

Looking Inside: Female Portraits in Illustrated Editions of

The Story of the Western Wing (1569-1676)

The Story of the Western Wing (*Xixiang ji*), written by the Yuan playwright Wang Shifu, is considered the most published and most illustrated dramatic text in the history of Chinese literature. In the intensely competitive print market in the Ming period, illustrations have become one of the selling points. The illustrators for *The Western Wing* therefore started to explore new interpretative modes of illustration, which were beyond their supposed function to narrate the story. One of the prominent features is to attach the bust-length portrait of Yingying, the female protagonist in the play, to the very beginning of the publication. Besides, publishers also collected a variety of supplemental short texts related to Yingying in these editions. Yingying sings fewer arias than Student Zhang and Hongniang in Wang's script, thus she may be considered the relatively least important figure among the three main characters. Why did she become the sole focus of the tale? How was she represented?

Bearing these questions in mind, this paper intends to explore the development and significance of the emergence of "portrait of Yingying" appended to the illustrated editions of *The Western Wing* from late Ming to early Qing, focusing on the editions published between 1569 and 1676, when this phenomenon was most obvious. I attempt to discuss these images in relation to other supplemental texts in these editions, and situate them in the context of illustrated editions to drama, the tradition of portrait painting, and the late-Ming culture.

An analysis of the supplemental texts reveals that Ming readers attempted to find Yingying's identity as a historical figure instead of a fictional character. In addition to studies based upon "historical documents", they also composed poems to express their appreciation or sympathy towards her. The trend to read the play focusing on the female protagonist might attest the shift from concentration on incident to characterization in reading drama, as in writing and reading contemporary fiction. While Jin Shengtan wrote his famous essay regarding the method of reading *The Western Wing* in 1656, he went so far as to claim that "*The Western Wing* was written solely for the purpose of portraying one person, Cui Yingying." His interpretation strongly influenced the editions of *The Western Wing* published later on, yet it might be traced to earlier Ming readers.

Portraits of Yingying in the editions of *The Western Wing* printed from 1569 to 1676 were attributed to five painters through the ages. Records of "portrait of Yingying" appeared no later than the Yuan period, though the original work did not remain. Accounts of Chen Juzhong's and Sheng Mao's portraits of Yingying were included in the

Ming editions of *The Western Wing*, which explained the attribution of these two painters in several versions of portrait of Yingying in the Ming editions. Tang Yin's version is very popular among those illustrated editions, though the attribution is dubious as well. Probably the only reliable attribution is Chen Hongshou's versions.

A chronological survey of these types reveals the compositional change in Yingying's gesture- from gazing off the picture to looking inside-, which first appeared in the 1639 Zhang's edition. Those images associated with the uncertain painters tended to depict Yingying's charming appearance, yet those related to Chen revealed an awareness of feminine sensibility and an interest in exploring the inner psychology of Yingying conveyed through depiction of introspective melancholy. The introspective mode of representation created by Chen gradually became prevalent, which was used to depict other female protagonist in other contemporary plays as well. This new mode of perception of Yingying was considered an ideal incarnation of the emotional, sensitive self. The reformulated femininity might be related to the pursuit of individuality and the cult of *qing*.