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Gender Differences, Authority's Discredibility, and Political Crisis: A Comparative Reading of Wang Shifu's *Xixiang Ji* and Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm*

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Abstract
Although Wang Shifu's *Xixiang ji* (*The Story of the Western Wing*) and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm* were written against different lingual, cultural, and social backgrounds, a comparative reading of these two dramas casts new light upon subjects that have up to now received scant attention. Wang Shifu's solemn temple and Lessing's secular inn are similarly spaces for temporary accommodation and are witnesses of political penetration. Both depict young ladies and their maids who are adept at argument and are brave to resist authority. By contrast, the male protagonists are more susceptible to traditional norms. Political crises play vital roles in demonstrating gender differences, re-formulating the male protagonists' conceptions about honor and love, and most importantly in revealing the dishonest behavior of authority.

Keywords *Xixiang ji* · *Minna von Barnhelm* · Gender · Authority · Crisis

With a temporal distance of approximately four centuries, Wang Shifu's *Xixiang ji* (西廂記, hereafter *The Story of the Western Wing*, ca. 1300) and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm* (1767) have been seldom raised together. This paper proposes a comparative reading of these two dramas and explores how these two playwrights share similar concerns on gender differences when confronting dishonest authority during a period of social and political crisis. Wang Shifu's Hong Niang (紅娘, or Crimson), the maid of the young lady Cui Yingying (崔鶯鶯, or Oriole), has become a well-known character in Chinese households not only because of her pivotal role as an intermediary between her lady and the protagonist but also, or

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more importantly, due to her argument and courage to refute Madam Cui, the highest authority of the family who has broken her promise made during crisis. This courage and speech act can also be found in Lessing's Minna and her maid Franciska. While the young lady Minna is witty, argumentative, and audacious to challenge the prevailing conceptions of blind patriotism and obedience to authority, Cui Yingying is equally courageous to sacrifice herself to save others from the rioters' assault and later fearlessly breaks off from stringent feudalistic norms restraining the younger generation's freedom and relationships. For her and Minna, when selecting partners for love and marriage, the protagonists' genuine love and uprightness gain privilege over the authority's recognition or bestowment of a title or honor to the men. On the contrary, the males appear more susceptible to the authority's manipulation as manifested by their fixation with an official title or recognition.

The Story of the Western Wing: More than Love and Freedom

Little information is available about the biography of Wang Shifu (王實甫) who was probably born in the 1260s and passed away at the end of 1330s. Even his authorship of the drama *The Story of the Western Wing* has been a controversy (Zhang Renhe, 2015, pp. 6–20), but it is now generally agreed that he was the author who rewrote the love story, originating from the short fiction *Yingying Zhuan* (鶯鶯傳, *Legend of Yingying*) by Yuan Zhen (元稹, 779–831) and the drama bearing the same title by Dong Jieyuan (董解元, dates of birth and death not confirmed) who lived in the Jin dynasty (金, 1115–1234). Wang Shifu adapted and rewrote the old story to a new height of aesthetics (for the history of this story, see Deng Shaoji, 1991, pp. 107–110). The popularity of Wang Shifu's version is mostly attributable to the "high quality of much of its poetry" (Dolby, 1994, p. 38). As Cheng Qianfan (2013, pp. 65–66) argues, Wang Shifu made minor though necessary revisions to the plot development but his largest contribution lies in the characterization of figures, enhancing the plausibility of the plot, adding new significance to a love story (i.e., aspiration for freedom and challenge to feudalistic constraints), and most vitally reforming the formal structure of *Zaju* (for a history of this genre, see Dolby 1976; Idema & West, 1982; for a brief introduction, see Idema, 2005).

The reception of Wang Shifu's *The Story of the Western Wing* was accompanied with controversy and censorship. William Dolby explained that its naughty themes and romantic boldness "troubled orthodox morality" and stood in contrast with "administrative restrictions" (1994, p. 30). According to Chen Wenxin (2014, p. 58), this drama was frequently depicted in many novellas of the Ming dynasty (明代, 1368–1644) as a misleading and pornographic text, and the female protagonist Cui Yingying became a synonym of lewdness. However, at the same time, it won great currency and imposed huge influence upon later stories such as *Hong lou meng* (ca. 1760, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, or *The Story of the Stone*) by Cao Xueqin (ca. 1715–1763). This popularity originated largely from the contemporaneous (young) readership's aspiration for free love, which was depicted in the drama but was impossible in real life in China's patriarchal society ruled under Neo-Confucian morality. Later, this drama was used as an ideological tool by a new generation of literati in

the 1910s who were eager to reform the Chinese literature to a new vernacular form. This literary and political goal required a new evaluation of ancient literature and even another process of canonization. As Stephen H. West and Wilt L. Idema pointed out, ancient works that had been largely neglected but "could be interpreted as attacks on the old morality or endorsements of the individual pursuit of happiness" would now enjoy new prominence (1995, p. 11). *The Story of the Western Wing* was one of the best choices, not only based on its vernacular merits but also on its protagonists "who flout traditional morality and its mainstay, parental authority" (West & Idema, 1995, p. 12). With the advent of Marxism, Chinese literary critics have shown particular attention to the issue of the working class and class conflicts in *The Story of the Western Wing*, reaching the conclusion that the young lovers and the maid represent progressive ideals whereas the heroine's mother is a manifestation of inhumane constraints from China's outdated feudalistic society. This politicized interpretation further enhanced the glamour of the maid Hong Niang, a representative of the best qualities of the working class, whose popularity between Chinese readership and audience had been largely based upon her warm-heartedness, wittiness, and courage.

However, through a comparative reading with Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm*, this paper argues that previous scholarship has paid scant attention to the discrepancies of how the male protagonist Zhang Junrui (張君瑞, or Student Zhang) and Cui Yingying react toward social norms regulating honor, status, and genuine love. Moreover, the crisis caused by the invading bandits has also received little heed. As a result, its vital role in disclosing the dishonest authority is neglected. The female characters' interrogation of authority and its norms is one of the central themes in *The Story of the Western Wing* and also *Minna von Barnhelm*.

Minna von Barnhelm: An Accusation against Authority by the Female

Unlike Wang Shifu's adaptation whose political background was too vague to receive adequate attention, Lessing used intentionally the political event of the Seven Years War (1756–1763) as a social background for the story of *Minna von Barnhelm* (for the historical background, see Dyck 1981). Although this drama was in effect completed in 1767, Lessing purposely inserted the misleading information "Verfertiget im Jahre 1763" under its title, so as to make sure that his contemporaneous spectators/readers would bear in mind (or recall) the specific political event when appreciating this drama. Therefore, the significance of this political crisis is evident not only for the plot development and characterization of its protagonist Major Tellheim and heroine Minna but also for Lessing's interrogation of enthusiasm in war, obsession with *Ehre* (honor), and extreme patriotism.

Noticing Lessing's obvious emphasis upon a particular historical period, scholars interpreted this drama from a perspective of social history and related issues such as the discrepancies between noble and middle classes, and the different focuses of two genders on judicial and emotional concerns (Hildebrandt, 1979; Michelsen, 1990; Saße, 1993; Ott, 2001). Scholars also stressed that Tellheim's concern about his honor is not merely an addiction to vanity but an acute problem of career, money, and livelihood (Seeba, 1973; Stockhorst, 2011). Beatrice Wehrli (1983) analyzed

Minna's argumentative skill and Lessing's rhetorical means for the dissemination of Enlightenment philosophical thoughts. Taking the feminist approach, Prutti (1996) held that Minna focused solely on her demand for love, whereas Tellheim suffered from a male identity crisis. The arguments between Minna and Tellheim center on the conflict between honor to be recognized and bestowed by authority and love grounded upon full appreciation of one's qualities and personalities. The conversation between Minna and Franciska sufficiently reveals the female's subjectivity and disdain for authority.

Through an elaborate comparative reading, this paper calls attention to the resemblances between Hong Niang and Franciska who are both loyal, courageous, witty, and argumentative maids to their young ladies. Furthermore, Wang Shifu's Zhang Junrui and Lessing's Tellheim reach a new recognition about the value of an individual after experiencing love and crisis, before which their ambition or goal is largely based upon the conventional expectation of their respective societies. For the former, it is to pass the royal civil service examination and hold a high position in the government, while for the latter it is to be officially bestowed (or restored) by the king with a military honor. It can be seen that their vision of achievement relies heavily upon the authority, whereas Cui Yingying and Minna are more interested in a genuine relationship, which appears at first sight less ambitious and restricted within a private and feminized space (family) but is in effect a full and even modern recognition of an individual's intrinsic qualities, their value standing independently from the judgment of the authority or society. The young ladies and their maids present a challenge to the control of authority whose credibility is severely criticized by Wang Shifu and Lessing. It is also in this way that the male protagonists' submissiveness to authority and their rules is interrogated by these two playwrights.

Political Crisis and Authority's Promise

It is during and after crisis that human nature will be fully exposed, as Monika Fick contended that "Nur in der Krise, wenn das Schiff gefährlich auf den Wogen schwankt, kann sich das Lebensvertrauen bewähren und seine Tragfähigkeit erweisen. Zugleich gewinnt der Glaube an die Vorsehung einen persönlichen, individuellen Entscheidungscharakter" (2016, p. 276). In Wang Shifu's *The Story of the Western Wing* and Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm*, political crisis functions not merely as a trivial social background but as the fundamental cause for the plot development. Moreover, both Wang Shifu and Lessing criticize the authority's failure to fulfill its promise made before or during the crisis.

Minna von Barnhelm bears explicit references to the contemporaneous political events. As Hugh B. Nisbet argues, "it is precisely Lessing's attempt to deal with pressing socio-political issues within a traditional dramatic framework that […] gives rise to the main problems of interpretation [of *Minna von Barnhelm*]" (2013, p. 336). At the diegetic level, the Seven Years War connects the chronological development of the story and marks the knots of the relationship between Tellheim and Minna. During the war, Tellheim's generosity and compassion in Saxony wins the love of the rich heiress Minna; after the war, his loss of honor, fortune, and prospect due to the

wrong accusation from the Prussian authority compels him to refuse to marry her out of his concern that her reputation will be severely impaired.

The drama begins when Minna and her maid Franciska arrive at an inn in Berlin, from which Tellheim has just been kicked out because he is now too impoverished to pay the lodging. The aftermath of the war, mainly reflected through the large number of heavily-wounded, homeless, and penniless soldiers in Berlin streets, is witnessed by Minna and Franciska before they finally see the destitute and desperate Tellheim with an injury in his arm. After their first sleepless night in Berlin, Franciska complains: "Die Karossen, die Nachtwächter, die Trommeln, die Katzen, die Korporals–das hört nicht auf zu rasseln, zu schreien, zu wirbeln, zu mauen, zu fluchen" (Act II, scene 1: 28). This miserable scene clearly unveils the military, political, and financial disasters, as well as Lessing's interrogation, of the Prussian King Frederick II's (1712–1786) war policy. Furthermore, it exposed other issues concerning the Frederick administration, which failed to keep its promise to award its soldiers, the *Freibataillone* (free battalions) in particular. When Minna inquires why the soldiers are dismissed after the war, Tellheim explains bitterly:

> Es ist gekommen, wie es kommen müssen. Die Großen haben sich überzeugt, daß ein Soldat aus Neigung für sie ganz wenig; aus Pflicht nicht vielmehr: aber alles seiner eignen Ehre wegen tut. Was können sie ihm also schuldig zu sein glauben? Der Friede hat ihnen mehrere meines gleichen entbehrlich gemacht; und am Ende ist ihnen niemand unentbehrlich. (Act VI, scene 6: 86)

Lessing's interrogation of the authority's credibility goes hand in hand with his doubt of Tellheim's and his subordinate Werner's ambition for honor, obsession with war, and loyalty to the authority. This critique partly derives from the experience of Lessing's friend Ewald Christian von Kleist (1715–1759) whose enthusiasm in war and patriotism costed him his life during the war. Surprisingly, this interrogation and doubt are mainly issued by Minna and Franciska. In other words, Lessing uses this war not only as a historical, social, and political background, but also to manifest the unusual strength and acuity of the females, even if their scope of activity was constrained within the private familial space and as a result their intelligence and vision were wrongly accused of being inferior to those of the males who enjoyed far wider space.

The political event in *Minna von Barnhelm*, concerning both its origin and aftermaths, has received sufficient attention from scholars, as stated above. By contrast, the political element in *The Story of the Western Wing* has been largely neglected. This ignorance may be attributable to the fact that the plot of the bandits' invasion has been passed down from Yuan Zhen's version to Wang Shifu's rewriting. With a gap of five centuries from Tang to Yuan dynasty, the historical event in Yuan Zhen's story has seemingly lost its significance and thus raised little interest. However, this paper argues that the political event plays a role as pivotal as its counterpart does in *Minna von Barnhelm*, in revealing important issues such as gender difference and the unreliability of authority.

In both the *Legend of Yingying* and *The Story of the Western Wing*, the protagonist Zhang Junrui encounters the heroine Cui Yingying in Pujiu Temple (Temple of Uni-

versal Salvation) in Puzhou (or Hezhong prefecture) of Shanxi province. Her father, a minister for the central government, passes away due to illness. During their way to convey his body to their hometown in another province, Cui Yingying, her mother Madam Cui, and their servants accommodate temporarily in the western chamber of the temple. Then, a group of rebellious soldiers besieges the temple. As Chen Yinke (陳寅恪, 1890–1969) wrote in his *Yuan Bai shi jian zheng gao* (元白詩箋證稿, *On Yuan Zhen's and Bai Juyi's Poems*, 1950), the rebel mentioned in Yuan Zhen's *Legend of Yingying* was in effect created upon a historical event, that is, a period of vacuum of administration between the death of the General Hunjian (渾瑊) in December 799 and the assignment of a qualified successor (Chen Yinke, 2011, p. 120). Dong Jieyuan added more information to the riot in his adaptation and Wang Shifu retained them, that is, an army of approximately five thousand rebellious soldiers under the leadership of a general named Sun Feihu (孫飛虎, or Sun Biao, 孫彪). However, Wang Shifu adapted this plot further. In his version, Sun Feihu threatens outside the temple and specially demands the beauty Cui Yingying; otherwise, he and his bandits will kill all monks and lodgers in the temple. This riot or crisis gives the protagonist a chance to demonstrate his wisdom to resolve the issue by secretly seeking for the help from his childhood friend, now General Du Que (杜確), a historic person who took the office of the late Hunjian. However, the function of this crisis in *The Story of the Western Wing* goes beyond this. This military riot discloses the social uncertainties discerned by Wang Shifu in the Yuan dynasty, although his concern is expressed in a drama with the Tang dynasty as its setting. Furthermore, the dishonesty and inconsistency of the familial authority, Madam Cui, are also fully exposed through this crisis.

Volume II of Wang Shifu's drama begins with the monologue of Sun Feifu (or Sun Biao) who introduces himself, the status quo of the country, and the motive of his rebel:

> At this moment Emperor Dezong [德宗, who reigned from 785 to 805] has ascended the throne and *all under heaven is in turmoil*. Because the commander-in-chief, Ding Wenya, has lost control, I, [Sun] Biao, guard the river bridge and lead some five thousand men and horse in plundering the good citizens of their valuables and goods. Recently I learned that the daughter of the former chancellor Cui Jue, Oriole [Cui Yingying], who has the looks to topple cities and states and the face of a Xi Shi or Precious Consort Yang [two legendary beauties in China's history], is now staying at the Temple of Universal Salvation. I've thought it over, and it seems that right now is just the time to exercise military might. *When the commander-in-chief is not acting right, why should I alone be incorruptible*? My troops listen to my orders: the men will all wear gags, the horses will all have bits. We will march this very night to Hezhong Prefecture. *I can snatch Oriole for my wife, then all my life's desires will be fulfilled*. (Volume II, Act 1: 149–150; Emphasis added)

In comparison, in the versions of Yuan Zhen (2020, p. 263) and Dong Jieyuan (2020, p. 294), the riot was only a regional threat within the prefecture; but it appears far more perilous in Wang Shifu's adaptation as the whole country is in turmoil. More-

over, unlike his predecessors Yuan Zhen and Dong Jieyuan, Wang Shifu gave Sun Feihu a specific motive to attack the temple, that is, his desire to snatch Cui Yingying, a famous beauty, although it is puzzling that this gangster does not invade the temple immediately but gives its lodgers three days for consideration. Ostensibly, this unnatural arrangement of plot aims at giving people trapped in the temple sufficient time for (demonstrating) different reactions. After panic and consideration, Madam Cui announces that her daughter will marry the one who can find ways to defeat the rioters. The bandit leader in Wang Shifu's adaptation has more visibility and justifies his plunder, corruption, and rebel by attributing the cause to the disappointing performance of the higher military authority. Without a second thought, Wang Shifu's contemporary or even modern spectators/readers will naturally assume that the whole society of the Tang dynasty was in a state of tumult and instability since the story and all its details indicate that historical period. However, Wang Shifu intentionally rewrote the riot by adding new details, which are absent in its two earlier versions. Since literary texts are products of a specific social, political, and cultural environment, it is quite tempting to interpret this plot as a manifestation of Wang Shifu's concern with his contemporaneous Yuan society.

The Yuan dynasty was built upon the victory of Mongolian warriors, a race of steppe. Its regime was originally established upon the onslaught or even extinction of the tribes of Nüzhen (女真, Jurchen) and Xixia (西夏, Tangut), but its policy of conquest gradually changed after it secured its position in northern China. As Frederick W. Mote wrote, later Mongolian authorities from 1250 to 1294 "dealt with their sedentary subjects more purposively and more effectively in the interests of the Mongolian state than had their formidable warrior predecessors" (1994, p. 617), and "Mongolian governors […] began to devise systems for maintaining the distinction between conquerors and conquered and for exploiting the latter to support their Eurasia-wide military campaigns" (1994, p. 629). On one hand, it was under the Mongolian rule that the northern and the southern parts of China were re-united. After the counselor Yelü Chucai's (耶律楚材, 1190–1244) proposal to Chengji Sihan (成吉思汗, or Genghis Khan, 1162–1227), "greater wealth could be obtained by administrating China as a conquered territory" on the basis of the Confucianism (Langlois Jr., 1981, p. 12). On the other hand, its policy raised controversy and discontent and thus risks were looming. In effect, the whole history of its rule was accompanied with constant riots (Han Rulin, 2008, p. 241–251). As the Chinese historian Han Rulin summarized, "元朝統治者長期以來推行階級壓迫和民族壓迫政策, 最後終於導致了社會矛盾的激化" (2008, p. 485. My translation: Rulers of the Yuan dynasty implemented the policy of class and race oppression for a long time, which eventually led to the exasperation of social friction.). Since there is a lack in the biographical information of Wang Shifu, it is difficult to confirm what he had experienced. However, given that presumably he resided in Dadu (now, Beijing), the capital of the Yuan dynasty, he must have witnessed the expansion of the urban construction, the coexistence of diverse cultures, and the implementation of the Mongolian regulations. It had once been wrongly assumed that the rise of drama in the Yuan dynasty was the result of the Mongolian rulers' suppression of the Han literati and elite (Mote, 1994, p. 640). Stephen H. West refuted this assumption and argued that this genre had "a self-sustaining and self-developing tradition" dated back to the eleventh century and

it turned out to be "a suitable and attractive vehicle for literary expression" (1981, p. 465). However, Han literati in northern China had to face a new regime, which suspended the civil service examination, the traditional channel for the educated to earn a living, fulfill their ambition, and achieve political reputation. This policy would undoubtedly induce discontent among the Han men of letters and would impair the social order. Through Wang Shifu's particular emphasis of the social turmoil, which is named after a previous dynasty, it can be glimpsed that the contemporary social condition was not stable and was thus a concern for him.

Political crises are adopted by Lessing and Wang Shifu for a common goal of exposing the discredibility and dishonesty of the authority, although their targets of criticism are slightly different at the face value. Lessing's interrogation is aimed at Frederick II's war policy and its diverse and disastrous aftermaths, whereas Wang Shifu's subject of questioning is superficially Madam Cui who has been conventionally interpreted/condemned by Chinese scholars from the Marxist approach as an old rich lady stubbornly upholding feudalistic norms that are to be challenged by the younger generation (Huang Jun & Huang Renshen, 2020, p. 72–73). However, this paper argues that Madam Cui and Frederick II resemble each other in terms of their after-crisis behavior of breaking their promise made during the crisis.

Because of Lessing's respect of three unities in *Minna von Barnhelm*, the Prussian government's promise of rewarding its officers and soldiers before the war, its later reluctance to fulfill it, and then its wrong accusation against Tellheim after the war can only be known from dialogs between diverse characters, for instance, that between Just (Tellheim's servant) and the innkeeper in the first two scenes of Act I (9–12), and the fierce arguments about honor, reason, and love between Tellheim and Minna in the ninth scene of Act II (44–48) and the sixth scene of Act VI (84–92). While lamenting Tellheim's physical, financial, and mental sufferings due to the Prussian authority's discredibility, Minna reminds him that it is senseless to respect such an authority, "Der König war eine unglückliche Karte für Sie" (Act IV, scene 6: 89). Moreover, in her diagnosis, Tellheim's expectation toward the Prussian authority is a product of his obsession with the so-called honor to be recognized or restored by it. Together with his current physical condition of being so dark and odious, his obsession draws him a parallel with the "Mohr von Venedig" (Act IV, scene 6: 89): "O, über die wilden, unbiegsamen Männer, die nur immer ihr stieres Auge auf das Gespenst der Ehre heften! für alles andere Gefühl sich verhärten!" (Act IV, scene 6: 90). Lessing interrogated the credibility of the Prussian authority by revealing the social and financial crisis induced by its policy, while his heroine Minna also points out to Tellheim explicitly the detrimental consequence upon him because of his service to such an authority. In this sense, Minna is the voice of Lessing in criticizing the Prussian government.

Wang Shifu assigns the task of criticizing the authority to Hong Niang (the maid) in *The Story of the Western Wing*. When Sun Feihu and his rioters besiege the temple and threaten to invade and slaughter all its residents, Madam Cui announces (upon the advice of her daughter): "Whosoever among the monks and laymen of either corridor [of the temple] has a plan to repulse the soldiers, the madam will send Oriole [Yingying] to him as wife—and throw in a dowry as well" (Volume II, Act I: 155). However, when the rioters are defeated, thanks to the poor young student Zhang

Junrui, Madam Cui refuses to keep her promise made during the crisis. Instead, she arranges a dinner in which she demands Zhang Junrui and her daughter to be sworn brother and sister in an unexpected and compulsory manner: "Come here, daughter, and pay your respects to your elder brother" (Volume II, Act IV: 177). In effect, this is not her first time of breaking promise. During the crisis, she is too frightened to recall that her daughter has an arranged marriage with Zheng Huan (鄭桓), her nephew and the son of Minister Zheng (Volume I, Act I: 115).

Since her husband has passed away, she is the authority of this aristocratic family that instructs its offspring strictly in line with the Confucian education. However, her own behavior violates the basic moral norms of Confucianism, which leaves efficient ground for Hong Niang to refute her and challenge her power. Realizing that her daughter has clandestinely spent several nights with Zhang Junrui, Madam Cui puts the blame on Hong Niang whom she has assigned to keep the young lady under surveillance. To a certain extent, Madam Cui's dishonesty forms an echo with what Sun Feihu has disclosed as the cause of his rebel, namely, the disputable performance of the authority. In this way, Wang Shifu uncovers a more serious social issue that bears close relationship with the central administration's policies, and affects the country's morality and stability.

Spatially, the Berlin inn in *Minna von Barnhelm* and the temple in *The Story of the Western Wing* are disparate places at first sight. The former is secular and crowded, and opens its door to various visitors, whereas the latter is solemn and its religious significance demands particular respect. However, in these two dramas, they are places for dwellers' temporary accommodation; and more importantly, they are equally susceptible for political penetration. The space of the Berlin inn is divided between the male and the female (Pütz, 1986, pp. 205–206). Its hall witnesses the male activities featured with themes such as military honor, ambition, and money, while the bedroom, from where Tellheim has been kicked out, is the space for Minna and Franciska who are more concerned about individuals' intrinsic merits and personalities. However, this does not mean isolation or security from the social reality. For instance, Minna and Franciska have to give detailed personal information for registration purpose to the innkeeper who is one of the "key figures in Frederick's network of police informers" (Nisbet, 2013, p. 340). In Wang Shifu's drama, factors of political and social uncertainty are also vividly seen in the temple, which is theoretically a sacred space of asceticism and independence from external social forces in China. It is in this temple that a love story with clear reference to clandestine sexual intercourse takes place. Its holy walls bear witness to a political rebel epitomizing social crisis and the contentious behaviors of two authorities, that is, an aristocratic family and the central government.

Young Ladies and Their Maids: Voice and Subjectivity

In *The Story of the Western Wing* and *Minna von Barnhelm*, respectively, Wang Shifu and Lessing depicted extraordinary female characters that are adept at argument and courageous to stand against the norms formulated by authorities. Their perceptions about life do not result from the traditional societies' expectations or regulations;

instead, they originate from their own understanding of what is the most valuable element in life. The young female's discontent with the authority is largely manifested through their unswerving relationship with a man who does not meet the conventional requirement for an ideal husband. To highlight those daring young women, Wang Shifu and Lessing use male characters as a contrast. Whereas the young female behaves against the authority, the male is relatively speaking more susceptible to its rules. One of the discrepancies between the female and the male characters lies in their differed abilities of argument.

Unlike other heroines in Lessing's bourgeois tragedies, *Miß Sara Sampson* and *Emilia Galotti*, Minna, together with her maid Franciska, is unprecedentedly lively, smart, and brave. When Tellheim prefers *writing* a letter to Minna to explain the unjust accusation from the authority, Minna, on the contrary, prefers listening to him and *talking* face-to-face with him, partly because of her overriding advantage of speaking and argument to him. Tellheim is fully aware of what a direct conversation with the observant and quick-witted Minna will bring: "Von mir selbst hören? Damit mich jedes Wort, jede Miene von ihr verwirre; damit ich in jedem ihrer Blicke die ganze Größe meines Verlusts empfinde?" (Act III, scene 10: 68). Most importantly, Minna enjoys a high degree of freedom and independence, partly because both her parents have passed away and her uncle is her only guardian who only appears at the end of the drama when almost everything has been settled. As a result, she is less constrained by social norms, which are generally manifested and implemented by parents, and thus she shows unparalleled courage and determination in pursuing her love.

When Tellheim keeps lamenting his physical wound and his loss of (military and social) honor, Minna uses different strategies, "von denen erotischer Zärtlichkeit über die der spitzfindigsten Argumentierlust bis zu einer erbarmungslosen Vorspiegelung falscher Tatsachen" (Wandruszka, 2005, p. 128). This paper categorizes her tactics into *arguing* and *acting*. First of all, to dispel his pessimism and self-pity, she *argues* by understating his sufferings: "Ich will nicht mehr mutwillig sein. Denn ich besinne mich, daß Sie allerdings ein kleiner Kriepel sind. Ein Schuß hat Ihnen den rechten Arm ein wenig gelähmt.—Doch alles wohl überlegt: so ist auch das so schlimm nicht. Um so viel sichrer bin ich vor Ihren Schlägen" (Act IV, scene 6: 87). Minna believes that he only exaggerates his anguish and suggests him to stop focusing on his miseries and laugh them off: "Kann man denn auch nicht lachend sehr ernsthaft sein? Lieber Major, das Lachen erhält uns vernünftiger, als der Verdruß. Der Beweis liegt vor uns. Ihre lachende Freundin beurteilet Ihre Umstände weit richtiger, als Sie selbst" (Act IV, scene 6: 87). When she realizes that her words do not work well as she has anticipated, she takes her last resort: to tell a lie and *act* that her life is going to be as dismal as Tellheim's, because she has refused to marry the man chosen by her uncle and is thus disinherited. This eventually works with Tellheim because in his opinion, "Gleichheit ist immer das festeste Band der Liebe" (Act V, scene 5: 101). But more essentially, the agony of Minna—although it is a lie—arouses his *Mitleid* (empathy), a keyword for Lessing's tragedies, as he tells Minna the new lesson he draws:

> Ärgernis und verbissene Wut hatten meine ganze Seele umnebelt; die Liebe selbst, in dem vollesten Glanze des Glückes, konnte sich darin nicht Tag schaffen. Aber sie sendet ihre Tochter, das Mitleid, die, mit dem finstern Schmerze vertrauter, die Nebel zerstreuet, und alle Zugänge meiner Seele den Eindrücken der Zärtlichkeit wiederum öffnet. (Act V, scene 5: 103)

Here, Minna is the best manifestation of what Lessing aspires from the genre drama to achieve. As Werner Jung explained, "Minna ist Lessings Engel, seine Lichtgestalt. Sie ist Tellheims Exorzistin und für die Gespenstervertreibung verantwortlich" (2001, p. 76). The educational effect of tragedy is to be realized by showing its audience the agonies of protagonists and then arousing its audience's *Mitleid*. Within this comedy, Minna designs a tragedy for her sole audience Tellheim who eventually walks outside the restrictive concept of honor to be bestowed by an unreliable monarchy and begins to realize the multiplicities of humanity and life. A military honor or title is not the whole value of life and Berlin is not the whole world, as he announces to Minna with optimism: "Von diesem Augenblicke an, will ich dem Unrechte, das mir hier widerfährt, nichts als Verachtung entgegen setzen. Ist dieses Land die Welt? Geht hier allein die Sonne auf? Wo darf ich nicht hinkommen? Welche Dienste wird man mir verweigern?" (Act V, scene 5: 103). Without any political motive, he has taken enormous risk to fight for Frederick II. After Minna's lesson, he interrogates the authority as well as his enthusiasm in war and honor as a brave and loyal soldier: "Die Dienste der Großen sind gefährlich, und lohnen der Mühe, des Zwanges, der Erniedrigung nicht, die sie kosten" (Act V, scene 9: 107). Now, his conception of life, or his ambition for life, gets closer to that of Minna, "ein ruhiger und zufriedener Mensch zu sein" (Act V, scene 9: 108). It is not to be based upon the acknowledgment of authority, but upon one's inner self. Although Minna succeeds in enlightening Tellheim, her maid Franciska still has a long way to go with her lover Werner on that matter. Werner's enthusiasm in participating in another war does not recede even after he falls in love with Franciska. This drama ends with his comic prediction: "Über zehn Jahre ist Sie [Franciska] Frau Generalin, oder Witwe" (Act V, scene 5: 119), thus casting a shadow on the happy ending of this comedy. However, more vitally, it expresses Lessing's concern about the prevalent preoccupation with authority and military honor at the expense of sacrificing oneself merely out of an enthusiasm for war.

Lessing presents his audiences and readers a young lady whose courage and independence are unprecedentedly impressive, while Wang Shifu depicts the *process* of how his heroine Cui Yingying becomes more courageous. In comparison with Minna, Cui Yingying leads a far more restrictive life due to the strict control of her mother. Minna's bravery to travel with her maid (without a male guardian's companion) and stay overnight at a Berlin inn fully indicates her access to diverse spaces. By contrast, Cui Yingying is restricted in the western chamber of the temple and needs her mother's permission to have a walk outside the chamber, but without trespassing the spatial limit of the temple and under the company (or surveillance) of her maid. However, this spatial restraint does not render her into a narrow-minded and fragile woman. Instead, her bravery is as remarkable as Minna's. When the temple is besieged by the rioters, she understands that she is the cause for this crisis and is

ready to sacrifice herself in order to save other dwellers (Volume II, Act I). This unusual qualities of bravery and selflessness demonstrated by an aristocratic young lady are so impressive upon the temple's dwellers that they are to be recalled in Zhang Junrui's dream in Volume IV, Act IV (for a psychoanalytical reading of this dream, see Lanselle 2018). The conflict between her desire for a genuine relationship with the protagonist and her hesitation for the secret meetings at nights with him forms the core of the difficult process of how she overcomes the feudalistic codes of morality and behavior. In fear that her daughter's dates with a poor young man will induce scandal and impair the Cui family's reputation, Madam Cui succumbs to the status quo and consents to marry her daughter to the protagonist, but on the condition that he passes the civil servant examination and assumes a title of government official. This demand does not go against the protagonist's life plan, as he has announced his ambition before he encounters Cui Yingying:

> After I've seen my brother [General Du Que], I'll be off to the capital to seek advancement. I'm mulling over how, by windows lit by fireflies at the desk where snowlight reflects, I scraped away grime to polish forth radiance. From studies completed came a belly stuffed with literature, but still I'm tossed about on lake and sea. When will I achieve my grand ambition? (Volume I, Act I: 116)

His love with Cui Yingying only gives him a powerful force and new confidence to continue his plan to seek for a social title, *honor*, to be bequeathed by the authority, as he swears to Madam Cui: "Relying on your ample support and on the talents in my heart, I will find obtaining official position no more than picking up a mustard seed" (Volume IV, Act III: 240). However, for Cui Yingying, as for Minna, this honor is less important than their love, a symbol for the female's subjectivity and independence that have been confined by tradition: "For me [Cui Yingying], finding a double-headed lotus / Far outstrips passing the examinations as head of the list!" (Volume IV, Act III: 242). The male protagonists of Wang Shifu and Lessing enjoy a larger and wider (public) space, but this access makes them more susceptible to the manipulation of traditional norms governing their mindsets; on the contrary, although Cui Yingying and Minna are spatially restricted to familial domains, they attach more importance to values that are conventionally deemed inferior or trivial by the authority, that is, the genuine relationship developed upon mutual admiration of inner qualities, rather than an honor or a title conferred by the authority.

The young and lively maids from the working class, Hong Niang and Franciska, play the vital role of connecting between the male-dominated public space and the elite female's private space. They assume prominence not only for their intermediary roles in facilitating the communication and relationship between the protagonists and their ladies, but also out of their shining qualities, such as the readiness to challenge conventional rules restricting the female's social status. The most distinctive resemblance between Hong Niang and Franciska is their ability in argument. For a long time, Hong Niang has been interpreted as a symbolic member of the working class who sincerely helps her lady to achieve freedom for love and bravely challenge the feudalistic authority. However, the glamour of this character lies in the incompatibility or multiplicity of her features. On the one hand, she is an illiterate; on the

other hand, she is adept at reciting Confucian doctrines and knows how to use them for her and her lady's purposes, which violate the norms upheld by the elite class. To reprimand Madam Cui (the authority) for breaking promise, Hong Niang even quotes from the *Analects of Confucius* (論語) that "To be a man and be without trust—I do not know if such is possible. A large cart without crossbar, a small cart without yoke—how can one drive them?" (Volume IV, Act II: 235). In effect, her power in argument originates from her tactics of using Confucian teachings to criticize an authority whose deeds have absolutely violated Confucian norms, which it should have strictly obeyed. Her superficial respect to social doctrines hides her challenge of their validity.

Franciska's disregard for convention is more evident than Hong Niang's disrespect, and the former's unparalleled ability in argument is mostly displayed by her witticism. Moreover, Franciska has a modern sense of self-esteem. She proudly introduces her hard-working father and brother. For her, diligence is a noble trait, and wealth thus achieved is as important as those inherited by birth. She protests that the innkeeper only writes "Kammerfrau" companying Minna as her identity for the registration (Act II, scene 2: 33). Instead, she considers herself equal to Minna as she calmly tells the innkeeper her biographical information and concludes that "Ich kam sehr jung auf den Hof, und ward mit dem genädigen Fräulein erzogen. […] Ich habe alles gelernt, was das genädige Fräulein gelernt hat. Es soll mir lieb sein, wenn mich die Policei recht kennt" (Act II, scene 2: 33). This esteem gives her the courage to speak and argue in public, and her learning equivalent to that of Minna is the foundation for her intelligence and witticism. She understands the mechanism of the world featured with hypocrisy and dishonesty, a prediction of the authority's reluctance to fulfill its promise, as she criticizes: "Man spricht selten von der Tugend, die man hat; aber desto öfters von der, die uns fehlt" (Act II, scene 2: 29). In her view, deeds matter more than boasting and bragging. Similar to Minna, she understates Tellheim's misery. For her, these trivial sufferings do not justify his self-pity and ignorance of his appearance. She invites Tellheim to have a face-to-face conversation with Minna but reminds (or requires) him that "Kommen Sie nicht so, wie Sie da sind; in Stiefeln, kaum frisiert. Sie sind zu entschuldigen; Sie haben uns nicht vermutet. Kommen Sie in Schuhen, und lassen Sie Sich Frisch frisieren.—So sehen Sie mir gar zu brav, gar zu Preußisch aus!" (Act III, scene 10: 70). Her and Minna's scorn for the Prussian authority forms a sharp contrast with Tellheim's reliance upon it. In particular, Franciska expresses quite explicitly that love is not everything for the female. "Wir [Minna and Franciska] behielten Sie gern zum Essen, aber Ihre Gegenwart möchte uns an dem Essen hindern; und sehen Sie, so gar verliebt sind wir nicht, daß uns nicht hungerte" (Act III, scene 10: 70). This statement clearly indicates Lessing's perception or expectation toward the young female generation: even if being excluded from the public space, they are not narrow-minded to focus only on trivial and private sentiments; instead, they fully understand the importance of money and the hardship of survival.

Conclusion

Through a comparative reading of *The Story of the Western Wing* and *Minna von Barnhelm*, this paper elucidates the common criticism of Wang Shifu and Lessing against the discredibility of authority during and after political crisis. Both adopt a period of social turmoil as their background and particular places (or spaces) for temporary accommodation as the setting for the plot. Against a historical and spatial backdrop featured with unpredictability and instability, the young female generation, that is, rich ladies and their maids, behave and conceive differently from the male protagonists. Although having been constrained within the narrow domestic space, they manifest surprising courage against tradition. Specifically, the maids in these two dramas, Hong Niang and Franciska, do not fit the gender stereotype of the obedient, silent, and instrumental maid; instead, they enjoy a high degree of visibility derived from their argumentative voice. In comparison with the young female, the young men, although with better access to a larger public space, turn out to be more susceptible to the power and influence of authority. It is through the young female's argument that the dishonesty of authority is fully revealed, and then the male protagonists begin to recognize the absurdity of blind obedience to the orders and norms formulated by a cheating authority that is reluctant to keep its promises made during crisis. In this sense, both Wang Shifu and Lessing interrogate the authority whose unreliability and hypocrisy are completely disclosed by its behavior before and after crisis. Moreover, they share similar standpoints regarding gender differences, which are mainly demonstrated through the disparate ability of argument and different perceptions of traditional norms imposed by authority whose influence penetrates all corners of both public and private spaces. Nevertheless, Wang Shifu and Lessing point out mutually that the young female generation's limited spatial freedom does not necessarily mean that they are narrow-minded, submissive, and fragile. Instead, they cast new lights on the essence of relationship and the value of life, which do not originate from authority's recognition but from the innate qualities of each individual and the sincerity and honesty among them.

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