

This study rests upon two related convictions I have gained through academic training and empirical research: Historians need to study popular culture in light of its interactions with elite culture as well as with the social context. They also must pursue such a sociocultural history within a local setting, for only a reduced scale allows us to more accurately analyze the complex transmission of beliefs and practices over time and space—thus understand—with the slightest possible deterministic reduction—changing patterns of interplay between systems of values and social affections and between lower and high cultures. This book, which focuses on a popular genre of ritual opera in a local society of late imperial China, is such an attempt. The highlighted region is Huizhou, a Jiangnan prefecture famed empirewide since the sixteenth century for its Confucian gentry society, strong practice of kinship organization, and far-reaching mercantile influence. The genre is *Mulian*, arguably the greatest of all Chinese religious dramas, featuring the epic journey by Buddhist monk Mulian through the underworld to rescue his sinful mother. This study explores two chief questions: How did Huizhou local society and popular *Mulian* performance interact, and what were the characteristics of traditional Chinese popular culture as revealed in Huizhou *Mulian*?

The performance of *Mulian* ritual opera did not fully mature until the late sixteenth century, although the myth, first introduced to China with Theravādic Buddhism in around the third century C.E., and enjoying further development in the subsequent centuries, had been performed in various guises prior to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). A Huizhou scholar named Zheng Zhizhen (1518–95) produced the first full-length script, *Mulian Rescues His Mother: An Opera for Goodness* (*Mulian jiumu quanshan xiwen*). This three-volume libretto, designed for three nights of consecutive performance, marked the completion of a new *Mulian* tradition. It was, in essence, a Confucian transformation of a Buddhist value system that had syncretized elements of Daoism and popular religion. Incorporated in Zheng's script were a large number of secular stories, mirroring the daily and spiritual life of local kinsmen and kinswomen. These stories, as well as the Mulian myth, were selected or remade to illustrate the governing theme of *Mulian* performance: “encouraging goodness and punishing evil” (*quanshan cheng'ei*), although the criterion of defining “goodness” or “evil” was ultimately Confucian, the means of “encouraging” or “punishing” was to appeal to

*Mulian* scripts and manuscripts. Soon after Zheng's manuscript was completed, high local demand led to its printing in 1582. Its publication further promote the style of *Mulian* performance that had been popular before Zheng's time. In terms of the fundamental orientation of socioreligious values, if not plot, Zheng Zhizhen virtually unified the ritual opera, in his home prefecture and other centers of *Mulian* performance in the eastern provinces of Anhui, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Zhejiang, Fujian, Hunan, and Sichuan. But nowhere was *Mulian* more popular and more revealing of the nature of traditional Chinese popular culture than in the Huizhou region. "Jiangnan people are truly distinctive," as a local proverb puts it, "their dogs can howl out three volumes of *Mulian* opera."<sup>2</sup> Two well-known *Mulian* operatic scripts, out of fifty-two listed in a recent survey from the Huizhou region; four of them are extant. They, along with Zheng's master copy, constitute one set of key sources for this study.<sup>3</sup> In a more conservative style than Zheng's script could possibly reveal, the performances on these later and longer scripts featured the following characteristics of traditional Chinese popular culture: the ritual embrace of operatic entertainment, the role of divine force in the transmission of public ideas of good and bad behavior, and the encrustation of Confucian values with popular and syncretic forms.

This study seeks to historicize and contextualize *Mulian* performances, that is, to study the ritual opera as a historically evolving and socially grounded cultural tradition. Many of the materials I analyze here have their origins or parallels in other genres of both elite and folk nature (as in the pre-Zheng Zhizhen *Mulian* literature), and wherever they are relevant to my concerns, I have explored these avenues. For the most part, however, I have assumed that once these materials made their way into the network of Huizhou *Mulian*, they could be used to shed light upon the consciousness of Huizhou people in a given historical period without constant reference to their existence in other genres. For example, although originating in the Song dynasty (960–1279), the ethico-religious discourse found in Huizhou *Mulian* was also present in many other genres of sixteenth-century and later vernacular literature and popular religious tracts, which nevertheless indexed the permeation of Confucian values into local culture and popular religion. Yet in *Mulian* performances, such a popular Confucian disc-

history, investigating one to illuminate the other. Huizhou was a remarkable place, showcasing many important developments of late imperial China.<sup>4</sup> As the ancestral home of Zhu Xi, the leading Song dynasty synthesizer of neo-Confucianism, Huizhou was a center of Confucian ideology and scholarship throughout late imperial times. The local social fabric served to enhance and crystallize this intensive Confucian milieu. In the sixteenth century, in particular, the region underwent a dramatic strengthening of Confucian lineage culture, featuring the establishment of corporate lands (partly used to sponsor ritual operas) and lineage temples (often with a newly built ritual operatic stage), the elaboration of ancestral rites to convey filial devotion and propriety, and the promotion of female natal fidelity. At about the same time, Huizhou emerged as a major cradle of mercantilism within the context of the rising money economy. Of great significance is the cooperative relationship between the educated gentry and merchants within the lineages, in local society, and outside Huizhou in terms of both cultural orientation and social behavior. Fully supported by their ancestral lineages and gentry kinsmen, Huizhou merchants spread throughout China, amassing enormous fortunes, significant portions of which were channeled back home to enhance lineage infrastructure. As a result, this led to the construction and maturation of what I call “mercantile lineages,” gentry-guided and merchant-based kinship communities that dominated the Huizhou social landscape. In this land of mercantile lineages, moreover, ritual operas flourished to promote Confucian ethics as well as cultural syncretism and popular cults. Most spectacularly, all of these facets of Huizhou social history found their expressions in one way or another in the popular *Mulian* performance.

All of this allows us to root the analysis of popular cultural representation in the local social order. Moving back and forth from text to context, I strive to seek out the social dimensions of *Mulian* and the social mechanisms that facilitated the interplay of higher and lower culture in the making of the ritual opera tradition. We shall see, for instance, how the new *Mulian* first codified by Zheng Zhizhen reflected new trends in the economic, intellectual, religious, and sociocultural spheres of the sixteenth century and how these trends were particularly manifest in Huizhou. Zheng Zhizhen was not an inventor of the *Mulian* ritual opera, although he played a

This social dimension of *Mulian* requires a new look into the ritual opera as well as popular culture. *Mulian* opera was always staged in a ritual context of thanking the gods for their protection and exorcising ghosts. According to Piet van der Loon, *Mulian* was staged simply and solely to “cleanse the community of all impurities” or “the malevolent forces of contagion,” but not to convey morality lessons and religious precepts “by threatening people with the punishment of their sins.”<sup>5</sup> This study, while taking into account the exorcising function of *Mulian*, seeks to illuminate the content and context of the ritual opera and, especially, its interaction in a given historical era. Although *Mulian* performances evolved from ancient exorcism rites, *Mulian* exorcism had undergone a fundamental transformation by the sixteenth century. This arguably modern genre of ritual opera had become the most powerful arena for local elite to convey kinship values as well as religious precepts. The *Mulian* served to both exorcise malevolent influences of ghosts and reinforce socioreligious norms; in the process, orthodox values penetrated the opera and cult symbols originally mobilized to exorcise ghosts.

Given this elite penetration, was *Mulian* still an artifact of popular culture? By way of giving a quick answer here, let me first note that the full-length script in the history of *Mulian* operatic performance, compiled by a local scholar, came from and returned to local popular culture.<sup>6</sup> Zheng Zhizhen’s rewriting did not alter the popular nature of the performance but rather helped transform the nature of popular culture. Printed script further promoted the trend of popular *Mulian* performance, making it more widely shared among all social groups within local communities. The shared nature of popular *Mulian* discourse is even more evidently in later anonymous scripts, for they are collective representations resulting from long negotiation between “authors” and audience or between elite and folk sentiments. Culture is marked by simultaneous integration and diversity.<sup>7</sup> Thus, “popular culture” in my usage is an exclusive manifestation of folkways. Rather, it designates a tradition that is publicly shared, although it may be appropriated in different ways by different people, or by the same person for different purposes under different circumstances.<sup>8</sup> Our task with the *Mulian* performance, then, is to figure out what was shared and what was used for different purposes. C

However, the significance of this study lies not just in a reinterpretation of traditional Chinese popular culture or an alternative perspective on the Confucian tradition. Its biggest contribution is the quest per se, by which I strive to integrate social, cultural, intellectual, religious, and gender history within a local setting.<sup>10</sup> More specifically, this book studies Confucian ideology as culture and culture as history by weaving popular performance of *Mulian* ritual opera into the social fabric of Huizhou gentrified mercantile lineages. I examine *Mulian* not only to illuminate the nature of traditional Chinese popular culture but also to shed new light on the social history of its birthplace. Just as Huizhou merchants cannot be fully understood without linking them to their home lineages, the gentry society of mercantile lineages cannot be fully understood without taking into account local popular culture (and vice versa). Differing from current scholarship, which seems to have irreversibly moved away from the gentry society and Confucian tradition, this study returns to these two seemingly “outdated” paradigms of late imperial China—but through the channels of mercantile lineage and popular culture.<sup>11</sup> I have discovered in *Mulian* a living history of gentrified Huizhou lineage culture, a culture that was quickly absorbing, and in turn thoroughly influenced by, increasing commercialization and developments in popular culture (including local cults) from the sixteenth century onward. I explore how local lineage elites of both gentry and mercantile extraction manipulated various social and gender relations via the medium of *Mulian* performance within the social context of a rising money economy. I show, as one example of this cultural manipulation, how lineage-sponsored ritual opera was used to convey Confucian notions of filial piety, female chastity, bond-servant loyalty, and a newly shaped mercantile ethos among villagewide audiences composed of both kinsmen and kinswomen. These were concerns of no small importance to elites in a region whose economic sustenance was largely predicated upon the wealth of sojourning merchants. The accumulated result of elite manipulation, at times conscious and at times instinctive, was a subtle but thorough Confucian remolding of local popular culture. The new *Mulian* was the staged form of Confucian ideology and social praxis of local kinship communities. Popular *Mulian* performance or discourse in late imperial Huizhou was gentrified mercantile lineage culture in practice.

ventional setting chapters, but central to both the subject matter and the sociocultural approach of this historical study. No historian has yet portrayed such a detailed, localized, and coherent picture of Chinese mercantile lineage culture, let alone its integration with popular *Mulian* performance.<sup>12</sup> To illuminate the newness of Zheng Zhizhen's contribution and to make full sense of it—the pre-Zheng legacy of *Mulian* literature and performance is first examined in Chapter 3. The new *Mulian* codified in Zheng Zhizhen's script and its place in concurrent Chinese popular culture are the subject of Chapter 4. This chapter also demonstrates a massive Confucian reorientation of other popular genres in the sixteenth-century context of vast socioeconomic and intellectual changes. Chapter 5 explores the further development of *Mulian* performance in the Huizhou region over the course of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). It compares Zheng's script with later and lengthier versions of *Mulian* from local villages in the Huizhou region, focusing on the similar formulation of women's virtues in these scripts. The comparison reveals the integration of local popular culture by demonstrating how Zheng Zhizhen virtually unified *Mulian* performances with Confucian ethico-religious discourse. Chapter 6 examines the actual *Mulian* performance in local communities. It first considers ritual dimensions of the opera, focusing on so-called *Mulian / Wuchang* performance, a particularly important ritual moment that most focally staged Huizhou mercantile lineage culture. It then concludes with an analysis of the ingredients of Huizhou *Mulian* performance as a shared lineage discourse. The ultimate concern of both Parts 2 and 3, and indeed of the book as a whole, is to integrate both the scripting and staging of *Mulian* into Chinese social history by seeking out social meanings of the ritual opera in the context of local mercantile lineage culture. The *Mulian* of Huizhou or the Huizhou *Mulian* may be a key to unlocking the rich treasury of late imperial Chinese society and culture. Integration of these two investigative strands opens up significant new dimensions of gentry society and popular culture that have not yet been seen or properly understood.