fall back before his onslaught until finally Xu Maogong and the powerful youth Luo Cheng capture him. Brought before the prince, Shan refuses to kneel, instead shouting,

“You Tang brat, if I can’t eat your flesh in this life, I’ll suck up your ghost after death!” He never stopped cursing.

Smiles covering his face, the Prince of Qin personally loosened Shan’s fetters. The moment his hand was free, Shan grabbed the sword he noticed the Prince was wearing and swung it at him. Guards from both sides stepped forward to save him, but more than twenty of them were cut down. The Prince retreated into his antechamber, and Maogong hurriedly ordered them to use a horse bridle to bring him to the ground and tie him up as before.

“Do not hobble him,” the Prince commanded as he stepped out from his place of hiding, “Brother Shan, you’ve let off enough steam for now. That event long ago on Hawthorn Ridge really was not intentional. You chased me all around the Imperial Orchard, and that should count as the revenge you desire. Today we want to treat you with fullest ceremony to urge you to surrender.” And then he knelt before him.

“You Tang brat, if you want me to swear allegiance to you, you’ll wait until the sun rises in the west!” Xiongxin declared.

Because he is so adamant, Xu advises the prince to execute Shan. To honor their vows of brotherhood, Xu, Cheng, and Qin are given permission to make “offerings to the living” (huoji), including incense and candles. Xu offers Shan a cup of wine with the words, “Brother Shan, even Jie’s dog bit Yao; each has his own master. I’ve filled this cup in remembrance of our feelings of brotherhood in
the past. May you quickly join the Immortals!” But Shan fills his mouth with
the wine only to spit it in Xu’s face. “You cow-nosed Dainoi! You put our fin
realm all in sixes and sevens, and you still want to talk about brotherly feelings!
How about the feelings of your mother’s ass! Who asked you for any wine?”
“Even if you will not drink it, I will complete my ritual,” Xu said. The others
drink him a toast, but Shan refuses to participate until Cheng approaches him.
“When I meet you in hell, I’ll say that you’re a doughty warrior who’d rather die
than switch allegiance — and that you’re ten times better than those who did it
just to save their miserable lives. As your younger brother I salute you with this
wine. I’ve been straightforward all my life. Drink it or not, as you please; I won’t
urge you again.” In the end Shan drinks Qin’s offerings and Cheng’s as well,
vowing to get revenge in the next life. Then others urge him again to drink,
including the hated (thanks to Cheng’s earlier lie) Luo Cheng. “Luo Cheng, you
son of a thief!” he cried. “You turned your back on honor when you joined the
Tang. If I can’t kill you in this life, I’ll kill your whole family in the next. And
I’ll fuck your mother!” At that, Luo struck him in two with his sword.

As with the characterization of Cheng, here, too, the Old Fisherman is at
pains to recreate the vitality of a storyteller’s performance, whether or not a
storyteller provided this outline of the episode. Its oral style can be discerned
in the numerous antagonistic exchanges between Shan and the Tang heroes,
their regular use of fixed, but not particularly informative, epithets (“cow-
nosed Dainoi” [Niu bizi Daoren]; “Tang brat” [Tang jong]; “scrounging mutt”
[goucai]), to say nothing of the earthy language with which Shan curses his
captors. The narrator here also engages in a fictive dialogue with his audience.
(“Readers, how much ability could Shan Xiongxin have, that he could fight his
way from east to west, from south to north in such a great Tang encampment?
There was a reason for this.”) Even so, these appropriations of oral narrative
practices do not preclude a highly literate author, suggested especially by the
appearance of well-constructed ironies throughout the novel.

OVER-THE-TOP UGLINESS

Comparisons of the ways that Shan Xiongxin meets his fate show just how the
Old Fisherman endeavored to replace refined and upright heroes with rude
and irascible warriors for his version of their adventures. Some scenes, such as
Shan’s capture and execution, are violent and crude, striking primarily in the
degree to which the literati novel characters — and their genteel manners —
have been subverted. These contrasting presentations, and the ironic distance
between them, are perhaps at their most comical in chapter 24, in which the
nearly forty heroes assemble to celebrate the sixtieth birthday of Qin Shubao’s
mother. The reader sees the scene through her reaction.

The matron had just come to the doorway and was still behind the door
screen when, ah, ya ya! Look that that bunch of guys: Some were dark-
green faced, some were red faced, some were purple faced, some were
blue faced; some had melon-skin green faces; some had scarlet hair with
red sideburns; some had big mouths with fierce fangs. Seeing these
strange faces, the old lady stopped dead in her tracks, startled, and
refused to go in. From his side of the screen, in a low voice Shubao
pointed out, “That one with the dark-green face is Shan the Second from
Luzhou; the one with the blue face is First Master Cheng; this one is the
scholar Chai Shao, he’s the Duke of Tang’s Commandant. They all are
my good friends, so there’s no reason that you shouldn’t go out.”

Clearly here the novelist is trying to familiarize Qin’s mother, and the reader,
with what should be grotesque and terrifying monsters, reading them back into
the narrative as presented by Chu Renhuo and his other literary sources. This,
too, is ostensibly a storyteller’s technique, here inserted for its comic effect.42

Mother Qin’s vision seems like a response to a lianpu, a register of fer-
cocious face patterns for the jing role types in traditional theater. The jing roles
required rough speech (both in content and delivery), projection of a strong
martial spirit, and conflicting personality traits. All wore complex facial paint,
each color of which suggests an attribute or a collection of attributes. Even for
those unfamiliar with the specific references, these colorful facial patterns
appear on the stage as gigantic warriors made to look larger than life with high-
soled boots, padding on the shoulders, and lofty headgear. Here the Old Fish-
seems to have self-consciously tapped his readers’ theatregoing experi-
ence to turn the more realistic — and courteous — figures of Sui Tang yanyi
into monstrous theatrical types, at once rude and grotesque, frightening and yet
wonderfully entertaining. In short, Shuo Tang quanzhuan has converted the
drama of the earlier novels into a spectacle of a theatrical sort by exaggerating
the characteristics of heroes in an oral performance. When compared with the
genteel manners of the characters having these names in literati fiction, the
incongruity of this sort of spectacle becomes extremely amusing.

HOW TO READ A HEROIC ADVENTURE

Although I have endeavored to demonstrate that the intertextual reliance of
Shuo Tang on earlier novels in the series enables reading the novel as a parody
of its immediate predecessor, Sui Tang yanyi, I am under no illusion that this
is the only, or even a particularly common, way to read it. Its brisk pace, its
earthy and overblown characters, its wildly exaggerated battles between titans,
its exoticism — all parallel the standard features of a theatrical performance. In
their textual reincarnation, these elements contribute to a ludic reading, for
the reader’s enjoyment primarily if not exclusively.

Theorists demonstrate that reading for pleasure depends for the most part
on the predictable appearance of familiar generic conventions of fiction. That
is why, in our own day, there are thousands of mystery fans, spy novel devo-
tees, passionate consumers of romances of the sort termed “bodice rippers,”
science fiction, or fantasies set in some enchanted variant on the European
Middle Ages. The majority of works in each of these genres is conventional in
structure and substance; it is their very predictability that ensures their wel-
come among the consumers of printed fiction.
Here I have argued for a type of unconventionality in *Shuo Tang quanzhuan*. Which way is it, after all? Can one novel both create humorous subversions of familiar material and remain predictable to readers? Can one and the same text reflect the conventions of performance and the writing games of idle literati? Reading *Shuo Tang* as a parody has required a kind of transgeneric interpretation: I have read *Shuo Tang* against its progenitor(s) and the very different conventions followed by the historical novel *Sui Tang yanyi* written for literati on the one hand and the performances for general audiences on the other. I have argued that it is only when viewed against this complex cultural context that the comic incongruities of the Old Fisherman’s innovations become readily apparent. Those who read the novel as I have would surely concur with me on the clever manipulation of received materials I have discussed there.

But those who customarily read—or listened to professional renditions of—adventure stories might have quite a different response. *Shuihu zhuan* and related oral or dramatic narratives, for example, have always had a considerable audience among the uneducated. Twentieth-century scholars have lauded it for that reason; this is also why commentators of late imperial China often warned against its potentially pernicious effects on public order. And in fact *Shuihu zhuan* was banned numerous times at a variety of locations throughout the empire during the Ming and Qing. Apparently *Shuo Tang quanzhuan* was also banned, probably because both novels romanticize rebels and bandits; China’s administrators often feared that reading (or seeing) such works might provoke unruly or even disloyal behavior among the masses (which were the most serious crimes during the Ming and Qing). Thus to potential censors and other critics, *Shuihu zhuan* and *Shuo Tang* were seen as related generically—in terms of the potential threat to civil authority they posed, if not in more specifically literary ways. And of course parallels can be found between the fantastic battles in the late *Ming Fengshen yanyi* and the duels of magic in *Shuo Tang*. Cloud transport for Li Jing and other characters here was surely inspired by the great *Xiyou ji* (Journey to the West, ca. 1580)—which has itself been read both as fantastic adventure and as religious classic. Likewise, *Shuo Tang* inspired sequels on the model of stories about the Yang family of generals, *Yang jia jiang tongyu yanyi* (Popular romance of the Yang family generals, ca. 1550?); and perhaps even the Qing fictional life of the Song-period general Yue Fei, *Shuo Yue quanzhuan* (Complete tales of Yue Fei, 1798). Thus when read along with books from this list, as making intertextual references to these novels of romantic adventure and heroic combat, *Shuo Tang* is not so different. Readers seeking diversion and entertainment from such books might have less interest in historical romances such as *Sui Tang* and might avidly have immersed themselves in its episodic and stirring narrative.

Although to my knowledge no critic during late imperial times identified in any detail a way of reading that would make such fiction politically subversive, danger could seemingly exist if the reader were to imaginatively project himself into the story. Ludic reading depends on visualization of the scenes and characters in the narrative; *Shuo Tang* encourages this through its colorful reference to physical attributes of the heroes, hints about the course of combat, suggestive but still vague names for weapons, fighting techniques, and battle arrays. Professional storytelling, generally performed with a minimum of realistic action or stage properties, invoked just this sort of imaginative interaction from the audience. And what is the point of visualization if not to make oneself a part the picture, if only as a vicarious onlooker, the narratee to whom the narrator speaks directly? Does not the fiction thereby take on a kind of personal reality, at least in the mind of the reader?

And is this so different from the "literate reading" I’ve outlined above? Ludic reading might involve seeing oneself in a distant past, galloping along at breakneck speed on a marvelous courser among gigantic warriors of unbelievable strength equipped with enormous weapons, bound to them by oaths of brotherhood and a common code of valor. Literati reading practices also involve imaginatively projecting oneself into the narrative. But, to follow the suggestions of the seventeenth-century critics Jin Shengtian and Zhang Zhuo, the sophisticated reader reads more slowly, projecting himself into the narrative not as a protagonist of the fiction or even as a bystander, but as its creator. Intellectual and emotional identification with the writers of past times had been recognized as the proper way to appreciate poetry for many centuries. Readers trained in the reading of poetry would undoubtedly follow the same practices in reading other works for enjoyment, at least to some degree. For them (as for me) pleasure would come as they delight in each new inversion of every sensitive *Sui Tang* hero into his foul-mouthed *Shuo Tang* opposite. To such ideal readers, these comic incongruities more than adequately compensate for the resultant infelicities in plot and unconvincing characterization in the later novel. Yet for the reader who speeds through the book to see what happens next, incongruities and infelicities might simply be passed over without notice.

One could conclude, then, that *Shuo Tang* is a very successful rewriting of *Sui Tang yanyi* and other novels. It does not compete with them for readers; it complements earlier fiction concerning Sui and Tang figures by encouraging new types of reading and other varieties of enjoyment. By using imaginative material appropriated from oral and theatrical performances, it builds on the strengths, and the weaknesses, of its predecessors to create new heroes and new adventures that transcend all bounds of conventions that guided Chu Renhuo and the other historical romancers. And like any other good book, it admits several types of reading, some perhaps overlapping, to satisfy a diverse aggregate of readers.44

Notes
1. The edition I will refer to here is Yuanhu Yusou jiaodeng, *Shuo Tang quanzhuan* (hereafter *Shuo Tang*). Another well-edited edition is the 1908 *Shuo Tang quanzhuan*. For a survey of early imprints, see Otsuka Hirotsugu, Zoko Chûgoku tsûkotsu shôsetsu shomoku, 207–209. Given his intimate familiarity with the characteristics, and probably the content, of oral narratives concerning these figures, we might hypothesize that the *Shuo Tang* author was an educated man from a not-so-educated family who was thus familiar with the ways of thinking and of organizing narratives that were distinctive to oral cultures. For
simply be referring to Yuan's earlier draft of the novel. I base this speculation on the author's preface to *Sui Tang yanyi* in which Chu Renhuo complains that he loaned an incomplete draft of his novel to friends, who returned it only years later, thus delaying its completion and publication. See *Sui Tang yanyi* (Sixuecaotang ed.), "Fafan," p. 1b. Yuan might have done the same. For noteworthy recent editions of these three works, see Qidong yeren, *Sui Yangdi yansi*; Yuan Yuling, *Sui shi yiyen* (a Taiwan photo-reprint of the 1633 edition); Yuan Yuling, *Sui shi yiyen*, ed. Liu Wenzhong; Yuan Yuling, *Sui shi yiyen*, ed. Song Xiangru (hereafter *Sui shi*); Chu Renhuo, *Sui Tang yanyi* (hereafter *Sui Tang*). Except as indicated, all are modern typeset editions.

7. See *Shuo Tang houchuan*; its major part is commonly reprinted with the title *Xue Rengui zhong deng* for the "Third collection" or *Xue Dingshan zheng xi*, see *Shuo Tang yang zi zhu*, a reprint of a Shanghai lithographic edition of ca. 1900. Wu Qiong summarizes the novel and its printing history in his "Qianyan," 1–2.

8. The narrative of *Sui Tang*, 274, ends with the admission that events of the reigns of thirteen emperors remain to be told and that they should form another novel (da dang jing ji bi bian), a "continuation" (xukan). Of the Ming novels mentioned above, *Tang shu zhihuan* is less "open" than *Sui Tang liangchao zhihuan* or *Sui Tang yanyi*; it is essentially the narrative of the career of Li Shimin, from his initial rising against the Sui in the 617 to the consolidation of his border defenses and the peace won through campaigns led by Xue Rengui.

9. For discussions of reading and critical practices in late Imperial China, see Kao, "Aspects of Derivation in Chinese Narrative," 1–16; Xiao Chi, "Lyric Archi-Occasion," 17–35; Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary*. Likewise, the Old Fisherman had a fine model for literary parody in the writings of Li Yu (1610–1680). However, for the most part Li Yu's source works were rewritten only in part, for example his send up of Confucian ideas in rewritten lines from Mengzi in his erotic novel *Rou putuan*, chap. 1; see my *The Novel in Seventeenth-Century China*, 173–174. For a broad study of Li Yu, see Hanan, *The Invention of Li Yu*. Hanan's translation of *Rou putuan* appeared as Li Yu, *The Carnal Prayer Mat*.

10. For studies of early vernacular fiction, see Idena, "Some Remarks and Speculations Concerning p'ing-hua," 69–120; and, more recently, Breuer, "Orality and Literacy in Early Chinese Vernacular Literature." English-language surveys of the development of Chinese vernacular fiction can be found in Idena and Haft, A Guide to Chinese Literature, 198–230; Hanan, "The Development of Fiction," 115–143; and in my *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China*, 21–71. For Chinese readers, the standard version is, of course, Lu Xun's (1881–1936) magisterial Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilue, trans. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang as *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, with which I will take issue below.

11. Qi Yukun, *Sui Tang yanyi xile xiaoshuo*. (My thanks to Martin Huang for providing me with a copy.)

12. The preface appears unpaginated at the beginning of all recent editions. Portions of it are translated in my *The Novel in Seventeenth-Century China*, 129; see also *Sui shi*, 1–2.

13. For suggestions about how to distinguish literati novels from more popular fiction, see my "Distinguishing Levels of Audiences for Ming-Ch'ing Vernacular Literature."

14. For the textual histories of these three novels, see my *The Novel in Seventeenth-Century China*, 241–246, 250–253; and my "Sui shi yiyen kao". There I trace the degree to which Chu Renhuo copied the earlier novels into his own. Recently Ouyang Jian has documented the remarkable degree of similarity between *Sui Tang* chaps. 68–100 and the entire contents of a now rare novel generally known as *Hun Tang yanyi* (Devastating the Tang: A romance). Based on a comparison of taboo characters in the two texts, Ouyang concludes that *Hun Tang yanyi* predates the Kangxi period and hence *Sui Tang* as well, for which it may have served as a source. For his discussion of this dating problem, see Ouyang Jian, "Sui Tang yanyi" *Zhui ji cheng zhijiao*, 353–396, esp. 385–395. Taking the opposing view, Sun Kaidi reportedly considered *Hun Tang yanyi* to be heavily indebted
to refute as it is to verify; certainly the Liu school would logically have developed their master's narrative materials rather like Yangzhou pinghua artist Wang Shaotang expanded the Shuishu zhuan tales of his father and grandfather. (See Wang Shaotang, Wu Song and Song Jiang; and Berdahl and Ross, Chinese Storytellers, 60-72, 102-125, 169-239.) Peng Zhihui considers Shuo Tang to be the intermediary in a direct evolutionary line between early prosemic oral narrative such as the late Ming Da Tang Qiuweng chiu and the northern pinghua versions of the Shi-Tang material by contemporary raconteurs such as Chen Yinxiong, Xing Tang zhuan, 4 vols. See Peng, "Lun Shuo Tang qiuweng de diben," 185-91. I agree that the Old Fisherman appears to have been inspired by storytelling and theatrical narratives. But I submit that its clearly subversive engagement with literati novels is at least as important as its appropriation of oral material for understanding the novel's significance and that searching for his specific sources is less fruitful than exploring how, and to what end, he used these easily identifiable earlier printed fictional texts.

22. I have explored the rather more detailed Shi chi chap. 22 version of this racy scene in my The Novel in Seventeenth-Century China, 113-119. Chen Renuhu deleted its graphic detail from Shi Tang chap. 18 to retain Qin's retaliation and subsequent flight from punishment from Yuan's novel.

23. Shuo Tang, 118-119. Later the reader learns that Cheng can in fact read one character, "ren" (person); see 126. Shi Tang and its parent novel Shi chi consistently refer to him using the simpler character for "zhili.

24. Qi Yukun and Peng Zhihui echo the usual interpretation of this racy language as proof of the novel's oral origins and that it was intended for unlettered readers. Needless to say, a reader of any level of sophistication can appreciate slang and vulgarity, but less experienced readers might well miss the literary play in their use. For summary statements on the characteristics of oral narrative, see Ong, Orality and Literacy, 37-56, esp. 44, 57, 70.

25. Shuo Tang, 119. As an anonymous reviewer pointed out, on the Beijing opera stage Cheng Yaojin was sometimes performed by a chou (clown) actor and at other times by a jing (painted-face) actor. Needless to say, this scene could not be presented on stage, although it may have formed part of a professional storyteller's repertory, another example of the gross physicality available in oral performance.


27. Shi Tang, 151-153. Compare Shi chi chap. 27, 215-221. In both novels, You merely demonstrates ex-fighting techniques from horseback, and Cheng is able to master them quickly.

28. See Shi Tang chap. 45, 341. Qi Yukun goes to great pains to demonstrate the degree to which Cheng embodies the mass's anti feudal and democratic principles; see Shi Tang yang xieli xiaoshuo, 65-65. Probably without realizing it, Qi even describes Cheng's youth still economic plight with a phrase from the Internationale [Gouqi ge]: "[Qilai, jihan jiaopo de [null]] [Arye, ye] prisoners of starvation, 63]. In a lengthy examination of Shuo Tang, Ouyang Jian takes great pains to show how the novel meets popular, specifically pinghua baixing (common people's), tastes. To Ouyang, the influence of the "older version" is visible here; he places it firmly within the Shuishu zhuan tradition of romantic fiction in contrast to its predecessors in the Shi-Tang series of novels. He hews to the idea that the most important attribute of a hero is yi, ignoring the role played by pure physical strength, so well explored by Qi Yukun. See Ouyang Jian, "Shuo Tang—pingmin de Shi Tang yingxiong pu." The unexamined agendas of these two critics can be easily discerned from these comments.

29. Qi Yukun, Shi Tang yang xieli xiaoshuo, 55.

30. The quotation is from Shuo Tang, 125; Cheng becomes emperor in chap. 28, 165-167. Later he complains when Li Mi disregards his suggestions that Li Mi has no respect for him, even though he would not have become an emperor if not for Cheng (250). See Qi Yukun's comments, Shi Tang yang xieli xiaoshuo, 64-65.
31. Shuo Tang, 172, 253–216. In Sui Tang—as in fact—the first ruler of Wagang was Zhai Rang, who later repents having yielded the throne to Li Mi, but as soon as he learns of this change of heart Li Mi has him executed; see Shuo Tang, 321–323, 345–348. Cheng Yaojin’s excursus in the underground palace has its source in Sui Tang as well. In chap. 32, 245–247, the mighty swordsman Di Quxie (who makes no other appearance in the novel) sees a vision of a giant rat in the cave; a deity explains that this is the real form of the Sui emperor Yang, who is doomed to die in five years. It is a wily twist to combine the figures, knight-errant and enormous rat, into the single, very ugly, bully emperor Cheng Yaojin.

32. Shan is introduced in Shuo Tang, 20–27; Shan has a register of all the bandits in the realm, a xianghua dan. The first quotation appears at the end of chap. 23; see Shuo Tang, 138, 142.

33. Shuo Tang chaps. 23–24, 166–180. In Sui Tang, Cheng Yaojin is rude to Qin Shubao because the latter does not recognize him; this is because, the narrator explains in an aside (172), that Cheng had not previously been so ugly: because he had encountered a “strange man” (yi ren) who had given him human form, for no explicit reason, an elixir (danruo), subsequently Cheng’s face had turned dark, his hair red, and his beard yellow. It would appear that the Old Fisherman accommodated this anomalous bit of afterthought (or theatrical convention?) by simply making Cheng ugly from the start and modifying the reason for the nonrecognition to be more realistic: the two have not seen each other for many years. Compare Shuo Tang, 141–142.

34. See Shuo Tang, 143. Such explanatory asides, reminiscent of storytellers’ practices, are another way in which the novelist draws the reader into a compact involving a complicating reading. Other such asides are numerous; see 13, 33, 45, 48, 50, 52, 58, 63, 65, 83, 86, 89, 92, 98, 99, 100, 135, 137, 142, 154, 159, 191, 212, 220, 223, 235, 237, 246, 248, 252, 256, 270, 280, 287, 299, 303, 305, 306, 343, 355, 359, 366, 370, 376, 377, 382, 389, 403, and 407. In many of these asides, the narrator addresses his audience as liwei. The narrator refers to himself with the first-person pronoun wo on 171, 248, and elsewhere. See n. 42 below.

35. Shuo Tang, 142–147. Thereafter Luo Cheng does boast of his abilities (he is higher in the ranking of baohan than Shan) with the purpose of irritating Shan, in which he succeeds. Cheng later exacerbates further this already obsessive grudge on Shan’s part; see chap. 39, 229–233. Such agonistic relations seem also to have originated in oral performance conventions; see Ong, Orality and Literacy, 44.

36. Shuo Tang chap. 51, 303–305; Qi Yukun also draws attention to this episode (Sui Tang yunyi xilie xiaoshuo, 70). The source for this is Sui Tang chap. 57, although there the prince chances a beautiful peasant to a mysterious monk saves him from pursuit. Shan’s response in the literary novel refers more to political realities than to personal loyalties: now we each have our separate rulers, and past personal feelings should be put aside. Shan insists; see Sui Tang, 440–441. Readers of erotic novels might know about a more famous anecdote in which an emperor cut off a part of his robe to avoid disturbing his sleeping lover. See Hirsch, Passions of the Cut Sleeve, 52–53.

37. These are Qi Yukun’s figures, 57–58.

38. Sui Tang, 461–464. Sui shi has Shan respond to his friends’ weeping with the retort, “Stop acting like women!” (Bu yuoi zhu ci er niu tu!) An original note on that page, most likely penned by Yuan Yuling himself, comments, “He’s a real man” (Shi zhengfu). Sui shi, 509. The rejoicing of heart to the corpse is intended to counteract the ostensibly infallil act of causing one’s body, the gift from one’s parents, to be mutilated. Such acts were performed in reality as well as in fiction for this purpose; here the heroes are again acting as surrogate family for their sworn brother Shan. Jia Tang shi (Bona edition), 679b, the biography of Xu Maogong (i.e., Li Ji, using the imperial surname that was granted to him by Li Shimin and deleting from his formal name, Shi, the taboo character in common with Li Shimin) records that it was only Xu who cut a piece of flesh from his thigh. His wish was that at least this piece of him might accompany his friend Shan into the grave.

39. Xiang Yu’s leave-taking appears in Shi ji, 1:333–334. For a translation, see Sima Qian, Records of the Grand Historian, trans. Watson, Han Dynasty 1:44–45. The film I refer to is, of course, Bawang bi jie (Farewell my concubine, 1993) directed by Chen Kaige and starring the late Leslie Cheung, Gong Li, and Zhang Fengyi. This scene is a favorite in traditional operas, such as the jingju version around which Zhang’s film revolves.

40. Shuo Tang, 333–337. The scene concludes with Shan’s spirit streaking off to another land where it takes the form of General Kaesomun, who will invade the Tang in days to come—suggesting a sequel.

41. See Ong, Orality and Literacy, 44. Some of the most vulgar expressions, such as “Ni niang de biqu,” were partially expurgated from the Shanghai Guji edition of Shuo Tang, 336; the Beijing Shiyou wenyi edition retains all of these expressions, however; see 448. In a private communication, July 30, 2002, Martin Huang insightfully observed, “The version of this incident in Sui Tang where words in the chapter title ‘cutting off his robe’ (to sever his relationship with his sworn brother) is very telling. In a word, this is not entirely the ‘innovation’ of the author of Shuo Tang. I tend to believe that Chu Renhuo has reinvented this detail into his novel to show that Shan is in fact the first to disregard yu, thus making more excusable Qin Shubao and others’ later failure to keep their words when they fail to die with Shan as they have promised in their swearing of brotherhood. Chu’s efforts to ‘alleviate’ Qin’s guilt can also be seen in his expanding the scene of Shan’s death in his novel (emphasizing more the attachment among the sworn brothers). . . . In fact, if Qin and others had tried really hard, they might have been able to save Shan. This is at least the impression I got from reading the version in Shi ji. Furthermore, this episode, though not seen in Sushi yiwen, is not Chu Renhuo’s ‘innovation’ either, since it can be found in Chapter 61 of Sui Tang tangchao zhibian.”

42. Shuo Tang, 144. On the rhetorical use of questions here, compare Bordahl, “Narrative Voices in Yangzhou Storytelling,” 9: “The storyteller-narrator’s narratee may be identified as the real audience. However, the narrator must be defined specifically as the storyteller’s narratee, i.e., his audience in its specific social role as audience at a storytelling performance. The difference is manifest, for example, in the way the audience reacts to his simulated dialogue: the storyteller asks many questions during his recitation, but he never expects to get an answer from his audience. The audience likewise is not prepared to enter into a dialogue. If someone from the audience would raise his voice from the benches and answer the storyteller’s question, it would be completely out of place.” Even more ironically, these heroes even look ugly to each other. In chap. 27, Cheng rides against the Wagang Fortress for the first time. A young warrior named Ma Zong rides out to challenge him to battle. “Ah ya, where in the world did such a weird looking character come from?” he says to himself. And to Cheng he shouts, “Hey, you ugly devil, who are you anyway? Tell me your name and be quick about it!” Enraged, Cheng responds, “Yer old man’s no other. I’m the Cheng Yaojin who smuggled salt, bumped off an official, grabbed a dragon robe, sold bamboo baskets, and raised hell in Shandong, that I am!” See Shuo Tang, 162–163.

43. On banned books, see Wang Liqi, Yuan Ming Qing sandai jinhuixiaoshuo xiqu shiliao, for the various attacks on Shuishan zuan, see 204–210, etc. An Pinggui and Zhang Peiheng, eds., Zhongguo jinshu daguan, include Shuo Tang on their list of books banned during the Qings (649–715); see 695. Okamoto Sae, Shinzi kinsho no kenkyu, does not, however. For the crimes of sedition, see Jones, The Great Qing Code, 237–239. Wang Liqi (Yuan Ming Qing sandai jinhuixiaoshuo xiqu shiliao, 18–21) quotes the general Qing legal restrictions concerning the sale of banned books.

44. Chartier writes convincingly about the many ways cultural products might be used within a single society; see his “Popular Appropriation,” esp. 89, 92–93.