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Parodies of *Qing*: Ironic Voices in Romantic *Chuanqi* Plays
by
Yanbing Tan

A dissertation presented to
The Graduate School
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
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Yanbing Tan

Washington University in St. Louis

August, 2018

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Parodies of *Qing*: Ironic Voices in Romantic *Chuanqi* Plays

by

Yanbing Tan

Doctor of Philosophy in Chinese and Comparative Literature

Washington University in St. Louis, 2018

Professor Robert E. Hegel, Chair

This dissertation looks into tongue-in-cheek moments in Chinese romantic *chuanqi* plays of the late 17th and 18th centuries and examines their reflections on the *chuanqi* dramatic genre and its close ties to the discourse of *qing* (sentiment, feeling). The discourse of *qing* during the late imperial era highlighted emotional authenticity and spontaneity as the defining elements of one's self and celebrated romantic love as an important manifestation of such elements. After Tang Xianzu's dramatic masterpiece, *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudanting*, 1598), pushed the literary rendition of the discourse of *qing* to its peak, *chuanqi* became an important vehicle for representing deep and spontaneous emotions. The standardization of the *chuanqi* genre, the concentrated interest in the theme of *caizi-jiaren* (scholar-beauty) love affairs, and the popularity of *chuanqi* as a writing practice among the educated elite led to the rather predictable problem of repetition and cliché. But in many *chuanqi* compositions, we also witness increased self-reflexivity that directs romantic narratives toward the comic and the ironic.

My dissertation focuses on four *chuanqi* plays that represent this rhetorical turn: Wu Bing's *The Remedy for Jealousy* (*Liaodu geng*, ca. 1633), Ruan Dacheng's *The Swallow's Letter* (*Yanzi jian*, 1642), Li Yu's *Ideal Love Matches* (*Yi zhong yuan*, 1655), and Wang Yun's *A Dream of Glory* (*Fanhua meng*, 1778). These plays underline the tension between the artificial

conventions of the *chuanqi* genre and the emotional spontaneity that the genre is purported to convey. They also expose many incongruities and contradictions embodied in the concept of *qing*: *qing* as both authentic emotion and textual imitation, devoted love and abundant desire, an aspiration for transcendence and an excuse for mundane self-interest. Furthermore, these *chuanqi* plays and their commentaries demonstrate that behind these incongruities and contradictions lie contested understandings of gendered emotions and ambitions.

This dissertation recognizes parodies of *qing*, glorified emotion, as a main source of amusement in romantic *chuanqi* plays. It is not only a study of a literary genre but also an inquiry into how the development of this genre facilitated reflections on one of the most important intellectual trends in late imperial China.

Introduction

Wang Yun's 王筠 (1749-1819) 18th-century *chuanqi* play *Fanhua meng* 繁華夢 (A Dream of Glory, 1778) includes a comic episode, in which a naïve young man named Wang seeks a romantic dalliance for the first time at a brothel. His hope for a great romance is crushed when he is received by Pipa Qian, a prostitute whose face resembles a wild ghost and who is old enough to be Wang's mother. The horrified Wang cannot think of anything but a quick escape. Pipa Qian, however, determines to take this young lad straight to her bed for quick sex. Chaos thus takes place:

(生急揖介) 媽媽，可憐饒了小生去罷。(丑) 說得這般容易，女兒們一同動手，擡也擡他進去。(二雜應，生慌介) 媽媽姐姐，快請放手，那邊有人來了。(丑回看介) 人在哪裏？(生推倒丑急下)(雜) 啊呀呀，跌壞了媽媽哉。(同扶丑起介)
(丑) 啊喲，有這等事，氣死我也。(大叫，起介) 待我趕上去。(欲跑，二雜扯介) 媽媽，那人去遠，趕不上了。(丑) 氣殺我哉。正是：走脫薄倖王公子，惱殺多情琵琶錢。(Hua, *Xiqu ji* 230)

Wang (bows anxiously with his hands clasped): Mother, please take pity on a young lad and let me go.

Pipa Qian: Easier said than done. Daughters, please give a hand. Carry him in for me.

Maids: Yes, Mother.

Wang (truly panicked): Mother, Sisters, please let me go! Someone is coming!

Pipa Qian (looking behind her): Where?

(Wang knocks Pipa Qian to the ground and runs off.)

Maids: Ah ya! Mother has taken a bad fall. *(They help Pipa Qian to get to her feet.)*

Pipa Qian: Ah ya ya ya—I could just die, I'm so mad! There is such audacity in this world. My anger is like a dagger piercing my heart. *(She yells.)* I'm going to go catch him! *(She attempts to run after him. Two maids stop her.)*

Maids: Mother, the man is already far away. You'll never catch him now.

Pipa Qian: Oh, I could just die. I'm so mad!

Indeed:

To lose such an unfeeling prince,
Would kill a love-struck Pipa Qian. (Q. Wu 80)¹

¹ This quotation is based on Wu Qingyun's English translation of Wang Yun's play. I have made a few modifications.

This scene, which features multiple layers of incongruity, invites the reader's laughter: the elite young man, Wang, appears as vulnerable to harassment; the courtesan, Pipa Qian, who has a monstrous face, does not lack human desire. Wang's horror in response to Pipa Qian's overflow of sexual energy results in a series of slapstick movements—pushing, falling, and running—enlivened by copious screams and cries. Pipa Qian's exaggerated expression of emotion reveals her crude nature. In the end, the defeated Pipa Qian's comment on her fruitless pursuit of love is pivotal: by calling herself a victim of her *duoqing* 多情 (love-struck) heart, Pipa Qian parodies the same grand claim that Wang will use to support his multiple romantic adventures later in the play—the appreciation of refined *qing* 情 (emotion and sensibility).

The romantic vision that leads Wang to visit Pipa Qian's house is consistent with a theme shared by a great proportion of *chuanqi* plays: the love relationship between a *caizi* 才子 (a talented young man) and a *jiaren* 佳人 (a beautiful young woman). In the scene quoted above, this romantic vision is turned upside down in a comic way. What complicates the scene even more is that the young man is actually a “dream male”—an illusion conjured up by a female character in her spring dream. The author of this scene, Wang Yun, was one of the few women in late imperial China who took up the endeavor of writing *chuanqi* plays. To a large degree, Wang's play is a self-reflexive or even metatheatrical joke on the melodramatic *caizi jiaren chuanqi* plays: when the *caizi jiaren* romance becomes a literary cliché, who will take its messages about love seriously? When the *caizi jiaren* narrative is conveyed in the rigid format of the *chuanqi* genre, how should one understand its promotion of emotional authenticity and spontaneity? Do the presentations of the romantic ideal in the mature *chuanqi* genre provide self-gratification for the literati authors and the readers, or do they actually mock the desire for such self-gratification? This study explores these questions by analyzing tongue-in-cheek

moments in romantic *chuanqi* plays of the late 17th and 18th centuries and examining their reflections on the *chuanqi* dramatic genre, particularly its obsession with the theme of love. In order to contextualize the *chuanqi* genre, the following section provides background information on the development and literary significance of this dramatic form.

Reading and Writing the *Chuanqi* Play

In histories of Chinese literature, the term “*chuanqi*,” which translates roughly into “tales of the marvelous,” refers to two different genres. *Chuanqi* was first applied to a type of fictional narratives on fantastic matters and romantic topics that flourished during the Tang dynasty (618-907). Later, in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), *chuanqi* began to denote a particular kind of poetic play set to southern music. As Guo Yingde points out in his study of Ming-Qing *chuanqi* dramas, the definition of *chuanqi* becomes clear when we compare it with two other major dramatic forms in late imperial China: *zaju* 雜劇 (Northern variety plays) and *xiwen* 戲文 (Southern plays) (*Chuanqi shi* 15).

Both *zaju* and *xiwen* came into being before *chuanqi* in the Song-Yuan period (960-1368). The production of *zaju* continued along with *chuanqi* until the very end of the late imperial era. *Zaju*, from the Song-Yuan period, are composed with northern styles of music and often feature four acts. Towards the end of the Ming, the earlier structures of *zaju* were largely forgotten. Like *chuanqi*, Ming *zaju* also utilizes southern music. The most obvious distinction between *chuanqi* and *zaju* is the length. Compared with *zaju*, the much longer *chuanqi* has larger narrative capacity, and it often features multiple singing roles.² *Xiwen*, the long drama that was popular as folk art in southern China from the Song to the Ming, was a close predecessor of

² From the late Ming on, a *zaju* play often included one to ten acts.

chuanqi. As Wilt Idema points out, *chuanqi* and *xiwen* can be understood as two phases in the development of the same genre (*Traditional* 826). As the later phase, *chuanqi* presents a larger degree of uniformity in terms of its musicality and narrative structure.³ This uniformity was a direct result of the literati's increasing participation in *chuanqi* composition, performance, and publication in place of theater professionals.

Although *chuanqi* plays were originally intended for operatic performances, by the late Ming, they had become popular as reading material and writing practice among the cultural elite. Like the novel and short story in late imperial China, drama was not ostensibly considered an orthodox or elite genre. But the level of intellectual sophistication displayed by drama, *chuanqi* plays in particular, indicates this genre's significant role in the amusement and contemplation of the cultural elite. *Chuanqi*'s narrative capacity and linguistic hybridity made it an important vehicle for literati to demonstrate their poetic skills, narrative techniques, and encyclopedic knowledge. The boom of drama publication during the Wanli reign (1573-1619) also encouraged playwriting among the literati. As Hsiao Li-ling points out in her book *The Eternal Present of the Past*, the increase in quantity and quality of drama publications led to a "bifurcation of drama culture" and provoked debates on whether written plays belong to literary or theatrical culture

³ In terms of scripts, *chuanqi*, as a lengthy poetic play, presents these characteristics: first, *chuanqi* opens with the role type *fumo* summarizing the entire plot for the audience; second, an average-length *chuanqi* features about thirty scenes and these scenes are divided evenly into two halves and each ends with a poem; third, the appearance of characters follows a conventional order: the male lead appears in the second scene, while the female lead comes onstage in the third. The *chuanqi* play includes various linguistic registers. The arias are refined poetry, and the dialogues can present the liveliness of the vernacular. From the early Ming to the mid-Ming, the musical form of *chuanqi* plays were dominated by four regional musical traditions and their singing styles: Haiyan, Yuyao, Yiyang, and Kunshan. From the mid-Ming onward, dramatists such as Shen Jing 沈璟 (1553-1610) endeavored to regulate "rhyming, intonation, and the correspondence between libretto and music" for *chuanqi* plays (John Hu 72). As Shen and his followers lived close to Kunshan, their effort to regulate the musicality of *chuanqi* also helped to promote dramas composed in the Kunshan style. The standardization of script and music of the *chuanqi* play was mostly the literati's effort, and it reflected the literati's tastes. See Guo Yingde's introduction in *Mingqing chuanqi shi* 明清傳奇史 (60-67).

(44). Hsiao points out that these debates about aesthetics also had their moral dimensions, because some literati believed that theater played an important role in “spreading belief, ideology, and morality and thus uplifting the society” (45). For some literary commentators, such as Wang Jide 王驥德 (1540 - 1623), the rising production and consumption of plays as texts meant literati’s declining interest in “the social function of theater,” which originally had the common people as its intended audience (Hsiao 47). Towards the late Ming, well-versed literati produced a great number of *chuanqi* plays that are clearly incomprehensible for people with little or no education because of their refined literary style.

Writing a play did not necessarily demand comprehensive knowledge of theatrical production. For example, playwrights were not required to understand the musicality of *chuanqi* plays, even though arias in *chuanqi* should be composed to set tunes. The publication of such works as Shen Jing’s *Nan jiugong shisandiao qupu* 南九宮十三調曲譜 (Complete Table of Southern Prosody) meant that playwrights could follow the rules about modes and rhymes without really knowing much about music. One of the major *chuanqi* playwrights in the late Ming who was criticized for being too literary in his dramatic composition and too ignorant in music was Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550 -1616). Tang, however, did not shy away from the criticism that his arias were too hard for actors to perform onstage. Tang famously responded to such comments by declaring that: “知曲意者，筆懶韻落，時時有之，正不妨拗折天下人嗓子” (“For people who understand the meaning of drama, it happens from time to time that the indolence of their brushes results in a few missed rhymes. But there is no harm in hurting people’s throats”) (qtd. in Guo, *Chuanqi shi* 258).⁴ Tang’s response was a blunt statement that

⁴ My translation. This dissertation includes many translations that I created. If I quote other scholars’ translations, I will provide sources for those quotations.

his plays were “writerly.” Tang’s younger contemporaries, such as Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574 -1646), tried to revise Tang’s renowned play *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudanting*, 1598) in order to make it more performable. But these revisions and adaptations have never challenged Tang Xianzu’s reputation as the greatest playwright in late imperial China or the status of the original *Peony Pavilion* as the most celebrated play from the Ming.

Even though some of the literati plays have been closet dramas since their creation, it is fair to say that few playwrights in late imperial China wrote their plays without wishing for them to be performed on stage one day. An ideal for these playwrights would be to have one’s play appreciated as both literature and theatrical performance. But it was only the textual dimension of their participation in the theatrical culture that could be preserved. As Katherine Carlitz has suggested, the late Ming dramatists and publishers understood that “drama on the stage was a performance for an audience of the moment, but drama on the page was a performance that could be calibrated to reach a number of different audiences in different ways” (“Printing as Performance” 269). On the one hand, playwrights were fully aware of the possibility that their plays might be consumed as literary texts only; on the other hand, the existent drama publications, many of which included commentaries and refined illustrations, attested to the importance of *chuanqi* plays as reading materials for the educated.⁵

In recent years, studies of drama have taken a turn toward cultural studies and shed valuable light on publication and performance histories. A rather unfortunate side effect of this turn is that dramatic texts have come to occupy an awkward position as a footnote of history, and

⁵ Ling Mengchu’s 凌濛初(1580-1644) “red-and-black” edition of *Pipa ji* 琵琶記 (The Lute) is a good example of elegant drama publications from the late Ming. It includes exquisite illustrations.

dramatists' endeavor of writing is overlooked because of our ambition to create grand scholarly narratives.⁶ Let us now turn to the subject of these plays.

The *Caizi Jiaren* Play and the Discourse of *Qing*

Chuanqi plays are predominantly melodramatic, with romantic love as a common theme. One of the most popular writers in the long seventeenth century, Li Yu 李漁 (1611-1680), half-jokingly wrote: “十部傳奇九相思” (“nine out of every ten *chuanqi* plays are about romantic longing”) (*Lian xiang ban* 110). Li Yu's statement probably exaggerates the proportions, but it nevertheless reflects the popularity of love stories in the *chuanqi* genre. According to the modern scholar Wang Yong'en's study, among the two hundred or so existent *chuanqi* plays from the Ming dynasty, about half are romantic plays (*Yanjiu* 91). During the Qing dynasty, this percentage decreased only because the total number of *chuanqi* plays produced increased (Y. Wang, *Yanjiu* 91)

Who can be the desiring and desired subjects in a romantic *chuanqi* play, however, is a crucial question. The old and ugly prostitute Pipa Qian, whom we have encountered earlier, is ridiculed for her thirst for love. Romantic *chuanqi* plays often feature the encounter and eventual union between a talented young man and a gifted and beautiful young woman. The male suitor, who is conventionally described as a *caizi* 才子 (talented man), is almost always from a scholarly family. The young woman, *jiaren* 佳人 (beauty), however, can be either an elite courtesan or the daughter from a respected household. A happy union between the male and

⁶ Studies that provide a good balance of historical inquiries and textual analyses include works such as He Yuming's *Home and the World: Editing the "Glorious Ming" in Woodblock-Printed Books* and Andrea Goldman's *Opera and the City: The Politics of Culture in Beijing, 1770-1900*.

female protagonists is expected from the beginning when they fall in love at first sight.⁷ After some vile characters or social upheavals interrupt the romance, the handsome *caizi* will eventually win the discerning *jiaren*'s appreciation and receive recognition from the emperor for his scholarly achievement and, sometimes, political contribution.

The attraction between these good-looking young lovers is a mixture of physical desire, emotional attachment, and literary or artistic appreciation. Besides beauty and youth, the protagonists of romantic *chuanqi* dramas are also gifted in such arts as poetry and painting. For the young lovers, talent stands for the innate beauty that makes successful expressions of authentic emotions possible. Such inner beauty is an essential quality for both female and male protagonists in romantic narratives. Pipa Qian's coarse and unlearned manner certainly does not help her win a lover.

In terms of theme and plot, the romantic *chuanqi* dramas are closely related to the *caizi jiaren xiaoshuo* 才子佳人小說 (long chapter-by-chapter novels featuring *caizi jiaren*), which have attracted more scholarly attention. The *caizi jiaren* novels, however, have never enjoyed a good reputation for their overall quality. Scholars have explained the immense popularity of the *caizi jiaren* novels in the early Qing as a manifestation of political escapism.⁸ An investigation into the connection between *caizi jiaren* plays and novels is beyond the scope of this study. But it is worth pointing out that the popularity of romantic *chuanqi* plays began much earlier than that of the *caizi jiaren* novels. Furthermore, the *caizi jiaren* novelists tended to be unsuccessful scholars who had little success at the imperial examinations. By contrast, a large percentage of *chuanqi* playwrights whose dramas are still existent today were elite men with official titles. The *chuanqi* plays and popular novels together present a broad spectrum of romantic narratives.

⁷ Sometimes the union does not happen in this world, but in an alternative universe such as heaven.

⁸ For examples, see Zhou Zuyan's *Androgyny in Late Ming and Early Qing Literature* (126).

The emphasis on romantic attachment as a defining element of one's life journey in both *caizi jiaren* plays and novels was an effect of the discourse of *qing*, which celebrated individuals' emotions and attachments during the Ming-Qing period. According to Wang Ayling, before the Ming, romantic love was typically presented as something "external" instead of essential for defining characters (*Shenmei* 167). As an important concept about human nature in premodern Chinese schools of thought, *qing* explains and describes the relationship between one's interiority and one's responses to external stimuli. The complexity of *qing* is manifested in its ambiguous connections with two other concepts, *xing* 性 (natural disposition) and *yu* 欲 (desire). Both Anthony Yu and Martin Huang have traced the origin of this ambiguity to the Confucian philosopher Xun Qing 荀卿 (314 BC– 217 BC) in their examinations of the concept of *qing* in Chinese intellectual history. According to Xun's text, the *Xun Zi*, *xing* describes one's inborn nature, and *qing* is its substance.⁹ In this sense, *qing* and *xing* are near synonyms. What complicates the matter is Xun Zi's later inclusion of *yu* along with pleasures, anger, sadness, fear, love, and hatred as the *qiqing* 七情 (seven *qing*) that define human beings (Yu 67). It is *qing*'s close connection to the morally problematic *yu* (desire) that makes *qing* suspicious. During the Han dynasty, cosmologists such as Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179 BC-104 BC) broke up the close tie between *qing* and *xing* and gave *qing* more negative connotations. In Dong's *yin-yang* cosmological system, *qing* is associated with the negative *yin* while *xing* is connected to the more positive *yang*. This implicit value judgment was carried on and made more explicit by the Song period Neo-Confucian thinker Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), whose differentiation of *xing*, *qing*, and *yu* emphasizes the potential danger of "overflowing" *qing* (M. Huang 27).

⁹ For Yu and Huang's comments on Xunzi, see Yu's *Rereading the Stone* (56-85) and Huang's *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China* (24-25).

However, towards the end of the Ming, the suspicion toward *qing* was challenged. The rise of the *xinxue* 心學 (School of Mind) philosophical school led to a growing interest in human subjectivity and interiority. As Martin Huang points out, the ambiguous relationships of *qing* with *xing* and *yu* leave room for reinterpretations and make *qing*'s rectification possible (47). One could emphasize the benevolence of *qing* by stressing its proximity to *xing*; meanwhile, the elaboration on *qing* could be a cover-up for an exploration of the more problematic *yu*—carnal desire. In general, the discourse of *qing*, which emphasized the authenticity and spontaneity of human feelings and desires, set up an alternative value system. It challenged orthodox Neo-Confucian morals that emphasized one's conformity to proper ritual behavior and the ultimate importance of social order and stability.

In the literary field, Tang Xianzu's "throat-hurting" *chuanqi* play *The Peony Pavilion* stands as the epitome of the discourse of *qing*. Its celebration of romantic love influenced the composition of *chuanqi* plays from the late Ming onward. In Tang's play, a poem from *Shijing* 詩經 (The Classic of Poetry, ca. 500 BCE) evokes romantic feelings in the heart of Du Liniang, the teenage daughter of an elite family. Later, when Du steps into her family garden in violation of parental rules, the spring scene stirs Du's emotions even further. After falling asleep in the garden, Du dreams of a romantic and sexual encounter with a young scholar. Unbeknownst to Du, this young man is a real person named Liu Mengmei. Du Liniang pines away because of her longing for her dream lover. Before her death, she paints a self-portrait to commemorate her life and her unrealized romance. This portrait eventually becomes a token of love, which unites Du Liniang, whose passion moves a judge of the Underworld to restore her to life, with the very real Liu Mengmei.

Tang's play promotes individual desires and their authentic expression even when they challenge orthodox Neo-Confucian values. Du Liniang's reading of the poem from *The Classic of Poetry* as an utterance of romantic longing disputes the orthodox interpretation of the poem as teaching the female virtue of non-jealousy. Du's tender feelings and physical desire, presented as a dream in a springtime garden, is a spontaneous and natural response to the sensuality of the season. They contribute to Du Liniang's developing subjectivity, which is later captured by her self-portrait. When Du Liniang reunites with her dream lover with the help of this portrait, her passion has not only transcended the boundary between dream and reality, but also the one between life and death. In his preface to the play, Tang Xianzu points out that the power of Du Liniang's love even defies rationality:

情不知所起，一往而深。生者可以死，死可以生。生而不可與死，死而不可復生者，皆非情之至也。夢中之情，何必非真？天下豈少夢中之人耶？必因薦枕而成親，待掛冠而為密者，皆形骸之論也。(1)

No one knows where love comes from, but once it comes, it goes deep. The living can die from it; the dead can be brought to life. And if the living cannot die from it or if the dead cannot be brought back to life, then it is not the ultimate love. Why should the feelings of love experienced in dream not necessarily be genuine? Are there not quite a few people in this world who are living in a dream? When the relationship between lovers depends on bedding together or intimacy awaits the renunciation of public office, we are on the level of mere flesh. (Owen, *Anthology* 882)

Tang's dramatic presentation of Du Liniang's pursuit of her passion embodies the cult of *qing* in the late Ming. As an allegory of self-awakening and a celebration of the beauty of spontaneous emotions, Du Liniang's saga is not simply a romantic love story. Even so, *The Peony Pavilion* helped to establish romantic love as the main subject of literary elaborations on *qing*.

Tang's celebration of the power of *qing* was groundbreaking in its time, but it is not a complete subversion of Confucian morality. Du Liniang's transgression is confined in a dream and later legitimized by her identity as a ghost. Outside of the dream and back in this world, Du

finds it necessary to follow family obligations and protect her chastity. Towards the end of the Ming, the interest in *qing* developed into an inquiry about the possible reconciliation between the provocative power of *qing* and the ethical values of a Confucian society. By proposing emotions as the foundation of human relations, some late Ming thinkers suggest the potential of *qing* in maintaining moral principles. In his renowned classical story collection *Qingshi leilue* 情史類略 (An Anatomy of *Qing*), which was compiled a couple of decades after the publication of *The Peony Pavilion*, the prolific writer and publisher Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574-1646) stresses that *qing* serves as the foundation for all ethical relationships (*Qingshi* 1). Even though romances between men and women are the focus of Feng's collection, Feng's preface also highlights the bonds between the father and son and between the lord and his subjects as representatives of *qing*. *Qing* becomes the essence of the cardinal relationships defined by Confucianism.¹⁰

This rather ethical turn of the discourse of *qing* in the late Ming paved the way for the reevaluation of *qing* after the fall of Ming, when the celebration of *qing* was recognized as an excuse for self-indulgence in the late Ming. There are two ways of interpreting Feng's effort to accommodate the transgressive *qing* to the Confucian ethics that safeguard social orders and stability, however. This accommodation could be either a sincere effort to utilize the power of *qing* for the propagation of Confucian morality or a strategic move for displaying the wonders of *qing* to more diverse readers.

Recent literary scholarship on the discourse of *qing* emphasizes its deep impact on the development of fiction in late imperial China. Li Wai-ye, in her monograph *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature*, investigates late imperial Chinese

¹⁰ The five cardinal relationships include relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife, and among friends.

writers' reflection on the rather illusory nature of *qing* through their experiment with fictionality. Continuing Li's exploration of the connection between *qing* and fictionality, Anthony Yu's book *Rereading the Stone* explains why the greatest of Chinese novels, *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (The Dream of the Red Chamber, also known as *Shitou ji*, 石頭記, The Story of the Stone, ca. 1760) should better be read as an fictional allegory of emotions and desires instead of as autobiographical fiction.

Published almost at the same time with Yu's *Rereading the Stone*, Martin Huang's monograph *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China* argues that the boom of fiction in late imperial China was directly associated with the fascination with *qing* because fiction's unique narrative capacity allows diverse reflections on the pleasures and dangers of human desires. Also emphasizing how the exploration of *qing* led to heterogeneous voices in fiction, Maram Epstein's study *Competing Discourses: Orthodoxy, Authenticity, and Engendered Meanings in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction* pays particular attention to the construction of gender in late imperial Chinese fiction after the advocates of *qing* promoted the feminine as representing the genuine and authentic. While Li's and Yu's books reevaluate fictionality in the Chinese context and describe *qing* as an essential element in the formation of this concept, Huang's and Epstein's studies respond to the scholarly interest in Bakhtin's theory of the heterogeneous nature of fiction. All of these influential works acknowledge the influence of the *chuanqi* play *The Peony Pavilion*, but their focus is clearly on vernacular novels and short stories.

As another important fictional genre in late imperial China, *chuanqi* plays hardly give the impression of heterogeneity to a modern reader. Some scholars have even promoted the view of the *chuanqi* as overly stable and lacking originality. Scholars such as Cyril Birch and John Hu have both suggested that *chuanqi* plays became "overripe" and "decadent" in the late Ming

(Birch, *Scenes* 247; Hu 75). Hu points out specifically that towards the end of the Ming dynasty, *chuanqi* playwrights “strove for novelty in expression rather than originality in perception” (75). Hu seems to deny the possibility that new expressions can also embody or reflect fresh perceptions. For some scholars, the literary convention of tying up all narrative threads in an uplifting ending—the *datuanyuan* 大團圓 (the grand reunion)—is the exact opposite of “heterogeneity.” In her reflection on the literary genres of late imperial China, Tina Lu describes the *chuanqi* as “the most totalizing form of late Imperial literature,” in contrast with the “open-ended and messy” novel (*Accidental Incest* 21, 265). According to Lu, the neat structure of the *chuanqi* play, highlighted by the grand reunion, symbolizes the stability of an empire. What is ironic is that the late Ming, which saw the popularization of *chuanqi* among literati, was anything but “stable,” and the following Qing did not become politically unified until the 18th century. This irony seems to invite us to take the ostensible “stability” of the *chuanqi* genre with a grain of salt.

The standardization of the *chuanqi* genre, the concentrated interests in *caizi jiaren* romance, and the popularity of *chuanqi* as a writing practice among the educated elite did lead to the rather predictable problem of repetition and cliché. In fact, Western scholarship on *chuanqi* texts has been preoccupied with only a small selection of *chuanqi* plays: notably, *The Peony Pavilion*, *The Palace of Eternal Life* (1688), and *The Peach Blossom Fan* (1699). These three plays, in chronological order, present a neat trajectory of the discourse of *qing* under the influence of ethical concerns: *The Peony Pavilion* presents an epitome of *qing*; *The Palace of Eternal Life*, which concludes with the Tang Emperor Xuanzong’s union with his favorite Consort Yang in Heaven, suggests a nostalgia for *qing* after the Ming-Qing transition; and the

Peach Blossom Fan, in which the protagonists are asked to abandon their personal and private emotions during a time of dynastic trauma, signals a withdrawal from the craze for *qing*.

Compared with English scholarship, Chinese scholarship on *chuanqi* often provides broad surveys of plays, sometimes without much detailed textual analysis. But the consensus is that *chuanqi* was an important literary medium for the promotion of *qing*. As an exception, Wang Ayling's meticulous 2005 study of *chuanqi* plays from the Ming-Qing transition to the mid-Qing, *Wanming Qingchu xiqu zhi shenmei gousi yu qi yishu chengxian* 晚明清初戲曲之審美構思與其藝術呈現 (*The Aesthetics of Late Ming and Early Qing Drama and Its Artistic Representations*), traces the continuous development of the discourse of *qing* in *chuanqi* plays and delineates the trajectory of *qing*'s gradual reconciliation with *daoxue* 道學 (prudishness).¹¹ Wang's study, however, takes playwrights' statements in *paratextual* materials too literally and tends to interpret dramatists' articulation of *qing*'s contributions to ethical orders as serious moral teaching. It sometimes overlooks the contradictions, ironies, and comic ruptures within the main texts.

The *chuanqi* dramas' standardized structure and generally repetitive presentations of the romantic theme readily invited parody, which in turn led to playful and self-reflexive commentaries on *qing* as the premise and promise of the *caizi jiaren* romance. The efforts to rectify *qing* and elaborate on its ethical dimensions often accentuated *qing*'s tension with Confucian morality. Sometimes laughter was the only way to resolve this tension.

Chuanqi and Laughter

¹¹ Patrick Hanan translates *daoxue* to a "puritanical" and "prudish" ideology (146).

Laughter is a crucial ingredient in *chuanqi* plays. In his preface to Shen Jing's *chuanqi* drama *Boxiao ji* 博笑記 (Winning a Laugh), which was contemporary with *The Peony Pavilion*, the late Ming commentator Ling Yiqu 凌義渠 (d.1644) suggests that plays that vent sorrow and anger usually end up doing harm to one's heart and spirit; he also questions whether any authentic and solemn representations of virtuous men in *chuanqi* plays are actually bringing respect to these exemplary figures (Shen Jing, *Shen Jing ji* 695). While challenging the idea of theater as a medium for serious moral teaching, Ling promotes "winning a laugh" as the key function of the *chuanqi* theater.

Like Ling, the dramatist and theater critic Li Yu 李漁 (1611-1680) recognizes the importance of laughter and highlights a practical use of humor for stage performance. In his renowned book on the cultivation of refined taste, *Xianqing ouji* 閑情偶寄 (Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling, 1671), Li Yu compares comic moments in slapstick scenes to energizing "ginseng soup" (*renshen tang* 人參湯) (55). According to Li Yu, laughter can wake up the audience and help them consume a play in its entirety. As Li Yu's own plays demonstrate, it is not only the slapstick scenes that cause laughter. *Chuanqi* plays offer varieties of sophisticated amusement. But Li Yu's statement informs us that comic moments are essential for any *chuanqi* play whose length may be a rather off-putting feature for its audience.

Ling Yiqu and Li Yu had little interest in explaining how laughter is produced, and neither probed into laughter's social functions, such as correction and the suspension of judgment. Ling and Li focused more on promoting laughter as a generic feature of *chuanqi* plays. In the West, theories of laughter tend to concentrate on three concepts: incongruity, superiority, and relief. The theory of incongruity attempts to explain the shared characteristic of laughable objects. In his *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Henri Bergson describes the sources of

laughter as the “mechanical inelasticity” or rigidity of one’s behavior and thoughts and the disharmony between people and their social environments (10). According to Bergson, laughter is “a sort of social gesture” that corrects manifestations of incongruity (20). The superiority theory centers on the power residing in the one who laughs and the social hierarchy that laughter helps to create. While the theory of superiority examines the social impact of laughter, the relief theory, promoted by Freud, turns our attention to the psychological effect of laughter as a “free discharge” of “psychical energy” (180). Critical theories on laughter aim to describe a shared formula for comic situations and encourage us to explore the deeper cultural and social meanings of laughter, beyond the surface of mere entertainment. But these generalized theories often neglect the historical specificity of laughter and fall short in demonstrating the richness of the articulation of amusement in particular genres.¹² For example, these critical theories cannot inform us what jokes *chuanqi* playwrights like to make in their dramas or explain how they make these jokes work.

In *Scenes for Mandarins*, a collection of excerpts from five *chuanqi* plays, the translator Cyril Birch uses the term “the turn toward the comic” when describing the general trend of *chuanqi* plays towards the Ming-Qing transition (*Scenes* 19). Unfortunately, he leaves the term undefined. Birch points out that towards the end of the Ming dynasty, the *chuanqi* playwrights were producing highly stylized romantic comedies; he seems to agree with John Hu’s view that this stylistic perfection was a sign of “overripeness” or even “decadence” in the development of *chuanqi* (John Hu 247). In this regard, “the comic turn” seems to refer to the popularity of romantic comedies from the late Ming on. Meanwhile, Birch’s choice of scenes highlights witty

¹² A good example of scholarship that emphasizes the importance of historical context and genre influences is Mary Beard’s book *Laughter in Ancient Rome: on Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up*. Beard investigates what made the Romans laugh and how they laughed. It shows the importance of historicizing laughter and also examines how laughter functions in different literary genres.

and humorous episodes from *chuanqi* plays and underlines the smart evocations of laughter. The question of whether this laughter elevates or downplays the *qing* ideal that a romantic comedy is supposed to convey remains unexplored in Birch's work.

In his study of Li Yu's *chuanqi* plays, Eric Henry comments on the application of the term "comedy" or "comic" to Chinese dramas and examines the critical depth of Li Yu's creation of amusement. Before presenting his analyses of Li Yu's plays, Henry lists three definitions of comedy in the English context.¹³ Two of them, which refer to the conventional plot structure in romantic comedies and jocular contents respectively, match Birch's emphases in his collection of translations. Henry's third definition of comedy as a literary outlook plays a central role in his study of Li Yu. According to Henry, comedy of the first two definitions is abundant in traditional Chinese drama. However, Henry defines one specific comic literary outlook, which deflates our impulse to "rise above our condition" and "implicitly advises us never to forget our condition," as Li Yu's unique contribution (4).

Qing and its Comic Renditions: Incongruities and Contradictions

While Henry's study touches upon the relation between amusement as a dramatic effect and as a thematic concern of Li Yu's *chuanqi* plays, its specific focus prevents it from giving a satisfying account of Li Yu's works as part of the development of the *chuanqi* play. Well before Li Yu's time, *The Peony Pavilion*, for example, already includes elements that remind the reader of how difficult it is to rise above the mundane and ordinary—what Henry would recognize as a "comic outlook." Besides such low-status characters as the buffoonish Sister Stone and the naughty maid Spring Fragrance, whose comic performances help to highlight the delicate nature

¹³ See the chapter "The Medium: Drama, Story, and Comedy" in Henry's book *Chinese Amusement: the Lively Plays of Li Yu* (1-18).

of Du Liniang's subjectivity, the male protagonist Liu Mengmei also evokes hearty laughter from time to time.

One of the late Ming readers of *The Peony Pavilion*, Zheng Yuanxun 鄭元勳 (1604-1645), joked about his dissatisfaction with Liu: “余嘗恨柳夢梅氣酸性木，大非麗娘敵手，又不能消受春香侍兒，不合判入花叢誘簿” (“I used to regret that Liu Mengmei's spirit is poor and dumb, he is far from a match for Liniang; nor does he have the ability to take advantage of Spring Fragrance. He is unworthy of a position in the record of great seducers of beauties”) (qtd. in Wang, *Shenmei* 85). Zheng's comment on Liu Mengmei's simplicity of wit as a character works as an indirect promotion of himself as the one who truly deserves beauties' appreciation. But his criticism of Liu is not groundless. Liu's obtuseness is mainly manifested at the moment when Liu fails to recognize Du Liniang's ghost when she shows up at his doorstep. Liu, who has been worshiping Du's self-portrait diligently, does not even recognize Du right in front of him, and he misidentifies Du as a girl who has lost her way. His misrecognition of Du Liniang illustrates the superficiality of romantic infatuation.

The male protagonists in romantic *chuanqi* plays in fact are often less developed than their female counterparts. Zheng Yuanxun's critique of Liu Mengmei's “dumbness” can apply to many of Liu's successors. Maram Epstein has pointed out the discourse of *qing* promoted the feminine as “emblematic of this representation of the ‘authentic’” (*Competing* 62). The dramatists' elaborate construction of female subjectivity often contributes to the impression that male characters are less complex and developed. The young *caizi* in *chuanqi* plays often follow the clichéd narrative of worldly success. Their achievements in both the romantic and political realms represent male literati's mundane desires. The disparity between the mundane desires conveyed by male protagonists and the lofty ideals usually represented by their better-developed

female counterparts provokes laughter and problematizes the literati's self-imagination, which has conjured up the *caizi jiaren* motif in the first place. The comic moments in *chuanqi* plays often alert us to the fine line between self-gratification and self-parody among literati.

Liu Mengmei's "dumbness" may be forgivable if we consider his subsequent devotion to Du Liniang. After all, this young man does not hesitate to violate the law against opening tombs after Du Liniang's ghost tells him to dig up her dead body. In later romantic *chuanqi* plays, the male protagonist's passion is often directed toward more than one target.¹⁴ The abundance of *qing*, used by Pipa Qian to define her emotional and sexual needs, is often utilized to explain the male protagonist's insatiable appetite for love. *Chuanqi* playwrights elaborated on the incongruous definitions of passion as concentrated love and as an overflowing desire to elicit laughter.

After *The Peony Pavilion*, such plot elements as the male protagonists' worship of their lovers' portraits became familiar staples of the genre. In such scenes the male protagonists' predictable and exaggerated expression of longing becomes curious, if not comic. The repeated use of such plot elements, along with such comic devices as coincidence and mistaken identities, highlights the artificiality of the written text and contradicts the spontaneity of *qing* that the text is supposed to convey. The deliberate display of such contradictions also creates amusement.

The seemingly "stable" *chuanqi* actually embodies many incongruities and contradictions. The present study picks up where Henry's investigation of the comic outlook leaves off. It identifies parodies of the discourse of *qing*, which had promised transcendence from the mundane world and offered fantasies of self-gratification for the literati, as a main source of amusement in late Ming and early Qing romantic *chuanqi* plays. My study questions whether

¹⁴ According to Wang Yong'en's research, this presentation of multiple love interests became increasingly popular towards the end of the Ming and early Qing. See *Ming Qing caizi jiaren ju yanjiu* 明清才子佳人劇研究 (266).

chuanqi dramatists' attempts to rectify *qing* and reconcile the self-oriented *qing* with moral orthodoxy constitute sincere intellectual efforts or just literary games. Unlike Henry, whose study pays little attention to how Li Yu manipulates the *chuanqi* genre to express ironic views, I contend that the stylistic maturity of the *chuanqi* genre contributed to the formulation of comic outlooks. My dissertation therefore takes into consideration the importance of genre, which regulates not only literary production but also reception. It demonstrates how the comic breaks the stable surface of the genre and helps us decode the genre's "overripe" and "decadent" image. I argue that this comic outlook presents an increasing self-reflexivity in drama composition. This self-reflexivity suggests cultural awareness of the tension between the artificial conventions of the dramatic genre and the emotional spontaneity the genre was expected to convey. It also indicates an anxiety of influence from Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion*, which established *qing* as a main theme of *chuanqi* plays and represented *qing* in a way that subsequent dramatists found easy to imitate but difficult to surpass. My study, therefore, considers the comic outlook as both a thematic and stylistic matter.

Chapter Outline

Tang Xianzu and Li Yu, these two most well-studied *chuanqi* playwrights, seem to stand for the "romantic" and the "comic" peaks of *chuanqi* composition respectively. My dissertation displays how *chuanqi* playwrights after Tang Xianzu developed the comic potential embodied in Tang's masterpiece *The Peony Pavilion*. While acknowledging the power and influence of Li Yu's comedies, I examine the diverse comedic possibilities explored by other playwrights and review their playful commentaries on the conventions of romance in order to suggest that we should not read Li Yu's "inventions" as an isolated case in literary history. Besides Li Yu, my

dissertation examines masterpieces by three other playwrights, Wu Bing 吳炳 (1595-1648), Ruan Dacheng 阮大鍼 (1587-1646), and Wang Yun 王筠 (1749-1819). The three male *chuanqi* playwrights included in this study, Wu Bing, Ruan Dacheng and Li Yu, represented the glorious days of *chuanqi* composition from the late Ming to the early Qing. Writing in the mid-Qing, Wang Yun, one of the very few female playwrights in late imperial China, turned the male tradition of *chuanqi* composition around and adopted a *caizi jiaren* narrative for an exploration of women's desires.

The first chapter introduces some of the key concepts in this study: comic transformation and the tension between the romantic and the comedic. Wu Bing's 吳炳 (1595-1648) play *Liaodu geng* 療妒羹 (The Remedy for Jealousy, ca. 1633) responds to contemporary cultural fascination with the tragic legend of Xiaoqing by turning this legend into a comedy. Instead of another melancholic story about Xiaoqing, *The Remedy for Jealousy* concludes with Xiaoqing's happy remarriage to a scholar-official, Yang Qi, with the help of Yang's own wife, Madam Yan. Its comic episodes complicate the audience's view of the Xiaoqing legend through laughter.

The Remedy for Jealousy both highlights and reflects on happy endings and lightheartedness as generic conventions of the *caizi jiaren chuanqi* play. My chapter argues that the merit of Wu Bing's comedy lies in its revaluation of *qing*. By foregrounding the theme of jealousy, Wu Bing problematizes the attachment to the self that is central to Xiaoqing's story and the discourse of *qing*. It questions the transcendent power of *qing*, underlines the burden of the self, and introduces an ironic view of the different standards of moral judgment imposed on different genders in terms of their pursuits of desire. By introducing a comic view on the romantic, Wu Bing questions whether the reconciliation between the Confucian ethics and the

romantic *qing* is possible. This first chapter explains Wu Bing's parody of *qing*, which was a self-gratifying discourse for the male literati reader.

The second chapter turns to Ruan Dacheng's *Yanzi jian* (The Swallow's Letter, 1642), which pushes the self-gratifying effect of the *caizi jiaren chuanqi* drama to a new level. In the play, the male protagonist Huo Duliang wins two official titles and enjoys a double wedding with a courtesan and an elite maiden. From the late Ming on, generations of critics have seen Huo Duliang as Ruan Dacheng's self-projection and used *The Swallow's Letter* as an illustration of the dramatist's own ambitions and vanity. Though Ruan's drama enjoyed popularity among literati during the Ming-Qing transition, its reception has been complicated by Ruan's unsavory legacy as a treacherous official of the Ming court ever since.

This chapter first demonstrates how the political reading of *The Swallow's Letter* as a sign of political and cultural decadence finds its textual support in the drama. It then reevaluates this reading by underlining the importance of the comic elements in the drama. Ruan's repeated uses of comic devices such as misidentification not only adds entertainment value to his play, but also trivializes Huo's worldly successes as the result of coincidences and mistakes. Ruan highlights his literary genius by exploring the stylistic potential of the discourse of *qing*. But his experiment with a complex plot also brings the sublime discourse of *qing* down to an imperfect world of misunderstanding and misidentification. Furthermore, this chapter also examines Ruan's parody of *The Peony Pavilion* and his curious pairing of Huo's romantic story with a narrative of crime. Ruan's play comments on *qing* as a projection of self-love and an excuse for sexual acquisition.

The third chapter turns to the complex relationships between talent, *qing* and gender in Li Yu's play *Yi zhong yuan* 意中緣 (Ideal Love Matches, 1655). The play features four historical

figures, including two women artists, Yang Yunyou 楊雲友 (?-ca.1630) and Lin Tiansu 林天素 (ca.1620 – ca.1642). The two women take part in the business of art forgery in a corrupt market that hardly values talent. Ironically, their forged paintings pave the way for their marriages with two celebrity literati—Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636) and Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558-1639) as Dong and Chen make these women their “concubine ghostpainters.” A story about the discovery of female talent, therefore, turns into a narrative of the appropriation of women’s artistic expression. This chapter explores Li Yu’s playful engagement with the late Ming discourse of *qing* that elevated women’s intellectual purity and emotional authenticity.

On the surface, Li Yu’s play is similar to Wu Bing’s *The Remedy for Jealousy* in terms of its reversal of women’s tragic lives. But instead of a celebration of the perfect *caizi-jiaren* union, the play is a lighthearted exposé of the male literati’s self-interested “promotion” of women’s talent. The chapter also refers to the female artist Huang Yuanjie’s commentary on Li Yu’s play, which questions Li Yu’s adaptation of Yang Yunyou and Lin Tiansu’s life stories. Huang’s comments are valuable not only because of the rarity of drama commentaries composed by women in late imperial China; they also provide us with a new perspective on Li Yu’s comic writings. At the same time that Huang praises Li Yu’s artistic genius in inverting the two historical female figures’ fates, she also leads the reader to question whether this inversion should be read as authorizing poetic justice for talented females.

The fourth chapter introduces a female dramatist’s comic rendition of the *caizi jiaren* narrative in her play that explores female desires. In this chapter, I turn to Wang Yun’s *chuanqi* play *Fanhua meng* 繁華夢 (A Dream of Glory, 1778). Wang’s play represents the female protagonist Miss Wang’s joy after she dreams of being changed to a male. In contrast to the plays discussed in the first three chapters, *A Dream of Glory* does not conclude with a grand

reunion. In fact, the play ends with Miss Wang waking up from her dream of happy marriages, initially feeling lost, and eventually bursting into loud laughter. While generations of readers have emphasized the ending of the play as a lament over a failed dream of worldly ambitions, my reading underlines the importance of comic elements in the play.

This chapter demonstrates how the play makes fun of the protagonist's journey of worldly successes and parodies the *caizi jiaren* tradition, especially that tradition's representation of male protagonists' romantic desires. The comic elements not only confirm the female playwright's ability to entertain her reader and audience; they also suggest the self-reflexivity of this fantasy of glory. In this chapter, I will also read Wang Yun's play alongside remarks by contemporary male literati readers, especially commentaries provided by Wang's own father. I examine these male readers' manipulation of the provocative power created by Wang Yun's humor.

This dissertation probes into the seemingly stable and uniform surface of the romantic *chuanqi* drama to examine this genre's hidden comic ruptures. It highlights *chuanqi* dramatists' critical reflections on the genre's close tie to the intellectual discourses of their time and their endeavor to articulate the incongruities and contradictions embodied in the promotion of *qing*. Their taste for the comic exposes this discourse on *qing*, which legitimized romantic desire and elevated individual subjectivity, as itself an artificial literary game played under the rule of self-interest.

Chapter One

The Burden of Selfish Desires:

Wu Bing's Comic Adaptation of the Legend of Xiaoqing

1.1 Introduction

Liaodu geng 療妒羹 (The Remedy for Jealousy) was written about a decade before the fall of the Ming in 1644. Its author Wu Bing 吳炳 (1595-1648), who obtained the highest degree of the imperial examinations, *jinshi* 進士 (presented scholar), in 1619, had served as the Education Commissioner of Jiangxi Province during the Chongzhen reign. After the Qing conquest of the Ming, Wu joined the court of the Southern Ming as a loyalist. According to the official history of the Ming, Wu Bing starved himself to death after being captured by the Qing forces. However, this narrative has been contested ever since the early Qing. Whether Wu died as loyalist after the Qing conquest or betrayed the Ming in the end remains a mystery.¹ Interestingly, Wu Bing's curious death and his questionable loyalty to the Ming have not challenged his status as a major *chuanqi* dramatist from the late Ming. Five of his *chuanqi* plays survive. All of these five plays are romantic comedies, and the majority of them allude to the *chuanqi* masterpiece *The Peony Pavilion*.

Wu's interest in exploring romantic sentiments and the lyrical sensibility of his plays contribute to the common understanding of Wu as an important successor of Tang Xianzu in the tradition of *chuanqi* composition. In *Huazhong ren* 畫中人 (The Lady in the Portrait), Wu elaborates and expands the famous scene from *The Peony Pavilion* in which the male protagonist

¹ Some historical writings suggest that Wu Bing might have surrendered to the Qing and later died of guilt or a sudden attack of dysentery. Mao Haixing's MA thesis "*Wu Bing Liaodu geng chuanqi yanjiu*" 吳炳療妒羹研究 gives a summary of different speculations concerning Wu Bing's death (8-14).

Liu Mengmei tries to call the maiden in the painting, Du Liniang, to life. In *Qingyou ji* 情郵記 (Romance at the Posthouse), Wu responds to Tang Xianzu's renowned statement on the transcendent power of *qing* by portraying *qing* as a mobilizing force in this mundane world.² And it is no coincidence that Wu Bing uses this particular flower, the tree peony, as a symbol for authentic talent in his celebrated satirical comedy *Lü mudan* 綠牡丹 (The Green Peony).

Among Wu Bing's plays, *The Remedy for Jealousy* presents the most intriguing intertextuality with the romantic masterpiece *The Peony Pavilion* as Wu utilizes his comic vision in his exploration of *qing*. This play features the legend of Xiaoqing—the epitome of *qing* 情 in the eyes of the late Ming literati.³ For highly cultured and educated readers of Wu Bing's play in the seventeenth century, Xiaoqing's story would have been familiar, because numerous prose narratives and poems were written on Xiaoqing around that time. Even though these writings provide various versions of Xiaoqing's story, they do share a common core: Xiaoqing is a young and talented beauty who has been cruelly persecuted by the jealous first wife of her husband. Since she is excluded from any marital bliss, Xiaoqing develops the habit of talking to her own reflection in the water. As a passionate reader of Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion*, Xiaoqing commemorates her strong identification with Du Liniang by obtaining an authentic portrait of herself before her lonely death at a very young age.⁴ Ellen Widmer contextualizes this fascination with Xiaoqing within the cultural and political environment of the late Ming.

Widmer suggests that the alienation of male intellectuals, the booming of women's literature,

² Wu Bing's own remark on *Romance at the Posthouse* adopts Tang Xianzu's renowned definition of *qing* in his preface to *The Peony Pavilion*. While Tang Xianzu praises *qing* for its power to transcend life and death, Wu Bing further suggests that *qing* can travel any physical distance (55).

³ In fact, Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582-1664) and Liu Rushi 柳如是 (1618-1664), two late Ming-early Qing poets and scholars, believed that Xiaoqing was fictional. They pointed out that Xiaoqing's name was a pun on the character "*qing*." See *The Red Brush* (Idema and Grant 514).

⁴ For various versions of Xiaoqing's legend, see Ellen Widmer's article "Xiaoqing's Literary Legacy and the Place of Women Writers in the Seventeenth Century" (114-132).

and the popularity of *The Peony Pavilion* in the late Ming all contributed to the elite's fascination with Xiaoqing's legend in the seventeenth century and beyond ("Xiaoqing" 122-128). She points out that, as a story of an underappreciated talent, Xiaoqing's legend may have appealed to male intellectuals who felt frustrated in their pursuit of official careers (Widmer, "Xiaoqing" 123). As a story of a woman poet whose poetic composition brings her posthumous fame, Xiaoqing's legend suggests to its female readers the possibility of achieving literary recognition (Widmer, "Xiaoqing" 133).

While gender might have brought differences to the construction and consumption of Xiaoqing's life story, the intertextual and historical connections between her story and *The Peony Pavilion* also add complexity to the cultural connotations of Xiaoqing's legend. *The Peony Pavilion* met with wide acclaim after its publication in 1598. As the play revolves around the female protagonist Du Liniang's awakening to her power as a desiring subject, it became a sensation among elite women readers. There were reported cases of female readers dying of their strong identification with Du Liniang. In fact, scholars sometimes cite Xiaoqing as an example of a female fan of *The Peony Pavilion* in the late Ming. One of Xiaoqing's poems, included in most biographical accounts, is her commentary on Tang Xianzu's drama :

冷雨幽窗不可聽，
挑燈閒看牡丹亭。
人間亦有癡於我，
豈獨傷心是小青。(qtd. in B.Wu 283)

Cold rain outside the dark window—such a mournful sound!
I trim the lamp and leisurely read *The Peony Pavilion*.
In this world there are people even more foolish than I:
Xiaoqing is clearly not the only one with a broken heart. (Idema & Grant 510)

In this poem, Xiaoqing does not only recognize Du Liniang's "foolish passion," but also considers herself a counterpart to Du. Xiaoqing's strong empathy for Du Liniang and her self-

pity mingle into one. Even though the Chinese poetic tradition embodies a strong autobiographical urge, it is rather rare that the poet addresses himself or herself in poems. This poem invites one to wonder about its authenticity and question Xiaoqing's historicity. But it is fair to say that the questionable authenticity of Xiaoqing's legend did not prevent readers from recognizing Xiaoqing as an inheritor of Du Liniang's passionate spirit.

By alluding to Xiaoqing's reading experience of *The Peony Pavilion*, writings on Xiaoqing are simultaneously responses to this famous *chuanqi* play on *qing*. For any *chuanqi* writer, the adaptation of Xiaoqing's story, as a sophisticated textual game that weaves together threads of cultural discourses and pieces of popular literary works, can be an alluring and challenging job. In Wu Bing's play, the jealous wife, Miao, is played by a *chou* 丑 (clown). At the age of fifty, she has not yet produced any children with her husband Chu Dalang. Under the pressure of her maternal uncle, she finally agrees to seek a concubine for her husband. But when the beautiful and talented Xiaoqing comes to her household as the concubine, Miao prohibits any physical contact between Xiaoqing and her husband and repeatedly insults and abuses Xiaoqing. At the same time, Miao's younger cousin Madam Yan is searching for a girl who matches her husband's high standard for a concubine. Upon seeing Xiaoqing and witnessing her misfortune, Yan decides to rescue Xiaoqing from Miao's family and unite her husband, Yang Qi, with Xiaoqing. Wu Bing's *The Remedy for Jealousy* concludes with Xiaoqing's successful second marriage to the literatus official Yang Qi through Madam Yan's help.

The Remedy for Jealousy transforms Xiaoqing's tragic legend into a comedy. Besides the happy ending of Xiaoqing's romance, comic episodes featuring the jealous wife's absurd activities embellish this comedy. One may explain Wu's transformation of Xiaoqing's legend as an inevitable product of the structural conventions of *chuanqi*, since most *chuanqi* dramas

conclude with uplifting grand reunions and present comic intervals between more lyrical scenes. But one still has to question why Wu chose the genre of *chuanqi* to adapt Xiaoqing's story in the first place. I agree with Widmer's point that Wu takes the adaptation of the narrative about Xiaoqing as "an opportunity to craft comedy" ("Xiaoqing" 119). But given that Xiaoqing's tragedy was so deeply embedded in the 17th-century literati's cultural imagination, the question of how this comic transformation of Xiaoqing's legend became possible demands scrutiny. Furthermore, how does this comedy alter our reading of Xiaoqing's story and *The Peony Pavilion*? How does this alternation comment on the discourse of *qing*?

I argue against the view of Wu's drama as a simplistic promotion of polygamy and as a reflection of the dramatist's shallow understanding of *qing*.⁵ I also challenge the interpretation of Wu's play as his offer of fictional justice to a tragic cultural icon.⁶ I will demonstrate instead that the critical insight and artistic genius of this play lie in its tension between the comedic and the romantic. In part one and part two, I examine the clown character, the jealous wife Miao, and one of the female leads, Xiaoqing. I explain how Wu Bing alludes to the connection between female jealousy and *qing* and draws the reader's attention to the problematic obsession with the self. In part three, I analyze Madam Yan's strategy in marrying Xiaoqing to her husband, especially her comic adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion* before revealing to her husband that Xiaoqing is available. This metatheatrical performance of *The Peony Pavilion* not only questions the transcendent power of *qing* but also puts Madam Yan's "selflessness" under scrutiny. Besides *The Peony Pavilion*, Wu's play also alludes to the early Ming play *Pipa ji* 琵琶

⁵ For expressions of this view, see scholarly works such as Wang Yong'en's *Ming Qing caizi jiaren ju yanjiu* 明清才子佳人劇研究, which regard Wu's comic transformation of Xiaoqing's story as a structural flaw and a revelation of Wu's artistic and philosophical inferiority to dramatists like Tang Xianzu (313).

⁶ See Guo Yingde's 郭英德 comment on *The Remedy for Jealousy* in his monograph *Ming Qing chuanqi shi* 明清傳奇史 and Yenna Wu's reflection on this play in *The Chinese Virago* (Guo 332; Wu 133).

琵琶記 (The Lute). In part three, I also explore how the references to two very distinctive plays work together in *The Remedy for Jealousy*. I conclude that by transforming Xiaoqing's tragic story to a comedy, *The Remedy for Jealousy* encourages a reevaluation of *qing* and highlights the moral burden of selfish desire.

1.2 The Comic Foil—Female Jealousy and *Qing*

In the quasi-historical accounts of Xiaoqing's life, the first wife's jealousy simply features as a side story that explains Xiaoqing's tragedy and sets off her sublimity as a talented beauty. *The Remedy for Jealousy*, however, elaborates on the first wife's jealousy in several scenes and makes her a prominent comic figure in the play. The jealous wife in Wu's play acts as a standard female clown whose excessive behavior amuses the audience with its absurdity. But Wu Bing's rendition of the jealous first wife both complements and challenges the contemporary construction of Xiaoqing as the epitome of *qing*.

Wu Bing's play caters to the late Ming interest in comic depictions of the shrew figure. The seventeenth century witnessed the rise of interest in representations of female jealousy. This fascination with jealous women went hand in hand with the idealization of women's "natural" expressions of emotions.⁷ The late Ming compilers of anecdotes and jokes often categorized jealousy as a distinctly feminine trait. Xie Zhaozhe 謝肇淛 (1567-1624), the compiler of the *biji* collection *Wu zazu* 五雜俎 (Five-part Miscellany), for example, regards jealousy as the top feature of female nature, which is overall terrible:

⁷ See Zhong Xing's 鍾惺 (1574-1624) preface to *Mingyuan shigui* 名媛詩歸 (Selections of Poems by Famous Ladies, ca. 1620). Zhong praises women's poetry for their "purity" and "naturalness." Women's literary expression was considered "uncorrupted" because they could not participate in imperial examinations or enter officialdom. For an English translation of Zhong Xing's preface and comments on its significance, see *The Red Brush* (Idema and Grant 350-352).

凡婦人女子之性，無一佳者，妒也，吝也，拗也，懶也，拙也，愚也，酷也，易怒也，多疑也，輕信也，瑣屑也，忌諱也，好鬼也，溺愛也，而其中妒為最甚。” (7498)

Among women's characteristics, none is good: jealousy, stinginess, stubbornness, laziness, clumsiness, stupidity, cruelty, inclination to anger, suspicion, credulousness, attachment to trivia, bafflement with taboos, belief in ghosts, and indulgence. Among these, jealousy is the most severe.

Along with this line of thinking, the renowned writer and publisher Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574-1646) in his *Gujin tan'gai* 古今譚概 (Survey of Talk Old and New), an anthology of entertaining historical anecdotes, devotes an entire section, *Guijie* 閨誡 (Warnings for the Boudoir), to stories about jealous women. This is the only section exclusively about women, and it is among the few sections where the compiler's judgment is apparent. The word *jie* 誡 (warning) in the title of this section makes it clear that the compiler regards jealous wives' obsessive behavior as a target for ridicule and derision.

In her monograph *The Chinese Virago*, Yenna Wu identifies the late Ming fascination with female jealousy as a preoccupation with deviant behavior (49). One of the cultural factors that contributed to this rising interest was the emphasis on *qing* (Y. Wu 49). According to Wu, this emphasis not only led to more explorations of romantic relationships but also gave rise to more investigations of human idiosyncrasies as expressions and manifestations of extreme emotions (49). The categorization and evaluation of human eccentricities and idiosyncrasies, however, were complex cultural undertakings in the late Ming. As a gendered emotion, jealousy was not thought to involve the same level of cultural ambiguity attributed to the male literati's obsessions, such as fascinations with books, paintings or epigraphs. Even though the discourse of *qing* legitimized these obsessions with artifacts as authentic expressions of individual desires

and passions, it rarely brought positive connotations to female jealousy.⁸ As modern readers, we may explain the general negativity towards female jealousy as a result of male chauvinist anxieties. But we cannot expect the late Ming literati to have such critical self-awareness. The question of how this community understood the connections and differences between jealousy and the idealized *qing* still needs to be unraveled.

For late Ming writers, *qing* and jealousy were not mutually exclusive matters. Some distinguished jealousy because of *qing* from jealousy in the absence of *qing*. In *Xu Jin Ping Mei* 續金瓶梅 (*The Sequel to Jin Ping Mei*), Ding Yaokang 丁耀亢 (1599-1669), Wu Bing's contemporary, categorizes three types of female jealousy: amorous jealousy (*qingdu* 情妒), lustful jealousy (*sedu* 色妒), and ferocious jealousy (*handu* 悍妒). The first type of jealousy reflects a deeply affectionate relationship.⁹ The second type of jealousy is a manifestation of the wife's strong sexual appetite. If the first two types of jealousy are identified by their causes, love and sexual appetite respectively, the third type, "ferocious jealousy," focuses on the *expression* of emotions. And it is this third type of jealousy that gets fuller elaboration.

Ferocious jealousy is manifested in physical and verbal violence. According to Ding, it is a kind of "aggressive nature" (*xiongxing* 凶性) that some women are born with:

第三是惡妒，生來一種凶性，一副利嘴，沒事的防籬察壁，罵兒打女，摔匙敦碗，指著桑樹罵槐樹，炒個不住搜尋丈夫，不許他睜一睜眼看看婦人。還有終身無子，不許娶妾，縱然在外娶妾，有了子女的，還百計捉回，害其性茗，或是故意替丈夫娶來，以博賢名，仍舊打死，以致丈夫氣憤，謂之凶妒。(331)

⁸ As Judith Zeitlin states, on the one hand, obsession was idealized in late Ming culture as a vehicle for self-expression; on the other hand, the foolishness and single-mindedness involved in obsessive behavior were also "irresistible target[s] for social satire" (*Historian* 90). The literati's attitude towards these obsessions with cultural artifacts was therefore quite complex. It was not all negative.

⁹ According to the narrator in *The Sequel to Jin Ping Mei*, Zhuo Wenjun's 卓文君 poem "Baitou yin" 白頭吟 and Cong Niang's 蔥娘 poem "Huiwen jin" 回文錦 are both products of such amorous emotions (331). These two women's literary texts, which had become canonical works long before the late Ming, helped to construct the cultural imagination of romantic relationships based on mutual appreciation of emotional sensibility and literary talent.

The third type is ferocious jealousy. Women with ferocious jealousy are born with a violent nature and a sharp tongue. Without reason, they guard fences, spy on neighbors, scold their sons and beat their daughters, throw spoons, break bowls, point fingers at one and accuse another. They fuss about searching their husbands, forbid them to even glance at other women. Even if they do not produce children, they do not allow their husbands to take concubines. If their husbands have kids outside of their households, they would try their best to capture the kids and murder them. Or, they make false promises that they will find their husbands concubines only to win better reputation for themselves. They will beat these concubines to death eventually and cause outrage on their husbands' side. This is "ferocious jealousy."

By defining ferocious jealousy as a category distinct from amorous jealousy (*qingdu* 情妒), Ding Yaokang suggests that jealousy embodied in violence has nothing to do with refined *qing*.

In Wu Bing's *The Remedy for Jealousy*, the first wife of Xiaoqing's husband, Miao, certainly qualifies as a ferocious wife. In fact, Wu Bing's portrayal of this jealous first wife matches perfectly with Ding Yaokang's description of ferocious jealousy. This close correspondence between Wu Bing's characterization of Miao and Ding Yaokang's definition of ferocious jealousy tells us how much the cultural imagination of female jealousy had already been conventionalized. In *The Remedy for Jealousy*, Miao purchases Xiaoqing for her husband in her attempt to rescue her reputation inside and outside of her household. According to *The Great Ming Code*, Miao, who is heirless at the age of fifty, can be driven out of her husband's household without stirring up any controversy on the basis of her jealous rage.¹⁰ But her husband no longer has the courage to even bring up the issue after living with her physical and verbal abuse for years. As the play develops, we discover that Miao's decision to bring Xiaoqing into her family is a plot with dire consequences. In fact, in imitation of *The Great Ming Code*, Miao creates her own household legal code that forbids and punishes any intimacy between her husband and Xiaoqing:

¹⁰ See Jiang Yonglin's translation of *The Great Ming Code* (88).

陳嫗聽著，凡司獄典卒將其監罪犯如法枷紐，牢固關防，若遇盜賊生發，即時奏聞...凡門應閉而誤不下鎖，杖六十，非時擅開閉者，杖七十，提備不設，為賊所掩襲者，杖八十... (B. Wu 271)

Chen, listen! All prison wards should shackle criminals and strengthen the security systems according to the laws. In case of criminal activities, they should report them immediately. ... Closing the door without locking it, sixty blows with the heavy rod; opening the door at unpermitted time, seventy blows with the heavy rod, imperfect safeguard, resulting in the criminals' ambush, eighty blows of the heavy rod. ...

Miao's "laws" read like a parody of the *The Great Ming Code*, as they borrow the professional language of *The Great Ming Code* only to subvert its legal support for the patriarchal society.

Miao's meticulous plan for impeding the consummation of marriage between her husband and Xiaoqing demonstrates the extremity of her jealousy. Unlike Ding Yaokang, who only identifies the "symptoms" of ferocious jealousy, Wu Bing explores the psychology behind Miao's jealousy. In her conversation with Madam Yan, who tries to convince Miao of the importance of getting a concubine for the continuation of the family line, Miao expresses her concern:

夫人你後生家不知事體，我們若一放倒架子，祇與那人相好，再不理我了，不是自家肚裏養出來的，一世不親，反要妝大記仇，不如大家不生落得乾淨。(B.Wu 276)

Madam, you are still too young to understand this matter. If we even once let down our guard against our husbands, they will just cozy up to the concubines. My husband will ignore me completely. And if the children are not the products of my own belly, they will never be close to me. The concubines will capitalize on their sons and seek revenge. It's better that neither the concubines nor we produce any offspring.

Miao's cautious notes for Madam Yan reveal the sense of vulnerability that has been driving her jealous behavior. For a modern reader, Miao's worries about her ownership of her husband's affection and her status in the family may seem more reasonable than Yan's selfless virtue. But Wu Bing's exploration of Miao's psychology fully reveals Miao's selfish concerns. His comic depiction of Miao's strategies to prevent the husband from approaching Xiaoqing underlines the absurdity of Miao's desire.

Miao's determination is a manifestation of self-love and insecurity rather than intense care for her husband. In his response to a friend's joke about jealous wives' contributions to their husbands' abstinence and wellbeing in advanced age, Xie Zhaozhe elaborates on his understanding of jealousy:

君知人之愛六畜者乎？日則哺之，夜則防護柵欄，惟恐豺狸盜爾啖之，此豈真愛其命哉？慾充己口腹耳。為畜者，但知人之愛己，而不知人之自為也。妒婦得無似之乎？(7498)

Do you understand people's care for the six domestic animals? They feed the animals in the morning and fence them at night to protect them, in fear that jackals and leopard cats might steal these animals and eat them up. Do these people really cherish these animals' lives? They only raise these animals to satisfy their appetite. These animals think that their human owners care about them, they don't understand these people are doing it for themselves. Don't jealous wives resemble these people?

Xie argues against the view that jealousy is a reflection of love and explains jealousy as a manifestation of self-concerns. By highlighting the component of female jealousy in Xiaoqing's legend, Wu Bing draws our attention to individual character's selfish desires.¹¹

As Ding Yaokang's classification of jealousy in *Xu Jin Ping Mei* and Xie Zhaozhe's comments on jealousy suggest, the boundary between *qing* and jealousy did not seem clear-cut for late Ming literati. At the core of the critique against female jealousy is a warning against self-interest. It is within such cultural contexts that Wu Bing's choice to underline the importance of the theme of jealousy in an adaptation of Xiaoqing's story becomes curious. Wu's elaboration on the comic figure of the ferocious wife contributes to the artistry of his comedy, as

¹¹ Dramatic exploration of the theme of jealousy oftentimes highlights the tension between selfish interest and public welfare. The play *Shicu ji* 十醋記 (Ten Acts of Jealousy) by Fan Xizhe 范希哲 (active in the early Qing) dramatizes how the wife Madam Shi, motivated by her selfish concerns, helps her husband survive and eventually suppress the An Lushan Rebellion. The play makes a twist of the comic convention by featuring jealousy as something that produces positive outcomes. By staging a comic representation of jealousy as both a selfish desire and a force that enhances harmonious relationships within and beyond the household, *Shicu ji* plays with the audience's anxiety about the damaging power of jealousy as a self-centered obsession.

the absurdity of the wife's behavior and the subversion of marital hierarchy entail laughter. But by making the cause for Xiaoqing's tragedy the source of amusement, Wu also adds an ironic twist to his adaptation of Xiaoqing's story. If the first wife's excessive behavior is a result of her selfishness, how do we understand Xiaoqing's narcissistic tendency as a manifestation of *qing*? Wu Bing's decision to articulate the first wife's selfish desire and his attempt to tone down Xiaoqing's narcissism both suggest his interest in the problematic of the self within the discourse of *qing*.

1.3 Selfishness and Narcissism

Jealousy highlights the issue of obsession with the self: to a large extent, *qing* is self-centered. Overly affectionate attention to herself was a dominant feature of Xiaoqing's personality according to multiple accounts of her life story. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Pan Guangdan, the pioneer scholar of Freudian psychoanalysis in China, described Xiaoqing's behaviors, such as her amorous conversations with her own shadow and her repeated quests for authentic self-portraits, as signs of her morbid narcissism.¹² In most biographical accounts of Xiaoqing, the characteristics that distinguish Xiaoqing from Du Liniang are the absence of an external object of Xiaoqing's *qing* and the fatal power of her self-love.

Du Liniang's joyful marriage with Liu Mengmei in this world towards the end of *The Peony Pavilion* celebrates the power of *qing* to break the boundaries between life and death and between dream and reality. This marriage therefore highlights the vitality of *qing*. Xiaoqing's lonely death, however, displays *qing* as a life-consuming force, and marks *qing* with a profound sense of otherworldliness. In fact, one detail of Xiaoqing's legend that is absent from Wu Bing's *The Remedy for Jealousy* is Xiaoqing's ability to recite *The Heart Sutra* after browsing through it

¹² See Pan Guangdan's *Feng Xiaoqing kao* 馮小青考.

only once at the young age of ten. Xiaoqing's extraordinary memory of the Buddhist classics exhibits her potential for Buddhist enlightenment, which suggests her ability to detach from this illusory mundane world and to break the burden of the transitory self. But in Xiaoqing's case, this potential never results in self-liberation. Instead, it develops into a manner of self-containment and an inclination toward self-pity. The attachment to the self is, after all, the most difficult desire to overcome.

The 1625 *zaju* 雜劇 (variety play) by Xu Shijun 徐士俊 (1602 -1681), *Chunbo ying* 春波影 (The Shadow of Spring Waves), for example, highlights Xiaoqing's reserved manner and her distance from worldly concerns. But this distance does not reduce her self-pity. In Xu's play, during their trip to West Lake, Mrs. Yang, whose counterpart in Wu Bing's play is Madam Yan, comments on Xiaoqing's solemnity:

小青娘怎麼不出聲也？兀的是心慵意迷，只不把言辭浪擲，誰似你千嬌百媚，怎不露出些春華秋實？(S. Xu 7)

Why are you so quiet, Lady Xiaoqing?
Is it because of your languorous heart and confused mind,
You don't want to casually cast your words about?
Nobody is as charming as you,
Why don't you reveal your beautiful nature?

Xiaoqing's silence stands out in the cheerful crowds of youth celebrating the spirit of spring. Mrs. Yang expects Xiaoqing, who is suffering from her abusive marriage, to reveal at least a hint of love interest. To her surprise, Xiaoqing's emotions are all self-contained. Explaining her distant manner and indirectly declining Yang's suggestion for a second marriage, Xiaoqing describes one of her childhood dreams:

吾幼夢手折一花，隨風片片着水，命止此矣，夙業未了，又生他想，彼冥曹姻緣簿非吾如意珠，徒供群口畫描耳。(S. Xu 9)

As a little child I dreamt that I plucked a branch of flowers, but then each and every petal was blown by the wind into the water. This is just my fate. How could I hope for someone else as long as my old karma has not yet been expiated? The register of marriages in the bureaucracy of the netherworld is not my wish-granting pearl: I would only make myself a laughingstock. (Idema and Grant 507)

In Xu's rendition of Xiaoqing's story, Xiaoqing gives up on finding an object of her longing and desire. Her determination to abandon all hopes for a successful second marriage stands in contrast with her sorrowful reflections on her loneliness, which she expresses in her poems throughout the play.

Xiaoqing's intense self-pity curiously goes hand in hand with her disinterest in her surroundings. It is her self-consuming passion that makes her the epitome of *qing*. As Catherine Swatek suggests in her study of *Chunbo ying* as a post-text (or alternative text) of *The Peony Pavilion*, what makes Xiaoqing attractive to authors such as Xu Shijun is her dramatic internalization of *qing*, the object of which is forever missing ("Tiaodeng" 557). Sophie Volpp explains the self-reflexive and self-consuming quality of *qing* in terms of the grammatical nature of this word: one cannot "*qing*" toward someone or something else (969). Xiaoqing's story gives an elaborative definition to "*qing*" as an intransitive verb and confirms Volpp's theory. This seems to suggest that *qing* is an emotion as strong as one's attachment to the self.

In his dramatic adaptation of Xiaoqing's story, Wu Bing, however, reduces the intensity of Xiaoqing's narcissism. Xiaoqing's self-love becomes a latent state of loving the "other." In one of the most frequently performed scenes from *The Remedy for Jealousy*, "*Tiqu*" 題曲 (Commenting on *The Peony Pavilion*), Xiaoqing responds to Du Liniang's intimacy with Liu Mengmei. What Xiaoqing finds in Tang Xianzu's play is an aspiration for a happy union with an ideal lover: "天那若都許死後自尋佳偶，豈惜留薄命活做羈囚?" ("If Heaven allows one to seek for an ideal lover after death, why should one be reluctant to leave her life as a prisoner in

this world?") (B. Wu 283). The otherworldliness of Xiaoqing, as elaborated by Xu Shijun in his *zaju*, is converted to the recognition of death as a promise of freedom in the search for a love companion in Wu Bing's *The Remedy for Jealousy*.

Xiaoqing's comment on *The Peony Pavilion*, quoted above, is Wu Bing's creation. Wu Bing also incorporates Xiaoqing's own poems, as recorded in her biographies, into his drama to modify the reader's impression of Xiaoqing. Like Xu Shijun's play, *The Remedy for Jealousy* also includes a scene of Xiaoqing's trip to West Lake. In contrast with the Xiaoqing in Xu Shijun's play, Wu Bing's Xiaoqing expresses her hope for a happy marriage. Her imagination of Bodhisattva Guanyin's willow branch, which blesses this world with joyful marriages, replaces her memory of the falling petals in her childhood dream, as Xiaoqing prays to the statue of Bodhisattva Guanyin:

稽首慈雲大士前，
莫生西土，莫生天，
願為一滴楊枝水，
撒做人間並蒂蓮。(B. Wu 290)

I bow my head and pray to the Mahasattva up on her cloud of compassion:
May I not be reborn in the Western Paradise, may I not be reborn in Heaven,
But may I become a drop of water dripping from your willow branch,
That sprinkled on the earth becomes a double-blossomed lotus flower. (Idema and Grant 509)

This aria is taken directly from the collection of Xiaoqing's poems. When read in the context of Xiaoqing's tragic legend, this poem about an unrealized hope marks Xiaoqing's loneliness in this world. But in Wu Bing's play, Xiaoqing's prayer is answered immediately as Madam Yan introduces her husband, Yang Qi, as a potential partner during the trip. Xiaoqing secretly confesses her delight in receiving appreciation from Yan's husband. Turning to the audience, she states: "這是前生若士天才妙，正好把我現生杜女生魂吊" ("This is the magic of the former Tang Xianzu. It commemorates Xiaoqing as the living ghost of Du Liniang.") (B. Wu

291). Alluding back to her previous comment on Du Liniang, Xiaoqing suggests that her search for an ideal lover no longer has to take place in the afterlife. Wu Bing brings Xiaoqing's otherworldly aspirations back to this world and assigns an object to Xiaoqing's passion.

In Wu Bing's adaptation of Xiaoqing's story, Xiaoqing's request for a self-portrait, the most striking episode in her legend, becomes less dramatic. As Catherine Swatek points out, Xiaoqing's decision to order her own portrait and her later commemoration of the portrait before her death is a performance of self-writing in response to *The Peony Pavilion* ("Tiaodeng" 557). It reveals Xiaoqing's desire to understand the true self and her hope that others will remember her in the way she wants to be remembered (Swatek, "Tiaodeng" 557). According to Feng Menglong's *Qingshi leilue* 情史類略 (An Anatomy of Qing), the dying Xiaoqing dresses up in her finest and prepares for the portrait. The otherwise reserved Xiaoqing becomes vocal in expressing her dissatisfaction with the painter's efforts. After turning down the painter's works twice, Xiaoqing decides to help the painter capture her beauty and spirit by abandoning her stiff pose and letting the painter observe her daily activities. Xiaoqing's high expectation for the portrait reveals her wish to control her self-image even after her death and her intense bond to herself. Xiaoqing's obsession with "owning" her self-image parallels the jealous wife Miao's desire for absolute possession of the husband's affection.

In *The Remedy for Jealousy*, the episode featuring Xiaoqing's request for a self-portrait emphasizes the painter's agency rather than Xiaoqing's demand. The painter's resolution to capture Xiaoqing's bewildering charm and his pride in his artistic skill drive him to discard his portraits time and again until he creates one that satisfies both Xiaoqing and himself. Instead of dressing up and performing her own identity in front of the painter, Xiaoqing is unaware of the painter's observing eyes. By diverting the reader's attention away from Xiaoqing's narcissism,

Wu Bing makes room for his elaboration on Xiaoqing's more conventional romantic relationship with the literatus official Yang Qi. On the one hand, Wu's revision of Xiaoqing's legend prevents Xiaoqing from becoming a problematic counterpart to the first wife Miao, whose jealousy is driven by the attachment to the self; on the other hand, Wu's revision reveals his ambivalence towards the self-centered desires that lurk in the discourse of *qing*, which has constructed Xiaoqing as a cultural icon. The irony of self-interest continues to loom in the background. It becomes more obvious when Xiaoqing's self-portrait, the token of self-love, is reduced to a stage prop in a comic adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion* directed by Yang Qi's "selfless" wife, Madam Yan.

1.4 Plays within A Play: Staging *Qing* and Jealousy

Xiaoqing's obsession with herself, which has already been toned down in Wu Bing's play, and the jealous wife's compulsion to monopolize her husband's attention both appear problematically self-centered compared to the generosity of the female lead Madam Yan. Impressed by Xiaoqing's beauty and talent, Madam Yan unites her own husband with Xiaoqing. The three female characters present a spectrum of self-love, with Yan and Miao representing the two opposite poles. As Wu Bing's play is often remembered as an adaptation of the Xiaoqing legend, it is easy to neglect the fact that Yan is also a main character in Wu's play.¹³ As Madam Yan helps Xiaoqing marry into her family, she seems to have cured Xiaoqing's romantic agony and also overcome female jealousy. But Wu Bing complicates our understanding of Madam Yan by letting this character direct a comic adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion* before the conventional *datuanyuan* 大團圓 (grand reunion) closure. This metatheatrical element invites the reader to

¹³ The most frequently performed scenes from *The Remedy for Jealousy*, "Jiaomu" 浇墓 (Commemorating Su Xiaoxiao) and "Tiqu" 题曲 (Commenting on *The Peony Pavilion*), are both from Xiaoqing's monodrama. The play is therefore often remembered as a play about Xiaoqing.

question whether Yan's behavior suggests the possibility of selfless love or actually confirms its impossibility.

Wu Bing's elevation of Madam Yan to the main female character is a major revision of Xiaoqing's legend. Some of the anecdotal accounts about Xiaoqing include a female figure who sympathizes with Xiaoqing and even proposes a plan for Xiaoqing to escape from the jealous wife. In these accounts, Xiaoqing, who believes she is fated for misery, declines the possibility of an escape. The plan ends inconclusively as this female friend leaves Hangzhou to accompany her husband to a new official post. Wu Bing develops the female lead Madam Yan in *The Remedy for Jealousy* from this female figure. In Wu's play, Madam Yan helps Xiaoqing run away from the jealous wife by fabricating the news of Xiaoqing's death and by marrying Xiaoqing to her own husband, who returns to Hangzhou before moving for a promotion.

For a modern reader, it is hard to understand Yan's "virtue" as anything other than pathetic. Yang Qi introduces his wife Yan as "a literatus within the inner chamber" (*guige wenren* 閨閣文人) who manages the household with industry and thrift. The couple enjoys their harmonious life with the only regret that Yan has not yet produced a male heir and Yang Qi is reaching the age of forty. Though Yan herself is merely twenty, her worry about Yang's family line motivates her to find a concubine for her husband. In order to demonstrate his love for his wife and avoid future domestic conflicts, Mr. Yang rejects his wife's plan firmly at first.¹⁴ He even swears an oath that he will only accept the most beautiful and talented woman as his concubine, expecting that his high standard will discourage his wife from looking for a match. But after being impressed with Xiaoqing's poetic comments on *The Peony Pavilion* and

¹⁴ Yang has the suspicion that his wife will later regret her decision to allow him to take a concubine, as he states: "只怕稱賢誦德一時勉博虛名起忌生疑日久終呈本色" ("I'm only afraid that my wife helps me in order to win a good reputation. After a while, she will become suspicious and jealous. Eventually she will reveal her true nature") (B.Wu 266).

enchanted by her physical beauty during the visit to West Lake, Yang Qi changes his mind. He fancies a romance with Xiaoqing, and his wife Madam Yan performs the challenging task of uniting Xiaoqing with him. When Yang acts out his passion for this elusive and vulnerable beauty, the original purpose of this search for a concubine, procreation, is completely ignored. Wu Bing's elaboration on the inconsistency of Yang Qi's attitude toward the matter of concubinage adds a comic note to the play. If Yang's initial refusal to take a concubine suggests his respect for his wife, his later changes invite the reader to doubt the sincerity of this initial refusal and the sustainability of his affection.

Madam Yan, along with the audience of the play, observes the husband's changes. But instead of being a passive observer, Yan directs her husband's actions and emotions by taking complete charge of the search for a concubine. Furthermore, she manipulates the audience's viewing of the husband's passion. Yan insists on a comic reading of her husband's self-conscious performance of a romantic lover. In Scene 29 "*Jiahun*" 假魂 (Fake Ghost), Yan orders Xiaoqing, who has been rescued from a coma by Yang Qi's best friend, to appear in Yang's study late at night and to pretend to be a ghost while Yang is still saddened by the false notice of her death.¹⁵ At the beginning of this scene, Xiaoqing explains that her "ghostly" performance, as a play within a play, is just to get a laugh:

夫人瞞過老爺，只說奴家果死。卻將春容暗遞，引起癡情。又叫奴家扮作鬼魂模樣夜往書齋做出一齣柳夢梅見鬼雜劇，以博一笑。(B. Wu 321)

Madam kept it from Master Yang, just telling him that I was indeed dead. But she secretly sent my portrait to him and evoked his foolish passion. Then she let me pretend to be a ghost and visit Master Yang's study at night. She asks me to perform the scene "Liu Mengmei Encounters a Ghost" for a laugh.

¹⁵ The jealous wife Miao tries to murder Xiaoqing by replacing Xiaoqing's medicine with deadly poison. But luckily, Xiaoqing's servant, who suspects Miao's conspiracy, discards the poison. Xiaoqing's prolonged illness worsens to a coma, but thanks to the medicine from Yang Qi's friend, Xiaoqing survives. Neither Miao nor Yang is informed of Xiaoqing's survival.

This insertion of a metatheatrical performance adds an intriguing twist to the narrative, as it will delay the progress of Xiaoqing's romance but elicit laughter from the audience. By letting Yan set up an adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion* that features her husband and Xiaoqing, Wu Bing introduces a series of dynamic viewings and positions *The Peony Pavilion*, Xiaoqing's story, and Yang Qi's imitation of the male protagonist from *The Peony Pavilion* within multiple interpretative frames.

In this adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion*, Xiaoqing is a reluctant participant, but Yang Qi plays along with enthusiasm. Yang's performance actually renders Liu Mengmei from the original *The Peony Pavilion* an inferior romantic lover. Yang does not doubt for a second that Xiaoqing's appearance is the result of his diligent worship of Xiaoqing's portrait. Furthermore, unlike Liu Mengmei, who mistakes Du Liniang's ghost for a girl "gone astray," Yang expresses his affection for Xiaoqing's "ghost" without any fear or hesitation. At one point, Xiaoqing asks Yang if he finds her "ghost" scary. Holding her close, Yang responds that he would not even mind sleeping at her tomb. If we see Yan's playful arrangement as testing Yang's attraction to Xiaoqing, Yang certainly passes the test. But if we take Yan's initial order for a laugh as an invitation for a comic interpretation of the scene, then we may feel reluctant to read Yang's reaction as a supreme act of *qing*. Yang Qi's enchantment by the presence of Xiaoqing's "ghost" is as laughable as the jealous wife Miao's bewitchment by the presence of Xiaoqing's "ghost" in Scene 26, "*Yigui*" 疑鬼 (Suspecting a Ghost). For the reader who is aware of Xiaoqing's survival, it is amusing to see the uninformed characters, Yang Qi and the jealous wife Miao, fall under the same spell of a fake ghost. While the encounter with the "ghost" transforms the jealous wife from a ferocious monster to a weakling controlled completely by her self-imagined

fear, it also turns the reserved literatus official Yang into a frenzied suitor. In both cases, the incongruities exaggerated by slapstick moves make the characters laughable.

After observing these incongruities, we cannot help but question whether Yang's passion is, not unlike jealousy, just another kind of selfish desire. The comic spirit of the play is heightened further when Yan suddenly breaks into Yang Qi's study and plays the role of a shrew in Scene 30, "*Jiacu*" 假醋 (Feigning Jealousy). The husband rushes to explain that Xiaoqing's ghost has visited his study. But Madam Yan pretends to be infuriated by Yang's explanation and denounces her husband's secret love affair. Shocked by his wife's sudden arrival and burst of anger, Yang desperately tries to convince his wife that he has succeeded in calling Xiaoqing back to life. Because of his faith in his wife's sincere resolution to help him find a concubine, Yang does not hide his passion for Xiaoqing from Yan. His direct way of communicating his passion to his "angry" wife gives off an air of awkward naiveté. The agitated Yang reminds the audience of a spoiled child whose doting parent suddenly decides to discipline him. If we follow Madam Yan's instruction and try to find amusement in the scene, we cannot ignore the bleakness in her humor: what is funny is not only Yang's awkward and embarrassing response to his wife's sudden arrival but also the contrast between his self-indulgence and Yan's self-sacrifice.

Madam Yan's comic adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion* is, in fact, a parody of this dramatic masterpiece. This parody highlights *The Peony Pavilion* as a textual and artificial construction of *qing*. Later in the scene "Feigning Jealousy," Madam Yan makes this comment half-jokingly on Yang Qi's participation in her theatrical production: "使使使聰明許讀還魂傳，莫莫莫，把死語認臨川" ("Oh, oh, only smart people should be allowed to read *The Peony Pavilion* / no, no, nobody should take Tang Xianzu's words as matter of fact") (B. Wu 324). What the director Madam Yan introduces to the reader is a cynical interpretation of Yang Qi's

expression of passion. Even though Yang Qi has no idea that he is acting a part in a stage adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion*, the director Madam Yan's comment identifies Yang's participation as a conscious imitation of the male lead, Liu Mengmei, in Tang Xianzu's play. It is a learned act by a bookish man. On the one hand, she questions the spontaneity of Yang's passion; on the other hand, she draws her audience's attention to Yang Qi's foolish attempt to apply the textual construction of *qing* from *The Peony Pavilion* to his real life.

Furthermore, Yan's adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion* pokes fun at Tang Xianzu's propagation of *qing* as a force that transcends life and death; the promise of transcendence is an important lure for the followers of the discourse of *qing*. Yang Qi's firm belief that the magical power of his love has persuaded Xiaoqing's ghost to roam back to this realm of the living is the target of laughter in Madam Yan's adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion*. As Madam Yan explains, by delaying her husband's knowledge of Xiaoqing's availability, she hopes Yang will not take his union with Xiaoqing for granted. Furthermore, her arias suggest that she tries to make the "illusory" aspect of love manifest:

只為打合紅線太方便，便轉關兒故作俄延，方顯得捏兩拈雲真幻變。(B. Wu 324)

Only because the knotting of the scarlet threads seems too easy,
I deliberately delay it,
To highlight the fantastical side of consummation.

But the irony here is that this fantastical side of consummation is Yan's own creation. As the reader knows, the husband's passion for Xiaoqing has not brought her back to this world. What the husband conceives as the magical power of *qing* is actually his wife's prank. Instead of elevating the power of *qing*, this delay of consummation only reminds Yang Qi and the audience of Madam Yan's contribution to Xiaoqing's successful second marriage. It is, therefore, a clever strategy for self-promotion and a parody of the husband's self-absorption.

How should we understand Madam Yan's decision to play a prank on the husband and her urge to get a good laugh from it? Do they suggest her genuine joy over her husband's new love, or do they reveal her hidden anxiety about her husband's union with Xiaoqing? Wu's problematization of the "self" in the characters of Xiaoqing and Yang Qi invites the reader to be more cynical. Madam Yan's invitation for a laugh has manipulated our view of her husband's performance of passion, but when we direct our attention to Yan's own participation in her staged adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion*, we find that Wu's portrayal of Yan is actually not that distant from his representation of the jealous wife Miao.¹⁶ As an attentive viewer of her husband's display of affection, Madam Yan reminds us of Miao who receives masochistic pleasure from spying on her husband's secretive approach to Xiaoqing:

笑齊人乞食望墳來，哪知有俏冤家跟隨郭外，潛身離繡閣，俏步下香階，莫先把浪蝶驚開，浪蝶驚開，等他搬演出當場態。(B. Wu 287)

How funny that this man from Qi heads to the graveyard for food!
How would he know that his cute wife is following him to the outskirts of the city?
She sneaks out of her boudoir
And quietly steps downstairs
So she would not scare away those dissipated butterflies, those dissipated butterflies.
She waits to watch her husband's improvisation.

Miao's soliloquy alludes to the famous satirical story from *Mengzi*: after a man brags to his wife and concubine that wealthy patrons feed him lunch every day, the wife follows him to the outskirts of a city and discovers that her husband satisfies his appetite by feeding on sacrifices of food left on graves. Miao uses this allusion to diminish her husband's authority and give moral license to her spying. Her curiosity about her husband's "improvisation" is surprisingly similar

¹⁶ The early Republican *Nuanhong zhai* 暖紅齋 reprint of *The Remedy for Jealousy* includes illustrations, which, according to the editor's notes, were reproductions of the original illustrations included in the late Ming edition of Wu Bing's play. The illustration for "Fake Ghost" depicts the moment when Madam Yan is at the door to her husband's study. It is ambiguous whether she is peeking through the door or is just about to step inside her husband's study. The illustration also displays the husband Yang's meeting with the "ghost"—a scene Madam Yan is interested in witnessing.

to Madam Yan's interest in Yang Qi's performance with Xiaoqing's "ghost." As Yang acts perfectly according to Yan's design without any knowledge of being part of her staged play, in effect, he becomes Yan's puppet. Yan's amusement at her "puppet's" improvised performance makes one wonder if she is essentially different from the jealous wife Miao. Or rather, as a superior puppet master, Yan realizes Miao's wish to bring the husband under her complete control.

For some contemporary readers, Yan oversteps the boundaries of proper wifely behavior by manipulating her husband's passion. When she finally explains her trick to the husband and allows him to take Xiaoqing's hand in Scene 31, "*Fuchong*" 付寵 (Entrusting the Loved One), the husband laughs at his own foolishness and nervously shows his gratitude for her arrangement. As Yan establishes absolute authority over her husband by uniting him with Xiaoqing and simultaneously making him the butt of a joke, she turns the marital hierarchy upside down. If the original motivation for getting a concubine is to secure male offspring and stabilize the patriarchal order, then Yan's "selfless" behavior only subverts this order. It is no wonder that in the marginal comment on the ending of this scene the late Ming commentator of the first edition of *The Remedy for Jealousy*, presumably male, writes: "酸意來了" ("Here sourness comes") (B. Wu 326).¹⁷ The commentator seems unconvinced that Madam Yan has succeeded in transcending jealousy. He invites the reader to question whether Yan has just been suppressing her jealousy and whether her performance of jealousy in the previous scene is actually a display of her real feelings.

¹⁷ The commentator's name is *Canggengzi* 鶻鶻子. *Canggan* is a kind of mythical bird. According to legend, *canggan* can cure women's jealousy. The names of all the commenters whose remarks are included in the late Ming *Liangheng tang* 兩衡堂 edition of Wu Bing's four dramas correspond to the titles of Wu Bing's plays. The commentator for *The Green Peony*, for example, is called *Mudan zhuren* 牡丹主人 (The Master of Peony). We cannot rule out the possibility that Wu Bing wrote commentaries for his own plays. The feeling of jealousy is conventionally called *cuyi* 醋意 (the taste of vinegar). This "sourness" in the comment refers to jealousy.

This commentator's reading reflects both the biased view of jealousy as a distinct female trait and the late Ming fascination with theatricality—the recognition that performed emotions on stage are not necessarily less “real” than emotions experienced in life offstage.¹⁸ The commentator seems to suggest that Wu Bing has been playing with the reader's sense of theatricality in his construction of the character Madam Yan, who is keenly aware of the power of theater. This commentator's note at this particular moment of the play discourages the reader from regarding Yan as an exemplary selfless figure and encourages the reader to cast a suspicious glance and a knowing smile at Yan—the producer of the comic adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion*.

Through the metatheatrical scene, Xiaoqing, the late Ming cultural icon, becomes an awkward walk-on character.¹⁹ In response to Madam Yan's quest for a comedy, Xiaoqing, who finally has the chance to approach the man for whom she longs, finds herself unable to respond to his expression of affection. Instead, she sets up the stage for Madam Yan's performance of jealousy by delivering this warning:

婦人家總無謙遜，莫倚托心腸不狠...假惺惺蜜語無憑准，問君家有幾個翠眉紅粉...
不干己事閒評論，只怕真人宮來也怒嗔。（B. Wu 322）

No woman is modest or unassuming.
All of them are hard-hearted...
Their sweet words are fake and unreliable.
May I ask how many fair ladies do you have?
This is none of my business and I am only commenting on it casually.
I am afraid that once she, the wife, really arrives here she will also get angry.

¹⁸ In cases such as Li Yu's play *Bimu yu* 比目魚 (The Paired Soles), the protagonists Tan Chuyu and Liu Miaogu, as professional actors, convey their romantic feelings towards each other onstage, because social protocols offstage prevent them from showing intimacy. The life onstage is then more “real” than life offstage.

¹⁹ The scene helps to establish Madam Yan as a figure of authority in the household and also settle the relationship between Yan and Xiaoqing. Being outside of the “five cardinal relationships,” the wife-concubine relationship lacked clear definition and regulation. But such classics as Li Xiang's *The Biography of Exemplary Women*, which had multiple expanded editions in the late Ming, seems to promote the wife-concubine relationship as something that resembles the mother-daughter bond. In the story “The Lord of Wei's Two Obedient Spouses,” for example, the concubine is praised for serving the childless wife as the matriarch of the house after the Lord of Wei's death.

When Madam Yan does step into the scene and “pretends” to be infuriated by Yang’s secret love affair, the audience will witness Xiaoqing’s escape from the stage. The stage direction reads: “小旦暗上從生後閃下” (“*Xiaodan* quietly steps onto the stage and then quickly exits the stage from behind the *sheng*’s back”) (B. Wu 324). In Wu Bing’s play, Xiaoqing has seemingly realized her dream to become Du Liniang and find her own Liu Mengmei in this world. But at the same time, her survival of the jealous wife’s tyranny is at the core of Madam Yan’s prank. Madame Yan’s comment on whether it is smart to take *The Peony Pavilion* too seriously seems to be an indirect joke on the Xiaoqing legend, which dramatizes Xiaoqing’s death after her deep engagement with Tang Xianzu’s play. In other words, Wu Bing’s comic transformation of Xiaoqing’s story centers on canceling the solemnity of Xiaoqing’s death—a ceremonial sacrifice for *qing*. In this process, Xiaoqing’s portrait no longer materializes Xiaoqing’s self-love or elevates it to an allegory of sublime passion. It becomes a stage prop in Madam Yan’s theatrical production and serves as a witness to the bursts of selfish desires permitted and promoted by the participants’ awareness of theatricality. Unlike Du Liniang’s portrait in *The Peony Pavilion*, which conveys the agency of a desiring subject, Xiaoqing’s portrait only suggests the passivity of Xiaoqing as a receiver of Madam Yan’s mercy.

The laughter evoked by Madam Yan’s parodic adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion* breaks the seemingly well-balanced structure of *chuanqi* plays—besides the conventional comic figure of the jealous wife, all the main characters invite laughter to a greater or lesser degree. This laughter encourages us to reevaluate Yang Qi’s belief in the “transcendent power” of his passion and recognize the childish selfishness embodied in his infatuation. It directs us to reconsider Yan’s “selfless” virtue, question the motivation behind her sacrifice, and reflect on how virtue may be motivated by self-promotion. Moreover, this laughter also sidelines Xiaoqing as

exemplar of *qing* and brings her down to the mundane world of characters driven by selfish desires. This metatheatrical episode enhances the comic spirit of Wu Bing's play; moreover, it ironically reveals the superficiality of both *qing* and jealousy.

If we set the metatheatrical element in "Fake Ghost" aside, this scene, together with the following "Feigning Jealousy," also resembles the scene "*Shuguan beifeng*" 書館悲逢 (Mournful Reunion in the Study) from Gao Ming's 高明 (1305-1371) *Pipa ji* 琵琶記 (The Lute). Gao's play is an early Ming Southern drama, which enjoyed immense popularity throughout the Ming. In *Pipa ji*, the protagonist Cai Bojie, under the pressure of his father, leaves his wife and his parents to participate in the imperial examinations in the capital city. After his success in the examinations, Prime Minister Niu chooses him to be his son-in-law, and Cai has to stay in the capital city against his own will. Meanwhile, his hometown suffers from severe famine. Even though Cai's wife, Zhao Wuniang, has tried her best to care for Cai's parents, they nevertheless die of hunger. "Mournful Reunion in the Study" happens after Zhao begs her way to the capital city and finds Cai's mansion and his new wife. At the same time that Zhao meets Cai's new wife, the daughter of the Prime Minister Niu, by coincidence Cai visits the temple where Zhao has been residing. He picks up two portraits whose subjects bear striking resemblance to his own parents. He has no idea that these paintings were created by Zhao Wuniang. Later Cai's new wife Niu, who is deeply moved by Zhao's sacrifice for Cai's family, asks Zhao to wait outside of Cai's study while Cai reviews Confucian classics. The teaching of family duties in the classics embarrasses Cai so much that he has to drop his books. He rests his eyes on the portraits he has picked up from the temple. But the portraits that remind him of his parents only make him sink deeper into guilt. Precisely at this moment of self-questioning, his wife Niu comes to the study. Niu teases Cai and questions how he would justify his decision to abandon his first wife from

humble background. Mistaking Niu's words for bitter jealousy, Cai asserts his resolution to reunite with Zhao and lectures Niu on the importance of loyalty and fidelity. After Cai's emotional speech, Niu surprises Cai by inviting Zhao to the study. The tearful reunion between Cai and Zhao takes place precisely through Niu's effort.

On the surface, "Mournful Reunion in the Study" shares several common elements with "Fake Ghost" and "Feigning Jealousy": the uninformed male protagonists, the secret planning between female characters, and portraits serving as important stage props. But unlike "Fake Ghost" in Wu Bing's play, "Mournful Reunions in the Study" gives the uninformed male protagonist Cai Yong a chance to redeem himself as a man of moral integrity. Gao Ming's *Pipa ji* is an adaptation of the infamous story of Cai Bojie, who betrayed his family for social advancement. As Gao states in his preface, he tries to transform Cai Bojie to a "completely loyal and completely filial" (*quanzhong quanxiao* 全忠全孝) figure in his play. Gao does it by highlighting Cai's intense moral dilemma: after being persuaded by his father to leave his home village to take the imperial examinations, Cai is forced into a new marriage by the stubborn Prime Minister Niu and is later appointed by the emperor to serve his imperial court. Gao Ming invites the reader to understand Cai's prolonged stay in the capital city as the result of his effort to fulfill his moral obligations as a son and as a subject to the emperor. "Mournful Reunion" is a climax in the play as it features the first meeting between Cai and his wife Zhao Wuniang after years of separation and suggests the possible reconciliation between the moral demands of both filial piety and political loyalty. The dramatist's elaboration on Cai's feeling of guilt and his anticipation for a reunion with his family back in the village marks his effort to redeem his character. However, the new wife Niu, who facilitates this reunion, occupies an awkward position onstage. After facing the uninformed Cai's false accusation of being jealous, Niu

quietly watches the outburst of emotions from both her husband and Zhao Wuniang. But like Zhao, Niu has sacrificed for her marriage, too.

Wu Bing's choice to combine elements from *Pipa ji* and *The Peony Pavilion* is a curious one. After all, *Pipa ji* had long been known for its promotion of Confucian ideology. Legend says that the founder of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, advised every elite household to possess a copy of *Pipa ji* as it provides “tastier” articulation of the Confucian ideology than the Four Books and Five Classics.²⁰ *The Peony Pavilion*, however, only pays lip service to Confucian morality. In the late Ming, *Pipa ji* was often set in comparison with the Yuan variety play *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 (The Story of the Western Wing). The intense debates over which of the two dramas was superior centered on questions about style and moral content. Such debates helped to establish *Pipa ji* as an exemplary play for its naturalistic language and serious moral messages.

The late Ming reader of *The Remedy for Jealousy* would not fail to see its references to “Mournful Reunion in the Study.” The question then comes to whether Wu Bing is resetting *qing* in a serious framework of Confucian ethics by alluding to *Pipa ji*, or whether Wu is actually questioning the credibility of the moral messages in *Pipa ji* by inserting elements from *The Peony Pavilion* as comic highlights. The allusion to “Mournful Reunion,” which features Cai's inner turmoil, invites the reader to contemplate the psychology behind Yang Qi's decision to have a new concubine in *The Remedy for Jealousy*. But Yang Qi's shameless display of desire also makes one wonder if Gao Ming's “completely loyal and completely filial” character, Cai Bojie, is believable.

²⁰ See Xu Wei's 徐渭 (1521-1593) *Nanci xulu* 南詞敘錄, quoted by Wang Ayling in her article “Lun Mao Shengshan fuzi *Pipa ji* pindian zhi lunli yishi yu piping shiyu” 論毛聲山父子《琵琶記》評點之倫理意識與批評視域 (1).

Wu's references to the two celebrated plays also underline the moral ambiguity of the character Madam Yan. Madam Yan's decision to help her husband unite with Xiaoqing certainly reminds us of the two self-sacrificing women characters in *Pipa ji*. But as I explained earlier, Madam Yan's order for a comic performance of *The Peony Pavilion* makes one reflect on the fine line between self-sacrifice and self-promotion. Furthermore, one may also ask whether Yan's husband Yang Qi is worth sacrificing for in the first place. A similar question applies to *Pipa ji*. The intensity of Cai's guilt can hardly match the extremity of Zhao's self-sacrifice for him and his family. While Zhao battles life-and-death challenges in the village, Cai is sitting comfortably inside the prime minister's mansion, complaining about being a victim of circumstances.

Like his character Madame Yan, who provides a parodic reading of *The Peony Pavilion*, Wu Bing introduces a reevaluation of *qing* in his play. He reflects on the relationship between *qing* and the Confucian ethical order through a comic adaptation of Xiaoqing's tragic story and an allusion to *Pipa ji*. Modern scholars miss the point when they criticize Wu's comic adaptation of Xiaoqing's tragic legend as a reductive interpretation of *qing*. They lament that Xiaoqing's unrequited passion loses its power when she is married into Yang Qi's polygamous family. But they fail to recognize that it is Wu's critical reinterpretation and re-evaluation of *qing* that make the play significant.

Wu Bing's play, which centers on Xiaoqing's integration into a family setting, responds to debates about *qing* in late Imperial China that revolve around the tension between (orthodox) communitarian interests and the pursuit of individual passions. In his preface to *Qingshi leilüe*, Feng Menglong declares that the motive behind his endeavor to collect and publish these stories of *qing* is to transform selfish *qing* to impartial *qing*:

又嘗欲擇取古今情事之美者，各著小傳，使人知情之可久，於是乎無情化有，私情化公，庶鄉國天下，藹然以情相與，於澆俗冀有更焉。(2)

I have also desired to select the most beautiful acts of *qing*, both ancient and contemporary, and write up a brief narrative for each, to let people know that *qing* can endure and thereby transform those without *qing* into people of *qing* and selfish (*si 私*) *qing* into impartial (*gong 公*) *qing*. If people from our village, kingdom, and all under heaven, can treat each other kindly with *qing*, then we can expect the frivolous social atmosphere to change. (Epstein 115)²¹

Feng Menglong's concept of "*siqing huagong*" 私情化公 (transforming selfish *qing* to impartial *qing*) suggests the possibility of turning *qing* to an ethical force; later, the early Qing scholar Huang Zongxi's 黃宗羲 (1610 – 1695) distinction of "*zhongqing*" (眾情, public *qing*) from "*yiqing*" (一情, individual *qing*) elevates communitarian *qing* as a superior form of passion. Huang Zongxi suggests that public *qing*, stemming from sufferings "for reasons far beyond those of their individual selves," is much more profound (M. Huang 55).

The increasing emphasis on the priority of the public and communitarian *qing* reflected the literati's heightened anxiety about the state of society as a whole. When the traumatic dynastic transition took place, it prompted the literati class to make atonement for past indulgence on individual desires. Locating Wu Bing's *The Remedy for Jealousy* in that context, we may understand Wu's reinterpretation of *qing* as part of the ethical turn of the discourse. But we also find Wu's response to the proposal of elevating private desires to interests in the public good rather cynical. In the process of revising the narcissistic elements in Xiaoqing's biography and preparing her for her new roles as a wife and a mother, Wu Bing reduces Xiaoqing's agency as a desiring subject and emphasizes Xiaoqing's contentment as a result of Madam Yan's mercy. Xiaoqing's transformation provides an unsatisfying example for adapting individualistic *qing* to

²¹ The original translation from Epstein ends with "selfish *qing* into impartial *qing*." I have added my own translations of the phrases that follow.

a communitarian setting. Furthermore, Wu Bing's insertion of the episodes on Madam Yan's adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion* provokes lingering suspicion of Madam Yan's motivation. As the outbreak of Madam Yan's jealousy lurks in background, the harmony within Yang Qi's household is far from reassuring. The tension between the self and the communitarian remains unresolved. The allusion to *Pipa ji* in the scene "Fake Ghost" underlines Wu Bing's ethical concern in his reinterpretation of *qing*. But Wu's play overall also calls Gao Ming's moral vision of "complete filial piety and complete loyalty," constructed upon the promise of selflessness, into question.

1.5 What is the Remedy?

So what is the remedy for jealousy after all if someone as virtuous as Madam Yan is still subject to this strong emotion? Wu Bing leaves the reader wondering about this question until the final scene of the play. As one can expect from a *chuanqi* play, the conclusion of *The Remedy for Jealousy* ties up all the loose threads of the narrative: after helping Xiaoqing marry her own husband, Madam Yan gives birth to a son. Before long, Xiaoqing contributes another male descendant to the Yang family. And then the jealous wife Miao makes her final appearance. In this concluding scene, when Miao discovers that Xiaoqing is still alive, she can hardly suppress her anger. But surprisingly, the target of her anger is her husband instead of Yang Qi, who has appropriated Xiaoqing. Miao suspects that her husband has been hiding his secret love affair with Xiaoqing at Yang's home. Agitated by Miao's burst of jealousy, Yang Qi's friend (the same one who paints Xiaoqing's portrait and rescues Xiaoqing from her coma) pulls out his sword and threatens to kill Miao and be done with her petty jealousy. As the knight lifts his

sword, both Miao's husband and Xiaoqing advance to beg for his forgiveness. In this potentially fatal moment, Miao compromises and swears to cast aside her jealousy.

As Miao hardly poses any threat to Xiaoqing anymore, Xiaoqing's expression of benevolence is rather "convenient." The husband's request for forgiveness is yet another display of his timidity as a consequence of his wife's tyranny. It is therefore hard to know if Miao is enlightened by her victims' goodwill or if she simply compromises under the death threat. But compared with his teaching on how Miao should learn from Madam Yan's exemplary behavior, this knight's sword has a more immediate impact on combating female jealousy. We can only conclude that what it takes to tame a shrew is a forceful man's display of violence. The remedy for jealousy is ironically the threat of death, which cuts off one's attachment to the self once and for all!

1.6 Conclusion

Wu Bing's *The Remedy for Jealousy*, which turns Xiaoqing's tragic legend into a comedy, is a response to the cultural fascination with Xiaoqing as a successor of Du Liniang in the literary tradition of *qing*. By foregrounding the theme of jealousy, Wu Bing problematizes the attachment to the self that is central to Xiaoqing's story and the discourse of *qing* in general. Wu Bing's effort to tone down the narcissistic elements in Xiaoqing's story only highlights the unsettling nature of Xiaoqing's attachment to the self. On the surface, Wu Bing's play presents a spectrum of self-love, with the jealous wife Miao and the generous Madam Yan representing the two ends of this spectrum. But Madam Yan's comic adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion* demands that readers scrutinize the motivation behind Yan's selfless act of marrying Xiaoqing into her

own family. This adaptation invites the reader to discover the self-promoting aspect of Madam Yan's act and speculate about her suppressed jealousy.

Wu Bing's adaption of Xiaoqing's legend, as a re-evaluation of *qing*, responds to the ethical turn of the discourse of *qing* in the late Ming. The allusions to the *Pipa ji* attest to Wu's ethical concern. But they also suggest an ironic view of *Pipa ji*'s moral messages. Just as Madam Yan introduces a comic understanding of the transcendent power of *qing*, Wu Bing expresses his deep suspicion of the possibility of elevating the individualistic *qing* to a more encompassing passion. Through his elaboration on female jealousy, his transformation of the narcissistic Xiaoqing into a wifely and motherly figure, and his construction of Madam Yan's well-planned prank, Wu Bing highlights the burden of selfish desires. While Tang Xianzu propagates *qing* as a life force that transcends life and death, Wu Bing points out the limit of *qing*'s power—its inability to break through the attachment to the self.

In *The Remedy for Jealousy*, the late Ming cultural icon Xiaoqing becomes the focus of ironic manipulation. Wu Bing's comic adaptation of Xiaoqing's legend meets the social expectation for *chuanqi* to provide an uplifting closure to a lighthearted entertainment. However, instead of being a passive follower of this convention of comedy, Wu Bing utilizes the convention to convey his profound concerns about the burdens of the self.

Chapter Two

Mistakes, Duplication, and Appropriation:

Ruan Dacheng's Ironic Rewriting of *Qing* in *The Swallow's Letter*

2.1 Introduction

In Wu Bing's *The Remedy for Jealousy*, the negotiations and collaborations among the three female characters Xiaoqing, the jealous wife Miao, and Madam Yan help the literatus official Yang Qi fulfill his *qing*. A few years after the publication of *The Remedy for Jealousy*, the politically notorious Ruan Dacheng 阮大鍼 (1587-1646), finished writing *Yanzi jian* 燕子箋 (The Swallow's Letter, 1642) and successfully had it staged. Similar to *The Remedy for Jealousy*, *The Swallow's Letter* also revolves around a male literatus' romantic quests, which end with his acquisition of two ideal women endowed with beauty, talent, and emotional sensitivity.

The Swallow's Letter was Ruan Dacheng's last *chuanqi* play. The play is set in the Tang dynasty, around the time of the An Lushan Rebellion (755-763). It delineates the eventful journey of a talented yet gullible young man, Huo Duliang, who achieves successes in both political and romantic realms. The story begins with Huo travelling to the capital city for the imperial examinations with his fellow student, the cunning Xianyu Ji. In the capital, Huo lives with his courtesan lover Hua Xingyun, whom he has visited before. Huo Duliang celebrates his longtime affection for Hua Xingyun by drawing her portrait and later including his own image in the painting at Hua's request. Meanwhile, Li Feiyun, the daughter of a high official, receives a portrait of the Bodhisattva Guanyin from a family friend. Both Huo's painting and this portrait of Guanyin are sent to the same shop to be mounted, and there, they are switched to the wrong owners.

After Li Feiyun, who looks exactly like Hua Xingyun, receives Huo's portrait, she develops an infatuation for him. Li writes down a poem about her longing for a companion like the male figure in the painting. A swallow picks up this poem and drops it on the bank of the Qu River. Coincidentally, Huo comes across the poem and fantasizes about its writer. But soon the imperial examinations start. Huo excels at the examinations, but Xianyu Ji manages to switch his own examination paper for Huo's. In order to cover up his crime, Xianyu, who knows about the incident of misplaced paintings, arranges for Huo to be arrested, falsely accusing Huo of trying to seduce Li Feiyun. But at the same time, the An Lushan Rebellion breaks out. Both the Li family and Hua Xingyun flee from the capital city.

During the rebellion, Li Feiyun becomes separated from her family. Mistaking Hua for their own daughter, the Lis later adopt Hua into their family. Meanwhile, their friend Jia takes Li under his guardianship. Jia arranges for Huo, who is working as his strategist under the name Bian Wuji, to marry his "daughter" Li. The couple soon find out each other's real identity. Meanwhile, Hua, residing with Li's family, helps to uncover Xianyu Ji's crime. When the rebellion is put down, Li Feiyun reunites with her family. Huo Duliang retrieves his good name, claims his title as the Top Scholar, and realizes his promise to marry Hua.¹

Ruan Dacheng had lost his official titles about fourteen years before he composed *The Swallow's Letter*. His political downfall was a result of his ambiguous relationships with both the Donglin faction (東林黨) and the followers of the eunuch Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢 (1568-1627). The members of the Donglin faction were mostly scholar-officials advocating Confucian orthodoxy for political authority. The eunuch party, however, gained enormous power thanks to Wei Zhongxian's intimate relationship with the incompetent Tianqi Emperor (r.1620-1627). As

¹ A more detailed synopsis is available in Appendix Two.

Benjamin A. Elman frames it, the conflict between the eunuch party and the Donglin faction was “a tug of war between imperial prerogative and the possibility of concerted and organized gentry involved in politics” (395). Ruan Dacheng, who achieved success in the imperial examination at an early age, started out as a follower of the Donglin, but later sought political opportunities from Wei Zhongxian’s collaborators.

When Wei Zhongxian fell into disgrace after the death of the Tianqi Emperor and the Donglin faction regained control of the political discourse, Ruan Dacheng became an ostracized target of denunciation. His reputation only got worse over time. During the Ming-Qing transition, Ruan came back to power as the president of the Board of War and Grand Guardian of the Heir Apparent at the short-lived Southern Ming court and sought revenge against members of the Donglin faction and their followers. Ruan’s immediate betrayal of the Southern Ming when it collapsed under the Qing forces solidified his image as a scheming traitor in Chinese history. As recent historical studies have suggested, Ruan’s notoriety reflected the political bias of the Dongling followers, who survived to exert a certain degree of influence on how the history of the Ming came to be written. Furthermore, Ruan Dacheng did not have male descendants who could defend his name.² It is fair to say that Ruan was an opportunist who became a victim of his own ambitions in the murky political environment of the late Ming.

Political controversies surrounding Ruan Dacheng have burdened the reception of his plays since their production. But Ruan’s works were popular among elite literati and especially at the court of the Southern Ming in Ruan’s times. Ruan Dacheng wrote with great confidence about his skills as a playwright in the preface to his drama *Chundeng mi* 春燈謎 (Spring Lantern Riddles, 1633):

² For Ruan Dacheng’s biographical information and contemporary sources for Ruan’s life, see Allison Hardie’s article “Self-Representation in the Dramas of Ruan Dacheng” (59-67). Huang Yifeng’s MA Thesis “Ruan Dacheng jianchen xingxiang de xingcheng” 阮大鍼奸臣形象的形成 discusses how Ruan’s image as a traitor was solidified.

余詞不敢較玉茗，而差勝之二：玉茗不能度曲，予薄能之。雖按拍不甚勻合，然凡棘喉滯齒之音，早於填時推敲小當，故易歌演也。昭武地僻，秦青，何戡輩所不往。余鄉為吳音，相去彌近，有裕所陳君者，稱優孟耆宿，無論清濁疾徐，宛轉高下，能盡曲致。即歌板外一種顰笑歡愁，載於衣褶眉稜者，亦如虎頭道子，絲絲描出，勝右丞自舞郁輪遠矣，又一快也。(6)

I would not dare to compare my lyrics with Yuming's (Tang Xianzu) lyrics, but mine are a bit better in a couple of aspects: Yuming had little understanding of music, I know a bit about musical composition. Though I am unable to smooth out the rhythm, when I compose lyrics to the music I pay attention to notes that might hurt performers' throats. My plays are, therefore, easy to perform. Zhaowu is far away.³ People like Qin Qing and He Kan would not like to go there.⁴ People of my hometown speak the Wu dialect, and my hometown is close to the Wu region. There is Chen Yusuo, who is considered a leading figure of the theatrical arts. No matter whether the note is light or heavy, fast or slow, no matter whether the pitch is high or low, he can perform them perfectly. Besides singing to the rhythm, he can even act out the emotional content through the movements of his costume and his eyebrows. His performance is as meticulous as paintings made by Gu Kaizhi and Wu Daozi. He is much better than Wang Wei dancing to *Yunlun pao*, music made by Wang himself. This is another pleasure [to be derived] from my plays.

In this preface, Ruan starts out with a modest gesture but quickly moves into a self-promoting mode. He proudly suggests that he has more advanced knowledge in music and performance than Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550-1616). Ruan's mother tongue and the closeness of his hometown to the cultural center of the lower Yangzi region, which hosted talented actors such as Chen Yusuo, provided him a better understanding of the dramatic art. Such a self-congratulating statement, however, also confirms the anxiety of influence experienced by late Ming playwrights. To a certain degree, they were all competing against the earlier master Tang Xianzu.

Four of Ruan Dacheng's eleven *chuanqi* plays survive. Among these four, *The Swallow's Letter* has been the best known. In terms of publication history, *The Swallow's Letter*

³ Zhaowu refers to Tang Xianzu's hometown Fuzhou 撫州.

⁴ Qin Qing and He Kan were both renowned singers. *Liezi*, a Daoist text produced during the Warring States period, records a story about Qin Qing's exceptional singing skills. The Tang-dynasty poet Liu Yuxi 刘禹锡 (772-842) wrote a poem to He Kan, who was famous for singing "The Song of Weicheng" (渭城曲).

has been published independently in multiple editions even after Ruan's downfall.⁵ Moreover, *The Swallow's Letter*, which was produced right before the fall of the Ming, has played its role in the cultural imagination of the Ming-Qing transition for later generations. Ruan Dacheng's notoriety as a treacherous official and the enormous popularity *The Swallow's Letter* enjoyed among its contemporary readers and audiences prompted literati in the Qing dynasty to interpret the play as a cultural metaphor for the decadence of the late Ming and to look for Ruan Dacheng's political messages in it. For a modern reader, *The Swallow's Letter*, which features two love affairs facilitated by two paintings and a mysterious swallow, seems nothing more than a second-rate comedy. Its heavy reliance on comic devices, such as coincidence and mistaken identities, no longer suits modern tastes.

This chapter reexamines the text of *The Swallow's Letter* by focusing on its comic elaborations on the romantic theme. I show how *The Swallow's Letter* consistently and intelligently parodies the conventions of the *caizi jiaren* motif by mocking the sexual undertone in romantic relationships, implicitly creating characters who are the unromantic opposites or counterparts of characters in *The Peony Pavilion*, interrupting the flow of a romantic narrative with a deft touch of reality, and paralleling the love story with a crime plot that underlines moral compromises. I argue that by adding ironic elements to his *caizi jiaren* play, Ruan calls into question some of the assumptions intrinsic to the discourse of *qing* that had been popularized by *The Peony Pavilion*. I will also examine receptions of the play in order to demonstrate how critics have politicized the ironic elements in *The Swallow's Letter* and perceived Ruan's composition of this *caizi jiaren* play as politically ironic.

⁵ Publications include the *Huaiyuan tang* edition 懷遠堂批點燕子箋 and *Xueyun tang* edition 雪韻堂批點燕子箋 from the late Ming, the *Ji'ao shanfang* edition 寄傲山房燕子箋記 from the Qing, and the *Nuanhong shi* edition 暖紅室批點燕子箋 from the early Republican era.

2.2 Sexual Urge and Romantic Impulse: Comic Elaboration on the Origins of Love

Ruan Dacheng marks the erotic undertone of romance in *The Swallow's Letter* by elaborating on the origin of the romance with comic performances. The starting point of romance lies in the accidental switching of two paintings. Though the scene that displays this mix-up is only a short interval featuring the female *chou* 丑 (clown), it plays a significant part in plot development and stresses the sexual undertones of the romantic encounters between the protagonists. The switching takes place at Drunkard Miao's home after Miao has finished mounting both the portrait of Bodhisattva Guanyin from Li Feiyuan's family and Huo Duliang's portrait of his courtesan lover Hua Xingyun. Drunkard Miao answers an unexpected call to official duty, leaving his sexually aroused wife at home. When a servant from the Li family comes to fetch the portrait of Guanyin, this unsatisfied wife almost forces herself onto the unprepared servant. Probably because of the servant's rush for the door or the wife's lack of attention to her husband's order, the servant gets the wrong painting. The clown's comic performance of the overflow of sexual energy provides a lighthearted interval between romantic scenes defined by their exquisite arias.

To a certain degree, Drunkard Miao's wife is the counterpart of Sister Stone from *The Peony Pavilion*. Like Drunkard Miao's wife, Sister Stone is also played by a female clown. Her narration of failed intercourse during her wedding night as a result of her bodily defect is an ingenious wordplay on the canonical *Qianzi wen* 千字文 (Thousand Character Classic). This comic oral performance brings the classics down to a crude display of sexual deprivation and anxiety. The unrealized (or unrealizable) female sexual desire demonstrated by lower-class women, such as Sister Stone and Drunkard Miao's wife, sets off the maidens' more elegantly expressed romantic fancies.

Both Miao's Wife and Sister Stone share the same function as the comic opposites of the female protagonists. The different timing of their appearances, however, marks differences in the functions of these two female characters in the two dramas. Sister Stone's comic narration of her wedding night takes place after Du Liniang's encounter with Liu Mengmei in her dream and Du's death from love sickness. Sister Stone's account of the disastrous wedding night, therefore, makes the reader appreciate the beauty of Du Liniang's spontaneous love making with Liu Mengmei even more. While Sister Stone's anxiety of deprivation results from a bodily defect, Miao's frustration comes from missed opportunities. Miao's crude unveiling of her sudden urge makes her a butt of the joke in *The Swallow's Letter*. Because her outburst of female desire appears right before Li Feiyun's appearance onstage, it introduces a comic perspective that shapes our understanding of Li Feiyun's immediate infatuation with the image in Huo Duliang's painting. This sequence alerts us to the continuity between Miao's sexual urge and Li Feiyun's romantic impulse.

Ruan skillfully mocks the sexual undertone beneath the delicate surface of Li's romantic longing by setting up the painting she receives by mistake as an erotic object instead of an innocent romantic token. Before the painting by Huo Duliang is mounted, the *fujing* 副淨 (villain, supporting role) character Xianyu Ji has already eroticized the painting. When Huo Duliang casually mentions his recent illness to Xianyu, Xianyu jokingly diagnoses Huo's discomfort as a sign of sexual indulgence and titles Huo's painting as "*Wushan tu*" 巫山圖 (Picture of Wushan)—a painting representing sexual intercourse.⁶ Xianyu rubs his face against the painting, declares his wish to share Huo's intimacy with Hua Xingyun, and succeeds in

⁶ According to Song Yu's 宋玉 (298 BCE to 222 BCE) "Rhapsody of Gao Tang," the goddess of Wu Mountain made love with the King of Chu in his dream when the King visited Gao Tang. Later in the play, both female protagonists Li Feiyun and Hua Xingyun will refer back to this classical allusion.

embarrassing the two lovebirds. Later in the chapter, I will elaborate on the irony that Li Feiyun follows in this villain character's footsteps and tries to partake in Huo Duliang and Hua Xingyun's loving relationship. It suffices to say here that Ruan's comic elaborations load the painting Li Feiyun receives with hints of sexual and sensual pleasures. They help to raise the reader's curiosity about Li's response to the painting—more specifically, about whether this naïve girl from an elite family can pick up on the hints.

The painting Li obtains by mistake is a humorous contrast to the portrait of Bodhisattva Guanyin she was supposed to receive. Li Feiyun's later fascination with the painting, a display of romantic infatuation, is an unexpected replacement for the teaching of transcendence and compassion promised by the portrait of Guanyin. The subjects of the two paintings being switched allude clearly to the tension between attachment and detachment. When Li tries to convince herself that the wrong painting is a manifestation of the Bodhisattva with Locked Bones (*suogu pusa* 鎖骨菩薩), who spreads Buddhism through sexual enchantment, she is probably referring to this Bodhisattva's *means* of teaching instead of the *goal* of her teaching. Li Feiyun's later resolution to seek mundane happiness through marriage with Huo Duliang certainly reveals her disinterest in the discourse of transcendence.

2.3 *Qing* as an Over-Reading

The painting that Li has received by mistake successfully initiates this maiden, who has been quietly residing in her inner chamber, into romantic love. Read independently, the scene featuring Li's viewing of the painting is a display of emotional sensitivity. But if we locate it in Huo Duliang's romantic journey, we may find Li's reaction to the painting problematic. By deliberately drawing connections between Li's reading of Huo's painting and Liu Mengmei's

response to Du Liniang's self-portrait in *The Peony Pavilion*, Ruan Dacheng makes fun of Li Feiyun as a seeming descendant of Du Liniang.

It had become a well-established motif in Chinese fiction and drama in the late Ming that a painting serves as medium of romantic attachment between the male viewer and the female subject in the painting: thanks to the male viewer's continuous appeals, the lady in the painting as the object of the male gaze is transformed into a living subject. Zhang Jin'er traces the origin of this motif to the story "Huagong" 畫工 (The Craft of Painting) in a collection of anecdotes, *Songchuang zaji* 松窗雜記 (491), by Du Xunhe 杜荀鶴 (846-904). But *The Peony Pavilion* utilizes this motif to the fullest: the male protagonist Liu Mengmei finds the female protagonist Du Liniang's self-portrait left in the garden where Du Liniang has dreamed about her intimacy with Liu. In that dream, Du Liniang had no knowledge of who this dream lover was; when Liu Mengmei picks up the painting, he has no idea that he had appeared in this painter's dream. But Liu Mengmei's diligent worship of Du Liniang's portrait summons the spirit of Du to him. What complicates the motif is that the painting in *The Peony Pavilion* is Du Liniang's self-portrait. As Du Liniang inserts her subjectivity to the painting, she is no longer a mere object of Liu Mengmei's gaze. In fact, Liu Mengmei's success in calling her back to life is more accurately a response to Du Liniang's emotions and desires made visible by this self-portrait. In *The Swallow's Letter*, however, Li Feiyun, who enjoys the same elite social status as Du Liniang, takes on the role of an active viewer. The gender switch here is Ruan Dacheng's playful response to the discourse of *qing* propagated by *The Peony Pavilion*. Li Feiyun's role as the viewer of a painting makes her a counterpart to Liu Mengmei, though her blooming romantic desire certainly marks her as a direct descendant of Du Liniang. The striking resemblance

between Li Feiyun and the subject of the painting, Hua Xingyun, further complicates our understanding of the initiation of Li Feiyun's romantic sentiments.

As a viewer, Li Feiyun's reading of Huo Duliang's painting corresponds to Liu Mengmei's examination of Du Liniang's self-portrait in *The Peony Pavilion* because both Li Feiyun and Liu Mengmei act out the viewing experiences in a series of misidentifications. In Liu Mengmei's case, he fails to understand that he is the addressee of the painting; in Li Feiyun's case, she over-reads Huo Duliang's painting as a portrait of and for herself. After confusing Du's image with Bodhisattva Guanyin, Liu Mengmei wonders if Du is the moon goddess Chang'e and proceeds to ask this "Chang'e" if he is going to be the one who "picks the osmanthus branch"—achieving success in the imperial examinations. With the help of Du Liniang's poetic inscription, Liu finally recognizes the lady in the painting as "a mortal girl" (*renjian nüzi* 人間女子) and categorizes the painting as a "portrait painted for one's own amusement" (*xingle tu* 行樂圖):

(看介)呀，原來絕句一首。(念介)“近觀分明似儼然，遠觀自在若飛仙。他年得傍蟾宮客，不在梅邊在柳邊。”呀，此乃人間女子行樂圖也。何言“不在梅邊在柳邊”？奇哉怪事哩！(Tang 347)

(*He peers closely.*) Yes, a quatrain:
(*Reads*) “However close the likeness
viewed from near at hand,
from farther off one would say
this was some airborne sprite.
Union with the visitor to the Toad Palace in some year to come
Will be beneath the branches either of willow or apricot.”
So, this is a *xingle tu* by some mortal girl. But what does she mean, “beneath the
branches either of willow or apricot”? Most mysterious! (Birch, *Peony* 145)⁷

In the last line of this poetic inscription, the character *liu* 柳 (willow) is Liu Mengmei's surname, while the character *mei* 梅 (apricot) is part of Liu's given name. This direct reference to his

⁷ Translation modified.

name gets Liu Mengmei's attention. But he seems to be more interested in the reference to "the visitor to the Toad Palace" (*changong ke* 蟾宮客), which can be interpreted as an auspicious sign foreshadowing his success in the imperial examinations. Only later does Liu start to pay attention to the romantic feelings Du Liniang has infused into her painting and respond to Du Liniang's gaze from the painting.

空影落纖娥，動春蕉，散綺羅。春心只在眉間鎖，春山翠拖，春煙淡和。相看四目誰輕可！恁橫波，來回顧影不住的眼兒睸。卻怎半枝青梅在手，活似提掇小生一般？
(Tang 347)

Image of slender grace
trailing her silken robe
where leaves of spring plantain seem to sway:
love's longings locked between her brows,
which curve, gentle as spring hills
to soft mist of hair.
We meet each other's eyes—
how can gaze of either lightly move?
Ah, flashing rays
transfixing me again and again!
And she bears a green sprig of apricot in her hand, as if somehow she were
holding my own self in her arms! (Birch, *Peony* 145)

When Liu finally pays attention to Du Liniang's image, especially the way it captures her gesture and expression, he can no longer take his eyes off it; this attention is precisely what Du Liniang wishes for when she draws her self-portrait. With much more advanced knowledge of Du Liniang's emotional investment in this self-portrait than Liu, the reader is likely to regard Liu's response to Du's painting as delayed. And it is precisely this delayed response that makes Liu a rather comic figure and an inferior lover in the play.

By alluding to Liu Mengmei's viewing process in his delineation of Li Feiyun's response to Huo Duliang's portrait of Hua Xingyun, Ruan Dacheng parodies the mystification of *qing* in this dramatic masterpiece. Liu Mengmei's delayed response to Du Liniang's image starts with his mistaking the image of Du Liniang for a Buddhist deity and continues with his mis-

categorizing of Du's self-portrait as a "*xingle tu* of a mortal girl." In a playful twist on Liu Mengmei's reading of Du's self-portrait, what Li Feiyun gets in *The Swallow's Letter* is precisely a *xingle tu*, even though what she is supposed to receive is the image of a Buddhist deity.

Xingle tu is a particular category of portraits in the Chinese artistic tradition. According to Richard Vinograd, *xingle tu* usually depict the subjects, mostly male literati, in casual settings that denote their leisure interests and elevated tastes (9). Liu Mengmei's misinterpretation of Du Liniang's self-portrait as a *xingle tu*, a lighthearted self-celebration, does not match the reader's understanding of Du Liniang's painting as a serious self-writing. Huo Duliang's portrait of Hua Xingyun depicting Hua enjoying her companionship with her lover in the springtime, however, is a good example of *xingle tu*. While Du Liniang invites a response to her gaze from her self-portrait and states her longing for a romantic partner in her poetic inscription, Hua Xingyun asks her lover Huo Duliang to paint himself into the painting and mark the portrait as a celebration of their fulfilled romantic desire.

After initially rejecting Huo Duliang's *xingle tu* for Hua Xingyun as an object of indecency, Li gradually develops a fascination with the striking similarity between herself and the female figure in the painting. While we may interpret Liu Mengmei's misreading of Du Liniang's self-portrait as a failure to recognize himself as the intended viewer of this painting, we can also sum up Li Feiyun's misinterpretation of Huo Duliang's portrait in a similar way: as she mistakenly associates herself with the female subject in the painting. Li Feiyun is right to identify the intimacy between Huo and Hua displayed in the painting, but as the reader understands, her fantasy about this painting as a gift from her secret admirer is an over-reading. After wondering how the painter might have managed to get a glimpse of her, Li tries to

convince herself of the significance of this randomly received object. She frames her anxiety about how to read the painting in terms of authenticity:

心事忒無端，惹春愁為這筆尖。啞丹青問不出真和贗，將為偶然，如何像得這般。
(Ruan 512)

The weight on my mind came from nowhere,
The tip of the painting brush triggered my spring sadness.
I ask this silent painting whether it is authentic or fake but get no response.
If it is just a random object,
Why does the woman depicted resemble me so much?

Later in the play, just before Li's romantic agony becomes unbearable, she will repeat a similar concern. Instead of authorship, the “*zhen*” 真 (authentic) and “*yan*” 贗 (fake) binary here seems to refer to the emotional content of the painting. What Li Feiyun is interested in is whether the romantic relationship depicted in the painting conveys real romantic feelings for her as the intended receiver and viewer of the painting.

The evocative power of the painting is certainly real. But if we take Li Feiyun's question about authenticity seriously, then the answer is a definite no. The original comment on Li Feiyun's viewing experience included in the *Huaiyuan tang* 懷遠堂 edition of *The Swallow's Letter* explains the initiation of Li's romantic feelings as “*Qing* where there is no *qing*” (*wuqing zhong zhi qing* 無情中之情) (Ruan 151).⁸ This ambiguous comment leads to several possible interpretations. On the one hand, it seems to praise Li Feiyun as “a person with feelings” (*youqing ren* 有情人) whose response to the painting makes a lifeless object a stimulant for emotions. But on the other hand, it draws one's attention to the irony that Li has imposed her fantasy on a painting that has nothing to do with her whatsoever. The commentator blames Li's maid for directing Li's focus onto the physical similarity between Li and the female figure in the

⁸ *Huaiyuan tang* is the name of Ruan Dacheng's study. The publication of the *Huaiyuan tang* edition might have been supervised by Ruan himself.

painting, as he playfully suggests “全是這丫頭撩撥挑動” (“it is all because of this maid’s teasing”) (Ruan 150). But this comment targeting the maid seems to reinforce the impression that Li’s active reading of Huo Duliang’s painting is inappropriate.

Li Feiyun’s response to the painting contributes to her development as a desiring subject; it also paradoxically suggests the captivating power of Huo’s portrait, an accidental gift. As quoted earlier in the chapter, Liu Mengmei’s delayed response to Du Liniang’s painting creates an impression of passivity; after encountering Du’s portrait unexpectedly, Liu later becomes enchanted by Du Liniang’s gaze in the painting. His enchantment confirms Du Liniang’s success in commemorating her subjectivity and conveying her desire in this self-portrait. Similar to Liu Mengmei’s experience, Li Feiyun’s development as a desiring subject is the consequence of a coincidence. In other words, though Li Feiyun may seem like a direct descendant of Du Liniang on the surface, her development as a desiring subject lacks the resolution and agency displayed by Du Liniang’s experience. Ruan Dacheng’s elaboration on how the painting ends up in Li’s hands encourages the understanding of Li’s *qing* and her relationship with Huo Duliang as matters of fate. The heightened comic mode in Ruan’s elaboration, as summarized in the previous section, seems to be a self-reflexive note on the concept of “fate” as the playwright’s artificial design. It also responds ironically to Tang Xianzu’s renowned statement in his preface to *The Peony Pavilion*: “情不知所起，一往而情深” (“No one knows why individuals fall in love, yet love grows ever deeper”) (Tang 1; Birch, *Peony* ix). According to Tang Xianzu, it is impossible to trace the origin of deep *qing*, and no one knows why individuals fall in love. However, it is overly clear that Li Feiyun’s *qing* starts from an unsatisfied wife’s negligence and her own far-fetched interpretation of a painting—mundane personal mistakes in both cases.

To a certain degree, *The Swallow's Letter* continues the theme of love and misunderstanding in Ruan Dacheng's previous play *Chundeng mi* 春燈謎 (Spring Lantern Riddles, 1633), in which the male protagonist Yuwen Yan and the female protagonist Wei Yingniang unite after a series of misidentifications. In the concluding meta-theatrical scene of the play, some street performers summarize the events within the play as “ten mistakes” and draw this conclusion for the entire play:

滿盤錯事如天樣，今來兼古往，功名傀儡場，影弄嬰兒像，饒他算清來，到底是個糊塗帳。(Ruan 168)

On the chessboard of life mistakes spread like swarms of stars in the sky,
From time immemorial,
Honors and fame are just subjects of the puppet theater,
And people with these worldly desires are like naïve babies in a shadow play.
Upon calculation,
Life is after all just a messy account book.⁹

This concluding remark questions whether we, as human beings, can expect ourselves to always make the right judgment or decision. Furthermore, just as a messy account book does not necessarily result in bad business, mistakes we make may have positive consequences.

While in *The Swallow's Letter* mistakes initiate romance, in *Spring Lantern Riddles*, romance is eventually realized regardless of how many mistakes have been made in the process. Some of the contemporary readers of *Spring Lantern Riddles* interpreted this play as Ruan Dacheng's attempt to excuse himself for all the problematic decisions he had made in his political career. But the renowned literatus official 王思任 Wang Siren (1576-1646) elaborates on the motif of mistake and its relationship to the discourse of *qing* in his preface to *Spring Lantern Riddles*. Wang writes:

⁹ *Spring Lantern Riddles* has another title, *Shi cuoren* 十錯認 (Ten Misidentifications).

然予斷之，兩言而止，天下無可認真，而惟情可認真；天下無有當錯，而惟文章不可不錯。情可認真，此相如，孟光之所以一打而中也。文章不可不錯，則山樵花筆之所以參伍而綜也，作《易》者其有憂心乎？山樵之鑄錯也，接道人之愍夢也，《夢》嚴出世，《錯》寬入世，至夢與錯，交行與世，以為世固當然，天下事豈可問哉？(Ruan 170)

But as I see it, two sentences can summarize the matter: There is nothing in this world that should be seen as authentic, except *qing*; there is nothing in this world that should be mistaken, only literary writings cannot be without (plots of) misidentifications. *Qing* is worthy of seriousness, it was why Sima Xiangru and Meng Guang could achieve their (romantic) goals without delay. Literary writings cannot be without (plots of) misidentifications, so Shanqiao's (Ruan Dacheng) brilliant brush creates such intricate writings that the writer of *I Ching* might feel concerned. Shanqiao's complexity follows the Tang Xianzu's naïve dreams. Tang's *Four Dreams* are serious about transcendence, Shanqiao's *Ten Misidentifications* is lenient toward the mundane. When dreams and mistakes become intertwined in this world, and one thinks it is how the world is supposed to be, how can anything that happens under Heaven be questioned?

Here Wang plays with the word *cuo* 錯, which can mean either “misidentification” or “intricacy.”

In both *Spring Lantern Riddles* and *The Swallow's Letter*, characters' mistakes make up the complex plot lines. As Wang Siren points out, “*cuo*” is Ruan Dacheng's unique contribution to the dramatic elaboration on *qing*, of which Tang Xianzu was a major promoter. Wang uses the word *han* 愍 (naive) to define Tang Xianzu's dramatic works and highlight Tang's use of the dream theme to depict infatuation. But as Wang Siren reminds us, Tang was ultimately interested in the possibility of transcendence. Among Tang's four works, the latter two, *Nanke ji* 南柯記 (The Nanke Dream, 1600) and *Handan ji* 邯鄲記 (The Handan Dream, 1601) are deliverance plays, in which their protagonists eventually see through the emptiness of vanity and worldly pleasures. According to Wang Siren, the trajectory of Tang Xianzu's dramatic composition suggests that the authentic *qing* embodies the potential of transcendence. Ruan Dacheng seems to have little investment in the elevating power of *qing*. In fact, *The Swallow's Letter*, in which a deprived young woman fantasizes about a romantic relationship and secures her romance in a marriage, seems to be a tongue-in-cheek comment on Tang Xianzu's aspiration

for enlightenment. Even though Tang elaborates on the theme of transcendental *qing* in the preface to *The Peony Pavilion*, the play itself revolves around sexual desire and its fulfillment. In Ruan's *chuanqi* plays, *qing* works as a presumption that allows multiple plot threads to be eventually tied together for the conventional *datuanyuan* 大團圓 (grand reunion). In this process of tying-up, mistakes are excused, and flaws are forgiven. By exploring the stylistic potentials of the discourse of *qing*, Ruan Dacheng also brings the discourse down to the imperfect reality of misunderstanding and misidentification. This is probably what Wang Siren means by *kuan rushi* 寬入世 (lenient to the mundane).

Wang Siren considers the complexity of Ruan's plotline, highlighted by series of mistakes and misidentifications, to be Ruan's major contribution to the theatrical arts after Tang Xianzu promoted *qing* as the major theme of the *chuanqi* theater. But to some critics, narrative complexity was aesthetically problematic. In the early Qing, orthodox scholars such as Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610-1695) would regard narrative complexity as merely catering to people who have no taste at all. In his preface to a collection of dramas composed by Hu Zicang 胡子藏, Huang writes: “顧近日之最行者，阮大鍼之偷竊，李漁之蹇乏，全以關目轉折，遮僮父之眼，不足數矣” (“Let's take a look at playwrights who are most popular these days: Ruan Dacheng's appropriation, Li Yu's deficiency, both of them rely on complex plotlines to delude vulgar people. Their works are not worth consideration”) (217). Huang expresses his dissatisfaction with contemporary taste in drama. Like many other scholars in the early Qing, Huang seems very critical about the literary and scholarly outputs from the late Ming to the Ming-Qing transition. Before Huang's unsurprising complaint about the degenerate quality of trendy dramas from Ruan Dacheng and Li Yu, he praises Hu Zicang's ability to reproduce the aura of the Yuan dramas. When writing this preface, Huang probably did not realize the irony

that the understanding of the Yuan Dynasty as the era that produced unsurpassable plays was itself a late Ming creation.¹⁰ Huang offers his theory on how the language of drama (*qu* 曲) is distinct from poetry (*shi* 詩) and song lyrics (*ci* 詞) because of its earthiness (*su* 俗) and authenticity (*zhen* 真). As Huang locates *qu* in the lyrical tradition, he hardly pays attention to the narrative aspect of drama.¹¹ When Huang accuses Ruan Dacheng of “appropriation” (*touqie* 偷竊), he does not offer a clear explanation for this remark. According to his later comment on Ruan’s use of intricate plotlines as a “cover-up” for “*touqie*,” this phrase “*touqie*” seems to suggest that Ruan Dacheng’s dramatic works are undistinguished in aspects other than narrative complexity. Huang’s accusation actually reveals how far Ruan’s works have traveled from the ideals of “earthiness” and “authenticity” that Huang sees as the distinguishing features of drama. In the refined artificial world created by Ruan Dacheng, even the most spontaneous force of *qing* becomes a plot device.

2.4 The Shaky Love Triangle

In *The Swallow’s Letter*, *qing* is manifested in a love triangle. Ruan playfully underlines this neat structure as an artificial design by inserting a hint of reality towards the end of the play. Approaching the conclusion, when the three characters from the love triangle finally gather, *qing* no longer has the power to unite them. As the brief summary of the plot has suggested, *The Swallow’s Letter* is comprised of several lines of events that eventually lead to Huo Duliang’s

¹⁰ Patricia Sieber explains how the Late Ming literati recreated Yuan dramas as the ideal dramatic works for their taste through editing, commentary, and publication in her book *Theatres of Desire: Authors, Readers, and the Reproduction of Early Chinese Song-Drama, 1300-2000*.

¹¹ As Wang Ayling points out in her reading of Jin Shengtian’s commentary on *Xixiang ji*, some late Ming and early Qing critics, such as Jin Shengtian 金聖嘆 (1608-1661), did appreciate plays as narrative art, not just a vehicle for poetic expressions. See Wang’s article “Wenben yishi yu yuedu de zhuanhua: lun Jin pi *Xixiang ji* zhi lilun yihan 文本意識與閱讀的轉化: 論金批西廂記之理論意涵 (803).

worldly successes. One thread of events revolves around the two contrasting male characters, Huo Duliang and Xianyu Ji. Another follows Huo Duliang's love affairs with two almost identical female characters, Hua Xingyun and Li Feiyun. As Huo's affairs conclude with bigamy, *The Swallow's Letter* predates the popular trend of early Qing *caizi jiaren* novels, which celebrate the talented male protagonist's union with two or more wives who have equal beauty and talent. According to Keith McMahon's study of early Qing *caizi jiaren* novels, such bigamy suggests a "compromised" male fantasy about polygamy in response to women's demand for monogamy and stands for "a chaste abbreviation of or metaphor for polygamy" (*Misers*, 121). Polygamy is a contested institution, as it requires not only justification from the man but also toleration from his primary wife. In *The Remedy for Jealousy*, Yang Qi legitimizes his acquisition of Xiaoqing in terms of *qing*. But the primary wife Madam Yan's delayed acceptance nevertheless calls the husband's behavior into question. Similar to *The Remedy for Jealousy*, *The Swallow's Letter* invites the reader to view Huo Duliang's two love affairs with skepticism.

The compiler of *Quhai zongmu tiyao* 曲海總目提要 (The Comprehensive Catalog with Content Summaries of the Ocean of Songs), Dong Kang (1867-1947), for example, reads these two love affairs as references to the playwright Ruan Dacheng's career paths in his note on Ruan's play:

按劇中霍都梁，大鍼自寓也。先識妓女華行雲，行雲是門戶中人，以比（崔）呈秀。後娶鄺飛雲，是貴家之女，以比東林。是時東林及呈秀之黨相攻，皆互詆為門戶也，其云：“朱門有女，與青樓一樣”，暗詆東林也。其云：“走兩路功名的是單身詞客”，大鍼自比兩路兼走，未嘗偏著一黨也。(434-435)

Note that Huo Duliang in the play is referring to Ruan Dacheng himself. Huo gets to know the courtesan Hua Xingyun first. Xingyun is in the (lowly) house of courtesans. Ruan is comparing Cui Chengxiu to a lowly courtesan.¹² Huo then marries Li Feiyun,

¹² Cui Chengxiu was a Ming official and a major figure of Wei Zhongxian's eunuch party.

who is the daughter of an elite family. Li stands for the Donglin faction. Back then when Donglin faction and Chenxiu's eunuch party were fighting, they slandered each other as the house of prostitutes. The line in Ruan's play "the daughter behind the vermilion gate is the same as the woman in the courtesan business" is an indirect attack on the Donglin followers. The line "the one who walks two paths of honor and fame is the single literary man" is Dacheng's self-reference: he follows both the Donglin faction and Chenxiu's party without favoring either group.

According to Dong Kang, Ruan Dacheng declares his political neutrality through his play. He also suggests that by pairing an elite woman with a courtesan in his play, Ruan adds a cynical comment on the self-righteousness of the Donglin faction. Ruan Dacheng's political legacy must have prompted Dong Kong to read this play along this line. This method of reading plays as insinuation (*yingshe* 影射) and a tool of satire (*fengci* 諷刺) had a long-established history before the compilation of *Quhai zongmu tiyao*.

Soon after Ruan's downfall, Zhang Dai 張岱 (1597-1689), an admirer of Ruan's dramas and their stage adaptations, commented on Ruan's art. In his memoir *Tao'an mengyi* 陶庵夢憶 (Dream Reminiscences of Tao'an, 1775), Zhang writes that Ruan's plays are all about slamming and mocking society, as well as blackening the reputation of the Donglin faction (33).¹³ Zhang, however, never specified or explained the references to social reality in Ruan Dacheng's plays as Dong Kang did. This reception of plays as critiques of and attacks on contemporary society seemed to be so popular in the late Ming and early Qing that Li Yu 李漁 (1610-1680) listed "guarding against satire" (*jie fengci* 戒諷刺) at the beginning of his advice for theater enthusiasts in his *Xianqing ouji* 閒情偶寄 (Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling, 1671). Li Yu warns playwrights against venting their personal resentment through words; he also cautions the audiences and readers of dramatic works not to overread plays or impose satirical meanings onto them. Since Dong Kang is writing almost three hundred years after the publication of *The*

¹³ The memoir was published for the first time in 1775.

Swallow's Letter, his interpretation of the love triangle in the play as representative of Ruan Dacheng's political relationships with the Donglin faction and the eunuch party might be far-fetched. But the sense of cynicism implied in Ruan's construction of the love triangle, which Dong Kang detected, deserves scrutiny.¹⁴

Just before the play ends with Huo Duliang's festive weddings with both Li Feiyun and Hua Xingyun, the two love affairs come into conflict with each other. In terms of narrative structure, this interlude before the grand reunion creates suspense and a humorous effect as it counters audiences' expectation for an idealized love story. But it also brings back the question of the generation of *qing*. When Li Feiyun reads her own fantasy onto a painting intended for Hua Xingyun, the affection between Hua Xingyun and Huo Duliang becomes challenged. This tension finally explodes at the end of the play after Huo Duliang is awarded his official title. The overjoyed Huo comments that Hua, Li, and the image of Hua in the painting (which Li had misidentified as an image of herself) make a glorious trio. Huo has used the similarity between Hua, Li, and the female figure in the painting to justify his romantic pursuit of these two beauties. His comment on the "glorious trio" strikes a self-congratulating note, praising his own success in winning both Hua and Li's favor. But Hua and Li refuse to accept that the painting can act as an inspiration for and witness of love for both of them. To Huo's surprise, an argument breaks out between these two women after they find that only one flower coronet, which indicates honorary recognition from the emperor, has been prepared. Li Feiyun and Hua Xingyun bitterly attack each other's relationship with Huo Duliang:

¹⁴ The modern scholar Allison Hardie has noticed that some textual and paratextual details in Ruan Dacheng's printed dramas may suggest Ruan's works are self-writings: for example, Ruan uses the name of his own study "Huaiyuan tang" for the studies in his plays; the illustrations of his dramas often include a figure with a big beard, which, according to Hardie, refers to Ruan Dacheng; and the obsession with the theme of mistaken identities can be a reflection of Ruan's own concern about false political accusations. See Hardie's article "Self-Representation in the Dramas of Ruan Dacheng (1587-1646)" (72-79). Hardie's essay reminds the reader of Ruan Dacheng's personal investment in his dramatic writings. These details, however, do not fully support an autobiographical reading of Ruan Dacheng's plays.

(酈飛雲) : 一鞍一馬正相當，哪有側出的行雲到要戀楚王？

(華行雲) : 盟言曾燒下普陀香，蓮花作證非虛謊，怎生別岫的飛雲倒把神女搶？
(621)

(Li Feiyun): One saddle for one horse, how should Running Cloud from the side long for the King of Chu?

(Hua Xingyun): We made a vow while burning incense for Guanyin from Mount Putuo, the lotus flowers certainly testify our commitment, how could the Flying Cloud from a cave elsewhere replace the goddess?¹⁵

Li Feiyun attempts to use the analogy “one saddle for one horse” to remind Hua Xingyun that her marriage with Huo Duliang has already taken place and Hua’s position will certainly be secondary. The former courtesan, Hua Xingyun, however, alludes to Huo’s vow in front of the portrait of Guanyin and reminds Li that she is only an intruder to her romance with Huo Duliang. Their argument seems to suggest that bigamy is not only morally inappropriate but also emotionally impossible. Furthermore, it also reminds Huo Duliang that even though he prefers to see them as the same, they are, after all, two very different individuals—one flower coronet does not fit them both. There can only be one wife; the other must be a concubine.

But a more damaging blow to the legitimacy of Huo’s love affairs comes from Huo Duliang himself. As the argument heats up, Huo Duliang seeks help from the female hunchback doctor who had acted as a go-between for Li Feiyun and Huo Duliang. When the doctor reminds Huo that this argument is an outcry of jealousy, Huo Duliang refutes and corrects her. According to Huo, Li Feiyun and Hua Xingyun are fighting for nothing but official titles. By refusing to consider this fight between Hua Xingyun and Li Feiyun as a manifestation of jealousy, Huo Duliang declares that he takes no responsibility for this disarray; instead of fighting for his love, those women are asking for official recognition as a benefit entailed by their connections to Huo. Given that Huo is the biggest winner in this triangle relationship, his

¹⁵ Running Cloud 行雲 is Hua Xingyun’s given name, Flying Cloud 飛雲 is Li Feiyun’s given name.

cynical interpretation of his lovers' argument seems to have demeaned his own feelings and downgraded them to business transactions. For a reader who has witnessed Huo's devoted affection to Hua Xingyun at the beginning of the play and the diversion of his affection as a result of a drunkard's mistake, Huo's cynicism calls into question his emotional commitment and makes him a parody of the ideal male lovers promised by the *caizi jiaren* convention.

When the conflict is finally solved by the arrival of two flower coronets, Huo Duliang's portrait for Hua Xingyun becomes the only object in Huo Duliang's love journey that has not been duplicated. Huo may explain his new fascination with Li Feiyun as his interest in a close copy of Hua and therefore an elevation of his love for Hua. But for Hua, it means nothing other than substitution. Cyril Birch compares the love triangle in *The Swallow's Letter* with that in the novel *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (The Dream of the Red Chamber), which was written about one hundred years later. The main difference is that, as Birch puts it, in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, the two main female protagonists Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai are "complementary" (Scenes 246). In *The Swallow's Letter*, however, Huo Duliang's two lovers are almost "identical" (Scenes 246). Birch then comments: "what makes Huo Duliang desire both of these women is nothing more admirable or sympathetic than simple sexual acquisitiveness" (Scenes 246). Even though Birch apologizes to his reader that this remark may seem harsh or even unhistorical, I would argue that Ruan Dacheng's comic elaboration on Huo's affair with Li Feiyun, explained in previous subsections, allows the reader to be skeptical about the genuineness and depth of Huo's love interest in two women.

Late Ming readers of the play might not have identified Huo's romances as representations of "sexual acquisitiveness," but they would not miss the irony that Huo attempts to present the idealized *qing* as an excuse for his selfish desire. Unlike Huo Duliang, who

accepts affection from both Li Feiyun and Hua Xingyun with equal joy, Hua Xingyun displays her loyalty to Huo Duliang by not only refusing Xianyu Ji's advances but also disclosing Xianyu's crime of stealing Huo's exam paper to Li Feiyun's father, who is an inspector working at the imperial examinations. If we consider Hua Xingyun's loss at Huo Duliang's double wedding, the burst of jealousy at the end of the play is, as Birch puts it, quite "realistic" (*Scenes* 223).

We may continue Birch's questioning of the insertion of a realistic element at this particular moment of such a stylized drama. First, the display of female jealousy reverses the images of both Li Feiyun and Hua Xingyun as infatuated lovers whose devotion to Huo Duliang leads them to subordinate themselves to his desires. As I have explained in the previous chapter, the depiction of female jealousy is a conventional comic plot element. But when Li Feiyun and Hua Xingyun both become the protagonists of the jealous wife plot all of a sudden, their performance temporarily suspends the audience's expectation for a neat grand reunion and therefore enhances the amusement level of the play. Second, this argument between Li Feiyun and Hua Xingyun does highlight the artificiality and conventionality of a neat grand reunion. This "realistic" moment shows that the playwright is fully aware of the consequences of Huo Duliang's desire to have it all. No matter whether these women are fighting for official recognition or exclusive possession of Huo Duliang's affection, their argument suggests their disbelief in Huo's capacity to love both of them as separate individuals and reminds the reader that their similarity in appearance is simply used by Huo Duliang as an excuse for acquiring both of them as lovers. Ruan Dacheng is not only making fun of the calculating female characters

through Huo Duliang's cynical voice.¹⁶ This "realistic" moment of the play, in which romantic bonds are contested by mundane concerns, seems to suggest again that Ruan Dacheng hardly believes in *qing*'s transcendent power. It requires the audience to keep a critical distance from Huo Duliang's expressions of "abundant *qing*" (*duoqing* 多情) and reinforces a skeptical view of Li Feiyun's role in Huo's romantic adventure.

2.5 *Qing* and Moral Compromises

To a certain degree, Li Feiyun's romance with Huo Duliang is a story of appropriation—claiming love that does not belong to her originally. It therefore parallels Xianyu Ji's theft of Huo Duliang's title of "Top Scholar." Both the romantic story and the crime story start from switched objects—paintings and examination papers in each case. Xianyu's crime, like the background story of the An Lushan Rebellion, sets an obstacle in the way of Huo's romantic adventure. The "villains' intervention" is a conventional plot element in *caizi jiaren* narrative as it highlights the preciousness of true love.¹⁷ But by making Li Feiyun's love affair parallel with Xianyu's examination fraud, Ruan Dacheng adds a twist to the convention: instead of testifying to the strength of the Li-Huo union, the crime story underlines the problematics presented by this relationship.

While the romantic story is initiated by the switching of two paintings, the parallel crime story features Xianyu Ji's success in replacing his nonsensical examination paper with Hua Duliang's excellent work. The scene "*Jiandun*" 奸遁 (A Demeaning Escape), which features the

¹⁶ Most Chinese scholars seem to believe that Huo Duliang is Ruan Dacheng's idealized self and the play reveals Ruan Dacheng's insatiable appetite for women and political power. See studies such as Hu Jinwang's *Rensheng xiju yu xiju rensheng: Ruan Dacheng yanjiu* 人生喜劇與喜劇人生: 阮大鍼研究.

¹⁷ The plotline of *caizi jiaren* narratives almost always includes these main elements: the scholar and beauty fall in love, their love relationship is interrupted by social upheavals or villains' intervention, the scholar achieves success in the imperial examinations, and the scholar and beauty reunite.

re-examination of Xianyu Ji's composition skills after Hua Xingyun reports Xianyu's crime, remains one of the most popular *zhezi xi* 折子戲 (selected scenes for individual performances) from the repertoire of Kun Opera performance until today. The scene offers biting criticism on people who attempt to corrupt the imperial examination system for personal gain—the “Top Scholar” Xianyu Ji escapes through a dog door after being given the task to finish an essay on his own in the Examiner's private study.¹⁸ In this scene, Xianyu Ji's confidence and pride, earned by dishonesty, gradually diminish in series of scares and humiliations from the examiner's servant. Xianyu hardly benefits from the title “Top Scholar” at all.

Some later performers have approached this scene from a perspective totally unexpected by Ruan Dacheng. In his detailed instruction of how to perform the scene, the renowned actor and scholar of Kun Opera, Xu Lingyun 徐凌雲 (1886-1966) draws a connection between Ruan Dacheng as a historical villain and Xianyu Ji, the villain character of Ruan's own creation. Xu writes: “如果要把阮大鍼搬上舞台，我想《狗洞》中的鮮於佶的造像，大可移贈給他” (“If one wants to play Ruan Dacheng onstage, I think he can base this character on Xianyu Ji from ‘Dog Hole’”) (158). He seems to be commenting on the humiliation Ruan had brought upon himself.

In *The Swallow's Letter*, Ruan Dacheng assigns the role type *fujing* 副淨 to play Xianyu Ji. Later Xianyu Ji became a classic, and almost defining, character for this particular role type. *Fujing* was an ancient role type that appeared much earlier than Ming *chuanqi*, but its characteristics were vaguely defined. According to Lu Eting, Ruan Dacheng's creation of this character Xianyu Ji helped to promote *fujing* or “*fu*” 付 as a regular role type in the

¹⁸ In the Kun Opera repertoire, the title of this scene is changed to *goudong* 狗洞 (Dog Hole). Compared with the original title in the dramatic text of *The Swallow's Letter*, “Dog Hole” is much more straightforward. It testifies to the popularization of the Kun Opera.

performances of *chuanqi* by Kun Opera troupes (*Qingdai* 46). The elaborate performances of *fujing* continue to be a distinct feature of Kun Opera. As Lu quotes from Li Dou's *Yangzhou huafang lu* 揚州畫舫錄 (The Painted Boats of Yangzhou):

二面之難，氣局亞於大面，溫敦近於小面，忠義處如正生，卑小處如副末。至乎其極，又服婦人之衣，作花面丫頭，與女腳色爭勝。(qtd. in Lu Eting, *Qingdai* 45)

The difficulty of playing *er'mian* (*fujing*) is: their *qi* (spirit) is inferior to *damian* [*jing*], when they are depicting gentle characters they are close to *xiaomian*, when the characters are loyal *er'mian* act like *zhengsheng*, when the characters are humble they act like *fumo*... In extreme cases, they can even wear women's clothes and take on the roles of comic maids and contend with other female roles.

As a role type, *fujing* is a challenge for performers because of its flexibility and complexity. It can combine different characteristics from other role types and play characters that are hard to define by one trait. Interestingly, Kong Shangren 孔尚任 (1648-1718) also assigns a *fujing* to play Ruan Dacheng in his drama *Taohua shan* 桃花扇 (The Peach Blossom Fan, 1699), which is based on Kong's intensive study of events of the Ming-Qing transition. This role type *fujing* may have helped Kong Shangren give more psychological depth to Ruan Dacheng as a character and reach a multi-dimensional understanding of Ruan Dacheng as a historical figure. Xu Lingyun's interpretation of Xianyu Ji as Ruan Dacheng's self-image was likely influenced by Kong Shanren's characterization of Ruan Dacheng in *The Peach Blossom Fan*. Kong's play has deeply affected the view of Ruan Dacheng among later generations, even though the complexity of Ruan Dacheng as a historical figure and as a character in *The Peach Blossom Fan* seems to have been overlooked.

Coming back to the text of *The Swallow's Letter* itself, a comparison between Xianyu Ji and Huo Duliang helps to delineate Xianyu's complex characteristics. In terms of literary talent and knowledge of the classics, Xianyu is certainly far behind Huo. But unlike the fools in such

satirical plays as Wu Bing's 吳炳 (1595-1647) *Lü mudan* 綠牡丹 (The Green Peony), Xianyu only manifests his stupidity in the literary field. His "street smarts," however, are indisputable. After all, he manages to convince Huo Duliang to take the imperial examinations along with him and succeeds in tricking Huo Duliang to reveal the index number of his examination paper. With accurate understanding of Huo Duliang's timid personality, Xianyu Ji drives Huo Duliang into self-exile with a fake arrest. The fact that the gullible and naïve Huo Duliang will later make a name for himself as a strategist by outsmarting An Lushan's military forces seems to be a laughable exaggeration. The "fake scholar" (*jiaru* 假儒) had long been a conventional comic character in both drama and fiction in the late Ming. But Xianyu Ji's story is not only a joke on unlearned men. It mocks someone like Huo Duliang, whose scholarship and literary talent do not make him less vulnerable to deceptions or worldly desires.

Xianyu Ji receives punishment for appropriating Huo Duliang's examination paper, but his involvement in Huo Duliang's love affairs is more morally complex. Besides stealing Huo Duliang's exam paper and the title of Top Scholar, Xianyu Ji also intends to win over Hua Xingyun after accusing Huo Duliang of seducing Li Feiyun. But without Xianyu's praise for Huo's portrait or his suggestion to mount the portrait, the entire love affair based on the switching of paintings would never have taken place. The rules for operating the imperial examinations, written in black and white, easily settle Xianyu's crime of switching an exam paper. The losses and gains, the right and wrong within the love triangle are, however, much harder to define and evaluate. Should Hua Xingyun be punished for overreaching herself and attempting to become a high official's first wife, even though she is a humble courtesan? It would certainly have been unsettling for contemporary audiences and readers to witness this courtesan's attempt to challenge Li Feiyun's status in the family. But shouldn't Hua Xingyun be

rewarded for her loyalty to Huo Duliang and her courage to expose Xianyu's crime? How can Li Feiyun's interference in Hua Xingyun's romance and her appropriation of Huo Duliang's love for Hua be justified except for her elite status? If one would like to appreciate *The Swallow's Letter* as a sincere celebration of the unions between the talented and the beautiful youths, one needs to suspend these moral inquiries. To a certain degree, Ruan's insertion of Xianyu Ji's crime story, which underlines the calculation of rewards and punishments as a crucial element in the play, makes this suspension rather impossible. It invites the reader to take the festive ending of the play with a grain of salt.

Even though the world of romance in *The Swallow's Letter* is a world of moral compromises, for some readers this dramatic work is still too elegant to be written by someone as notorious as Ruan Dacheng. Huang Zongxi's note on Ruan Dacheng's "*touqie*," quoted earlier, might be referring to rumors about actual stealing. The legend, which says that Ruan Dacheng was not the real author of *The Swallow's Letter*, creates an additional connection between Ruan Dacheng and his character Xianyu Ji—as both men take literary works from others. One version of the legend declares that *The Swallow's Letter* was in fact written by Ruan Dacheng's own daughter Ruan Lizhen, and that Ruan Dacheng took this work away from his daughter and contributed it to the Ming court in order to fulfill his political ambitions. In *Zhongguo nüxing wenxueshi* 中國女性文學史 (The Literary History of Chinese Women), one of the pioneer works on women's literature in pre-modern China, the modern author Tan Zhengbi 譚正璧 (1901-1991) includes a chapter on Ruan Lizhen that argues for her composition of *The Swallow's Letter*. Tan marks his source of information as a collection of anecdotes (*biji* 筆記) from a late-Qing scholar Chai E 柴萼 (1893-1936) (236). In his collection, Chai notes:

阮圓海之《燕子箋》，即鄙薄其人如吳應箕，侯朝宗輩僉許為才人之筆，不知實為其女所做，圓海特潤色之。女名麗珍，字楊龍友之幼子名作霖者。美容色，工詞曲，所撰尚有《夢虎緣》（梁紅玉事），《鸞帕血》等曲，今皆不傳。阮降清，女為某親王所得，甚寵愛之，後為福晉所嫉，鳩死。(568)

People who looked down at Ruan Yuanhai (Ruan Dacheng), such as Wu Yingqi and Hou Chaozong, nevertheless considered *The Swallow's Letter* a work of literary genius. But the play was actually written by Ruan's daughter. Ruan Yuanhai only revised it. The daughter's name was Lizhen. She was betrothed to Zuolin, the youngest son of Yang Longyou. This daughter was beautiful and skilled at lyrics (ci) and plays (qu). Her works include *Menghu yuan* (stories about Liang Hongyu) and *Luanpa xue*. These works are lost today. When Ruan Yuanhai surrendered to the Qing, his daughter was obtained by a prince. The prince favored Lizhen. Lizhen was later poisoned to death by the prince's wife.

Chai's anecdote emphasizes that Ruan Lizheng was a victim of her father's political ambitions, the dynastic transition, and a Manchu woman's jealousy. It is hard to tell if Ruan Lizheng is yet another creation of the male literati's fascination with the talented but vulnerable women. But Tan supports this argument that the daughter is the real author by quoting arias from *The Swallow's Letter*. He suggests that Ruan Dacheng, as an evil man, would be unable to create such convincing female characters as Li Feiyun and Hua Xinyun (Tan 326). Tan's argument may seem unsophisticated to scholars today. But by putting *The Swallow's Letter* under Ruan Lizhen's name, this 20th-century Chinese scholar suddenly gains the freedom to praise *The Swallow's Letter* as a work of refined sensitivity. The debates on the authorship of *The Swallow's Letter*, therefore, can be a strategy for rescuing this dramatic work from its political burden.

2.6 Politicizing and Demonizing the *Caizi Jiaren*

This political discourse turns Ruan Dacheng, a skillful craftsman of irony, into the protagonist of a historical irony. The controversies that surrounded Ruan Dacheng in late Ming history resulted in two contradictory ways of reading *The Swallow's Letter*. On the one hand,

critics such as the compiler Dong Kang made an effort to read political messages hidden in the play; on the other hand, *The Swallow's Letter* has been notorious precisely because it is considered as an apolitical romantic comedy produced during the time of social turmoil. *The Swallow's Letter* is often compared to “*Houting hua*” 後庭花 as “the sound of the fallen dynasty” (*wanguo zhi yin* 亡國之音) that announces the collapse of a dynasty as a result of its over-indulgence in cultural refinement.¹⁹

For those readers who considered *The Swallow's Letter* as merely a romantic play, this theatrical piece works as evidence of Ruan Dacheng's inability to take part in the political realm. Ruan Dacheng was always interested in military strategies. Even when he was banished from his official post, he did not stop socializing with military leaders. In fact, some scholars speculate that Ruan Dacheng used his theatrical works to approach people in power.²⁰ But when political opportunity came once again to Ruan Dacheng, his theatrical works became a target of criticism among people with more secure positions. According to Ji Liuqi's 計六奇 (1622-?) study of the Southern Ming, *Mingji nanlue* 明季南略 (1670), when Ma Shiying 馬士英 (1591-1646) recommended Ruan Dacheng to lead the Bureau of Military Affairs for the Southern Ming regime, a large number of officials opposed Ma's proposal. One of Ma's opponents, Luo Wanxiang 羅萬象, made a sardonic comment on Ruan Dacheng's knowledge of military strategies: “然而大鍼實未知兵，恐“燕子箋”“春燈謎”即枕上之陰符而袖中之黃石也” (“But Dacheng actually knows nothing about commanding the army. I am afraid that *The Swallow's Letter* and *The Spring Lantern Riddles* are his *Huangdi yinfu jing* on the pillow and the yellow

¹⁹ “*Houting hua*” was composed by the last emperor of the Chen Dynasty, Chen Shubao 陳叔寶 (553-604).

²⁰ See Hu Jinwang and Xu Lingyun's preface to *Ruan Dacheng xiqu sizhong* (2).

rock inside his sleeve”) (Ji 42).²¹ For someone like Luo, complex stories such as *The Swallow’s Letter* and *The Spring Lantern Riddles* can hardly suggest Ruan’s mental capacity as a strategist. The idea of employing a playwright for the military was nothing but a joke.

Kong Shangren’s *Peach Blossom Fan* continued to publicize this impression of *The Swallow’s Letter* as a sign of cultural decadence. The Prince of Fu, who has been chosen as the head of the surviving Ming regime, is carried away by the performance of *The Swallow’s Letter* and forgets about his fallen empire. As Shen Jing points out in her chapter on *Peach Blossom Fan* in *Playwrights and Literary Games in Seventeenth-Century China*, Kong Shangren sets *The Swallow’s Letter* as an opposite to Tang Xianzu’s *The Peony Pavilion*, whose propagation of the *qing* ideal is also diminished at the end of Kong’s play. She notices the intriguing fact that while Kong cites heavily from *The Peony Pavilion*, there is no quotation from *The Swallow’s Letter* at all, even though both plays have their essential roles in the plot of *The Peach Blossom Fan*.

Shen puts it this way:

The selected lyrics of Du Liniang, which reveal an illusory vision of self and others in the context of *The Peach Blossom Fan*, are intended to represent the confidence in and obsession with a subjective experience in late Ming, a trend to be criticized—but not without nostalgia—by Kong Shangren. Despite being part of late Ming culture, *The Swallow’s Letter* is simply portrayed as a poisonous work to be condemned, as it is deprived of lyrical voice in *The Peach Blossom Fan*. (238)

As Shen has suggested, *The Swallow’s Letter* exists in *The Peach Blossom Fan* as merely a metaphor—a cultural opposite to *The Peony Pavilion*; a play which the noble female character Li Xiangjun would refuse to perform. Within the context of Kong’s play, *The Peony Pavilion* stands for the discovery of subjectivity, which might lead to one’s understanding of his/her political agency during the Ming-Qing transition; *The Swallow’s Letter*, used by Ruan Dacheng

²¹ *Huangdi yinfu jing* 黃帝陰符經 was a book on military strategies. There are contested views on who wrote this book and when it was written. The yellow rock refers to the story about Zhang Liang, who helped Liu Bang establish the Han Dynasty. It is said that Zhang learned military tactics from a book left by Huangshi Gong (Lord Yellow Rock).

as a means to political advancement, only implies the danger of self-interest. By setting *The Peony Pavilion* and *The Swallow's Letter* as opposites, Kong deliberately downplays the intricate intertextuality between these two plays and actually ignores the important role Ruan's play played in the development of the discourse of *qing*. To a certain degree, Ruan's cynical reflection on *qing* had paved the way for Kong Shangren's powerful questioning of *qing*'s legitimacy in the time of dynastic changes.

The Ruan Dacheng character in Kong's *The Peach Blossom Fan* desperately craves validation of both his artistic skills and his political influence. Kong dramatizes the fact that Ruan, unlike Huo Duliang in *The Swallow's Letter*, cannot get both. The scene "Zhenxi" 偵戲 (Inspecting on the Play) revolves around Ruan Dacheng's inquiry about the reception of his play by the Revival Society, which includes direct descendants of the Donglin faction. The four major members of the Revival Society celebrate Ruan Dacheng's genius as a dramatist. But they conclude the play-watching party with denunciation of Ruan Dacheng's opportunistic reliance on the eunuch party and the waste of his genius for the wrong cause. This historical gathering of the Revival Society was actually mentioned by one of its participants, Mao Xiang 冒襄 (1611-1693), in his memoir commemorating his beloved courtesan-turned-concubine Dong Xiaowan 董小宛 (1624-1651):

秦淮中秋日，四方同社諸友感姬為余不辭盜賊風波之險，間關相從，因置酒桃葉水關。時在座為眉樓顧夫人，寒秀齋李夫人，皆與姬為至戚，美其屬余，咸來相慶。是日新演《燕子箋》，曲盡情豔。至霍華離合處，姬泣下，顧李亦泣下。一時才子佳人，樓臺煙水，新聲明月，俱足千古，至今思之，不啻遊仙枕上夢幻也。(21-22)

It was Mid-Autumn Day at the Qinhuai River. My friends of the Revival Society from all over were moved by Dong Xiaowan's endeavor to follow me all the way, disregarding the dangers of bandits and thieves. They arranged a banquet at the water pavilion at Taoye. At the banquet there were also Lady Gu (Gu Mei) from the Mei Tower and Lady Li (Li Wanjun) from the Hanxiu Studio. Both ladies were Dong's close friends. Delighted by the fact that Dong Xiaowan found her sense of belonging in me, they came

to congratulate us. On that day, *The Swallow's Letter* was put onstage for the first time. The play displayed the beauty of *qing* perfectly. Dong cried over the scenes of Huo Duliang and Hua Xingyun's separation and reunion. Scholars, beauties, towers and terraces over misty water, new music under the bright moon—everyone and everything on that night deserved to be remembered eternally. When I think of that night now, it seems nothing less than a dream on the magic pillow that makes one enjoy the illusion of wandering as an immortal.

In this memoir with abundant romantic sentiments, Mao Xiang mentions nothing about the polemic against Ruan Dacheng. Instead, he emphasizes the almost dreamlike quality of the performance—the *caizi jiaren* narrative onstage corresponded perfectly with the *caizi jiaren* story offstage, of which Mao Xiang and Dong Xiaowan were the protagonists.

The dream quality of the play onstage and the life offstage, however, does not imply a sense of perfection. Like Hua Xingyun in Ruan's play, Dong Xiaowan was a celebrated courtesan before she married into Mao's family. Even though her union with Mao Xiang would later become legendary, the relationship started out as quite unpromising due to Mao's lack of commitment. Before this Mid-Autumn celebration, Mao had turned down Dong's company on several occasions because of his concerns about family obligations and career advancement. Dong's tears, shed at the scenes of separation and reunion, seemed to comment on her difficult love journey. One wonders if Mao Xiang saw himself in the rather self-centered character Huo Duliang and whether the audience members were equally moved by Huo's love affair with Li Feiyun as they were by Huo's romance with Hua Xingyun. We only know that despite his contempt for Ruan Dacheng, Mao Xiang's appreciation for *The Swallow's Letter* was enduring. After the fall of the Ming, he recruited many members of Ruan Dacheng's family troupe and kept *The Swallow's Letter* in the repertoire of his home theater at his private Shuihui Garden. As *The Swallow's Letter* came under heavy political scrutiny during the Qing dynasty, the taste for

Ruan's drama as a romantic play would die out, just like the courtesan culture represented by Mao's union with Dong Xiaowan.

2.7 Conclusion

Setting its political controversies aside, *The Swallow's Letter* is an exquisite romantic comedy that utilizes "coincidences" and "mistakes" not only as plot devices but also as central themes. In this play, the shaky love triangle, formed as a result of a drunkard's mistake, an "innocent" maiden's over-reading, and a young scholar's sexual acquisitiveness, somehow finds its balance and even receives official recognition towards the end. In *The Swallow's Letter*, *qing* works as a presumption that allows multiple threads of plot to be eventually tied together for the weddings in the end—even though what really connect characters are personal mistakes.

While the late Ming critic Wang Siren considered the intricacy of Ruan's writing as a major contribution to *chuanqi* theater after *The Peony Pavilion*, someone like Huang Zongxi would categorize it as artistic degeneration. The complex plotline, featuring mistakes and compromises, conveys Ruan Dacheng's cynical understanding of *qing*: in Huo's love triangle, the authenticity of *qing* no longer matters. Unlike his examination paper, Huo's *qing* can be duplicated, appropriated, and used as an excuse for sexual acquisition. In this regard, the world of *qing* is indeed amoral and degenerate.

Critics such as Dong Kang, following the contested tradition of reading plays as social satires, interpreted Ruan Dacheng's cynicism as a statement on political neutrality and opportunism. But *The Swallow's Letter* also existed as an example of apolitical theater and a metaphor for cultural decadence and sensual indulgence at the end of the Ming. Generations of readers have struggled with the contradiction between the apolitical content of the play and the

playwright's ambitions as a politician. The most convenient solution seems to be negating Ruan Dacheng as the author of the play. When later performers, such as Xu Lingyun, imagined Ruan Dacheng according to Ruan's own comic villain character Xianyu Ji, Ruan's composition of *caizi jiaren* plays became a joke as well. Just as Ruan Dacheng was suspicious about the transcendent power of *qing*, his readers were unconvinced that his literary sensibility could redeem his political mistakes. But ironically, both the promoters of *qing* and Ruan Dacheng would shoulder the burdens of history during the Ming-Qing transition.

Chapter Three

Caizi and Jiaren in the Market:

Male Artists and Their Female Forgers in Li Yu's *Ideal Love Matches*

3.1 Introduction

In his influential collection of outstanding plays, *Nanshuying qupu* 納書楹曲譜 (The Collection of Tunes from the Nashuyin Studio, 1792), the compiler Ye Tang 葉堂 points out that Li Yu was a direct successor of Ruan Dacheng in terms of dramatic composition. According to Ye, the “causticity” (*jianke* 尖刻) of Ruan’s writings gave rise to Li Yu’s 李漁 (1611-1680) “malicious and clumsy compositions” (*e’zha* 惡札) (486). Ye left his negative comment on both Ruan Dacheng and Li Yu unexplained, however, as if it stated an obvious fact.

Like Ruan Dacheng, whose literary merit has long been overlooked because of his political notoriety, Li Yu had been considered a frivolous figure in literary history until recent decades. Although he had little luck with the imperial examinations, Li Yu nevertheless managed to make a living through his active participation in various cultural productions, including writing, publication, theatrical performance, and garden design.¹ As a professional writer and cultural entrepreneur, Li Yu was never a member of the cultural or political elite, even though his career was closely tied to literati circles. During the Ming-Qing transition, Li Yu, who was born in the late Ming, did not follow the path of the Ming loyalists. His decision to carry on his career into the new dynasty and his success in catering to the interests of the new

¹ Li only managed to pass the first level of the examinations. It did not help him obtain an official position.

cultural elites of the Qing earned him a bad reputation as a “literary hack” (*bangxian wenren* 幫間文人).²

To a certain degree, it was studies in the West that rescued Li Yu from unresolvable debates on his moral and political integrity and made him into one of the best-studied authors from the long 17th century. Scholarship in the 1980s, such as Robert Hegel’s study on Li Yu’s erotic novel *Rou putuan* 肉蒲團 (The Carnal Prayer Mat, 1657), Eric Henry’s research on four of Li Yu’s *chuanqi* plays, and Patrick Hanan’s examination of Li Yu’s mastery of multiple genres brought renewed attention to Li Yu’s literary genius, especially his great sense of humor and irony. This scholarly interest in Li Yu continues to the present day. More recently, scholars have taken a heightened interest in Li’s participation in and contribution to the cultural production of the early Qing. Lenore J. Szekely’s dissertation, “Playing for Profit: Tracing the Emergence of Authorship through Li Yu’s (1611-1680) Adaptations of His *Huaben* Stories into *Chuanqi* Drama,” examines Li Yu’s responses to “the vacuum of authority produced by increasing literary production” in early modern China (31). Also commenting on Li Yu’s contribution to the “modern,” S. Kile’s dissertation, “Toward an Extraordinary Everyday: Li Yu’s (1611-1680) Vision, Writing, and Practice,” argues that Li Yu’s cultural enterprise introduced a new way of appreciating everyday life to the cultural elite of the early Qing. The scholarship on Li Yu has constructed him as a representative figure of the long 17th century, during which social and cultural hierarchies were constantly challenged by the development of commerce and political upheavals.

² Lu Xun, one of the most important figures of modern Chinese literature and an erudite reader of vernacular fiction of imperial China, made this title famous for Li Yu, even though the real target of Lu Xun’s criticism were Lu Xun’s own contemporary literary men. See Lu Xun’s article “Cong bangmang dao chedan” 從幫忙到扯淡.

Among Li Yu's writings, his *chuanqi* repertoire has begun to draw more attention in recent years. Some of Li Yu's plays are direct adaptations from his own short stories. Szekley has pointed out in her study that Li Yu's plays seem less provocative than his vernacular stories because the intended reader for the vernacular stories was Li Yu's "zhiji" 知己 (bosom friend), while the plays were produced for a broader audience (24). This conclusion, however, needs to be refined, because the comparison excludes Li Yu's dramatic writings that were not adapted from short stories. Even though Li Yu does address the importance of popular appeal in his dramatic writings, the contemporary audiences and readers of his plays were mostly literati. Also, an author's desire for a broader audience does not necessarily lead to an intentional reduction of sophistication or provocativeness in his writings. Within Li Yu's *chuanqi* repertoire, *Yi zhong yuan* 意中緣 (Ideal Love Matches, 1655) would probably be considered a "mild" one. After all, Li Yu's *chuanqi* plays include such stories as a freak of nature marrying three beautiful ladies, two women becoming the wife and concubine of a literary man to fulfill their homoerotic desire, and a couple turning into fish before turning back into humans. Unlike these plays, which are obvious subversions of the *caizi jiaren* convention, *Ideal Love Matches* looks like a typical rendition of the convention on the surface.

However, *Ideal Love Matches* stands out in Li Yu's dramatic writings because of its references to real cultural celebrities from the very recent past. Similar to Wu Bing's *The Remedy for Jealousy*, *Ideal Love Matches* spotlights cultural icons familiar to its contemporary readers. While seventeenth-century literati suspected that Xiaoqing was fictional, the protagonists in Li Yu's play were based on historical figures. *Chuanqi* dramatists during the Ming Qing period tended to draw inspirations from distant history. At the time when *Ideal Love Matches* was published, dramas featuring recent or contemporary affairs became popular, along

with plays conveying nostalgia towards the fallen Ming dynasty. In his article “Onstage Humor, Offstage Voices: The Politics of the Present in the Contemporary Opera of Li Yu” (Li Yu refers to the other early Qing dramatist 李玉), Paize Keulemans suggests that those dramas of contemporary affairs differ from other plays of cultural nostalgia in their uses of news and gossip to convey a sense of political urgency and a call for political engagement (169-170). Li Yu’s *Ideal Love Matches* seems to lie in an odd place in between the two trends of incorporating recent history or contemporary affairs into dramatic writing. Its use of anecdotes from the late Ming appears apolitical, but it hardly glorifies the cultural scene of the past dynasty.

In *Ideal Love Matches*, Li Yu betrothes the female painter Yang Yunyou 楊雲友 (? - 1630s?) to the renowned high official and amateur artist Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636) and fabricates a conjugal connection between the famed “hermit” Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558-1639) and the talented courtesan Lin Tiansu 林天素 (ca.1620 – ca.1642). When the play was published in the 1650s, some contemporary readers might have had personal interactions with the four people featured in the play. In reality, the two male literati celebrities never had love affairs with those two female artists, but their social lives did overlap. The crossed life paths of the four famed people left their marks in the poetry anthology *Chunxingtang shiji* 春星堂詩集 (Poems from the Hall of Spring Stars), compiled by the wealthy merchant and famous patron of arts Wang Ranming 汪然明 (1577-1655). According to the anthology, the four were all participants in Wang’s lavish parties on West Lake before the fall of the Ming. Wang Ranming once presented Yang Yunyou’s portrait of Chen Jiru as a birthday gift for Chen, and he also invited Dong Qichang to comment on Yang’s paintings. Dong praised Yang’s elegant demeanor and her artistic achievement. As a witness of Wang Ranming’s intimate relationship with Lin Tiansu, Chen Jiru commented on Wang’s poetic remembrance of the courtesan. Cao Shujuan points out

in her study of *Chunxingtang shiji* that besides conveying their appreciation of these female artists' talent, the male literati also voice sympathy for these women's lot, and they frequently express their romantic interests in their poems (431).³ Even though the conjugal unions between Yang Yunyou and Dong Qichang, Chen Jiru and Lin Tiansu did not really exist, Li Yu's theatrical representation of these four figures together comments on the late Ming literati culture, whose celebration and commercialization of artistic productions entailed different challenges for talented people based on their genders.

The playwright Li Yu himself did later join Wang Ranming's circle. In his study of the famous courtesan Liu Rushi 柳如是 (1618-1664), Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 (1890-1969) speculates that the character Jiang Huaiyi in Li Yu's play is a reference to Wang Ranming. Wang Ranming played a significant role in the legendary union between Liu Rushi and the renowned poet and high official Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582-1664), and his pursuit of Lin Tiansu was well-known among contemporary literati. Chen Yinke, therefore, comments that Li Yu probably had the romantic relationship between Liu and Qian and the one between Wang and Lin in mind when he wrote the play. The play, therefore, is not just a literary game (*youxi zhi bi* 遊戲之筆), but also embodies particularly deep meanings (*shu you shenyi* 殊有深意):

後來李笠翁作意中緣劇曲，以陽雲友配董玄宰，林天素配陳眉公...然不及柳如是配錢牧齋，林天素配汪然明，更為理想之因緣。此點笠翁亦未嘗不知，不過當時尚有避忌，不然便公然形諸紙墨，其中間有關涉然明者則以“江懷一”或“江秋明”之假名代之，實不得以也。(364)

Later Li Liweng wrote the play *Ideal Love Matches*. He betrothes Yang Yunyou to Dong Qichang and matches Lin Tiansu with Cheng Jiru in this drama... but these matches are not as ideal as the relationship between Liu Rushi and Qian Qianyi, or the one between Lin Tiansu and Wang Ranming. Liweng was not ignorant of this fact. But there was still a taboo back then, so he could not write openly about these matches on the page. When

³ I thank Dr. Li Wai-ye for informing me of Cao's article.

there is anything related to Wang Ranming in the play, the name “Jiang Huaiyi” or “Jiang Qiuming” is used. Li Yu really had no other choice.

Chen does not specify what Li Yu’s concerns were when he decided to conceal the names. But he is probably referring to the fact that the legendary romance between Liu Rushi and Qian Qianyi was nevertheless considered scandalous for their contemporaries. Liu was, after all, a lowly courtesan, and the scholar official Qian Qianyi was nearly forty years her senior. Furthermore, Wang Ranming’s pursuit of Lin Tiansu turned out to be unsuccessful. Whether Li Yu thought of those relationships as ideal, as Chen would think, must remain unknown. As I will explain, however, Li’s elaboration on the fictional ideal love matches is not lacking in biting irony. For Li Yu’s contemporary readers and audiences who might have known Qian Qianyi, Liu Rushi, Wang Ranming, and Li’s protagonists (either in person or by gossip), one of the charms of this play might be its twisted familiarity. There might be some “inside jokes” in the play that are lost to modern readers like us.

The ahistorical matches created by Li Yu seemingly cater to the reader’s interest in consuming the “scholar-beauty” (*caizi-jiaren* 才子佳人) ideal during the Ming-Qing transition. The charm of the play, however, lies in the accentuated artificiality of the “ideal matches” facilitated by forgeries. Li Yu highlights the generic force of *chuanqi* that pushes a narrative toward a perfect conclusion of romantic reunions through repeated uses of the comic convention of disguise. The play starts with Dong Qichang and Chen Jiru donning commoners’ clothes to escape to West Lake in order to avoid high demand for their paintings. During their visit to West Lake, they stop by an antique shop owned by Monk Shikong and discover two high-quality forged paintings signed with their names. Convinced that the forgers are two talented women, Dong and Chen decide to seek them out and marry them. Their searches, however, encounter obstacles. Upon hearing Dong’s plan for a marriage, Shikong, a guileful and licentious man

faking the identity of a monk, hires a bum, Huang Tianjian, to impersonate Dong Qichang. Shikong arranges the marriage between this fake Dong and the forger, Yang Yunyou, before the real Dong Qichang finds where Yang is. Shikong's real motive, however, is to marry Yang Yunyou himself. While Dong Qichang's union with Yang Yunyou is delayed by Shikong's conspiracy, Chen Jiru's romance with Lin Tiansu is interrupted by bandits. Chen, in fact, finds Lin right away after the visit to Shikong's shop, and his proposal of marriage is immediately accepted. But Lin needs to travel to Fujian to bury her parents before the wedding. On her way to Fujian, Lin, disguised as a young scholar, is captured by bandits, who then employ her as a strategist. Only after Chen asks a general to rescue Lin from the bandits is Lin able to reunite with Chen. Lin later puts on a scholar's attire again to help Dong Qichang, who has to move to an official post in Beijing, to secure his marriage with Yang Yunyou. As one may expect from the conventional structure of a *chuanqi* play, *Ideal Love Matches* concludes with Dong's happy marriage with Yang Yunyou and Chen Jiru's reunion with Lin Tiansu. Instead of inverting the truism about the *caizi jiaren* pairing, Li Yu promotes this convention only to expose it as an inversion of reality in *Ideal Love Matches*. Li Yu thereby congratulates himself on his artistic genius and the manipulative power of his creativity.

Among Li Yu's *chuanqi* plays, *Ideal Love Matches* is the only one whose preface and commentary are both written by a woman.⁴ The commentator Huang Yuanjie 黃媛介 (ca. 1620 – ca. 1669), along with Yang Yunyou and Lin Tiansu, represented well the increasing visibility and mobility of talented women in the 17th century.⁵ Huang Yuanjie's preface and marginal comments on Li Yu's play note the tension between the surface celebration of the "scholar-beauty" ideal and the deep-down denial of its possibility. If Li Yu's play is, as Li himself

⁴ Wang Duanshu 王端淑 (1621 – ca. 1701) wrote the preface for Li Yu's *Bimu yu* 比目魚 (The Paired Soles).

⁵ See Dorothy Ko's book *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, especially the chapter "Margins of Domesticity" (117-142).

suggests, produced only for entertainment, how does Huang's commentary promote its playful outlook? How does the commentary help us understand Li Yu's comic transformation of the life stories of the late Ming cultural celebrities in the historical background of the Ming-Qing transition? Focusing mainly on the female leads in *Ideal Love Matches* and sometimes touching upon her personal experiences, Huang reminds the reader of the far-from-ideal lives of female artists in reality. At the same time when Huang praises Li Yu's artistic genius in inverting the two historical female figures' fates, she also leads the reader to question whether this inversion should be read as authorizing poetic justice for talented females or whether it only underlines and intensifies the tragic undertones of their life stories. Huang's commentary, therefore, uncovers the irony in Li Yu's play and highlights the somberness of its historical references.

In this chapter, I argue against the view that the ideal love matches in Li Yu's play confirm the indestructible power of authentic self-expression in the face of market forces (T. Lu, *Cambridge History* 151). I uncover the irony behind Li Yu's portrayal of love relationship as business partnership.⁶ By focusing on the forgery-facilitated romances and the gender dynamics implied by the artist-forgery relationship, I demonstrate how *Ideal Love Matches* invites the reader to question the loaded concept of talent as a reflection of one's innate authenticity and the foundation of the *caizi jiaren* union. I will also argue that Huang Yuanjie's commentary invites us to examine Li Yu's reinvention of two female artists' life stories for theater. Even though the plot centers on the discovery of female artists and the fulfillment of their romances, it offers limited poetic justice to these women. The male literati's romantic interests in talented women go hand in hand with their appropriation of these female artists' expressive voices.

⁶ In her unpublished article "The Real and the Fake in Seventeenth Century Literature," Li Wai-ye gives a more positive reading of the economic calculations in Li Yu's play. Li suggests that Li Yu is proposing economic calculations "as the potential solution to some of the contradictions in late Ming sensibility and social reality"—the promotion of genuineness and the anxiety about the vulnerability of the authentic in this play ("The Real" 33).

3.2 Twisted Authenticity: Romance in the Art Market

Written in the early Qing, Li Yu's *Ideal Love Matches* plays with the multidimensionality of the concept *zhen* 真 (genuineness, authenticity). Scholars have tried to explain the late Ming craze for authenticity as having resulted from intellectual explorations of interiority and from the commercial boom. Authenticity was a celebrated quality in the realm of emotions and feelings; it suggested a challenge to socially conformist behavior and an endorsement of more individualistic expressions of the self. Likewise, the term "authenticity" also promoted authorship as a determining factor in the monetary and aesthetic values of creative works during the late Ming, which saw the expansion of decorative arts, the widespread reuse of artistic elements in such settings as book illustrations, and the growth of forgeries of major artists, all thanks to the development of commerce. The ability to distinguish forged artworks from genuine ones became an important mark of connoisseurship and a strategy of self-promotion among the literati.

The setting in the art market and the use of forged art as a medium for romance certainly set *Ideal Love Matches* apart from other more conventional *caizi jiaren* narratives.⁷ Even though the exchange of artworks, especially poetry, plays an important role in the development of romantic entanglements in *caizi jiaren* narratives, the exchange is usually between the lovers themselves, and no monetary calculation is involved. In Li Yu's play, Dong Qichang and Chen Jiru encounter Yang Yunyou and Lin Tiansu's paintings in an art market that invests in forged artworks for profit. The cases of art forgery add a curious twist to the romantic narrative: Li Yu, who was certainly aware of the two female artists' fame during the late Ming, could simply start

⁷ In her study of Li Yu's romantic plays, Wang Ayling points out that Li Yu expands the space of *caizi jiaren* narratives. The common setting for romance is the garden, but the love stories in Li Yu's dramas can happen in a wider range of places such as the market. See Wang's *Wanming Qingchu xiqu zhi shengmei gousi yu qi yishu chengxian* 晚明清初戲曲之審美構思與其藝術呈現 (492).

the narrative with Dong Qichang and Chen Jiru's appreciation of their works instead of a difficult detection of forgery. One is prompted to ask how this added twist comments on the "ideal matches" between the artists and forgers—that is, whether these matches redeem the world of corruption or whether they are part of the corruption themselves.

In the eyes of the beholder, art forgery can both challenge and intensify the mystification of the genuine. The artist's attitude towards his or her forger, however, can be much more complicated. The issue of forgery became more prevalent and complex after the rise of the art market during the late Ming. Not only anonymous forgers but also celebrity artists helped to promote the market of art forgeries. According to James Cahill, Dong Qichang was one of several artists who definitely hired ghostpainters to meet the demand for his paintings (142). In fact, Dong Qichang was famous for "his disinterest in the quality or even the authenticity of what paintings under his own name reveal" (Cahill 142). Cahill cites Dong Qichang's self-deprecating inscription on one of his lesser albums of landscapes: "The people who make so many fakes of my paintings these days can take this as one of their [fake] Dongs" (142). It seems that Dong did not really mind other painters helping him out with these more formulaic and, therefore, more imitable paintings. As Cahill has suggested, Dong's disinterest in forgery under his name and his clear distinction of serious paintings from formulaic ones could reveal his high standard for his own artistic practice (142). But Dong's display of disinterest might also be a very clever strategy to attribute his lesser works to others and maintain his reputation as a distinguished amateur painter, whose lack of concern about his works on the market differentiated him from lower-status professional artists.

It is more than likely that Li Yu had heard anecdotes about Dong Qichang's ghostpainters. Li Yu's contemporary Zhou Liangong 周亮工 (1612-1672) noted that Dong Qichang

sometimes sought help from his concubines to finish commissioned works (Cahill 142). Li Yu's fabrication of Dong Qichang's "appropriation" of Yang Yunyou as a concubine and a ghostpainter might be inspired by similar "urban legends" about Dong Qichang. Li Yu's depiction of Dong Qichang, however, does not lead us to understand Dong's disregard for forgery as a result of Dong's attachment to his more serious works. Instead, Li Yu portrays Dong Qichang and his best friend Chen Jiru as exhausted artists who have been heavily burdened by their artistic skills.

The drama starts with Chen and Dong traveling to West Lake to escape demands for their paintings. On the one hand, consumers who request their paintings only care for the value of their signatures; on the other hand, the two cultural celebrities themselves understand the function of art production as nothing other than meeting popular demands. Consequently, Dong and Chen, these two representatives of the so-called "amateur painters," are more exhausted than hard laborers from a professional artist's studio. It is because of their negation of any real value in their artistic production and their loss of interest in artistic creation that they come up with the plan to seek out qualified ghostpainters. Dong and Chen rationalize their plan in this way: "只要這真方不誤人間病，又何妨假藥權充市上仙?" ("As long as the real prescription does not mistreat the illness in this world, what does it matter that fake medicine plays the part of the elixir of life on the market?") (Y. Li 325). While the authentic is nothing miraculous, the fake may not be that harmful. Dong Qichang and Chen Jiru's tolerance of forgery certainly reflects their confidence in their unshakable celebrity. But at the same time, this tolerance is the result of their disbelief in their paintings as expressions of true feeling; forgery is no longer a challenge to the authentic when no distinct value is attached to the authentic. Their rather cynical view of art

seems to correspond to their pessimistic understanding of the mundane world, whose “illness” cannot be treated by either real or fake medicines.

3.3 The Power of (Feminine) Self-Expression

On the surface, the following story of Dong and Chen’s discovery of Yang Yunyou and Lin Tiansu’s talent appears to be a narrative of redemption that celebrates the power of art as self-expression. The two women’s paintings, though signed under fake names, win the two male cultural celebrities’ recognition and admiration. Scholars have tended to follow this line of thought. Tina Lu, for example, suggests that even though imposture is a major theme in the play, the play is not a complete negation of the concept of artistic authenticity:

...the play does not simply abandon art’s traditional promises about its expressive powers. Shaped by the market and set onstage, the question of distinguishing the real from the fake has become much more complicated. All four of the main characters, whether elite painter, elite calligrapher, impoverished daughter, or courtesan, make their livings not just with their brushes, but with their ability to convey something distinctively individual, even if fake. Miss Yang’s self-portrait, painted in Dong Qichang’s style and signed with a forgery of his name, nonetheless manages to capture her essence and communicate it to Dong Qichang. Originating as it does in the market, the connection between each artist and his forger is nonetheless incontrovertibly authentic. A forged painting is no less real in the feelings it communicates. (*Cambridge History* 151)

Lu interprets the matches between the four artists as resulting from the creation of art that communicates the “essence” of the self, even though “art” in this case refers to the practice of forgery. But Lu understates the dynamics within the artistic communication depicted in the play. If we take into consideration how the medium of expression and gender play their roles in this communication, we may complicate Lu’s reading and recognize how Li Yu’s work makes fun of the mystification of (feminine) authenticity.

Lu’s account of the play overlooks an important detail: how the forgery is actually detected. Both Dong Qichang and Chen Jiru appear puzzled when they encounter paintings

signed with their names. For Dong Qichang, the brushwork in Yang Yunyou's painting looks just a little suspicious. This prolific amateur artist knows that he cannot rely on his memory to recall whether this painting is created by his own hand or not. He needs the female voice in the poetic inscription on the painting to convince him that this artwork is not his own:

貧閨風透壁全無，
吹得詩腸別樣枯。
呵凍自傳蓬戶影，
也堪補入鄭公圖。(Y. Li 327)

Wind penetrates the shabby walls of the impoverished inner chamber.
It dries out my poetic inspiration.
Breathing onto my hands to warm them, I record the image of this humble abode.
It can be added to Zheng Xia's *A Portrait of Refugees*.⁸

As the poem starts with the phrase *pingui* 貧閨 (the impoverished inner chamber), the female voice is painfully obvious. After a moment of contemplation, Dong suddenly bursts into loud laughter. He explains to his puzzled companions that “若不看诗，哪里辨得出?” (“If I had not read the poem, how could I tell?”) (Y. Li 334). Dong's assumption of equivalence between the speaker and the poet convinces him that this painting depicting a young lady in humble surroundings is an “authentic” self-portrait of a female artist.⁹ If we follow Dong's assumption, which is in line with the Chinese tradition of poetry criticism, and read the poetic voice as autobiographical, then we realize that only someone as uneducated as the fake monk and art dealer Shikong would mistake this painting for one created by Dong's own hand.¹⁰ Chen Jiru, who has more difficulty detecting the authenticity of a painted fan bearing his signature,

⁸ Zheng was an eleventh-century official. He drew “The Portrait of Refugees” to protest against Wang Anshi's economic reform in the reign of the Song emperor Shenzong (1067–1085).

⁹ It is the inscription on the painting that leads Dong to recognize the woman figure as the focal point of the painting. Yang also portrays her father in the painting. The father is depicted as an old man carrying a walking stick and standing right outside of the family hut. Without this hint from the poem, the painting may not be taken as a young lady's self-portrait at all.

¹⁰ It is Shikong who asks Yang Yunyou to fake Dong's painting. When Shikong gets the painting from Yang, he fails to notice the poem and considers this forged painting impeccable.

complains to Dong Qichang about the lack of poetic inscriptions on the fan. Without inscriptions as clues, Chen hesitates to make his judgment, but he gets lucky when Lin Tiansu's servant blatantly declares that Lin has painted the fan.

If we celebrate these male protagonists' eventual recognition of the female artists' skill as a victory of expressive art, shouldn't we also laugh at these male protagonists' abuse of artistic power? Li Yu's joke lies precisely here. Yang Yunyou, the forger, is not even serious about faking; when she adds her poem to the painting, she does not expect either Shikong, the dealer, or his potential customers to understand or care about the difference between the real and the fake. The overly productive artists Dong Qichang and Chen Jiru do not remember their own works, and they rely on pronounced errors—one made by the artist herself and one made by the artist's servant—to detect whether the paintings belong to them or not.¹¹ The romantic relationships built in the art market are lucky accidents entailed by general indifference and ignorance about artistic creation.

If we follow Lu's reading of the drama as a confirmation of authenticity in art, we may ask what kind of authentic messages the female artists' paintings convey to Dong Qichang and Chen Jiru. Dong Qichang correctly detects Yang Yunyou's poverty, and he also highlights this poverty as related to the artist's gender:

假筆真情現，難道我男子效蛾眉？（嘆介）同是一般的技藝，我享這樣的榮華，她受那般的貧困，豈不可憐！為甚的世上的侏儒同怨飽，閨中曼倩獨啼飢？（Y. Li 334）

Authentic feelings are manifested in a forged painting.

How can it be possible that I, a man, imitate a lady?

(sighs.)

With the same level of skill, I enjoy such fame and fortune, while she endures poverty.

What a pity!

¹¹ As Aviva Briefel states in her book *The Deceivers: Art Forgery and Identity in the Nineteenth Century*, the power of forgery lies in its anonymity (37). Yang Yunyou's painting, which states her gender identity loud and clear, is therefore not a forgery of high quality, even though it showcases Yang's extraordinary artistic skill.

Why do male scholars in this world all complain about being full,
While the delicate beauty in the inner chamber alone laments her hunger?

Dong, who has been exhausted by the market and lost his faith in the power of art, would like to think of Yang as a starving artist marginalized by the market because of her gender. However, in the second half of the play, it is precisely Yang's identity as a woman that wins her good business. Dong's readily-presented pity downplays the transgression embodied in Yang's act of forgery. It diverts our attention away from Yang's artistic agency and invites us to understand Yang as a victim of the market who is waiting for Dong's rescue.

For Chen Jiru, the authenticity of Lin's painting resides in its "feminine charm" (*jiaomei* 娇媚)—in other words, in the revelation of the artist's gender. Lin Tiansu sells her forged paintings for a reason different from Yang's. Lin wants to test whether people in Hangzhou have discerning eyes and whether her paintings have achieved the same level of artistry as Chen Jiru's works. Upon seeing the fan painted by Lin Tiansu, Chen Jiru notices "feminine charm" hidden behind the painted images, which are otherwise identical to his own:

心迷，若說是真的呵，我禿筆枯毫，醉後狂時，怎寫得憑般嬌媚？若說是假的呵，又與我的懶雲怪石，偃竹欹松，又纖毫無異。好教我狐疑，難道是自避嫌名，卻請他人書諱？終不然又有個貧家女士，盜把名題。(Y. Li 334)

If it is real, how can my worn out and dry brush produce such feminine charm during my delirium of intoxication? If it is fake, why are the languid clouds, grotesque rocks, slanting bamboos and leaning pines no different from mine? I am so perplexed. Did the painter appropriate my signature in order to avoid the burden of fame? Is it possible that there is another impoverished lady conducting forgery?

Similar to Dong Qichang's recognition of Yang Yunyou's feminine voice in her inscription, Chen Jiru's celebratory comment reinforces the conventional understanding that women have

their own particular form of artistic expression and are never able to create masculine art.¹² Both Yang Yunyou and Lin Tiansu's talents are recognized, but at the same time, they are safely contained. In her study of art forgery as a literary theme in 19th-century Europe, Aviva Briefel discusses a curious fact: while women's imitation of masterpieces is often portrayed as harmless, the same act carried out by men leads to suspicion of crime (37). Implied by such fictional narratives is the assumption that creative art is a masculine realm, in which women are unable to participate. In Li Yu's drama, women do venture into the world of art, but their successes in challenging the male artists' authority somehow only draw more attention to their limitations as women. If we agree that Dong and Chen have detected "authenticity" in Yang and Lin's paintings, this "authenticity" is rather crudely identified with femininity.

In fact, both female artists call Dong and Chen's understanding of femininity into question. In contrast to Dong Qichang's assumption, when Yang Yunyou has to sell her paintings in public later in the play, the market celebrates her works precisely because of her gender, as her paintings provide voyeuristic pleasure for male customers. Playing along with the market demand, Yang succeeds in feeding herself and even manages to buy an official title for her fake husband Huang Tianjian. The gender divide underlined by Chen's detection of feminine charm in Lin Tiansu's painting is also debunked immediately by Lin Tiansu's impeccable cross-dressing performance. To protect herself from harassments and attacks, Lin puts on men's attire before starting her journey to the south. The cross-dressed Lin Tiansu succeeds in fooling Chen Jiru's friend, the heroic Jiang Huaiyi. And rather unfortunately, she also deceives the bandits, who keep her in captivity and appoint her as their military strategist.

¹² In his recent study of the female poet Li Qingzhao, Ronald Egan argues that Li's contemporary male authors were uncomfortable with the thought that a woman could effectively appropriate a masculine persona in her writings. See *The Burden of Female Talent: the Poet Li Qingzhao and her History in China* (111).

In response to Jiang Huaiyi's inquiry about the secret of her successful cross-dressing performance, Lin says:

須要自家認定，我是個鬚眉如戟的丈夫，把那些男子反當作婦人看待，自然氣雄膽壯，不露纖弱之容。當初木蘭從軍，想來也用此法。(Y. Li 358)

What I need to do is to believe firmly that I am a man with halberd-like eyebrows and regard those men as women instead. In this way, my courage will naturally be boosted, and I won't reveal any traces of vulnerability. I guess this is also the strategy Mulan used when she joined the army.

After this explanation, Lin states, half jokingly, that there are not that many real men anyway.

At least half of them are just "variations on women" (*emei fenzhong* 蛾眉分種) (Y. Li 358). The cross-dressed Lin demonstrates how this label of "feminine charm" masks her potential to break gender boundaries. Her satirical note on feminized men reminds the reader of her own lover Chen Jiru's passivity during their courtship.

Compared to Lin Tiansu, Chen Jiru seems to lack the courage and bravery conventionally associated with masculinity. In Scene 20 "*Jiebing*" 借兵 (Borrowing Soldiers), Chen Jiru freezes in shock upon hearing the news that Lin Tiansu has been captured by bandits on her way to bury her parents. He laments his failure to act:

空將二目瞠，嘆無能！這擎雲妙手將誰倩？辜負你堅貞性，密邇情，稀奇行，慚愧我力綿無術將伊拯，只好把遭逢委向紅顏命。(Y. Li 385)

I stare in vain, lament my incompetence!
From whom will you, the one with skilled hands, seek help?
I am unworthy of your unshakable faith, intense and deep emotion, and extraordinary deed.
I am so embarrassed that I don't have the strength to rescue you
And have to let you, the beauty, suffer.

Under the advice from his friend Jiang Huaiyi, Chen Jiru writes a letter in verse to a military general asking for help. Even though the general does not know Chen Jiru personally, he is flattered to receive a letter from such a cultural celebrity and is more than ready to help.

Believing that Chen Jiru's verse will eventually be included in Chen's anthologies and appreciated by generations of readers, the general foresees the possibility of achieving immortality by accepting Chen's request. Chen Jiru's use of his fame is successful, as the general later rescues Chen's lover with ease. But he may disappoint the general's hope for immortality as this poem addressing the general will more than likely be buried in a flood of texts signed under Chen's name.

Chen's overproduction of texts had already become a joke during Li Yu's times.¹³ The consequence of this excessive production is the overabundance of trivial objects associated with Chen's name. Li Yu pokes fun at this in his *Xianqing ouji* 闲情偶寄 (Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling, 1671), a collection of essays on various aspects of literati life. Elaborating on his culinary interests, Li Yu explains why he never writes about pigs even though he has a sophisticated taste for pork:

甚矣，名士不可為，而名士遊戲之小術，尤不可不慎。至數百載而下，糕、布等物，又以眉公得名。取“眉公糕”、“眉公布”之名，以較“东坡肉”三字，似覺彼善於此矣。而其最不幸者，則有溷廁中之一物，俗人呼為“眉公馬桶”。噫，馬桶何物，而可冠以雅人高士之名乎？予非不知肉味，而於豚之一物，不敢浪措一詞者，慮為東坡之續也。即溷廁中之一物，予未嘗不新其制，但蓄之家，而不敢取以示人，尤不敢筆之於書者，亦慮為眉公之續也。（148）

It is really hard to be a celebrity. One has to be cautious about exercising his talent in playful activities. For almost a hundred years, rice cakes, cloth, and other items have carried Meigong's name.¹⁴ Compared with “Dongpo pork,” “Meigong rice cakes” and “Meigong cloth” sound much better.¹⁵ The most unfortunate case is an item from the restroom. Common people call it a “Meigong chamber pot.” Alas! What kind of thing is a chamber pot! How can it be labeled with the name of a refined master? It is not that I don't know how pork tastes, but I don't dare to waste a single word on that thing, in fear of continuing Dongpo's (unfortunate) legacy. Even for the item in the restroom, I have

¹³ Jamie Greenbaum has pointed out that at the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century, scholar officials' comments on Chen became more and more hostile (205). Chen was criticized for his lack of action during the time of dynastic crises. Greenbaum suggests that Chen is a positive figure overall in Li Yu's play (187-190). He does not seem to notice the irony in Li Yu's depiction of Chen Jiru.

¹⁴ Meigong is Chen Jiru.

¹⁵ Dongpo pork is a dish named after Su Shi (Su Dongpo). The original Chinese name of this dish sounds as if the meat comes from Su Shi himself.

renovated it for the better. I store it at home and never show it to others, not to mention writing about it. I am afraid of repeating Meigong's mistake.

In an abrupt turn, Li Yu's writing on food changes to an ironic comment on cultural celebrities who failed to protect their fame. As Li Yu points out, having rice cakes and cloth named after oneself may be acceptable, having a chamber pot that carries one's own name is certainly an unfortunate embarrassment. According to Li Yu, Chen Jiru brought this humbling experience on himself thanks to his careless writing. Chen's overuse of his words resulted in the subversive appropriation of his name as a brand. When the general in *Ideal Love Matches* invests his hope for immortality on Chen Jiru's poem, he fails to take this overabundance of Chen's writings into account. The general's naiveté is certainly laughable, but the superfluity and superficiality of Chen's literary production are also the targets of Li Yu's joke.

Chen Jiru's celebrity status helps him rescue his romantic interest without direct confrontation with the bandits. The plot comments on the "convenient" use of literary fame. But Chen's letter to the general is at the same time Chen's apology for incompetence. After Chen sends out his letter to the general, he waits comfortably at home for Lin Tiansu to return all the way back from Fujian on her own. Unlike other more conventional dramatic narratives, in which the male leads depart for the fulfillment of filial or official duties and leave their lovers in romantic agony, Li Yu's play features Lin Tiansu as an active subject and a survivor of dangerous adventures.

3.4 Paying the Price for Forgery

The agency the female artists display through gender-crossing—either by forging male celebrities' paintings or by taking on the risks of traveling alone—is nevertheless limited. To a certain degree, their mobility is presented as the price they have to pay for their daring act of art

forgery. Before their eventual unions with Dong Qichang and Chen Jiru, the female artists have to cope with numerous hardships. Dong Qichang and Chen Jiru, however, enjoy the pleasant surprises brought about by their encounter with art forgery. As mentioned earlier, Lin Tiansu endures captivity in bandits' camp before uniting with Chen Jiru. In Yang Yunyou's case, Dong Qichang's interest in her almost exposes her to rape. After appropriating Dong Qichang's signature, Yang Yunyou falls victim to a Dong Qichang impersonator—Huang Tianjian, the rascal who is hired by Monk Shikong to play Dong Qichang and trick Yang into marriage. Shikong's ultimate goal, however, is to take Yang to Beijing and marry her himself after he grows his hair back. Monk Shikong's "aesthetic" concern adds a humorous twist to his malicious plan. His rising sexual desire for Yang is painfully suppressed by the slow growth of his hair. Thanks to this hair issue, Yang Yunyou is able to detect Shikong's conspiracy before he has the chance to violate her body. For Dong Qichang, Huang Tianjian's impersonation turns out to be as harmless as Yang's forgery. It only leads to a brief misunderstanding between Dong Qichang and his friends. Yang, however, is uprooted from her hometown, Hangzhou, and has to make a living on her own in the capital city. It is the female protagonists who have to pay the price for forgery after all.

Miraculously, the female bodies remain intact through this series of setbacks. The preservation of the female protagonists' chastity is a key component of Li Yu's plot design. Li Yu advertises it in the prologue by comparing the two female artists' bodies to the famous *Heshi bi* 和氏璧, a jade disc that was returned to the state of Zhao in its original shape after the emperor of Qin threatened to seize it (Y. Li 321). In the second half of the play, Dong Qichang points out that the circulation of female bodies has its own principle different from artwork on the market. A painting can be exchanged between hands multiple times, but a decent woman's

body cannot. Before Yang Yunyou's father gets on his journey to search for the daughter in Scene 24 "*Furen*" 赴任 (Going to the Official Post), Dong Qichang reminds Yang Yunyou's father that if he eventually meets Yunyou, he has to accept the "son-in-law" who has tricked his daughter into a marriage. Furthermore, the father should not care too much about this "son-in-law's" lack of talent. Startled by Dong's advice, Yang's father asks Dong how he can call a rapist his "son-in-law." What makes the real Dong Qichang concerned about Yang's journey to Beijing is not the hardship she has endured but the availability and chastity of her body. For protecting Yang's virginity, Dong should be thankful to the physically deformed surrogate, Huang Tianjian, whose male reproductive organ is damaged because of excessive sexual adventures in earlier years.¹⁶ Huang, who is supposed to guard Yang Yunyou's body for Shikong, does his job for Dong Qichang.¹⁷ Dong wins his ideal romantic partner with ease, while Yang Yunyou has to carefully protect her chastity to maintain her status as the desirable lover. After all, for Dong Qichang, the charm of a woman's "feminine authenticity" disappears once the principle of chastity is violated.

3.5 A "Romantic" Appropriation of Women's Talent

When Dong Qichang finally unites with Yang Yunyou, he praises Yang Yunyou's wisdom in keeping her body intact throughout her journey to Beijing and her travel back to Hangzhou. When he finally possesses Yang's body, he also appropriates Yang's talent. The male artists' handling of the female artists' talent invites a cynical view of their love relationships. The reader may ask to what degree Dong Qichang and Chen Jiru are different from the ridiculed male customers who follow Yang Yunyou after she starts to paint under her

¹⁶ The name Huang Tianjian literally means "Huang, the natural eunuch."

¹⁷ Congratulating himself on his work guarding Yang's virginity, Huang compares himself to an upright official who leaves the government treasury untouched before leaving his post.

own name. The story takes a comic twist in Scene 21, “*Juanlian*” 卷帘 (Rolling up the Curtain). After Yang Yunyou discovers Shikong’s plan and kills him for good, she has to sell paintings in Beijing for survival. When Yang paints under Dong Qichang’s name, the “authenticity” of her art is recognized by Dong and his literati friends. Ironically, it is when Yang Yunyou steps out of anonymity that the authenticity of her paintings is questioned. Unlike what Dong Qichang has imagined, Yang’s identity as a female artist wins her good business, but it also results in false accusations. Scene 21 depicts Yang’s “performance” of authenticity in front of her male customers. These men suspect that Yang relies on the help of a male artist. In order to prove her artistic skill, Yang has to roll up the curtain and expose herself. Those customers, surprised and intrigued by her beauty, make further and more improper advances by asking Yang to remove the front desk and show them her bound feet. Yang’s studio then becomes a circus. When Yang’s male audiences watch her novel presence, Yang also observes their absurd demeanor. Li Yu portrays these men in a ridiculous light as he elaborates on how they over-read Yang’s paintings. At one point, Yang absentmindedly paints a monkey for a customer who reminds her of the animal. The customer takes this doodle as a sign of romantic interest. Instead of valuing Yang’s paintings, the male customers are more interested in the artist’s sexual identity and her possible availability. But how are these male customers different from Dong Qichang and Chen Jiru, who are equally drawn to the femininity in Yang and Lin’s paintings and who express their appreciation of the “feminine” paintings through marriage proposals?

What makes Dong and Chen different is simply that their marriage proposals get positive responses. The significance of the female artists’ “authentic” expressions is eventually lost in the “ideal” matches as their husbands appropriate their artistic skills and confine them to the category of forgers. Early in the play, when Yang Yunyou is painting under Dong’s name, her

monologue foreshadows her eventual union with Dong Qichang and frames this union in terms of servitude:

冒名顏厚，強把燃眉救。款落完了，待我用起圖書來。（印介）假印刊來慣，法網偏能漏。噯！我想那董思白，不知怎麼樣一個人兒，就這等多才多藝？... 我想他那位夫人，不知修了幾世，才嫁著這等一個才子！我們貧賤之人呵，便做他個捧硯妾也難僥倖，為甚麼才子福直憑的輕消受？呸！好沒來頭，他不知是甚麼時候的人，如今在世上不在世上，好好的去想起他來？這的是閨里無人不害羞，向紙上尋郎作好逑！（Y. Li 327）

I barefacedly paint under a false name in order to deal with this emergency. Now I have signed it. Let me use a fake seal. I am used to this business now, somehow it evades the law... Alas! I'm wondering what kind of person Dong Sibai is.¹⁸ Why is he so versatile? I wonder if his wife must have cultivated her virtue for many lifetimes in order to marry such a talented man. We poor and lowly people don't even have the fortune to become his "ink-stone holding maids." Why does this kind of fortune come so easily for some people? Pah! This is nonsense. I don't even know when he was born or whether he is still alive. Why do I think about him all of sudden? How shameless am I! Looking for a mate on paper!

Here, Yang Yunyou's monologue redefines the set phrase "spiritual communication on paper" (*shenjiao zhishang* 神交紙上). This phrase refers to an open communication between the artist and the beholder, free from the constraints of time and space. What distinguishes Yang Yunyou's "spiritual communication" is first her understanding of her imitation of Dong Qichang's painting as a violation of the law. As I have explained earlier, Yang's painting does not initially convey any transgressive message to Dong at all. However, her painting opens the door to more ambiguous subject-object (artist-painting) and subject-subject (Yang-Dong) relationships since Yang experiences the process of forgery as a romantic fantasy. When Yang expresses her wish to be Dong's "ink-stone-holding-concubine," this *shenjiao*, instead of confirming Yang Yunyou's artistic agency, becomes a declaration of her servitude to a man.

When Dong and Chen make Yang and Lin "concubine ghostpainters," the female artists' talent and self-expression are submerged. The story about the discovery of (feminine)

¹⁸ Sibai is Dong Qichang's style name.

authenticity, therefore, circles back to the original narrative about male cultural celebrities' artistic fatigue. Dong Qichang puts it quite blatantly to Yang's father in the concluding scene of the play when he finally meets Yang Yunyou:

下官做了半世忙人，總為筆墨所苦。如今得了令愛，那些書畫應酬，不怕沒人代筆！這下半世得閒人，有幾分做得成了。(Y. Li 416)

I have labored for half a lifetime, being burdened by brush and ink all the time. Now that I have obtained your daughter, I no longer have to be afraid that the business of calligraphy and painting won't be taken care of. I can finally expect to be a man of leisure in the second half of my life.

Dong Qichang and Yang Yunyou then sing in harmony: “懶夫勤婦同偕老” (“Lazy husband and diligent wife live in conjugal bliss to a ripe old age”) (Y. Li 417). The female forger fulfills the male artist's romantic interest and shares his workload. Yang expands the category of women's domestic labor, as it now includes painting for the market demand. But this expansion only underlines Yang's confinement because of Dong's fame. This concluding scene of an extravagant wedding ceremony responds to the uplifting *datuanyuan* 大團圓 (grand reunion) convention. But as Dong shows no intimacy towards Yang at the wedding and perceives her as skilled labor, this conclusion only highlights the dullness of the romance, the dryness of the calculation, and Dong's self-interest.

Li Yu certainly had the skill to conjure up scenes of intimacy. In fact, when Lin Tiansu secures Dong's proposal to Yang Yunyou by “marrying” Yang first, the “wedding” scene gets sensuous. The cross-dressed Lin passes Yang's tests on poetic and painting skills for her potential husband, and she finally has the chance to meet her “bride” face-to-face. Lin helps Yang undo her hair and loosen her robe. She finds Yang's body aroma intoxicating. When Lin takes off her shoes and reveals her lotus feet, Yang discovers that she has been fooled by a fake man for the second time. But the two decide not to waste a tender night together after Lin tells

Yang about her mission. The two women, equal in talent and beauty, regard their meeting as “a happy union of two soul mates” (*liang xiangzhi xi gong yi* 兩相知喜共依) (Y. Li 412). But then their communication becomes physical. Lin happily plays the role of a husband, hugs Yang around the waist, and suggests that they will warm the wedding bed together. This homoerotic scene would have been a stimulating spectacle for the late Ming audience. As Li Wai-ye points out, this scene is the “most romantic scene in the play” because the recognition between the two women is “divested of economic and practical consideration” (“The Real” 41). But it also makes one wonder whether the union between these two female artists is actually more satisfying than the two heterosexual relationships in the play. This sensuous scene featuring the two female artists underlines the overall unromantic spirit of the play.

Rather than adhering to the conventions of a romantic *caizi jiaren* play, *Ideal Love Matches* presents an ironic portrait of a cultural landscape nurtured by the alliances between artists and forgers. In doing so, the play questions the very concept and practice of “authenticity.” By simply marrying their forgers, the male artists turn the threat of forgery into an opportunity to secure leisure time for themselves. One may ask if this story is a personal fantasy of the cultural entrepreneur, Li Yu, whose publications were frequently pirated. After paying a high price for their forgery, Yang Yunyou and Lin Tiansu contribute all their artistic talent to their husbands and become “licensed forgers.” Li Yu’s representation of the two female artists caters to the audience’s curiosity about women who managed to step into the high-culture scene dominated by male literati. In the end, however, the *caizi jiaren* matches domesticate these talented women. Instead of recovering the life stories of Yang Yunyou and Lin Tiansu, Li Yu invents their romances and elevates the art of forgery (*jia* 假) to a new degree: he rewrites these women’s fates for the amusement of his audience.

3.6 Huang Yuanjie's Mixed Review of Li Yu's Comedy

The commentator for the original edition of *Ideal Love Matches*, Huang Yuanjie, was a renowned female artist. In addition to marginal comments, Huang Yuanjie also contributed a preface. Though modest in length, Huang's commentary touches upon both the style and content aspects of Li Yu's play. It also includes her social critiques and self-reflection inspired by the drama. Li Yu certainly expected that Huang Yuanjie's fame would help market his drama. Patrick Hanan suspects that there was another reason why Li Yu invited Huang to be the commentator: it was Huang who had kindled Li Yu's interest in the women artists, Lin Tiansu and Yang Yunyou, in the first place (17).

Huang Yuanjie's biographies do bear resemblance to Li Yu's depiction of both Yang Yunyou and Lin Tiansu. Like the two female protagonists in Li Yu's play, Huang Yuanjie's life as a female artist is marked by its mobility. Dorothy Ko introduces Huang Yuanjie's life on the move in *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*: as a famed poet, painter and calligrapher, Huang traveled frequently in the lower Yangzi region to join circles of literati and visit communities of writing women.¹⁹ After the fall of Ming, Huang even journeyed to Beijing to become an instructor for the daughter of a high official (Ko 118). Just like Chen Jiru in Li Yu's play, Huang's husband was the one who stayed at home and had to see Huang off from time to time (Ko 119). But unlike Chen Jiru or Dong Qichang, Huang Yuanjie's husband was an unsuccessful scholar who depended on Huang's income. According to Chen Yinke, Zhang Pu 张溥 (1602-41), the leader of the influential literary society *Fushe* (復社 Revival Society) once proposed to take Huang as a concubine, but Huang firmly refused (*Liu Rushi*, 18). The ideal

¹⁹ For Huang's biographical information, see *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (117-123).

matches in Li Yu's play seem to allude to this episode of Huang's life, even though Huang's choice was very different from that of the play's female protagonists.²⁰

Besides physical mobility, Huang's life also demonstrated the increasing social mobility enjoyed by women during the Ming-Qing transition. As Ko states, Huang's life as a professional woman, who "obliterate[d] the boundaries between women from good families and entertainers from the pleasure quarters," made Huang's contemporaries feel uneasy, but they still respected Huang's talent and her literary pursuits (121). To downplay Huang's challenges to gender norms, the male literati interpreted Huang's participation in the art market as a reluctant choice and stressed her devotion to her family. For example, Ko cites Chen Weisong's 陳維崧 *Furen ji* 婦人集, which records Huang's decision to close her painting shop immediately after she got enough money to meet her family's basic needs (285). Chen highlights Huang's disinterest in business promotion and her concern for domestic duties. The anecdote also portrays Huang as an artist with a strong sense of pride and dignity, which sets her apart from the male protagonists in Li Yu's play. According to Chen's account, Huang did not compromise her art under the pressure of market demand.

We may speculate that Huang Yuanjie's sense of pride and dignity came from her understanding of her own vulnerability as a female professional. After all, female artists were marginal figures on the cultural landscape of the late Ming. In response to the scene depicting Yang Yunyou's performance of "authenticity" in front of her male customers, Huang states her disgust towards the accusation that Yang Yunyou has been helped by a male ghostpainter. She also expresses her disappointment at Yang Yunyou's decision to satisfy her male customers' curiosity towards her female body:

²⁰ Ko also mentions this episode of Huang's life in *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (118).

余少年時亦受此謗，然堅持不動，彼亦無奈我何！只此一節，稍勝雲友，索書畫者，頗能諒之。(Y. Li 387)

When I was young I also received such accusation. But I refused to be affected. They could not do anything to me. I was a notch above Yunyou only on this matter. Those people who asked for paintings from me were quite understanding.

Huang's firm refusal to compromise actually won understanding from men who were interested in her art. While Li Yu's play offers a satirical depiction of frivolous male art customers, Huang Yuanjie's comment on the drama teaches one how to win these customers' respect in a corrupted market.

The suspicion and criticism Huang Yuanjie received throughout her career made her a fervent critic of pretentious scholars. Her frustration towards pretentious scholars even let her side with minor villains in the play. In Scene 15, "*Rumu*" 入幕 (Becoming a Staff Member), a group of bandits who are on a mission to search for a competent scholar capture Lin Tiansu, who is disguised as a young scholar. The bandits give Lin Tiansu a warning that they bury scholars who turn out to be incompetent. They test Lin's scholarship by asking Lin to sing some arias, as they have heard that all contemporary literati are theater enthusiasts. Lin, a well-trained courtesan, passes this test with ease. In this scene, Li Yu is obviously making a joke at the expense of his literati audience, whose real passion lies outside of serious scholarship. In her marginal note, Huang Yuanjie makes an ironic comment on the bandits' resolution to find a true scholar: "坑假儒而物色真儒，此賊勝秦始皇萬倍" ("Burying fake scholars and looking for real ones—this bandit is ten thousand times better than the First Emperor of Qin") (Y. Li 367). Setting these bandits' cruelty in contrast to Qin Shihuang's historical crime, Huang's comment suggests that being buried alive is exactly the punishment these fake (male) scholars deserve. Huang therefore pushes Li Yu's joke further and makes it a provocative comment on the lack of careful scrutiny of incompetent scholars. This comment demonstrates Huang's moral authority

and intellectual confidence. Furthermore, it reveals her frustration at cultural elites' easy acceptance of unqualified male scholars and suspicion of truly talented women like her.

Huang Yuanjie collaborates with Li Yu on these jokes targeting unqualified scholars. In these instances, Huang Yuanjie is reminiscent of Du Jun, who, as Zhang Jie suggests in her dissertation *The Game of Marginality*, is the “ideal” reader of Li Yu’s short stories (151). Zhang’s dissertation shows us how Du poses as Li’s defender and gives Li’s ironic texts further twists in his numerous commentaries on Li Yu’s writings (153-162). Zhang explains Du’s support for Li Yu’s ironic vision as a result of his low social status; like Li Yu, Du was unsuccessful in his pursuit of an official career (152).²¹ As a female artist whose political power was disproportionate to her fame and talent, Huang Yuanjie shared Li Yu’s cynicism and playfulness. Most of Huang Yuanjie’s comments praise Li Yu’s comic composition, which can range from sophisticated wordplay to vulgar sexual jokes.²² In her commentary, Huang Yuanjie points out how Li Yu distinguishes himself from other literati playwrights by his masterful construction of *jing* 淨(villain) and *chou* 丑(clown) characters: “從來文人填詞，宜於生旦，不宜於畫面。笠翁獨能各肖情形，真八面才也!” (“From the past till the present, literati dramatists have been good at depicting *sheng* and *dan*, not *chou* or *jing*—the painted-face. Only Liweng is able to present lively portrayals of all of them. This is comprehensive talent!”) (Y. Li 338). The *Sheng* 生 (male lead) and the *dan* 旦 (female lead) speak in the language of the

²¹ For more discussion of Li Yu and his commentator Du Jun, see David Rolston’s *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary* (291-301). Maria Franca Sibiu gives an introduction to Du Jun’s commentaries on Li Yu’s *Silent Operas* and *Priceless Jade* (221-231).

²² Huang’s remarks on Li Yu’s jokes include: “文人善謔” (“Literary men are good at making jokes.”) (345) 好情節，好關目，從來無此惹看戲文，絕曲絕倒” (“Good story, good plot, I have never read such an intriguing play, I roar with laughter”) (373) and “詭絕，智絕，趣絕，雅絕！從來無此妙劇。凡做傳奇者看到此等處，俱可廢然矣” (“Extremely artful, witty, amusing, and elegant! There has never been a play as clever as this one. All *chuanqi* dramatists who read to this part should give up writing”) (410).

literary elite. The characters with painted faces (*chou* and *jing*), however, utilize a different linguistic register and do not shy away from vulgar subjects.

Huang Yuanjie expresses her amusement at the *jing* and *chou* characters even when their speeches become sexually explicit. For example, Huang inserts the phrase “extremely skillful” (*qiaojue* 巧绝) as a comment on Monk Shikong’s complaint about his sexual suppression during the “marriage” between Huang Tianjian and Yang Yunyou: “老婆睡在別人艙，自己埋頭不敢張。棒槌擦褲襠，頭毛不肯長，几時才做黃和尚?” (“My wife is sleeping in the cabin of someone else, I bury my head, dare not to look around. A wooden club rubs the crotch of my pants, but my hair refuses to grow back. When can I become a fallen monk?”) (Y. Li 387). The villain Shikong makes a fool of himself as he falls victim to his own conspiracy with Huang Tianjian. Shikong’s aria is an outright bawdy joke about a man’s loss of control of his desire. Huang Yuanjie not only got the joke but also tried to draw the reader’s attention to it with her comment.

Huang’s marginal comments contrast starkly with her preface, which is written in a much more serious tone. This disparity reflects the different conventions governing the prefaces and commentaries. Prefaces are usually weightier, while marginal commentaries can express the pleasure of reading. Huang’s preface expresses her mixed feelings towards Li Yu’s comic transformation of the female artists’ tragic life stories:

奮筆絳章，平增院本一段風流佳話，使才子佳人良願遂於身後。嗟夫！孽海黑風，茫無岸畔，從來巾幗中抱才負藝者，多失足於此。苟不幸而失足，斯亦已矣，何至形銷骨毀之後，尚祈靈於三寸不律，為翻月籍而開生面耶？抑造物者亦有悔心，特請文人補過耶？此不慧之所以心悲意憐，而欲倩巫陽問之湖水也。(Y. Li 318)

Wielding his pen passionately, Li adds a new and romantic tale to the theatrical repertoire and allows the fond wishes of the beautiful and talented to be fulfilled after their deaths. Alas! How often in the past have women with literary talent and artistic skills slipped and fallen into the dark torrents of the boundless ocean of bad karma? If by misfortune

they fall in, how can they seek help from an author's magical brush to rewrite their marital fates after their bodies have melted and their bones decayed? Could it be that the creator, experiencing remorse, invites literary men to make up for his mistakes? This is why my stupid heart is filled with sadness and why I feel the need to invite sorcerer Yang to find answers in the waters of West Lake.²³

Huang's solemn preface stands in sharp contrast with Li Yu's concluding poem of the play:

李子年來窮不怕，
慣操弱翰與天攻。
佳人奪取歸才士，
淚眼能教變笑容。
非是文心多倔強，
只因老耳欠龍鍾。
從今懶聽不平事，
怕惹閒愁上筆鋒 (Y. Li 417-418)。

After these years, Master Li is no longer afraid,
He is used to hold his delicate brush to fight against fate.
He returns beauties to the talented scholars,
And brings smiles to tearful faces.
It is not that his literary heart is stubborn,
It is only that his hearing has not declined enough.
From now on, he will be too lazy to hear matters of injustice,
In fear that idle sadness may taint the tip of the brush.

In this concluding poem, Li Yu constructs a heroic image of the dramatist (himself) waging a war against fate. The poem starts with an uplifting tone. Even though Li is only armed with a fragile writing brush, his resolution to achieve fairness in this world gives him inexhaustible courage. Heaven is heartless in assigning miserable fates to beauties, but Li is stubbornly determined to rescue these beauties from bad marriages and therefore bring smiles back to their tearful faces. But the poem abruptly transits from self-congratulation to self-mockery in the second half, where speaker explains that this “war” against Heaven, instead of being a display of courage, is actually a revelation of exhaustion from knowing too many human sufferings. One may ask if this virtual fight against unfairness on paper is nothing but an escape from dire

²³ Yang has the power to call back the spirits. See “Zhaohun” 招魂 (Calling back the Spirits) from *Chuci* 楚辭 (*Songs of the Chu*).

realities. In this poem, Li Yu celebrates his literary genius but also openly points out its limits. This self-reflexivity, of course, is Li Yu's showcase of wisdom. The poem is lighthearted after all. It does not linger on the topic of irreversible tragedies. Rather, it highlights a successful, even though momentary, escape from an unjust world, and it makes fun of anyone who takes this drama as a sincere promotion of the ideals represented by the *caizi jianren* narratives.

In contrast with Li Yu's poem, Huang's preface is much more somber. Huang expresses her concern about the motive and consequences of Li Yu's composition in a question for the female artists: why do you seek help from literary men to rewrite your life stories? Huang's question underlines the futility of the literary men's attempts to change women's fates by creating manipulative narratives. The critical voice here reminds the reader of Huang's comment on Yang Yunyou's decision to satisfy her male customers' curiosity. When the ghosts of female artists ask for help from literary men, aren't they also promoting the consumption of their miseries as just another curious tale for the theatrical repertoire? In this preface, Huang's strong sense of dignity and her deep sympathy for her fellow female artists have diverted her attention away from Li Yu's genius for fabricating lovely romances. Instead of regarding the author as a fighter seeking justice for the beautiful young women who have suffered at the hands of Heaven, Huang perceives the author as speaking for the Creator, who is too embarrassed to apologize for his mistakes.

While Li Yu's concluding poem invites the reader to see Li's comic transformation of the two female artists' fates as a manifestation of his genius, Huang Yuanjie's preface emphasizes the belatedness and emptiness of this transformation. Li Yu succeeds in bringing smiles to Huang's face time and again, but Huang's preface to the drama makes it explicit that her smiles are momentary. If we read Huang Yuanjie's preface in the context of the early Qing, we feel the

historical weight involved in Huang's lament. The "dark torrents of the boundless ocean of bad karma" that drowned talented women certainly included the dynastic transition. Huang herself was a victim of kidnapping, and possibly even rape, when the Manchu forces tried to conquer the south (Ko 118). The fight for the survival of her family during the social turmoil of the Ming-Qing transition must have been a very difficult task.²⁴ Huang would certainly detect the irony in the union of the "lazy husband and diligent wife" (*lanfu qinfu* 懶夫勤婦) in Li Yu's play. In Huang's case, such a division of labor was a consequence of the husband's incompetence, and the prosperity the fictional couples enjoy was probably far from the reality of Huang's life. In contrast with Li Yu, who decided to "close his ears to the unfairness in this world" (*lanting buping shi* 懶聽不平事), Huang Yuanjie did not hesitate to show us how much her heart was disturbed by the unfairness. The critical voice in Huang's preface seems to stand in tension with her promotion of Li Yu's humor throughout the text. Though Huang shared similar cynicism with Li Yu, her attitude was certainly informed by her gendered experience.

3.7 Conclusion

On the surface, Li Yu's *chuanqi* play *Ideal Love Matches* celebrates the recognition of artistic skills and the union between the talented and the beautiful. It seems to have fulfilled the conventions of *caizi jiaren* romances. But the setting of the art market and the focus on two female artists, based on historical figures, lead to interesting narrative twists. The discovery of female talent in the play, instead of honoring the power of expressive art, reveals the fatigue of art production and a crude understanding of femininity. The male cultural celebrities' marriage

²⁴ Because more women writers took on the mission of poetic witnessing during the Ming-Qing transition, we have more records of women's experiences and perceptions of this turbulent time period. See Li Wai-yee's article "Women Writers and Gender Boundaries during the Ming-Qing transition" (179-213).

proposals sanction their appropriation of the female artists' talent. And ironically, the female artists still have to pay the price for their transgressive acts of forgery before the marriages are consummated. The ideal love matches—the “lazy husband and diligent wife” unions—only mock a cultural landscape nurtured by the alliances between artists and forgers.

Even though one of the selling points of Li Yu's play is the portrayal of two female artists who manage to enter the competitive male-dominated art market, and Li Yu does challenge gender norms by including scenes of gender inversion, the play concludes with the domestication of the female artists' talent and highlights their servitude. As a satirical play and a romantic comedy, *Ideal Love Matches* ultimately downplays the increasing visibility and mobility of women artists in the 17th-century China in the name of bringing smiles to the reader's face. In her commentary, Huang Yuanjie, the renowned female painter, celebrates Li Yu's humor and wit. But she also voices her lament for the two female artists whose life stories have been reinvented by Li Yu for the entertainment of the theatre audience.

By occasionally alluding back to her own experiences, Huang Yuanjie's commentary seems to be inviting later readers to take her life story as an additional layer of commentary on Li Yu's play. For Huang, the *caizi jiaren* fantasy presented by *Ideal Love Matches* must be a dark joke: the concept of authenticity, which is used to promote female artists, also limits their creative expression and burdens them with undeserved scrutiny; the charade of male support for female talent turns out to be a display of crude self-interest; and the dramatic presentation of women artists as ready to commit to the roles of anonymous forgers obscures all the difficult decisions women had to make in reality. Huang Yuanjie's commentary highlights the ironies in Li Yu's reinvention of women artists' life stories and his inversion of the *caizi jiaren* narrative.

Chapter Four

A “Glorious” Dream of Awkward Romance:

Humor and Desire in Wang Yun’s *A Dream of Glory*

4.1 Introduction

After Li Yu half-jokingly stated that nine out of ten *chuanqi* plays were about love and longing in the middle of the 17th century, the production of romantic comedies remained high. *Caizi-jiaren* 才子佳人 (scholar-beauty) love continued to be a dominant theme in *chuanqi* dramas. The *caizi jiaren* novel also became a popular genre in the early Qing. In the 54th chapter of the 18th-century novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the matriarch of the Jia family, Grandmother Jia, famously criticizes the repetitiveness of *caizi jiaren* stories and their unrealistic representations of scholars and beauties from elite families. At about the same time as *Dream of the Red Chamber* started to circulate, the female dramatist Wang Yun 王筠 (1749-1819) completed her drama *Fanhua meng* 繁華夢 (A Dream of Glory, 1778), a *caizi jiaren* story framed as a deliverance play in the *chuanqi* form.¹ Surprisingly, Wang Yun, a woman from an elite family, shared Li Yu’s taste for parody.

Wang Yun’s play is one of the very few extant *chuanqi* plays written by women in late imperial China.² In this play, the daughter of an elite family in Chang’an, Miss Wang, is frustrated by the social restrictions placed on women. In a dream, she transforms into a man with the help of the Bodhisattva Guanyin. Miss Wang was performed by the *sheng* 生 role type (male lead). At the beginning of the play, the male actor who played Miss Wang wore women’s

¹ Wang Yun’s play was first published in 1778, about ten years after its completion.

² According to Hua Wei, nineteen dramas written by female dramatists in late imperial China are still available in their complete forms today. Many of them are *zaju*, which is a shorter form than *chuanqi*. See Hua’s *Ming Qing funü xiqu ji* 明清婦女戲曲集 (6).

clothes. This actor displayed Miss Wang's gender transformation by changing to men's attire.³ After this transformation in a dream, Miss Wang becomes "Wang Menglin" and sets off to pursue his masculine ambitions. Wang Menglin travels to the south to study, but he seems to be more interested in finding beautiful ladies. While his parents arrange his marriage to a girl from an elite family, Wang makes his vows with another two young ladies during his trip. Besides winning the love of three charming women, Wang also succeeds in the imperial examinations and becomes a high official. Wang's wife and concubines share his affection, and they all live in perfect harmony. But before long, Miss Wang wakes up, finds herself back in her female body, and realizes the emptiness of her dream. The play concludes with a curious burst of laughter from Miss Wang. Written in the *chuanqi* form, *A Dream of Glory* presents the structure of a deliverance play, which promises religious enlightenment in the end, but its dream content revolves around *caizi jiaren* romance.

The dramatist Wang Yun (style name Songping 松坪) was a native of Chang'an 長安 (present day Xi'an 西安 in Shanxi Province).⁴ Her father, Wang Yuanchang 王元常, achieved the title *jinshi* 進士 (presented scholar) a year before Wang Yun was born. According to Wang Yuanchang's commentary on *A Dream of Glory* and Wang Yun's own poems, the father took the daughter along with him to official posts in the south. Wang Yun married into a family not far from her hometown Chang'an around the age of nineteen. Little is known about Wang Yun's husband, as Wang hardly mentions him in her extant writings. But it is possible that he died

³ The stage direction reads, "內細樂。小生出鏡引生起，取衣巾與生穿戴介，舉拂塵拂生面身介，復送至原處" ("Soft music comes from behind the stage. The *xiaosheng*, young male actor, playing the Bodhisattva Guanyin's assistant, uses a mirror to direct the *sheng* to get up. And then he helps the *sheng* put on men's clothes, wipes the *sheng*'s face with hossu, and walks him back to his original spot" (36). Wang's stage direction seems to suggest that the audience should be able to witness the cross-dressed *sheng* changing back to men's clothes and then present Miss Wang's transgender experiences.

⁴ For Wang Yun's biography, see Hua Wei's *Ming Qing funü zhi xiqu chuanguo yu piping* 明清婦女之戲曲創作與批評 (110-111) and Wu Qingyun's introduction to her translation of *A Dream of Glory*.

young. It is also likely that this husband had an unsuccessful career; Wang often wrote about her poverty after marriage. Wang's only son, who became an advanced scholar in 1802, commemorates his mother's effort to educate him in an impoverished household in his epilogue on *A Dream of Glory* (Hua, *Xiquji* 142-143). Wang Yun was proud that her son continued her natal family's tradition of scholarship and achieved the highest title of the imperial examinations fifty-four years after her father did.

Wang Yun associated her identity as a writing woman with her natal family. Wang Yun published her poems along with her father's and son's in an anthology under the title *Xiyuan banxiang ji* 西園瓣香集 (Segments of Incense from the Western Garden). Wang Yun's own volume is named after her father's study, *Huaiqing tang* 槐慶堂 (Celebration Hall for the Chinese Scholar Tree).⁵ Her poetic exchanges with her father, male cousins, and her father's disciples make up a large portion of her anthology. Two of Wang Yun's poems from this volume also appear in Yun Zhu's 惲珠 (1771-1833) *Guochao guixiu zhengshi xuji* 國朝閨秀正始續集 (Sequel to Correct Beginnings: Women's Poetry of Our August Dynasty), an anthology of poetry by elite women in the Qing dynasty. As Wang Yun was a drama enthusiast, dozens of her poems included in *Huaiqingtang ji* are about plays and theatrical performances.⁶ In addition to cooperating with her father on the publication of her two *chuanqi* dramas, *A Dream of Glory* and *Quanfu ji* 全福記 (The Hall of Complete Fortune), Wang Yun also contributed two poems to Gu Sen's 顧森 *chuanqi* play *Huichun meng* 回春夢 (A Dream of Spring's Return), for which

⁵ The 1804 block-printed edition of *Xiyuan banxiang ji* is included in *Qingdai shiwen ji huibian* 清代詩文集彙編 (Collection of Poems and Essays from the Qing Dynasty), compiled by the National Qing Dynasty Compilation Committee.

⁶ Wang gave poetic commentaries on plays such as Tang Xianzu's *Linchuan simeng* 臨川四夢 (Four Dreams of Linchuan) and *Taohua shan* 桃花扇 (The Peach Blossom Fan). She also wrote about several *zhezi xi* 折子戲 performances and an actor surnamed Zhu, who was very close to her family.

her father was the commentator.⁷ The Wangs' erudition and their shared passion for *chuanqi* seemed to be well known in their region.

By the time of the publication of *A Dream of Glory* in 1778, the overall production of the lengthy poetic *chuanqi* drama favored by elite male literati had declined as a writing tradition. According to Guo Yingde, the decline of *chuanqi* was a result of several causes: the rising interest in the performances of *zhezi xi*, selected scenes from existent *chuanqi* plays, weakened the incentive to compose new plays; as most *chuanqi* plays were written for the tunes of Kunshan-style music, the decline of the Kunshan opera also had negative influence on literati's interest in *chuanqi*; furthermore, since the Qing government forbade officials to keep family troupes, commercial theaters flourished, and their operation did not depend on the literati's production of new *chuanqi* dramas (*Chuanqi shi* 571). The decreasing possibility of stage adaptation contributed to the overall slump in *chuanqi* composition. However, the recognition of *chuanqi* as an elite writing tradition, one that combined both poetic sensitivity and narrative skills, continued throughout this period of decline.⁸ Based on contemporary comments on Wang Yun's play, Hua Wei speculates that though *A Dream of Glory* was performed on private stage(s) a few times during Wang's lifetime, it has been a closet drama ever since (Hua, *Chuangzuo* 114).

Wang Yun's choice to write in the *chuanqi* style seems a curious one. When Wang Yun wrote *A Dream of Glory*, *tanci* 彈詞 (plucking rhymes) had become popular as a writing and performance genre among women.⁹ Similar to Wang Yun, many *tanci* writers elaborated on

⁷ Gu Sen was originally from Suzhou and moved to Wang's home region after some political misfortune. The play *Huichun meng* shares the dream theme with Wang Yun's play. At the play's beginning, the protagonist Gu gets drunk and dreams of himself marrying a high official's daughter and achieving political advancement. The play concludes with Gu waking up from this dream and attaining Buddhist enlightenment.

⁸ Guo Yingde describes the century between 1719 and 1820 as a period in which *chuanqi* had a lingering influence (*yushiqi* 余勢期) (571).

⁹ *Tanci* is a genre of prosimetrical narrative. See the introduction to plucking rhymes in *The Red Brush* (717-719). More detailed study on major *tanci* works, see Hu Siao-chen's monograph *Cainü cheye weimian: jindai zhongguo*

their fantasies of breaking gender boundaries through narratives about cross-dressing. But the wide influence of *tanci* on women writers and readers did not help to promote its literary prestige. As a distinct “feminine literature,” *tanci* was and still is considered a “minor” genre. Wang Yun’s decision to write in the dramatic style of *chuanqi* demonstrated her ambition to tackle this elite and male-dominated genre. Furthermore, *chuanqi*, whose main body consists of poetic monologues from protagonists, allowed Wang Yun to explore her fictional characters’ psychology in depth through their direct speeches in poetic forms.

One of the charms of *A Dream of Glory* is the ambiguous relationship between the dream male Wang Menglin’s dramatic monologues and the female dramatist Wang Yun’s comments about herself. As scholars have pointed out, Chinese dramatists started to be conscious of the dramatic genre as *daiyan ti* 代言體 (speaking in others’ voices/speaking for others) as early as the mid-Ming.¹⁰ The late Ming dramatist Meng Chengshun 孟稱舜 (1599-1684) points out that there is an essential difference between drama and poetry in his preface to *Gujin mingju hexuan* 古今名劇合選 (A Compilation of Famous Plays from the Past to Present):

吾嘗為詩與詞矣，率吾意之所到而言之，言之盡吾意而止矣，至於曲，則忽為之男女焉，忽為之苦樂焉，忽為之君主，僕妾，僉夫，端士焉。(qtd. in Wang Yongen, *Yanjiu*, 238)

I have composed *shi* poetry and *ci* lyrics. My words follow where my thoughts have reached. My words stop where my thoughts end. In terms of *qu* drama, all of a sudden, I can transform from a man into a woman; my emotion can change from sadness to joy; I can become a king, a servant girl, a base person or an upright man.

In Meng Chengshun’s view, what differentiates drama from poetry is the construction of personas. To a modern literary critic, Meng seems to have simplified the concept of self-

nvxing xüshi wenxue de xingqi 才女徹夜未眠：近代中國女性敘事文學的興起 and Guo Li’s *Women’s Tanci Fiction in Late Imperial and Early Twentieth-Century China*.

¹⁰ See Wang Yong’en’s article “Lun Ming Qing caizi jiaren de xushi shijiao” 論明清才子佳人劇的敘事視角 (80-87).

expression in Chinese poetic tradition by overlooking the performative element in self-representation.¹¹ Meng understands drama as an art that allows the author to create fictional characters of different genders, social statuses, and moral qualities.

Li Yu states similar ideas in the chapter “*Yu qiu xiaosi*” 語求尚似 (Striving for Realistic Voices) in his *Xianqing ouji* 閑情偶寄 (Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling, 1671). For Li, his dramatic imagination allows him to speak in the styles of high officials and literary geniuses, whom he aspires to become. Li’s tongue-in-cheek remark, therefore, complicates the definition of “speaking in others’ voices” by portraying it as an expression of the dramatist’s wishful thinking. “Speaking in others’ voices” becomes “the dramatist’s self speaking through others’ voices.” Whether women’s dramas were read as *daiyan ti* in the same way as male literati’s works is a more complicated matter. First of all, dramatic works written by women in late imperial China were scarce. Second, as Maureen Robertson points out in her article “Changing the Subject: Gender and Self-inscription in Authors’ Prefaces and ‘*Shi*’ Poetry,” readers of female poets tend to overlook the distinctions between the poets’ “existential (historical) subject, authorial (or writing) subject, and the textual (or speaking) subject” (177). In other words, the readers of female poets in the late imperial period were likely to assume that poetry was an authentic expression of the female author’s true inner feelings. In the case of Wang Yun’s play, her father, the commentator, followed along the convention of reading *shi* poetry and agreed with Li Yu’s comment on wish fulfillment. In his comment, he defines the textual dream in his daughter’s work as her self-expression of *yi jinguo wei hen* “以巾幗為恨” (regrets about being a

¹¹ Poetry has long been regarded as a form of self-expression in the Chinese poetic tradition. One important way of evaluating a poet’s works is to examine whether the poet has stayed “true” to himself in his writings and whether the poet’s written words allow his contemporary readers (and, more importantly, readers of later generations) to know the poet as a real person with emotional ups and downs, political ambitions, and moral concerns. As early as the Han dynasty, the Mao Commentary on the earliest collection of Chinese poetry, *Shijing*, already emphasizes poetry as coming directly from one’s heart and speaking of one’s intent. On the topic of poetry as self-expression, see Stephen Owen, “The Self’s Perfect Mirror: Poetry as Autobiography.”

woman) (Hua, *Xiquji* 142). He thereby downplays the complex relationship between his daughter, the author, and the characters she has conjured up in her drama.

Generations of readers have echoed Wang Yuanchang's reading of his daughter's play, acknowledged Wang Yun's superior skills in composing *chuanqi*, and recognized her articulation of unfulfilled ambitions through a story about becoming a man. For some readers, the play overall is a bit too depressing. At least one contemporary male reader of Wang Yun noted that he was unsatisfied by the solemn tone of *A Dream of Glory*: Zhu Gui 朱珪 (1731-1807), a prominent scholar of his time, commented that Wang's play was so "cold and desolate" (*lengji* 冷寂) that it would reduce the reader to tears (Hua, *Xiquji* 247).¹² Zhu Gui's critique makes sense given that the play concludes with its female protagonist waking up to a disappointing reality.

Despite the overall coldness and the concluding disillusioned tone of *A Dream of Glory*, this play is not without its comic elements. How do we read comic elements within a play known for its solemnity? How may the comic depiction of the dream male Wang Menglin complicate or challenge the reading of his "glorious" journey as Wang Yun's imagination of fulfillment? To a large degree, Wang Yun's play, which revolves around the dream male Wang Menglin's love experiences, follows a conventional narrative in *caizi jiaren chuanqi* compositions, which defines men's success largely in terms of winning beautiful ladies. But by highlighting Wang Menglin's romantic adventures with humor, Wang Yun's drama invites us to reflect on the role romantic desire plays in a woman's self-fulfillment. Scholars such as Wu Qingyun, the first English translator of *A Dream of Glory*, have recognized Wang's play as a parody of previous *chuanqi* plays (Q. Wu 22-25). But scholars have yet to investigate how the

¹² Zhu Gui achieved the "advanced scholar" degree in the same year as Wang Yun's father. He later became a tutor of the Heir Apparent, the later Emperor Jiaqing.

comic elements function in the play or fully explain the complexity of Wang Yun's parodic voice. Here I will explore how Wang's humor facilitates transgressive imaginings about the pursuit of love, provokes reflection on masculine successes, and discloses a woman writer's unease about her articulation of desire. This humor demands that we read *A Dream of Glory* not simply as a direct reflection of Wang Yun's desire, but rather as a sophisticated contemplation of the textual construction of passion by a female author. In this regard, her father's commentary—which downplays the daughter's power of imagination and “domesticates” her transgressive humor—works against Wang Yun's agenda. In response to her male literati readers' misreading of her dramatic composition and their disappointment at the coldness of her writing, Wang Yun ends her second *chuanqi* play, *Quanfu ji* 全福記 (The Hall of Complete Fortune, 1772), with a lavish display of spring delights. Wang Yun's use of humor and its reception by Wang's contemporary readers demonstrate a female playwright's creative effort to explore women's self-fulfillment under the constraints of conventional understandings of worldly success promoted by the long-established dramatic tradition.

4.2 The Humorous Quest for Romance: A Caricatured Citation of a Dramatic Cliché

In the *chuanqi* tradition, especially since the publication of *The Peony Pavilion*, the male lead is usually a less significant character than his female counterpart. The analyses of *chuanqi* plays in the previous three chapters have demonstrated how the female protagonists usually present greater complexity. While the construction of female protagonists emphasizes emotional depth, the depiction of male protagonists more or less follows conventional narratives of “male success.” As Lenore J. Szekely observes in her PhD dissertation, “male success, as it is replicated over and over again in *chuanqi*, fits within such a constrained and cliché narrative, that

it often gets overlooked or treated in shorthand in *chuanqi* dramas themselves” (72-73). The events that represent worldly success in the *chuanqi* play are the happy conclusion of the male protagonist’s romantic quests and his attainment of one of the highest rankings at the imperial examinations. But the male protagonist’s scholarly and official successes often serve primarily as plot devices that help him overcome an obstacle on his way to marriage; as a result, they seldom get much elaboration.

Wang Yun appropriates the *chuanqi* convention to build on the dream male’s romantic desire in *A Dream of Glory*. She devotes most textual space to the dream male Wang Menglin’s quest for love and, later, his intimacy with his three wives. In the second scene, “Solitary Lament,” after grieving over her wasted talent and complaining about her confinement to the inner chamber, Miss Wang takes out a portrait of a beautiful woman and addresses the beauty in the painting repeatedly. She declares that if she were a man, she would definitely marry this lady. As I have discussed in the previous chapters on *The Remedy for Jealousy* and *The Swallow’s Letter*, speaking to the beauty in a portrait became a theatrical convention of showing the male lead’s romantic passion after the popularization of *The Peony Pavilion*. Here, Wang Yun’s drama gives this convention an intriguing twist, as it is the female protagonist who speaks to a portrait. Wu Qingyun has identified lesbian desire in such a plot, but it is rather ambiguous whether Miss Wang really wants to form a romantic and erotic union with another woman or just longs for the freedom to be a desiring subject, which was an exclusively male privilege in late imperial China (17).¹³ In this scene “Solitary Lament,” Wang Yun marks clearly three sources

¹³ There are several reasons why it is problematic to identify this as a lesbian desire. First, in the context of Qing-China, one’s identity was not defined by his or her sexual orientation. It was, therefore, tricky to identify lesbianism in Wang’s historical context. Second, in scenes featuring the dream male Wang Menglin’s intimacy with women, these women have no knowledge of Wang’s past as a woman. In other words, in Miss Wang’s dream world of romance, she is identifying herself as a man. Third, by letting her female protagonist perform her appreciation of the beauty in the painting, the dramatist creates a “safe” space for her exploration of desire. In her study on lesbianism

of Miss Wang's frustration: her ambition, her wanderlust, and her longing for companionship. But from the third scene onward, the dream male Wang Menglin's romances dominate the play, almost to the exclusion of his scholarly and political ambitions. Both Hua Wei and Wu Qingyun have pointed out that official rank and power, obtained through Wang Menglin's scholarly skills, do not seem to be at the heart of the protagonist's fantasy (Hua, *Chuanzuo* 113; Wu 16). This being the case, the protagonist Miss Wang's dream of glory is actually a dream of romance, and her fantasy transgender experience basically follows the *caizi jiaren* convention.

To a large degree, Wang Yun's representation of the fulfillment of Miss Wang's desire through gender transformation does not rescue the play's narrative of male success from conventionality. But by adding humorous elements into Wang Menglin's pursuit of romance, Wang Yun presents her drama as a parody of the *caizi jiaren* cliché. Wang Yun makes it hard for the reader to evaluate whether Miss Wang's transformation results in a demotion or promotion of this character. As Li Guo observes in her study of cross-dressing in *tanci*, women authors of *tanci* usually insist on the moral uprightness (such as chastity and filial piety) of cross-dressed female characters in order to give them some legitimacy and justify their transgressions against prescribed gender roles (20). The moral ambiguity of Miss Wang's transformation, especially the ridiculous quest for love companions, invites the reader to question to what degree this dream male Wang Menglin represents Wang Yun's ideals and how significant the satisfaction of romantic desire is for a woman's self-fulfillment.

in China, Tze-lan Sang suggests that female-female intimacy was not really seen as a social threat or a sign of moral corruption in late imperial China as long as it did not challenge conventional heterosexual marriages (20-21). Sang points out that "female-female affection enjoys legitimacy as sisterhood, and female-female intercourse is viewed as a secondary, substitutive practice that does not exclude conventional marriage or cross-sex activity" (21). As I will elaborate later in this chapter, Wang Yun's own father would promote his daughter's play as a work of "feminine innocence."

Wang Yun's humorous depiction of Wang Menglin's quest for romance underlines his excessive desire and its awkward expressions. On the one hand, it mocks Wang Menglin's desire; on the other, it reveals the female playwright's ambivalence toward her own articulation of his passion. Wang Menglin's romantic quests all take place after his parents arrange his marriage with Miss Xie, a talented beauty from an equally prominent family, during his journey to the south. The reader, who learns about this marriage even before the character himself does, may recognize Wang's search for a spouse without parental guidance as a bit of a rush. The fact that Wang makes this search the main purpose of his journey is also morally problematic and open to comic exaggeration.

Wang is clearly more occupied with his romantic adventures than with his scholarly progress. Making fun of Wang's obsession with beautiful women, his friends trick him into visiting a prostitute named Pipa Qian, who, it turns out, looks like a female version of the Pig, Zhu Bajie, from *The Journey to the West*. Wang Menglin's servant Yaoqin (played by an actor specializing in clown roles) invites the reader to understand Wang's disastrous encounter with Pipa Qian, which ends with Wang's embarrassing flight from Pipa Qian's sexual advances, as a punishment for his master's unrestrained desire:

(丑扮瑤琴，笑上)：自家非別，王解元手下一個大總管周瑤琴的便是。自從跟隨來到南方，見了多少美景，看了無數好戲。(笑介)真非凡之大樂也。好笑我家公子，今日也訪佳人，明日也尋美色，沒來由被楊老爺，高相公捉弄了去，訪什麼“琵琶美人”。那日起了個清早，打扮得風風流流，欣然去訪。去了半日，氣沖沖跑將回來，進了門不問好歹，說我失誤迎接，著實打罵了一頓。(Hua, *Xiqu ji* 55)

(*Yaoqin enters laughing.*) I am none other than the butler of *jiyuan* Wang. Since I followed him all the way to the south, I have visited many scenic spots and have seen many good shows. (*Laughing.*) What extraordinary fun I've had! My young master is really laughable. One day he goes out looking for a lovely lady. The next day, he again looks everywhere for a great beauty. No wonder he was fooled by Master Yang and Master Gao into visiting this "beauty" Pipa Qian. That day the young master got up early. He dressed up nicely and went to see her in a cheerful mood. But after half a day, he

came running back crestfallen. And the minute he stepped inside the door, he started to scold me and beat me, accusing me of my tardiness in receiving him. (Q. Wu 81)¹⁴

The romantic yet innocent Wang Menglin almost becomes the prey of the ugly yet sexually experienced Pipa Qian. Wang Yun's depiction of Wang Menglin's defeat at the brothel is a parody of romantic *chuanqi* plays, such as *The Swallow's Letter*, that feature instant intimacy between young scholars and beautiful courtesans.

Wang Menglin's meeting with Pipa Qian is so ridiculous that it gives his servant and also the audience the opportunity to laugh at him. In her introduction to this play, Hua Wei mentions that the laughter provoked by the humorous depiction of Wang Menglin's visit to the brothel acts as a "psychological defense mechanism" allowing Wang Yun's expression of female desire that must be suppressed in reality (Hua, *Chuangzuo* 49). Hua also claims that the laughter directed at the difficult beginning of Wang Menglin's romantic adventure reveals the dramatist's anxiety about the pursuit of desire (Hua, *Chuangzuo* 49). To push Hua's interpretation a bit further, the comic element here facilitates the depiction of Wang Menglin's eros but nevertheless marks the female playwright's concern about the reader's reception of her articulation of desire and reflects her uncertainty about where this dream male's interest in love companions may lead him. If we don't recognize the comic elaboration on the romantic quest as a repeating pattern in the play, we may overlook the depth of Wang Yun's ambivalence.

Instead of being discouraged by his experience with Pipa Qian, Wang Menglin vigorously continues his quest for romance. Wang Menglin's encounter with Miss Hu, which results in Miss Hu's mother proposing that Wang marry her daughter, is an unexpected compensation for Wang's awkward meeting with Pipa Qian. The reception of a marriage proposal from a girl's family after only a brief encounter and before a long journey away is a

¹⁴The English translation of *A Dream of Glory* used in this chapter is based on Wu Qingyun's book, but I have made some modifications.

testimony to the hero's charm but also a test of his integrity. Even though Wang Menglin eventually fulfills his promise to marry Hu in the second half of the play, the fact that he starts his search for a new woman of interest immediately after receiving the marriage proposal nevertheless makes his integrity questionable and his manner laughable.

The comic climax comes when Wang pursues Miss Huang right after his vow of love to Miss Hu. On a clear autumn night, Wang Menglin overhears the sound of someone beating clothes to wash them. Wang can hardly suppress his curiosity about the woman who is conducting this domestic chore, which is often associated with romantic longing in the Chinese poetic tradition. As his view is blocked by a wall, Wang Menglin has to climb up a willow tree in order to catch a glimpse of this woman. Immediately enchanted by her beauty, Wang recognizes this encounter as a chance of lifetime that should not be missed. The only obstacle between him and this object of desire is the wall. Wang Menglin decides that this wall should not prevent his advance, even though he is also fully aware that jumping over the wall would be an improper act:

(搖首介) 不可, 夤夜入人家, 非姦即盜, 萬一被人拿住, 成何體面? (又看, 笑介) 嘆, 我也顧不得了, 壯一壯膽, 跳過去吧。(Hua, *Xiqu ji* 62)

(*Shaking his head.*) Oh, no. Only a rapist or a robber would break into another's yard at midnight. If I get caught, how can I preserve my dignity? (*Watching the lady again, he smiles.*) Well, I can't care that much any more. Brave it out and jump! (Q. Wu, 90)

The reference to the Yuan period *zaju* drama *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 (The Story of the Western Wing) is hard to miss here. The scene from the *Western Wing* titled “*Tiaoqiang*” 跳牆 (Jumping over the Wall), which features Student Zhang leaping over the wall to meet with his love interest Cui Yingying and being tricked by the mischievous maid Hongniang, was one of the most popular

scenes for performance from this well-known play.¹⁵ The wall signifies the transgressiveness of Zhang's behavior, and the act of jumping highlights the sheer physicality and lack of ethical restraint in his amorous pursuit.

Compared with Student Zhang, Wang Menglin seems to be even more reckless as he jumps over the wall to approach a complete stranger of the opposite sex. Miss Huang is about to scream for help when she sees Wang Menglin, but she stops when she notices his scholarly attire. Although Wang's formal dress and gentlemanly appearance rescue him from being shamed by Huang's family, they also draw our attention to the contradiction between his social status and the vulgarity of his behavior. Wang, therefore, feels the need to defend himself:

非關吾把儒冠玷，只怪伊家貌忒妍... (生羞介) (唱) 我原非慣，都只為藍橋咫尺，豈可竟無緣。我自愧無端，怎奈情牽。(Hua, *Xiqu ji* 63)

I did not intend to blemish my scholar cap.
You can only blame your bewitching beauty...
(*With shame.*)
I am not used to practicing such shady behavior.
It's only because the Blue Bridge is within my reach.¹⁶
How could I be blind to our destiny?
I am sorry for what I've done.
But I was led astray by my passion. (Q. Wu 91)

The incongruity between Wang's social status and his behavior entails laughter, which establishes readers' sense of superiority over the character and, again, highlights the author's critical distance from the character. This construction of superiority and critical distance, however, may also help to veil the pleasures that both author and reader may experience from the scene's discharge of sexual and psychic energy.

¹⁵ The 18th-century anthology of popular dramatic scenes, *Zhui baiqiu* 綴白裘 (*White Fur Robe*), includes this scene. Since the Ming Dynasty, there were several *chuanqi* adaptations of the 14th-century variety play *The Story of the Western Wing*, and the performance of this play continued to be popular thanks to these adaptations.

¹⁶ The Blue Bridge stands for "a rendezvous for lovers" (Wu, 91).

If Wang's abrupt advances seem funny, then his hasty retreat also appears peculiar. Unlike Student Zhang's transgression, which results in illicit sexual intercourse with Cui Yingying in the Yuan *zaju* play, Wang's jump leads straight to a wedding vow. After the initial embarrassment, Wang and Miss Huang express their mutual admiration, bow to each other repeatedly, and exchange their promises to marry each other. Satisfied with this mutual commitment, Wang leaves in a hurry, showing no interest in physical intimacy. Wang Menglin's growing romantic appetite seems to be more of an intoxication with courtship instead of a hunger for sexual indulgence. Similar to the scene of Wang's confrontation with Pipa Qian, Wang's naiveté here is laughable. However, it is problematic to assume Wang Menglin's naiveté as a simple revelation of the dramatist Wang Yun's innocence, as Lin Heyi has suggested in her study on marginal desires in *caizi jiaren* dramas (177). One may actually wonder if the depiction of Wang Menglin's polite courtship of Miss Huang after his impulsive actions is a result of Wang Yun's self-censorship. Furthermore, as we laugh at Wang Menglin, who rushes out of Miss Huang's courtyard feeling contented, Wang Yun seems to have succeeded in teasing our imagination of romantic desire and its consummation.

4.3 Jealousy and Marital Bliss

In the second half of the play, the awkward lover Wang Menglin surprisingly attains marital bliss. A conventional *caizi jiaren* play would conclude at the male protagonist's wedding; what happens after marriage is left to our imaginations. Wang Yun, however, departs from this convention by continuing her play with depictions of Wang Menglin's married life in the second half of the play. This part of the play seems to take a different turn from the first half. Wang Menglin, who eagerly seeks for beauties in the south, finds himself blessed with an arranged

marriage to an extraordinary beauty, Miss Xie, when he returns home after succeeding in the imperial examinations. In addition, he soon unites with the two beauties from the south thanks to Xie's generosity. This polygamous family structure finally secures the fruits of his past romantic adventures. Wang Menglin seems to have settled with a perfect domestic life while being recognized as a man of talent by the emperor at the imperial court. The glory in the dream has reached its peak, and it seems nothing other than a patriarchal ideal. In contrast to Wang Yong'en, who highlights Wang Yun's embrace of a male perspective in her imagination of Wang Menglin's polygamous family life, Wu Qingyun has pointed out that female characters such as Wang's wife and concubines take center stage in the second half of the play (Wang, *Yanjiu* 255; Wu 22). Wu suggests that Wang's wife and concubines form a close-knit community that challenges the conventional image of competitive and antagonistic wife-concubine relationships (23). Further analysis is needed to establish whether Wang Yun's elaboration on marital bliss corresponds to a fantasy of sexual acquisitiveness (like those we have witnessed in Ruan Dacheng's *The Swallow's Letter*) or suggests a utopian vision of same-sex community. In fact, Wang's continuous use of humor, especially in her utilization of the jealousy plot, invites the reader to put the dream male Wang Menglin back into the picture and examine his marital bliss critically.

In this second half of the play, the joke actually continues to revolve around Wang Menglin's abundant love and his seemingly undeserved luck with women. Before Wang consummates his marriage, he manages to ask his brother to find Miss Hu and Miss Huang and bring them to his family compound. On the wedding night, his regret at leaving the two beauties aside disappears at the moment he lights the candle and marvels at the sublime beauty of his bride. It is Wang's cautious mother who expresses concerns about the two women residing in

the family garden. She brings up the matter to Wang's wife, Xie, and asks for her permission to let these two young women become Wang's concubines.

To the mother's surprise, Xie welcomes the two women right away. However, Xie still finds it necessary to play "fake jealousy" in front of Wang. Consequently, a scene similar to "Feigning Jealousy" in Wu Bing's *The Remedy for Jealousy* takes place. Unlike Madam Yan, who hides her intention in a stage adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion*, Xie has a straightforward explanation for her decision to pretend to be jealous:

但怪相公年少輕狂，既有此事，就該實告我知，為什麼一意隱瞞，片言不露？我如今欲令相見，教他看得太容易了，因此袖了他昔日聘二姬的雙玉，待等朝回，且做個假意兒，為難他一番，有何不可？ (Hua, *Xiqu ji* 96)

It is only my husband, who was wild at a younger age, that should be blamed. Since there was such an affair, he should have told me about it. Why did he try to cover it up and say nothing about it? If I let him meet those two ladies now, I make it all too easy for him. So I hide the two pieces of jade that he gave them as love tokens in my sleeve and wait for his return. I will fake my expression and embarrass him. Why not? (Q. Wu 132)

Xie seems to be surprised by Wang Menglin's past as a libertine and disappointed by Wang's hesitation in taking responsibility for his previous romantic adventures. Xie feels that a delay in the reunion between her husband and the two beauties will teach Wang a lesson. Her display of jealousy successfully bewilders her husband. When Xie shows her husband the two love tokens, Wang finds it impossible to hide his past romantic quests from his wife anymore. Like Madam Yan's prank on her husband, Xie's performance of jealousy results in Wang Menglin's humiliation. But Xie continues her dramatic role even after Wang kneels down to beg for her virtuous tolerance and forgiveness. Flinching before his wife's "outrage," Wang proposes to dismiss the two beauties. Even at this moment, right before his possession of all three beauties and the grand conclusion of his romantic quests, Wang's bewilderment and vacillation are being ridiculed.

Xie's performance of jealousy is a straightforward criticism of Wang Menglin's superfluous desire and deficient sense of responsibility. In her study of women-authored *tanci*, Mariam Epstein suggests that women write about jealousy differently from men. In male-authored fictional narratives, female jealousy is strongly associated with selfish desire, possessiveness, and strong sexual appetite; in contrast, Epstein points out, female *tanci* authors tend to depict jealousy as "the only tool that women have in a social world that places no restraints on men's sexuality" ("Turning the Authorial Table" 179). In other words, women authors often utilize the theme of jealousy to call attention to men's lack of self-control and therefore challenge the association of the female gender (*yin* 陰) with the overflow of sexual desire (*yin* 淫) (Epstein, "Turning the Authorial Table" 158). Wu Bing's creation of the jealous wife Miao is representative of what Epstein would consider a convention among male authors, even though his dramatic elaboration on Madam Yan's feigning jealousy embodies a complexity overlooked by Epstein's study.

Initially, Xie's expression of jealousy in *A Dream of Glory* seems to confirm Epstein's account of women writers' use of the jealousy plot. Later in the play, however, Wang Menglin successfully turns the tables. Before Wang Menglin gives two young women to his brother to show his gratitude for the brother's help with his reunions with Miss Hu and Miss Huang, he fools Xie into believing that these two women are about to serve him for his own pleasure at home. Xie reminds Wang Menglin that his status as a high official does not allow him to continue his libertine lifestyle. Satisfied to see that his wife responds to his joke so seriously, Wang Menglin states that he would never let his official title take control of his life. He asks: "只要夫人不妒，何妨廣列金釵?" ("As long as my wife is not jealous, what is wrong with having as many concubines as I can?") (Hua, *Xiquji* 107). When Miss Xie gives up on Wang Menglin,

the two concubines, Miss Hu and Miss Huang, confront Wang and remind him that Xie has the full authority to veto this expansion of the inner chamber. When Wang Menglin finally reveals that the two women will be sent to his brother, he triumphantly mocks his wife's expression of "fake jealousy" in the past and declares his success in revenging his wife's prank on him. The "united front" of his wife and concubines protesting together against the new concubines must have brought tremendous satisfaction to Wang Menglin's ego.

After Wang reveals the truth, the wife and the two concubines chuckle along with the husband, and the scene becomes a display of domestic harmony. Wang Yuanchang, the commentator, inserts the comment *youqu* 有趣 (amusing) right at this point where Wang Menglin's prank wins good laughs. But is this amusing display of domestic harmony really celebrating the victory of Wang Menglin's abundant desire? We have to keep in mind that Wang Menglin's prank on his wife starts with his self-parody—a deliberate and exaggerated performance of excessive romantic appetite. Wang's joke works precisely because his wife Xie has all the right reasons to believe that he is interested in more concubines, and Wang apparently recognizes this. In other words, Wang Menglin's prank is a self-reflexive moment at which Wang acknowledges the consequence of overabundant desire: domestic chaos. But Wang Menglin utilizes his self-parody to challenge his wife's previous performance of "fake jealousy" and receives gratification from the united protest, a sign of real jealousy, from his wife and concubines. In this regard, what Wu highlights as Wang Yun's imagination of "female union" serves Wang Menglin, the male desiring subject, as a fantasy about his absolute dominance in the realm of romance. If Wang Menglin's self-parody suggests a moment of self-reflection, this moment quickly devolves into self-indulgence.

4.4 The Awakening—the Danger and Potential of the Female Body

Wang Menglin's self-indulgence seems to signify patriarchal depravity. But Wang Menglin is never simply a representative of the patriarchal authority; he is also a woman's alter ego. Wang Menglin is particularly funny because of our recollection of his original gender. Readers' amusement at Wang Yun's humorous depictions of the dream male's romantic journey intensifies as we recognize the contrast between Miss Wang's reserved manner as an elite woman and the dream male's exaggerated expressions of desire after gender change. One may ask what is presented as laughable here: women's desire or its repression. Moreover, as the reader chuckles over the incongruity between the dream male Wang Menglin's strong appetite for love, manifested in his daring approaches to his romantic interests, and his obvious naiveté about sex, suggested by his abrupt retreats in the scenes of intimacy, the female dramatist successfully pokes fun at the opposite stereotypes of women's wantonness and innocence.

Within the play, it is Wang Menglin's female family member, the mother, who truly understands the depth of women's romantic longing. Wang Menglin's excessive quest for love is certainly humorous. The immediacy with which he develops his appetite for romance and vanity is also amusing. Right after Wang's gender transformation, the reader witnesses Wang's pure joy and his absolute confidence in his family's positive response to this dramatic change:

笑盈盈满腮，笑盈盈满腮。从此得舒怀，了却裙钗债。（白）此去说与祖母爹娘
啊，定然惊喜也。（急行，笑唱）去堂前訴來，去堂前訴來，管取顏開，共相稱快。
(Hua, *Xiqu ji* 37)

Smiles beam upon my face.
Smiles beam upon my face.
Finally I can unburden my heart;
Be done with the obligations of womankind.
(*Speaking.*)
I am going to tell my grandma and my parents. They will surely be surprised, but with
joy!
(*Hurries away, singing merrily.*)

I'm going to tell them in the front hall.
I'm going to tell them in the front hall.
They're sure to be delighted.
O'er this sight they'll all rejoice. (Q. Wu 58)

Wang Menglin adopts a male identity with ease and self-assurance. His male family members readily embrace their new son and support his journey to the south, believing that it will help to alleviate his “great frustration over the injustice” (*wanzhong buping zhi qi* 萬種不平之氣) of being confined to the inner chamber for so long (41).¹⁷ They seem to find nothing surprising in a woman's aspiration to become a man.

Wang Menglin's disregard for his pre-transgender experience, and his male relatives' belief in the thoroughness of his transformation, are set in contrast with the mother's worries. The mother reminds the reader that the original female body of Miss Wang is still lurking in the background. As Wang Menglin's scholarly skills are recognized at the imperial examinations soon after the transformation, he succeeds in fulfilling his male family members' high expectations. It is the mother who worries about his “girly traits” affecting his pursuit of success. After not hearing from Wang Menglin for a while, the mother conveys her concerns to the father:

(外) “你休憂慮，免淒慘，不日龍駒來帝里。(老旦) 怕他小孩子家沒主意，身迷花柳，有誤功名...(老旦) 還有一件，他如今雖做男兒體，怕嬌柔終有些裙釵氣。
(外) 夫人一發多慮了。(老旦) 咳，相公，我則怕他客舍秋風被病所欺。(Hua, *Xiqu ji* 67-68)

(*Master Wang*): Do not worry. Do not look sad. Your young dragon steed will be in the Capital in no time.¹⁸ (*Madam Wang*): He is still a child, without a mind of his own. I'm afraid that he would be seduced by willows and flowers and forget about his career¹⁹. ...

¹⁷ In her article “Androgynous Males and Deficient Females: Biology and Gender Boundary in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century China,” Charlotte Furth examines narratives of sex changes and social elites' reactions to the rare cases of such transformations. According to Furth's research, while a man's feminization was interpreted as an alarming omen of social disharmony, much less social anxiety was projected onto a woman's masculinization (18). In fact, gaining a son after a daughter's change into a man was regarded as delightful matter. Gender hierarchy manipulates one's view of sex changes. This disparity in social attitudes partly explains the male family members' positive reaction to Miss Wang's transformation.

¹⁸ The phrase “young dragon steed” refers to the son, Wang Menglin.

¹⁹ Willows and flowers stand for prostitutes.

(Madam Wang): Something else is bothering me as well. Although he has changed into a male body, I am afraid that he still keeps the tender and delicate traits of a girl. *(Master Wang):* These are unnecessary worries. *(Madam Wang):* My Lord, I fear that our son has fallen ill in a country inn, groaning somewhere under the autumn wind. (Q. Wu 97)

While Wang Menglin's success in the imperial examinations meets the father's expectations, his excessive lust for beautiful women does not. The father's understanding of his daughter's "great frustration" seems far from comprehensive. To a certain degree, the mother's worries are not unreasonable.

The mother perceives Wang Menglin as being subject to several gendered dangers, including women's physical weakness and psychological vulnerability to sexual desire, which Wang Menglin is now allowed to express as a young man. The father's comment, "these are unnecessary worries," highlights his incomprehension of the reasons behind the mother's concerns. The mother's decision to provide an additional explanation for what she means by "girly traits" only draws the reader's attention to the fragility of the female body as a reflection of repressed sexual energy. As a woman, Wang Menglin's mother knows better what her daughter, Miss Wang, was deprived of, and she is thus alert to the potential dangers in Wang Menglin's new life of freedom.

It is curious that right before the end of the "glorious" dream of awkward romance, Wang Menglin suddenly recalls his past as a woman. Wang Menglin states that his original gender has never faded into oblivion but has in fact been an important factor behind his path to glory. He himself provides further commentary on the "girly traits" first mentioned by his mother:

本是個著裙釵繡閣媧，今做了戴烏紗皇朝宦。（指筆介）這一枝小霜毫，只不過題心怨，怎承望掃千軍把社稷安？（抖袖介）一般兒佩金章惹御烟，又何必拜相榮封侯顯？（呆想介）猛想起這二十載的富貴繁華也，怕做了一枕邯鄲午夢酣。
(Hua, *Xiqu ji* 125)

I was a lady in skirts and hairpins hidden in the boudoir.
Now I have donned an official's cap and serve at court.

(Points to the pen)

Such a small brush could have only served to release the frustrations of a person's heart.
Dared I hope that it would wipe out thousands of troops and safeguard the state?

(Shakes his sleeves)

Suffice it that one wins the gold badge of recognition and imperial favor;
Why did I seek glory in high office?

(Mired in deep thought)

All of a sudden, I seem to realize that these twenty years of fortune and glory
Are nothing but a Handan daydream. (Q. Wu 168)

Before the dream, Miss Wang questions Heaven for assigning her the “wrong sex” and letting her brilliant brush and precious sword waste away in vain. Towards the end of the dream, however, the dream male Wang Menglin wonders whether a tiny womanly brush can shoulder the responsibility of commanding troops and safeguarding society. He expresses his regret for his obsession with social recognition through his questioning of his competence; he was a “lady in skirts and hairpins” after all.

While initially Miss Wang's unsatisfying identity as a woman leads her to conjure up an illusory world of glory, this same initial identity allows her to see into the inherent emptiness of that glory. To a certain degree, Wang Menglin's recollection of his past as a woman already prepares him for enlightenment, even before he wakes up from his dream. This sets *A Dream of Glory* apart from Tang Xianzu's *Handan ji* 邯鄲記 (A Handan Dream), a deliverance play mentioned by Wang himself in his aria. In *Handan ji*, the protagonist Student Lu needs the Daoist immortal Lü Dongbin's help to understand that his “experience” of fortune and fame is just a short dream. In *A Dream of Glory*, thanks to his contemplation of his original gender identity, Wang detects the vanity of this wish to be a successful man before a Daoist deity comes to deliver her speech about enlightenment and transcendence. Being a woman is the cause of both illusion and disillusion in *A Dream of Glory*.

Curiously, Wang Menglin's above-quoted reflection centers on his ambition for political success. It does not touch upon his desire for love, even though his transgender experience revolves around the search for romance and, later, the management of intimacy within the family. As I have mentioned earlier, in *caizi jiaren* plays, the male protagonists' political successes are often just subplots that support their eventual unions with their love interests. But even compared with those conventional *caizi jiaren* plots, elaboration on Wang Menglin's political achievements seems scarce in *A Dream of Glory*. Throughout the play, Wang Yun has pushed the *caizi jiaren* plot to such an extreme that it reaches the stage of parody and caricature. Surprisingly, however, the romantic spirit of *caizi jiaren* lingers until the very end of the drama. Wang Menglin's lack of reflection on his romance seems to further reveal the depth of his indulgence. For him, love is more alluring than status and fame.

The play ends with a cautionary voice from the awakened Miss Wang. This voice marks the absence of a grand reunion and contributes to the "coldness" of Wang Yun's play.

無端一覺消春夢，夢裏空馳騁。三生情枉痴，一笑今何用？方曉得女和男一樣須回省。(Hua, *Xiqu ji* 137)

A spring dream fell upon me from nowhere;
I squandered the passion of my past, present, and future.
How useless is this passion?
I can only dismiss it with a laugh.
I came to realize: both women and men need to contemplate. (Q. Wu 181-182)

One may wonder whether this cautionary comment is a serious negation of all passions or just convenient way for the dramatist to avoid being questioned on her creation of such a "spring dream." At least, this ending, which makes the play appear "cold," cannot totally obscure the amusement the reader may have derived from the play. And it certainly does not circumscribe the provocative power of the playwright's humor in her exploration of desire.

The protagonist Miss Wang's cautionary voice is actually preceded by her laughter. Wang Yun's own collection of poem includes her poetic commentary on *Handan ji*. In this poem she highlights Student Lu's laughter right at the moment of enlightenment: “將相榮華六十春，覺來一笑即歸真” (“Six springs of glory as the man of power, a laugh upon awakening returns him to the truth”) (*Huaiqing tang* 142). Miss Wang's laughter echoes Student Lu's as a sign of wisdom. But what exactly is Miss Wang laughing at? The playwright's stage direction for this laugh is brief and abstract; the male actor, who is now back in women's clothes, bursts into a loud laughter. This enigmatic laughter has several possible targets: Miss Wang, the fanciful female protagonist; the amorous young man Wang Menglin, into whom Miss Wang has transformed; and the reader, who goes on an imaginative journey with Wang Menglin only to find the ending of this fantasy desolate and cold. Isn't the reader, who feels disappointed at the ending, more intoxicated by worldly desires than the characters in Wang Yun's play?

4.5 The Father's Commentary

The playwright's father Wang Yuanchang gives his own interpretation of his daughter's humor in his commentary on *A Dream of Glory*. Within the play, the father's enthusiasm for Wang Menglin's transgender experience contrasts sharply with the mother's worries. Outside of the diegetic world, the author Wang Yun's own father also showed his support for his daughter's writing project on gender transformation. Wang Yuanchang's contribution to his daughter's dramatic work included a commentary, an epilogue, and modifications of the text itself.²⁰ As recent studies on father-daughter relationships in late imperial China have shown, elite males

²⁰ In his epilogue, the father mentions that he deleted some passages from the drama because he found them verbose and that he also polished some parts of the play (Hua, *Xiqu ji* 143). How he altered *A Dream of Glory*, however, will remain forever a mystery.

from the late sixteenth century onward had more freedom to express tender feelings towards their children, and especially their daughters. Partly thanks to expanding female literacy, literary exchanges within elite families also strengthened the father-daughter bond.²¹ Wang Yuanchang's editorial work on *A Dream of Glory* testifies to this change in family relationships in the mid-Qing.

As the father states, it took him ten years before he had the courage to share his daughter's work and his commentary with readers outside of the family (Hua, *Xiquji* 143). He invited his poet friends from Jiangnan, Zhang Fengsun 張鳳孫 (1706-1783) and Zhang Zao 張藻 (?-1778), to read Wang Yun's play. Zhang Zao was a famous female scholar and the mother of the prominent scholar official Bi Yuan 畢沅 (1730-1797). Bi Yuan, who had a long official career in Wang Yun's home region, was probably an acquaintance of the Wang family. Zhang Zao and her daughter Bi Fen were advocates of women's writing, and their family established a prominent community of women writers in the lower Yangzi region (Widmer, *Beauty* 19). The fact that Wang Yuanchang solicited comments on *A Dream of Glory* from the Zhangs suggests that the lower Yangzi region remained the center of women's writing in the mid-Qing, but literary exchanges between women from the north and south were ongoing. It was the Zhangs in the south who confirmed the literary value of *A Dream of Glory* and facilitated its publication. Although the father's epilogue expresses his reservations over whether his daughter's drama will be sufficiently appreciated, his decision to print her play revealed his recognition of her literary ambition and his high regard for her compositional skills. The printing of Wang Yun's text was

²¹ See works such as Lu Weijing's "A Pearl in the Palm: A Forgotten Symbol of the Father-Daughter Bond" and Hsiung Ping-chen's *A Tender Voyage*. In terms of literati's commentaries on their daughters' literary works, the most famous example may be Ye Shaoyuan's 葉紹袁 (1589-1648) commentary on his daughters' poetic and dramatic works in the collection *Wumeng tang ji* 午夢堂集 (Collections of the Midday Dream Hall). Katherine Carlitz argues that by publishing *Wumeng tang ji*, Ye Shaoyuan commemorated his affection for his family members, promoted his ideal of a literati family, and established himself as a representative of both passion and fatherly love ("Mourning" 67).

a “vanity publication,” the purpose of which was to record the writer’s achievement. As a project of family pride, it was also subject to family control. When we read Wang Yun’s play together with her father’s commentary, we discover how the father’s commentary “domesticates” the transgressiveness of the daughter’s writing—a transgressiveness which, as we have seen, is often tinged with the comic.

As one would expect, Wang Yuanchang’s commentary praises the refinement of the play’s lyrics and highlights its careful plot design. One of the most distinctive features of Wang Yuanchang’s commentary on his daughter’s drama, however, is his notes on the prototypes of those characters that appear in the episodes featuring Wang Menglin’s search for romance. At the moment of Pipa Qian’s comic self-introduction, for example, Wang Yuanchang makes this note: “琵琶錢，余婢母也，既老且醜。吾女嘗揶揄之，故譜入戲文，以為笑柄” (“Pipa Qian was my servant. She was old and ugly. My daughter often made fun of her. She included such an episode in her play to make the reader laugh”) (Hua, *Xiqu ji* 81).²² Unlike some of the other marginal comments made by the father, this note says nothing about Wang Yun’s compositional skills. Instead, Wang Yuanchang informs the reader that he clearly recognizes the reference to his daughter’s personal life and gets the “inside joke.”

Wang Yuanchang’s comment showcases the intimacy between the father and daughter, but it also demonstrates the father’s uneasiness about how far his daughter’s humorous imagination should go. As Susan Mann explains in *Precious Records: Women in China’s Long Eighteenth Century*, the status of courtesan culture in the High Qing period was lower than it had been in the Late Ming, and there was a significant divide between the courtesans’ entertainment

²² The father also felt that it was necessary to inform the reader that Miss Hu and Miss Huang were also based on real-life figures.

quarters and the elite women writers' inner chambers, not to mention the gap between elite women and lower-end prostitutes such as Pipa Qian (121-125). Thus, Wang Yun's representation of Pipa Qian's brothel, a space designed explicitly for the consummation of sexual desire, is a significant act of border-crossing. While the modern critic Hua Wei takes the comic scene as a reflection of Wang Yun's repressed sexual desire, Wang Yuanchang's comment invites us to regard the scene as a silly trick that his daughter has played on a familiar household figure. By informing the reader that Pipa Qian is based on a domestic servant, Wang Yuanchang diverts the reader's attention away from his daughter's creative imagination and directs it to her ability to depict domestic life with a comic twist. By pointing out the prototypes of multiple characters in Wang Yun's dramatic narrative, the father's commentary encourages the reader to understand these romantic and funny episodes as being primarily disguised references to the daughter's (innocent) life experiences, rather than creative elaboration on the realm of desire. By emphasizing the autobiographical referentiality of his daughter's dramatic text, Wang Yuanchang downplays the imaginative element in her writing.²³ His agenda of "domesticating" his daughter's writing, however, runs counter to the latter's own reasons for fiction writing, which included making use of her imagination and her literary talent to break out of the bounds of the inner chamber.

Besides pointing out the domestic references in Wang Yun's writing, Wang Yuanchang also manages to tone down the transgressiveness of his daughter's humor by categorizing it as a manifestation of "feminine innocence," or a masked lament over past friendships. As quoted in the previous paragraph, Wang Yuanchang refers to the humorous episode about Wang Menglin's encounter with Pipa Qian as *yeyu* 揶揄—harmless ridicule targeting an old maid (Hua, *Xiqu ji*

²³ Wu Qingyun also draws the reader's attention to the autobiographical features of Wang Yun's play. But Wu's understanding of the references to Wang's personal life in the play is based on Wang Yuanchang's marginal comments (18-19).

81). By doing so, he not only downplays the joke on the romance-seeker Wang Menglin, but also discourages interpretation of the episode as a female writer's subversive articulation of desire. As we can see from this comment, along with others that he makes on the episodes featuring Wang Menglin's intimacy with his three wives later in the play, Wang Yun's father regards the humorous depiction of Wang Menglin's desire as *guizhong yunshi* “閨中韻事” (playfulness within the inner chamber) and a reflection of feminine innocence (Hua, *Xiqu ji* 104).

Wang Yuanchang suggests that sometimes this innocence can lead to emotional suffering. For example, in his comment on the last appearance of the only clown figure Yaoqin 瑤琴, the male servant of Wang Menglin, he writes:

周有姐，永清周氏女也。隨伊父母服役署中。黠而慧。吾女愛之，名之曰“瑤琴”。未幾，以疾夭。故譜入曲中。蓋一切嬉笑之詞，皆斷腸聲也。(Hua, *Xiqu ji* 115)

Sister Zhou You was the daughter of the Zhou family from Yongqing. She accompanied her parents to serve at my office. She was astute and smart. My daughter liked her and gave her the name “Yaoqin.” But before long, she died of illness. My daughter included this character in her play for this reason. All the playful words are expressions of sorrow.

Yaoqing's “playful words” refer to the servant's comically critical comments on his master's obsession with beauties as well as the servant's own shameless request for a wife. This clown, therefore, is an ironic figure who demonstrates the “contagiousness” of sexual desire. Wang Yuanchang's interpretation of his daughter's comic elaboration on this character as a lament for an innocent friendship inside the inner chamber is, therefore, quite far-fetched.

In contrast to his effort to downplay the sexual energy inside the humorous episodes, Wang Yuanchang promotes his own image as a romantic figure by identifying with the romance seeker. In his commentary on the episode, in which Wang Menglin's first wife Xie pretends to be jealous of the concubines Huang and Hu, Wang Yun's father points out that Xie talks like his own wife and Wang Yun's own mother (Hua, *Xiqu ji* 99). Wang Yuanchang places himself at

the center of a love rivalry and seems eager to show off his marital bliss. While Wang Yuanchang does not deny the power of desire, he assigns the realm of desire only to the father figure within the confines of an established marriage. It is hard to determine what exactly motivated Wang Yuanchang's "domestication project." It could be his effort to protect Wang Yun's reputation as an elite woman writer.

4.6 The "Afterlife" of *A Dream of Glory*

One year after finishing *A Dream of Glory*, Wang Yun composed another *chuanqi* play, *Quanfu ji* 全福記 (The Hall of Complete Fortune). As one of the first few readers of Wang Yun's *chuanqi* plays, Zhu Gui was pleased to find out that the second drama was much more cheerful than the first one. Zhu Gui's preface to *The Hall of Complete Fortune* invites the reader to think that his comment on *A Dream of Glory* influenced Wang Yun's composition of her second play:

庚寅，南圃訪余晉陽臬署，出以相示。余曰：“曲則佳矣。但全劇過於冷寂，使讀者悄然而悲，泫然以泣，此雍門之琴，易水之歌也。奏於華筵綺席，恐非所宜耳。”南圃以為然。歸以告筠。筠唯唯。越次年，而《全福記》又脫稿矣。南圃託郵筒寄余京邸。余展而讀之，見其豎義落想，處處出人意外，而且另闢蹊徑，都不前書。《繁華夢》如風雨淒淒，《全福記》如春光融融。(Hua, *Xiquji* 247)

In the Gengyin year of the Qianlong reign (1770), Nanpu [Wang Yun's father] came to visit me at my court office in Jinyang and showed me the play [*A Dream of Glory*]. I said: "the arias are good, but the play is too desolate overall. It makes the reader become sad quietly and tear up. It is like the music played on Yongmen Zhou's zither and the song sung by Jing Ke at the Yi River.²⁴ It may not be appropriate for splendid banquets." Nanpu agreed with me. He went back and told Yun my opinion. Yun concurred. A year later, Wang Yun completed the manuscript of *The Hall of Complete Fortune*. Nanpu mailed it to my residence in the capital city. I opened the manuscript and read it. The conception of this play is far more than one could hope for. It was an innovative work

²⁴ Yongmen Zhou (Zhou from Yongmen) was Lord Mengchang's (? – ca. 279 BC) entourage. It was said that his music could move listeners to tears. The assassin Jing Ke sang a sad farewell song beside the Yi River before his unsuccessful attempt to kill the King of Qin.

that does not simply repeat the previous play. *A Dream of Glory* is like chilly wind and cold rain, but *The Hall of Complete Fortune* resembles warm spring sunlight.

Zhu Gui underlines the contrast between Wang Yun's two plays and emphasizes the originality of the second play. But Zhu's comment also prompts one to wonder whether *The Hall of Complete Fortune* can be read as Wang's revision of *A Dream of Glory* in response to Zhu's idea of an "appropriate" *chuanqi* play. The obvious similarities between Wang Yun's two dramas, which Zhu Gui overlooked, invite such a thought.

Like *A Dream of Glory*, *The Hall of Complete Fortune* revolves around a talented young man's romance with three beautiful ladies. Born into a prominent family, the male protagonist Wen Yan is planning to marry Miss Jia, the daughter of an equally elite family. Jia has a sworn sister, Shen, who dresses as a young man and studies for the imperial examinations after her parents' death. Shen has romantic interest in her fellow examinee, Wen, and her disguise as a man helps her conceal her feelings. During a solitary walk, Wen encounters a village girl named Chunjuan. Chunjuan has her eyes on Wen and lets her mother persuade Wen into a marriage. Under pressure, Wen promises to take Chunjuan as a concubine. Soon Wen achieves the highest degree at the imperial examinations. Wen consummates his marriage with Jia and seems to have no desire to take a concubine. Determined to shame Wen, Shen secretly brings Chunjuan to her home and announces to her fellow examinees that she has just taken a concubine. Wen comes to celebrate Shen's marriage and is surprised to find out that Chunjuan has changed her mind. Soon the emperor orders Wen to fight pirates and bandits. Wen accomplishes his missions with ease. While he is away at war, his wife Jia persuades Shen to change back to her women's clothes and marry Wen. When Wen comes back, he agrees to follow his wife's arrangement, though with some hesitation. He decides to give Chunjuan away to his best friend. Initially frustrated by Wen's decision, Chunjuan finds the newly arranged marriage satisfying.

Unlike the dream male Wang Menglin in *A Dream of Glory*, the male protagonist Wen Yan does not appear to be swept up in a frenzy of romantic adventures. Wen's encounter with Chunjuan is almost a repetition of Wang's engagement with Miss Hu in *A Dream of Glory*. But Wen's decision to give Chunjuan away seems to be the playwright's apology for Wang Menglin's excessive appetite for love. Completely fooled by Shen's disguise as a young scholar, Wen never imagines that Shen's friendship implies heterosexual desire. Without devoting much effort to the pursuit of love, Wen is blessed with two beautiful and talented wives. And unlike Wang Menglin, who indulges in his marital delights, Wen is eager to perform his loyalty for the emperor. The elaboration on Wen's success in warfare expands the scope of the play beyond the domestic sphere.

The one character who diligently pursues her desire is the cross-dressed Miss Shen. Even after knowing that Wen is engaged to her very own sworn sister, Miss Shen is unwilling to give up her fancy for Wen. Her repressed desire for Wen drives her to take Chunjuan as a "concubine" and embarrass Wen. The "hostage" Chunjuan ends up becoming the unfortunate victim of Shen's arrangement. Preoccupied with her own romantic longing, Miss Shen appears heedless of the consequences of her actions. She seems to share the same impulsive spirit with the dream male Wang Menglin, whose thirst for love leads him to create awkward situations. But unlike Wang Menglin's desires, Miss Shen's pursuit of love is, after all, marked by its focus on a single object—Wen Yan. This devotion gives some legitimacy to Miss Shen's expression of passion.

Besides giving a more strategic representation of her characters' romantic desire, Wang Yun also expands the conventional celebratory plot of *chuanqi* in her second play. *The Hall of Complete Fortune*, a 26-scene play, includes four weddings and two banquets.²⁵ As if this were

²⁵ The four weddings include Wen Yan's marriages with Miss Jia and Miss Shen as well as his friend's marriages with Chunjuan and a defeated female bandit.

still not enough to brighten up her play, Wang Yun adds an extra scene, “*Youchun*” 遊春 (Spring Excursion), after the grand reunion. In this scene, all the main characters enjoy their trip along the Qu River, where the royal park is located. Besides sightseeing, they encounter groups of courtesans and watch new participants in the imperial examinations having their carefree moments in the capital city. The character played by the role type *fumo* 副末, who offers metatheatrical comments at the beginning of a drama, explains the function of this additional scene:

(副末上白) 華堂歌舞有光輝，酒散歌殘世所悲。一切衣冠重出現，請醒醉眼看芳菲。此一部傳奇，名曰《全福記》，扮演文狀元家門故事，已到封拜團圓地位，似乎再無話說了。但作此記者，另有心事，以為世上戲文，每到場終，鑼鼓一響，滿堂寂然。坐客亦將告辭，光景甚屬無味，因而於末尾又撰《遊春》一折。變冠帶為巾服，異功名為山水。將前番角色，重新出現。使列位看官，於煙消火滅之後，復見熱鬧排場，豈非從來戲場一大奇觀？ (Hua, *Xiqu ji* 241)

(*Fumo comes onstage and speaks.*) Songs and dances bring brilliance to the splendid hall. But when the wine is spilled and the songs are over, people get sad. All the performers in costumes reappear, wake the drunken audiences, and direct the audiences' attention to the beautiful and fragrant. This *chuanqi* play, named *Complete Fortune*, tells the story of the Top Scholar Wen Yan. It has already reached the great reunion, and so it would seem that there is nothing left to say. But the dramatist thinks differently. She feels that when a drama reaches its conclusion, the gong and drum are struck, and the entire hall becomes quiet. Guests are about to leave, and the atmosphere just becomes dull. For this reason, she adds the scene “Spring Excursion” to the end of her play. Male characters change from their official attire into casual clothes. Instead of focusing on fame and glory, they enjoy natural scenery. All the characters, who have appeared before, reemerge for the audience, so the audience can enjoy another lively scene after the smoke is gone and the fire is out. Isn't this an unprecedented wonder of the theater?

Talking through the *fumo* character, Wang Yun suggests that the conventional grand reunion only highlights the disappointment after a play is over. Wang therefore goes in the exact opposite direction in this second play: while *A Dream of Glory* concludes with the protagonist waking up to the cold reality from a fantasy of romance and empowerment, *The Hall of Complete Fortune* continues the celebration of love unions and political successes with a lavish

display of spring delights. But one wonders if this extra scene can rescue the audience from the feeling of emptiness after the show is over, or rather, if this scene of extravagance only elevates the sense of desolation. After all, what follows this “unprecedented wonder of the theater” is again the quieting down of the theater hall and the return to reality. One may also question whether the addition of “Spring Excursion” constitutes Wang’s sincere effort to make her play more cheerful or an ironic comment on the social expectation for *chuanqi* plays to be lighthearted fantasies. Like her first play, *The Hall of Complete Fortune* pokes fun at *chuanqi* audiences, such as Zhu Gui, who preferred to indulge in fictional splendor. In light of these ambiguities, Zhu’s statement that *The Hall of Complete Fortune* reflects Wang Yun’s “progress” after accepting his comments on *A Dream of Glory* appears rather problematic.

4.7 Conclusion

Wang Yun’s *chuanqi* play *A Dream of Glory* revolves around a woman’s dream of gender transformation. This play has conventionally been understood as a manifestation of a woman’s desire to break social restrictions—a talented woman, not unlike her male counterparts, wishes to achieve worldly successes. But if this dream of gender change represents a woman’s aspiration, then how can we explain that the dream male Wang Menglin, into whom the female protagonist transforms, ultimately appears rather ridiculous? The fact that Wang Menglin achieves romance and fame in the play does not mitigate the comic awkwardness of his single-minded pursuit of love. If we understand Wang Menglin as a representative of patriarchal depravity and denounce the female dramatist’s embrace of patriarchal values in her imagination of a life of glory, we may have simplified Wang Yun’s decision to create Wang Menglin as a rather laughable figure. Wang Yun’s use of humor in her depiction of Wang Menglin is in fact a

strategic choice. It allows the dramatist to explore the sensitive realm of female desire with few restrictions and to reflect critically on worldly ambitions.

The dream male Wang Menglin is preoccupied with romance, but Wang Yun's play hardly touches upon other mundane desires. What does this say about Wang Yun's understanding of women's aspirations? Is Wang Yun prioritizing romantic companionship in a woman's pursuit of self-fulfillment? Wang Yun's views on romantic desires seem more complex. When Wang Yun experiments with the *chuanqi* form to articulate female desire, she also turns her play about romantic quests into a parody of the *caizi jiaren* tradition, which had promoted the clichéd narrative of men's successes as defined by their victories in winning love. In other words, Wang Menglin's ridiculed preoccupation is an ironic comment on how *caizi jiaren* narratives had educated and, at the same time, limited women's imagination of a glorious life. When the awakened Miss Wang declares the emptiness of her dream, Wang Yun is probably not denouncing women's decision to dream, but rather questioning precisely what women should wish for.

Even though the dream male's awkward adventure reveals the female dramatist's ambivalence about where romantic desire can lead one, it hardly suggests naiveté on her part. Instead, Wang Yun has successfully teased the reader's imagination about how romance should be consummated. Her father's commentary, however, undercuts the provocative power of his daughter's humor and diverts the reader's attention away from the complexity of her textual construction of desire by interpreting her humorous creations as expressions of feminine innocence and personal memory. Through his commentary, the father promotes himself as a man of passion but simultaneously downplays the ostensible transgressiveness of the daughter's imagination.

The father's interpretation of the play might have shielded his daughter's work from criticism. Indeed, Zhu Gui's comment on Wang Yun's play as "cold and desolate" suggests that some among Wang Yun's contemporary readers followed the father's interpretation and ignored Wang Yun's strategic use of humor and her ironic voice. Wang Yun's second play, *The Hall of Complete Fortune*, seems to be a response to Zhu Gui's criticism. Like Wang's first play, *The Hall of Complete Fortune* strategically creates space for the expression of female desire. Its excessively festive tone mocks the social expectation for *chuanqi* to be celebratory. In doing so, it reminds readers of Wang's courage in revealing a woman's aspirations as well as her struggles with these aspirations.

Conclusion

As Wang Yun states in the conclusion of her play *A Dream of Glory*, romantic *chuanqi* plays are *chunmeng* 春夢 (spring dreams/romantic fantasies) conjured up by the dramatists. These dreams allow their readers to travel near and far and even experience passion that transcends the realities of everyday life. If, as Wang Yun suggests, romantic *chuanqi* plays are dreamwork, then the plays considered in this study also demonstrate a heightened self-awareness of this dreamwork as fantasy-making, often conveyed through comic twists in dramatic narratives.

To a large degree, the indulgence in fantasies of passion and romance was a result of the craze for *qing*, which highlighted emotional authenticity and spontaneity as the defining elements of one's self and celebrated romantic love as an important manifestation of such elements. After Tang Xianzu's masterpiece, *The Peony Pavilion*, pushed the literary rendition of the discourse of *qing* to its peak, *chuanqi* became an important vehicle for expressing *qing*. Later romantic *chuanqi* dramas were more or less responding to the influence of *The Peony Pavilion* and its close connection to the cultural obsession with *qing*.

However, as we have seen, dramatists' response to *The Peony Pavilion*—whether in the form of allusion or imitation—often challenges an understanding of spontaneity as the essence of *qing*. Some of the comic twists in *chuanqi* dramas poke fun precisely at the contradiction between *qing* as spontaneous emotional force and *qing* as textual construction and imitation. Wu Bing's play *The Remedy for Jealousy* features the most famous female reader of *The Peony Pavilion*, Xiaoqing. Like Du Liniang, who pines away after her dream encounter with Liu Mengmei, Xiaoqing dies after reading about Du Liniang's deep longing. To a certain degree,

Xiaoqing's legend, which Wu Bing adapts and rewrites, is a copycat of *The Peony Pavilion*. Wu's play "rescues" Xiaoqing from a tragic and lonely death. Xiaoqing's "resurrection" is simply fake news used by Madam Yan to fool both the jealous wife and her husband. The solemnity of Xiaoqing's conscious imitation of Du Liniang, highlighted in her legend to celebrate her as an epiphany of *qing*, is cancelled out in Wu Bing's play. But the real target of Wu's irony is rather Yang, the literatus official who fervently believes in Xiaoqing's "ghost," and consciously plays the part of Liu Mengmei in Madam Yan's comic adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion*. Spontaneous *qing* becomes a bookish man's learned act in imitation of the original. Like the character Yang, *chuanqi* dramatists had to deal with the anxiety of influence from Tang Xianzu. Similar to Yang's expression of passion, the *chuanqi* genre, as a celebrated medium for articulating genuine *qing*, also carries the burden of artificial conventions and clichés.

Some of the dramatists deliberately play with this intrinsic contradiction of the *chuanqi* genre. We see in this study how Ruan Dacheng's and Li Yu's repeated uses of comic devices, such as mistaken identities and disguises, highlight the tension between the artificiality of the plot and the authentic emotion it is expected to convey. In Ruan Dacheng's *The Swallow's Letter*, a female counterpart of Liu Mengmei over-reads a portrait delivered to her by mistake and creates a romantic adventure for herself and the male protagonist Huo Duliang. The gender inversion—the maiden being the active gazer at the portrait and reading romance into this lifeless object—is part of the pattern of switched identities and objects that recurs throughout Ruan's play. As consequences of human mistakes, these switchings nevertheless lead to the protagonist Huo Duliang's surprising marriages with two almost identical women of talent and beauty. As I have explained earlier, the narrative complexity facilitated by episodes involving mistakes is a defining feature of Ruan's play. But the irony also lies here: it is mistakes, instead of the

profound ideal of *qing*, that help to tie the main characters together in this imperfect mundane world. Worse than an empty promise, *qing* serves as an excuse for insatiable desire and sexual acquisition in Huo Duliang's case.

Similar to Ruan Dacheng, Li Yu shows off his authorial genius in a complicated plot sequence through incidents involving disguises and forgeries in *Ideal Love Matches*. These incidents push the issue of authenticity to the forefront of critical attention. In this play, the male literati celebrities express their craze for women's "authentic" art as romantic interest. But this craze turns out to be nothing other than a mask for selfish concerns. What the literati celebrities are really pursuing are female artists' bodies and their artistic labor. The marriages between the literati and their female forgers answer to the *datuanyuan* convention of the *chuanqi* play. But instead of celebrating the discovery of authenticity, the marriages constitute a satirical comment on the market, which neglects genuine artistic expression and promotes a crude understanding of femininity. In this sense, the heightened artificiality of Li Yu's play is a direct blow to the promotion of (feminine) authenticity within the discourse of *qing*.

Thanks to this promotion of feminine authenticity, the female protagonists in romantic *chuanqi* plays are typically better developed than their male counterparts. Hence, it is not surprising that this genre has attracted generations of female readers. As mentioned before, the devoted reader of *The Peony Pavilion*, Xiaoqing, was probably a fictional figure constructed by male literati. Huang Yuanjie's commentary on Li Yu's *Ideal Love Matches* and Wang Yun's composition of *A Dream of Glory*, however, give us a more direct view of female readers' responses to romantic *chuanqi* plays. In her marginal comments, Huang Yuanjie praises Li Yu's skill in making lighthearted jokes on his characters, but in her preface, she also states her ambiguous feelings towards Li's decision to transform two female artists' tragic stories into

romantic comedies. As we have also seen in Wu Bing's rewriting of Xiaoqing's legend, the "comic transformation" does more than show the dramatist's craft in making comedy. In Li Yu's case, this comic transformation seemingly offers the female artists, Yang Yunyou and Lin Tiansu, poetic justice by promising them "happy" marriages on the page. Huang reminds the reader that this narrative downplays the hardships that professional women like herself had endured during the Ming-Qing transition. To a certain degree, Huang's remark is also a comment on the *datuanyuan* convention of the *chuanqi* genre. Read along with Li Yu's play, Huang's preface further exposes the impossibility of the "ideal love matches" promised by romantic *chuanqi* plays.

Like Huang Yuanjie's commentary, Wang Yun's creation of *A Dream of Glory* is also a response to the romantic tradition of the *chuanqi* genre. In this play, the comic transformation is realized through the female protagonist Miss Wang's gender change in a dream. This transgender experience allows Miss Wang to explore the world as a typical young and talented *caizi* figure. The dream male Wang Mengling's high anticipation for romantic adventures in the fashion of *caizi jiaren* love stories results in series of awkward encounters. The contradiction between Wang's elite status as an aspiring scholar and his blatant transgressions for love (jumping off the wall to flirt with a maiden, for example), along with the later tension between his social obligation as a high official and his single-minded interest in romantic intimacy, may evoke scornful laughter. Adding onto these layers of incongruity, the contrast between Wang Mengling's behavior before and after gender change elevates the humor in *A Dream of Glory*. Through the dream male's rather comic love journey, which ends in abrupt dissolution, the playwright Wang Yun questions whether the conventional romantic *chuanqi* plays with the motif of *caizi-jiaren* love have actually limited her imagination of a woman's self-fulfillment.

Written during the time when *chuanqi* composition was in decline, Wang Yun's *A Dream of Glory* subverts the romantic *chuanqi* genre to a great extent. It amplifies the parodic voices that we have encountered in plays by Wu Bing, Ruan Dacheng, and Li Yu. Reading these male dramatists' works along with Wang Yun's, we discover how fine the line between self-gratification and self-parody is in *chuanqi* dramas. In studies of the *caizi jiaren* novel, which shares many similarities with romantic *chuanqi* drama in terms of theme and plot, scholars have underlined the escapism inherent in fantasy-making. What we tend to neglect is the self-critical voices inside both fictional and dramatic narratives. In the dramas of Wu Bing, Ruan Dacheng, and Li Yu, we see both subtle and blunt questioning of literati's promotion of self-interest in the name of *qing*. The male protagonists in *The Remedy for Jealousy* and *The Swallow's Letter* either neglect the primary wife or sideline the sworn lover for their pursuits of passion. Both male characters take advantage of the different and even contradictory interpretations of *qing* as concentrated love and as abundant desire. In Li Yu's *Ideal Love Matches*, the male protagonists' self-interests are manifested in the transformation of wholehearted *qing* into cold calculation—they praise the authentic “feminine voices” of the female artists in order to appropriate their labor. It is not only the male characters but also the female characters that invite the reader to question literati ideals. Madam Yan in Wu Bing's play, as an exemplary female figure representing the values of the privileged polygamist family system, tests the boundaries between self-sacrifice and self-promotion and displays the performative nature of virtue.

This study shows a rather serious side of these seemingly frivolous and repetitive Chinese romantic comedies. It sheds light on the self-reflexivity behind fantasy-making and emphasizes the crucial but previously overlooked role that irony plays in the development of *chuanqi*. It identifies parodies of *qing* as a main source of amusement in late Ming and early Qing romantic

chuanqi plays. In the dramas I have examined, the playwrights poke fun at *chuanqi*'s stylistic features and the social expectations that surround this elite dramatic genre. These dramatists explore and challenge the genre's strong tie to the discourse of *qing*, either by underlining the artificiality of textual construction or by displaying the moral dilemmas entailed by the promotion of *qing* with a sense of humor. Through their comic renditions of the discourse of *qing*, these *chuanqi* dramatists provide sophisticated commentaries on the power and limitations of human desires and emotions. This dissertation is, therefore, not only a study of the dramatists' experiments with a literary genre, but also an inquiry into how these experiments facilitate the dramatists' negotiations with cultural ideals and their rather conflicted understanding of the self.

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Appendix One

The Remedy for Jealousy Synopsis

Main Characters:

Yang Qi: performed by *sheng* 生 (male lead)

Madam Yan: performed by *dan* 旦 (female lead)

Xiaoqing: performed by *xiaodan* 小旦 (younger female, secondary female)

Han Taidou: performed by *xiaosheng* 小生 (younger male, secondary male)

Wife Miao: performed by *chou* 丑 (clown)

Yan Daxing: performed by *wai* 外 (older male)

Chu Dalang: performed by *jing* 淨 (villain)

Servant Chen: performed by *laodan* 老旦 (old female)

The First Half

Scene 1: *Chengyu* 醒語 (Prologue)

The prologue speaker comments on the destructive power of female jealousy and suggests that men should strengthen themselves against attacks from their wives. He then summarizes the play for the audience.

Scene 2: *Xianfeng* 賢風 (Virtuous Character)

Yang Qi praises his wife Yan for her virtue. Because Yang is almost forty but still does not have a son, Madam Yan urges him to get a concubine in order to continue his family line. Yang initially refuses because of his love for his wife, but he is also afraid that his wife may change her mind after he gets a concubine. Yan's uncle Yan Daxing comes to visit and applauds his niece's behavior. He also reveals his concern for another niece Miao's (ferocious) jealousy.

Scene 3: *Cuojia* 錯嫁 (Faulty Marriage)

Chu Dalang complains about his wife Miao's abusive behavior. Quoting from the *Great Ming Code*, Yan Daxing pressures Miao to accept a concubine for her husband. Right after Yan Daxing leaves, Miao shows off her new tool for torturing her husband. She also declares new household "laws" designed to prevent any intimacy between her husband and the future concubine.

Xiaoqing appears as the concubine. The cruel and greedy Miao confiscates her jewelry, books, and writing tools.

Scene 4: *Lihua menag* 梨花夢 (Pear Blossom Dream)

Xiaoqing narrates her life story: she was from a scholarly family but her parents died early. The neighbor of her family raised her to become a skilled courtesan. Xiaoqing falls

asleep after grieving over Miao's confiscation of her books. During her sleep she dreams of a branch of pear blossoms being blown to the ground by a gust of wind. She tells her servant Chen that this dream may be an ill omen. She may be destroyed by her marriage.

Scene 5: *Daifang* 代訪 (Making Inquiries for a Friend)

Yang Qi's good friend Han Taidou travels to Yangzhou to look for a concubine for Yang. On his way he encounters Chu Dalang and criticizes Chu for his fear of his jealous wife Miao.

Scene 6: *Xianyu* 賢遇 (Encountering the Virtuous One)

Madam Yan visits Miao and mentions her plan to find her husband a concubine. Miao warns Yan that a concubine will threaten her dominance of her husband's affection. Yan asks to see Xiaoqing and is immediately impressed by Xiaoqing's beauty and talent. Xiaoqing reveals her miserable situation to Yan. Yan consoles her.

Scene 7: *Xuanqie* 選妾 (Selecting an Concubine)

Madam Yan visits a matchmaker to look for a girl suitable to become her husband's concubine. The girls introduced by the matchmaker are either ugly or ignorant. The visit is fruitless.

Scene 8: *Yujiao* 語嬌 (Describing the Beauty)

Madam Yan reports that her search for her husband's concubine has been fruitless. She and her uncle try to persuade Yang Qi to lower his standards. But Yang refuses.

Then Madam Yan mentions her meeting with Xiaoqing, who would be an ideal choice for her husband. Her uncle regrets letting Xiaoqing fall into Miao's hands.

Scene 9: *Tiqu* 題曲 (Commenting on *The Peony Pavilion*)

On a windy and rainy night, Xiaoqing reads *The Peony Pavilion*, which is lent by Madam Yan. She narrates the plot and explains her identification with the female protagonist, Du Liniang, to the audience. To show her appreciation for this drama, Xiaoqing writes a poem as her commentary.

Scene 10: *Kongfang* 空訪 (Fruitless Search)

Han Taidou comes back from Yangzhou. He has not found a perfect girl for Yang Qi either. Yang tells Han Taidou that Xiaoqing from Chu Dalang's household has impressed his wife. Han pities Xiaoqing for falling prey to Miao and decides to help Xiaoqing.

Scene 11: *Deqian* 得簽 (Receiving the Poem)

With his mind still on Xiaoqing, Yang Qi randomly picks some romantic dramas to read. When he opens his copy of *The Peony Pavilion*, he finds Xiaoqing's poem. Amazed by the poem, Yang becomes infatuated with Xiaoqing. He tells his wife about his desire for Xiaoqing.

His wife plans to take Xiaoqing to visit West Lake and arrange a meeting between her husband and Xiaoqing there.

Scene 12: *Dutai* 妒態 (Acts of Jealousy)

Chu Dalang attempts to have some physical intimacy with Xiaoqing. Miao follows him quietly and stops him before he enters Xiaoqing's room. Miao is about to torture her husband and Xiaoqing. Right before the beating takes place, Yan Daxing arrives and scolds Miao for bringing shame to her family.

Scene 13: *Youhu* 遊湖 (Visiting West Lake)

Yan invites Xiaoqing and Miao to visit West Lake. At a temple, Miao prays for pregnancy while Yan quietly wishes Xiaoqing to become her husband's concubine. Later, these women have a drinking party on a boat. Yang Qi's boat follows these women's boat closely. After Miao becomes drunk and falls asleep, Madam Yan introduces her husband Yang to Xiaoqing and tells Xiaoqing that her husband appreciates her comment on *The Peony Pavilion*. Xiaoqing reveals her secret crush on Yang Qi to the audience.

Scene 14: *Xuying* 絮影 (Talking to the Reflection)

Xiaoqing recalls her visit to West Lake and her meeting with Yang Qi. She laments over her loneliness and her misery under Miao's tyranny. She talks to her reflection in water with self-pity. Her servant Chen warns Xiaoqing not to provoke Miao's suspicion.

Scene 15: *Zhuanfang* 賺放 (Release)

Yang Qi has to move to a new post in the capital. Madam Yan tries to rescue Xiaoqing from Miao before she leaves with Yang.

Miao comes to congratulate Yan on her husband's promotion. Yan tells Miao that in order to prevent any intimacy between Chu Dalang and Xiaoqing, Miao had better drive Xiaoqing away from their house. Convinced by Yan, Miao decides to leave Xiaoqing at a desolate hut on Gushan, an island on West Lake. Madam Yan asks Xiaoqing's servant Chen and Han Taidou to take good care of Xiaoqing.

Scene 16: *Quchao* 趨朝 (Heading to the Capital)

Han Taidou, Yan Daxing, and Miao see the Yangs off to the capital.

The Second Half

Scene 17: *Diaosu* 吊蘇 (Commemorating Su Xiaoxiao)

Away from Miao's tyranny, Xiaoqing and her servant Chen live in desolation on the Gushan Island. Missing Madam Yan and Yang Qi, Xiaoqing decides to visit Su Xiaoxiao's

tomb and commemorate this famous courtesan of the Tang Dynasty. Xiaoqing laments the fact that her fate is even worse than Su Xiaoxiao—unlike Su Xiaoxiao, her beauty and talent will remain unrecognized.

Scene 18: *Zhuiyi* 追逸 (Chasing the Escapee)

Chu Dalang plans to visit Xiaoqing, but he has to abandon his plan when Miao's servant intervenes.

Scene 19: *Bingxue* 病雪 (Sick on a Snowy Day)

On a snowy day, Xiaoqing becomes severely ill. She recalls *The Peony Pavilion*, in which the female protagonist Du Liniang paints a self-portrait before her death. Xiaoqing decides to invite a painter to draw her portrait.

Scene 20: *Maidu* 買毒 (Purchasing Poison)

The jealous wife Miao asks her servant to buy poison and murder Xiaoqing. The medicine peddler, who is also a Daoist priest, boasts about the power of his medicines. Unwilling to participate in a murder, the seller gives medicine instead of poison to the servant and jokes about the evil of jealousy.

Scene 21: *Huazhen* 畫真 (Painting the Portrait)

Han Taidou accepts Xiaoqing's invitation to paint her portrait. Han is amazed by Xiaoqing's beauty. Hoping to capture her ethereal appearance and elegant spirit, Han makes multiple sketches. In preparation for the third sketch, Han quietly observes Xiaoqing's casual behavior. After swallowing a few cups of wine, Han produces a marvelous portrait within a few minutes.

Scene 21: *Jueyu* 決語 (Farewell Address)

Miao's servant delivers the "poison" to Xiaoqing's residence. Suspicious of Miao's intention, the servant Chen throws the "poison" away. Xiaoqing feels her life is approaching its end. She commemorates her portrait with pear juice. She dresses up in the clothes Yan has given her and dictates her last wishes to Chen. She asks Chen to keep her poems, burn Han's first sketch of her portrait, bury the second sketch with her, and give the final portrait to Yan.

Scene 23: *Huisheng* 回生 (Resurrection)

Miao goes to Gushan to check whether Xiaoqing is dead. She refuses to give Xiaoqing a decent burial and takes away Xiaoqing's belongings. When Han Taidou arrives at Xiaoqing's residence, he finds that Xiaoqing is actually in a coma. With the help of Han Taidou's medicine, Xiaoqing wakes up. Han moves Xiaoqing to his own residence.

Scene 24: *Kujian* 哭柬 (Crying over the Letter)

Yang Qi receives a notice of Xiaoqing's severe sickness. Madam Yan reads a letter sent by Xiaoqing before she fell into a coma. The Yangs worry about Xiaoqing's condition. As Yang Qi has just been awarded another promotion, the couple decides to return to Hangzhou before moving to the new post.

Scene 25: *Zhangdu* 杖妒 (Beating the Jealous One)

Yan Daxing hears about Xiaoqing's death. He decides to seek justice for Xiaoqing. In order to force the jealous wife Miao to confess her murder of Xiaoqing, he pretends that he is witnessing Xiaoqing's vengeful ghost. The servant who has bought the "poison" for Miao dies from a miscarriage and swears to get revenge against Miao in the underworld.

Scene 26: *Yigui* 疑鬼 (Suspecting Ghost)

Miao falls under the spell of a self-imagined ghost. On his way to seek help for his wife, Chu Dalang encounters Xiaoqing's servant Chen and invites Chen home. Chen witnesses Miao's madness.

Scene 27: *Nichong* 匿寵 (Hiding the Favored One)

Back in Hangzhou, the Yangs are informed of Xiaoqing's death.

The servant Chen comes to tell Madam Yan that Xiaoqing is still alive. Yan has a secret plan. She decides to hide this good news from her husband and Miao. She asks Han Taidou to give Xiaoqing's portrait to Yang Qi to evoke Yang's longing.

Scene 28: *Lihua* 禮畫 (Praying to the Portrait)

Yang Qi grieves over Xiaoqing's death. He hangs Xiaoqing's portrait in his study and examines it day and night. He prays to the portrait and hopes that Xiaoqing in the painting can come back to life. Madam Yan laughs at Yang Qi's expression of passion. Yang becomes curious why his wife becomes "jealous" all of the sudden.

Scene 29: *Jiahun* 假魂 (Fake Ghost)

At Madam Yan's request, Xiaoqing pretends to be a ghost and visits Yang Qi's study late at night. Yang is surprised by the arrival of Xiaoqing's "ghost." He thinks that Xiaoqing in the painting has responded to his diligent prayers. Instead of being intimidated by Xiaoqing's "ghost," Yang asks for intimacy from Xiaoqing. Xiaoqing reminds him that his wife may get jealous.

Scene 30: *Jiacu* 假醋 (Feigning Jealousy)

Madam Yan suddenly arrives at Yang's study and "pretends" to be jealous. Yang is surprised by his wife's arrival and her sudden change of attitude. Madam Yan scolds Yang for hiding his secret lover at his study. Yang explains that his prayers to Xiaoqing's portrait have

brought Xiaoqing's ghost to this realm of the living. Yan laughs at Yang's illusion and his bookish belief in *The Peony Pavilion*. Yang decides to uncover Xiaoqing's tomb and prove to his wife that what he has said is real.

Scene 31: *Fuchong* 付寵 (Entrust the Loved One)

Yang Qi fails to find Xiaoqing's tomb. Madam Yan reveals her prank to Yang and tells him that Xiaoqing is still alive. She lets Xiaoqing unite with her husband. She half-jokingly warns her husband that she may play more pranks in the future.

Scene 32: *Miqing* 彌慶 (Celebrating the Births of Sons)

A year has passed. Both Madam Yan and Xiaoqing have given birth to sons. Miao comes to congratulate Yan and finds out Xiaoqing is still alive. Suspecting that her husband is hiding his lover at the Yang's, Miao bursts into fury. At this moment, Han Taidou takes out his sword and threatens to kill Miao. Only then does Miao promise to stop being jealous.

Appendix Two

The Swallow's Letter Synopsis

Main Characters:

Huo Duliang: performed by *sheng* 生 (male lead)

Li Feiyun: performed by *dan* 旦 (female lead)

Hua Xingyun: performed by *xiaodan* 小旦 (younger female, secondary female lead)

Li Andao: performed by *wai* 外 (older male)

Li Feiyun's mother: performed by *laodan* 老旦 (older female)

Xianyu Ji: performed by *fujing* 副淨 (villain, supporting role)

Hunchback doctor: performed by *chou* 丑 (clown)

An Lushan: performed by *jing* 淨 (villain)

Jia Nanzhong: performed by *mo* 末 (male)

The First Half

Scene 1: *Jiamen* 家門 (Prologue)

The prologue speaker briefly summarizes the play for the audience.

Scene 2: *Yueshi* 约试 (Arranging a Trip for the Examinations)

Huo Duliang introduces himself as a hardworking scholar who has lost his parents at an early age. He has not yet had much luck with the imperial examinations. He tells the audience that he is still single but has had a romantic relationship with a courtesan, Hua Xingyun. Huo is residing at his mentor Qin Ruoshui's house. Huo's servant delivers a letter from Huo's schoolmate, Xianyu Ji, to Huo. Xianyu invites Huo to travel to the capital Chang'an with him to take the imperial examinations together. Huo accepts the invitation. But his servant reminds him that Xianyu is rather untrustworthy.

Huo says goodbye to his mentor Qin Ruoshui.

Scene 3: *Shouhua* 授畫 (Presenting the Painting)

The elite official, Li Andao, is spending leisure time with his wife and their only daughter, Li Feiyun. A gift from his old friend, Jia Nanzhong, arrives. The gift is a portrait of Bodhisattva Guanyin, painted by the famous artist, Wu Daozi. The daughter asks her father to give the painting to her for her worship of the Buddhist deity. Li Andao agrees but decides to have the portrait mounted by Drunkard Miao first.

Scene 4: *Xiezhen* 偕征 (Journey Together)

Huo Duliang's companion, Xianyu Ji, is a cunning fellow who has no literary skills. He reveals his plan to steal Huo's examination essay.

Huo and Xianyu travel together and arrive in the capital city. But the innkeeper tells them that because of the An Lushan Rebellion, the imperial examinations have been delayed. Huo immediately thinks about his old acquaintance, Hua Xingyun. The innkeeper reports that because of her longing for Huo Duliang, Hua seldom receives clients these days.

Scene 5: *Hewei* 合圍 (A Hunting Break)

An Lushan leads his military forces towards the capital city Chang'an. On his way to Chang'an, he takes a break to enjoy hunting.

Scene 6: *Xiexiang* 寫像 (Painting the Portrait)

Hua Xingyun states her wish to unite with Huo Duliang and her resolution to quit her career as a courtesan.

Huo comes to visit Hua. He paints a portrait for Hua Xingyun. Hua persuades him to include his own image in the painting. Xianyu Ji later joins them. He makes fun of the intimacy between Huo and Hua. He suggests that they should have the portrait mounted by Drunkard Miao.

Scene 7: *Gouxing* 購倖 (Buying Luck)

Zang Butui is a corrupted man who works as a staff member for the imperial examinations. Xianyu visits him before the examinations. They come up with a plan: after the examinations, Xianyu will ask Huo for the assigned number on his exam essay, Zang will then forward Huo's essay under Xianyu's name.

Scene 8: *Wuhua* 誤畫 (Switching the Paintings)

Drunkard Miao has mounted the paintings for the Lis and Hua Xingyun. His wife, who has had too much wine, wants to have sex. Unfortunately Miao is summoned for official duties and has to leave. When the servant from the Li family comes to fetch the portrait of Bodhisattva Guanyin, the intoxicated wife gives him Hua Xingyun's portrait by mistake.

Scene 9: *Haixiang* 駭像 (Shocked by the Portrait)

Li Feiyun is about to pray in front of the portrait of Bodhisattva Guanyin. She is shocked to find that she has received a portrait of a young lady, who is probably a courtesan. Her maid comments on how handsome the man in the portrait looks. She also remarks that Li Feiyun and the lady in the painting look like each other. The inscription on the painting, which states this painting is made by Huo Duliang for "Yun," further puzzles Li Feiyun.

Scene 10: *Fanghu* 防胡 (Guarding against the Barbarians)

Jia Nanzhong defends the Tang frontier against An Lushan's attacks.

Scene 11: *Tiqian* 題箋 (Inscribing a Poem)

Li Feiyun is feeling sad on a spring day. She examines the portrait that she received by mistake. And she wonders how it has ended up in her hands. She and her maid speculate about the relationship between the man and woman in the painting. The painting stirs up romantic desires in Li's mind. She commemorates this curious incident of receiving a portrait and expresses her romantic feelings in a poem. After she writes the poem down on letter paper, a swallow picks up the letter and flies away.

Scene 12: *Shijian* 拾箋 (Picking up the Letter)

Huo Duliang is taking a walk and enjoying the beautiful spring. At the same time, he is thinking about his lost portrait. He finds it amusing that he and Hua Xingyun have received a portrait of Bodhisattva Guanyin. Suddenly he notices that a swallow is following him. The swallow drops a letter. Huo picks it up and discovers its writer is a woman named Feiyun. Feiyun has recently received a portrait of two lovers. Huo becomes curious about the letter and its writer. He goes back to show Hua Xingyun the letter. Hua suggests they should search for the portrait after Huo finishes his examinations.

Scene 13: *Ruwei* 入闈 (Going to Take the Imperial Examinations)

Li Feiyun's mother is worried about her daughter who has suddenly fallen ill. A female hunchback doctor comes to diagnose Li Feiyun. The doctor finds out that Li is suffering from "spring illness." After the mother goes away, the doctor asks the maid where Li's romantic malaise comes from. The maid tells her about the portrait Li received. The maid shows the doctor the portrait. The doctor says the woman in the painting looks very familiar but she cannot recall who she is. And she also finds the similarity between Li and the woman in the painting striking.

Li Feiyun's father is also concerned about the daughter's illness. But as the Inspector of the Imperial Examinations, he has to depart for the examination site.

Scene 14: *Kaishi* 開試 (The Examinations Begin)

Students, including Huo Duliang and Xianyu Ji, enter the examination hall.

Scene 15: *Shijiong* 試窘 (Embarrassment at the Examinations)

Servants are waiting for their masters who are taking the examinations.

The examinations are over, the examination takers emerge. Huo Duliang tells his servant that he has written a good essay. Xianyu, who is taking too long to finish his exams, irritates the examination staff. Xianyu reveals to the audience that his exam essay is complete nonsense. He needs to follow Zang Butui's plan and ask Huo Duliang for the number on his examination paper.

Scene 16: *Tuoxie* 駝泄 (Revelation from the Hunchback Doctor)

Huo Duliang gets sick after the examinations. He shows Hua Xingyun his exam essay, which he has copied after finishing his examinations. Xianyu comes to visit the two lovers. Hua

lets Xianyu read Huo's exam paper. After complimenting on Huo's essay, Xianyu asks for its assigned number.

At the same time the hunchback doctor is called in to diagnose Huo Duliang. The doctor recognizes Huo as the man in the portrait received by Li Feiyun. She tells Huo Duliang where Hua Yingyun's portrait is. She also informs Huo of Li's longing for him. Huo feels much better after hearing what the doctor says. Hua Xingyun asks the doctor to take the letter back to Li Feiyun and then have her return the portrait. Xianyu Ji finds the incidents of switched paintings amusing.

Scene 17: *Mouji* 謀緝 (Planning an Arrest)

Xianyu Ji tells Zang Butui the number of Huo Duliang's examination essay. Zang informs Xianyu that switching his paper with Huo's will be very risky because they come from the same region. The crime can easily be exposed. Xianyu tells Zang the story about Hua Xingyun's portrait. Xianyu suggests that Huo is trying to seduce the daughter of the Inspector Li Andao for his success in the imperial examinations. Xianyu and Zang come up with a plan: they will get Li Feiyun's letter from the hunchback doctor and then order a false arrest of Huo Duliang.

Scene 18: *Guiquan* 閨痊 (Recovery in the Inner Chamber)

Li Feiyun is recovering from her illness. Before joining her mother for a trip to a Buddhist temple, Li Feiyun examines Hua Xingyun's portrait again.

Scene 19: *Weiji* 偽緝 (False Arrest)

Hua Xingyun bows to the portrait of Bodhisattva Guanyin and thanks the deity for Huo Duliang's recovery. Huo Duliang joins Hua. He vows in front the portrait that he will share his glory and wealth with Hua if he succeeds in the imperial examinations. He then expresses his wish to find Li Feiyun.

At this time, officers escort the hunchback doctor to Hua's place. The officers accuse Huo for seducing Li Feiyun and use the letter they got from the doctor as evidence. Xianyu Ji follows the officers and pretends he is on Huo Duliang's side. He "helps" Hua Xingyun bribe the officers so the officers can let Huo Duliang escape. Scared of this false arrest, Huo Duliang takes the swallow's letter and leaves the capital city immediately.

Scene 20: *Shoukui* 守潰 (Defense Fails)

The Tang general Geshu Han tries to defend the Tong Pass but fails. An Lushan and his military forces head to Chang'an.

Scene 21: *Hubeng* 扈奔 (Flee)

Li Feiyun and her mother are spending the Duanwu Festival without Li's father who is supposed to be working at the examination compound. To their surprise the father comes back and seems to be in a rush. The father tells them An Lushan's forces are approaching Chang'an.

The emperor has already left the city and he has to follow the emperor. The mother and the daughter are left on their own.

The Second Half

Scene 22: *Jutiao* 拒挑 (Rejecting Seduction)

Hua Xingyun is worried about Huo Duliang's well-being. She laments over their separation. Xianyu Ji tries to seduce Hua Xingyun. Hua declares her loyalty to Huo and forcefully rejects Xianyu Ji. The innkeeper comes to find Xinyu and informs him that An Lushan is approaching Chang'an.

Scene 23: *Bingxiao* 兵燹 (Military Aggression)

An Lushan finds his forces under attack by the Tang general Jia Nazhong. He realizes he cannot stay in Chang'an for long. Before heading to Longxi, An Lushan orders his forces to loot the city.

Li Feiyun and her mother are fleeing Chang'an. Meanwhile, Hua Xingyun and the hunchback doctor are also leaving the city. Crowds of refugees run in all directions.

Scene 24: *Shounü* 收女 (Adopting a Daughter)

General Jia Nazhong asks a scout to report on the situation in Chang'an. The scout tells Jia that An Lushan's forces are already gone. But the forces of the Tang general, Geshu Han, which have been defeated by An Lushan, continue to loot the city. Jia orders them to stop the looting and to shelter women who are separated from their families.

Among those women are Li Feiyun and the hunchback doctor. When Jia finds out that Li Feiyun is the daughter of his old friend, he adopts Li Feiyun as his daughter. Li and the doctor are surprised to see each other again. The doctor tells Li about Huo Duliang and how Huo Duliang happened to find Li's poem. The doctor complains that the letter got both her and Huo Duliang into trouble. She then reveals to Li Feiyun that the woman in the portrait is Huo's courtesan lover Hua Feiyun.

Scene 25: *Wuren* 誤認 (Misrecognition)

Hua Xingyun is now fleeing alone. Feeling exhausted, she has to take a rest. Meanwhile, Li Feiyun's mother is crying over her lost daughter. She then finds Hua Xingyun and mistakes Hua for her daughter. After recognizing her mistake, the mother reveals who she is. Hua understands that her daughter is the one who received her portrait. Li Feiyun's mother asks for Hua Xingyun's company. Soon they encounter Li Andao who is on his way back to Chang'an. The mother tells her husband that their daughter has gone missing. The father in grief decides to adopt Hua Xingyun as his daughter before searching for Li Feiyun.

Scene 26: *Ye Qian* 謁汧 (Visiting Qianyang)

Qing Ruoshui is guarding the city of Qianyang. Huo Duliang arrives at Qianyang and visits his mentor Qing Ruoshui. Huo tells Qin why he had to run away from Chang'an.

Qing then gets a message from Jia Nanzhong. Jia's forces will stop in Qingyan to prepare for battle with An Lushan.

Scene 27: *Rumu* 入幕 (Becoming a Staff Member)

With Qin Ruoshui's introduction, Huo Duliang meets Jia Nanzhong. Because he thinks he is still under the threat of an arrest, he uses a fake name "Bian Wuji." Huo states that An Lushan has already lost the trust of his followers. He suggests that they should persuade An Lushan's close followers to assassinate An. He then writes a proclamation for this assassination plan.

Scene 28: *Guiyi* 闺忆 (Memories in the Inner Chamber)

Li Feiyun's mother is missing her daughter. Her adopted daughter Hua Xingyun is also in deep sorrow. She takes out the portrait of Bodhisattva Guanyin and prays for Huo Duliang's safety. She then reads Huo's examination essay, which she has managed to preserve.

Scene 29: *Cijian* 刺奸 (Assassinating the Traitor)

Jia Nanzhong succeeds in persuading An Lushan's follower Li Zhu'er to kill An. The assassination is successful.

Scene 30: *Pinghu* 平胡 (Putting down the Barbarian's Rebellion)

Jia Nanzhong and Huo Duliang receive the message that An Lushan has been killed. Jia Nanzhong admires Huo's talent and wants to marry his adopted daughter to Huo. Huo tells Jia that he has already made marriage vows with another woman, but Jia insists that Huo should follow his arrangement.

Scene 31: *Quanhe* 劝合 (Talking the Maiden into a Marriage)

The hunchback doctor tries to persuade Li Feiyun to accept the marriage Jia Nanzhong has arranged for her. The groom-to-be is "Bian Wuji." In order to show her gratitude for Jia, Li Feiyun reluctantly accepts this arrangement. When the doctor leaves, Li reveals the reasons why she does not feel enthusiastic about this marriage. One of them is that she is still longing for Huo Duliang.

Scene 32: *Zhaohun* 招婚 (Wedding)

"Bian Wuji" marries Li Feiyun. The groom almost mistakes Li Feiyun for Hua Xingyun. Li finds the similarity between the groom and Huo Duliang in the painting striking.

Scene 33: *Fangbang* 放榜 (The List of Successful Candidates Comes out)

The results from the imperial examinations are out. Xianyu Ji is the Top Scholar. The crowd celebrates the conclusion of the imperial examinations as a sign for restored peace after An Lushan's rebellion.

Scene 34: *Hongbao* 轟報 (Shooing away the Messengers)

Xianyu Ji is eagerly waiting for the results from the imperial examinations. A crowd of people rush in to inform Xianyu of his success and asks Xianyu for reward, but they mispronounce Xianyu's name as Xie Zixing. Xianyu believes they are just trying to fool him for money. A fight between the crowd and Xianyu starts. Then the official messenger arrives and the crowd finds out this Xianyu really is the Top Scholar. Xianyu is also surprised to discover his success.

Scene 35: *Qianhe* 簽合 (United by the Letter)

Li Feiyun grieves over her separation from her parents. She is also puzzled by the fact that her husband "Bian Wuji" looks exactly the same as Huo Duliang in the painting. At the same time Huo Duliang is also wondering about Li's identity. The hunchback doctor comes to visit the newly-wed Li Feiyun and tries to find out whether "Bian Wuji" is a good match for Li. She is surprised to find that this Bian Wuji is actually Huo Duliang. Thanks to the doctor, Li discovers who her husband really is. Before revealing who she is, Li Feiyun asks if Huo still has the letter dropped by the swallow. Huo expresses his admiration for the letter writer. Li tells Huo she is actually the writer Li Feiyun. Huo explains to Li why he had to change his name. Then Li recounts how the swallow picked up her poem. Li Feiyun and Huo Duliang finally find each other. Huo, however, still wonders where Hua Xingyun is.

Scene 36: *Bianjian* 辨奸 (Detecting the Treachery)

The Inspector, Li Andao, is waiting for the Top Scholar's visit. Xianyu Ji arrives at Li's mansion. The doorkeeper asks the Top Scholar for some gifts. Xianyu Ji arrogantly ignores him. When Li's wife and the adopted daughter Hua Xingyun hear that the Top Scholar has arrived, they are curious to find out who he is. Shocked to see Xianyu Ji, Hua Xingyun sneaks back to her inner chamber.

At his first meeting with the Inspector Li Andao, Xianyu blatantly asks Li Andao if he still has a daughter available for marriage. Li has to consult his wife before he decides to marry his adopted daughter Hua Xingyun to the Top Scholar. Hua informs the Lis that Xianyu Ji is actually a bum. After some hesitation, Hua tells Li how Xianyu managed to steal the exam essay from her "cousin" Huo Duliang. But Li Andao finds it hard to believe that a crime took place at the imperial examinations that he had supervised. After Hua shows him the copy of Huo Duliang's exam essay, Li is convinced. He decides to give Xianyu another test.

Scene 37: *Qianguan* 遷官 (Getting Promotions)

Jia Nanzhong gets promoted because of his effort in putting down the An Lushan Rebellion. His strategist "Bian Wuji" also gets an official title. Jia and "Bian Wuji" depart for their posts in the capital city along with their families.

Scene 38: *Jiandun* 奸遁 (A Demeaning Escape)

Li Andao conducts a second test for Xianyu Ji. He asks Xianyu Ji to finish an essay in his study. Unable to write anything, the desperate Xianyu escapes through a dog door.

Scene 39: *Shuanggou* 雙逅 (Double Reunions)

In Chang'an, Jia Nanzhong invites Li Andao to visit his home. Jia tells Li that he has been taking care of his daughter, Feiyun. When Li Feiyun finally unites with her father, Jia informs Li Andao of his daughter's marriage. Li is delighted to find that his son-in-law, "Bian Wuji," is an elegant and talented man. Li then reports to Jia that he has discovered forgery at the imperial examinations. The real Top Scholar should be Huo Duliang. But he is unable to find this real Top Scholar. His daughter then reveals to him that his son-in-law "Bian Wuji" is actually Huo Duliang. And Huo Duliang explains to Li Andao why he had to escape Chang'an and change his name. Li Andao then asks Huo if he has a cousin who kept the examination paper for him. Huo is puzzled. Li asks his servant to bring Hua Xingyun. Hua Xingyun arrives and finally meets Li Feiyun. Both Huo Duliang and Hua Xingyun burst into tears when they see each other. Huo then discloses that Hua is actually his courtesan lover.

Both Hua Xingyun and Li Feiyun start to worry that Huo can no longer devote his love to them.

Scene 40: *Paiyan* 排宴 (Arranging the Banquet)

Huo Duliang's mentor Qing Ruoshui reports Huo Duliang's name change. Huo is now able to accept his official title with his real name.

The Emperor orders a banquet for both literati officials and military officers. Li Andao, Huo Duliang, and Jia Nanzhong are all on the guest list. The court servants are busy arranging seats and preparing for guests' arrivals.

Scene 41: *Heyan* 合宴 (The Combined Banquet)

Huo Duliang, Li Andao, Jia Nanzhong and Qing Ruoshui attend the extravagant banquet.

Scene 42: *Gaoyuan* 誥圓 (Unions Made by the Imperial Order)

The portrait of Bodhisattva Guanyin and Huo's painting originally made for Hua Xingyun are both displayed on the wall. Both Li Feiyun and Hua Xingyun bow in front of the Buddhist deity. Huo Duliang comments that Li, Hua and the figure in his painting form a glorious trio. But a quarrel breaks out between Li and Hua. Both of them argue that they should get the flower coronet from the emperor—an official recognition of the wife's status. Even Li Feiyun's parents cannot mediate this dispute. Huo then asks the hunchback doctor for help. Failing to persuade either of the two young ladies, the doctor becomes desperate. Luckily, Jia Nanzhong arrives with two flower coronets. Because Huo is awarded two official titles for his success at the imperial examinations and for his work as a strategist for Jia, both Li Feiyun and Hua Xingyun

get official recognition. The scene concludes with the swallow's return. Huo Duliang, Li Feiyun and Hua Xingyun bow to the swallow—their matchmaker.

Appendix Three

Ideal Love Matches Synopsis

Main characters:

Dong Qichang: performed by *sheng* 生 (male lead)

Yang Yunyou: performed by *dan* 旦 (female lead)

Chen Jiru: performed by *xiaosheng* 小生 (younger male, secondary male)

Lin Tiansu: performed by *xiaodan* 小旦 (younger female, secondary female)

Jiang Huaiyi: performed by *wai* 外 (old male)

Huang Tianjian: performed by *chou* 丑 (clown)

Monk Shikong: performed by *Jing* 淨 (villain)

Bandit Liu Xianglao: performed by *Fujing* 副淨 (villain, supporting role)

Miaoxiang: performed by *laodan* 老旦 (old female)

The First Half

Scene 1: *Dayi* 大意 (Overview)

The prologue speaker summarizes the play for the audience. He laments that in reality scholars and beauties often suffer from bad fates. The speaker then draws the audience's attention to the fictionality of Li Yu's play and warns the audience not to take the plot too seriously.

Scene 2: *Mingbu* 名徧 (Escaping from the Burden of Fame)

Both Dong Qichang and Chen Jiru appear exhausted from the high demand for their paintings and calligraphy. They decide to put on commoners' clothes and escape to West Lake in Hangzhou for a break. But they also realize that this escape is temporary. A better strategy to reduce the burden of their fame is to hire ghost painters. Dong and Chen plan to look for skilled painters during their trip to West Lake.

Scene 3: *Du'er* 毒餌 (Poisonous Bait)

Monk Shikong, who makes a living by selling fake antiques and forged paintings, wants to return to secular life and get married. He has his eyes on Yang Yunyou, the only daughter of a poor scholar. He has asked Yang Yunyou, who is trying to earn some money for her family, to forge Dong Qichang's paintings.

Then we see Yang Yunyou come onstage. She is working on a painting that depicts her humble surroundings. After she finishes the painting, she inscribes a poem that explains how the painting is made. Only then does she recall that this painting will be signed with Dong Qichang's name.

Creditors follow Yang Yunyou's father home. Soon Monk Shikong arrives. He pays the creditors and saves the Yangs from embarrassment. Shikong tells the father that in order to

rescue the family from dire poverty he should marry his daughter to a good family. Shikong promises he will help Yang Yunyou find a decent husband.

Scene 4: *Jishan* 寄扇 (Delivering Fans)

The courtesan Lin Tiansu from the southern province of Fujian travels to West Lake to experience the high culture in the lower Yangzi region and look for a decent man to marry. Lin plans to visit Jiang Huaiyi who is an upright and generous man. Meanwhile she asks her servant to deliver her fans painted under Chen Jiru's name to a shop. Lin explains that this is a test. She wants to know if the locals in Hangzhou can distinguish her paintings from Chen's.

Scene 5: *Huayu* 畫遇 (Encounter Paintings)

Jiang Huaiyi joins Dong Qichang and Chen Jiru on their boat trip in West Lake. They are interested in visiting the antique shops around West Lake. They come to Shikong's shop, where Shikong boasts about his collections. He tells his visitors that he even has paintings from the most celebrated contemporary artists—Dong Qichang and Chen Jiru. Dong and Chen are curious to see them. When Shikong brings out the paintings made by Yang Yunyou and Lin Tiansu, Dong and Chen are puzzled. Dong detects the forgery thanks to the poetic inscription on Yang's painting. Chen discovers "feminine charm" on Lin's painted fans. When they ask Shikong where he got the paintings, Shikong makes up the story of his friendship with both Dong and Chen. Dong and Chen then reveal their identities and ask Shikong who the forgers are. Shikong, who has the secret plan to marry Yang Yunyou, pretends he has no idea. At this time, Lin Tiansu's servant comes back to the shop to ask Shikong where to find Jiang Huaiyi. He reveals to Shikong's visitors that Lin has painted the fans. Chen Jiru expresses his interest in marrying Lin. Dong Qichang is anxious to know who has forged his painting. The generous Jiang Huaiyi tells Dong that he will try his best to find this female forger.

Scene 6: *Jian'e* 奸罔 (Evil Decoy)

Monk Shikong plans to go to the capital and return to secular life. In order to secure his marriage with Yang Yunyou, he hires a bum, Huang Tianjian, whose sexual organ no longer functions because of his indulgence in brothels. Shikong promises Huang that he will give Huang a free ride to the capital city and then Huang can make a living as a eunuch. Huang will disguise himself as Dong Qichang, marry Yang Yunyou, and guard Yang's virginity for Shikong.

Scene 7: *Zimei* 自媒 (Matchmaking for Himself)

Yang Yunyou and her father are harassed by their creditors again. The father remembers Shikong's generosity. His daughter, however, expresses her suspicion of Shikong. Soon Shikong arrives at their door. Shikong tells the Yangs that he has found a good man for Yang Yunyou. Because Shikong knows Yang Yunyou's admiration for Dong Qichang, he asks the father if he is willing to let his daughter become Dong's concubine. The scholar father thinks the status of a concubine is too low for his daughter. But Shikong promises good betrothal gifts from Dong. The father finally accepts this arrangement.

Scene 8: *Xianding* 先訂 (Early Engagement)

Jiang Huaiyi visits Lin Tiansu. He tells her that Chen Jiru admires her painted fans. Lin is embarrassed that Chen has discovered her forgery. Jiang then reveals Chen's marriage proposal to her. When Lin states her feeling of inadequacy to be Chen's concubine, Jiang reassures her that she and Chen Jiru will be an ideal match. Lin soon accepts the proposal because of her respect for Chen as a renowned literatus.

Then Chen Jiru and Dong Qichang come to see Lin Tiansu. Dong congratulates Chen on his marriage and jokes about Lin's quick decision to accept Chen's proposal. Lin responds that she is sincerely interested in Chen's talent. And she tells Chen that before their wedding she has to go back to Fujian to bury her parents. Chen praises Lin for her filial piety.

Scene 9: *Yizhai* 移寨 (Moving Camp)

Bandit Liu Xianglao has expanded his sphere of influence to the coastal region of Fujian. He occupies a strategic spot in Xianxia Mountain. He orders his soldiers to rob passing merchants and capture travelling scholars. He needs a real scholar to work as his strategist.

Scene 10: *Zhubi* 嘱婢 (Instructing the Maid)

Shikong's maid Miaoxiang laments over her miseries. Shikong locks her in the cellar and often uses her for his sexual needs. Miaoxiang just hears that Shikong wants to marry Yang Yunyou and feels outraged at Shikong's evil nature. Miaoxiang manages to find out what Shikong's plan is.

Shikong suspects Huang Tianjian, who is crude and almost illiterate, will raise Yang's suspicion. He asks Miaoxiang to help Huang with his disguise as Dong Qichang.

Scene 11: *Zhuanhun* 赚婚 (Earning a Marriage)

Huang Tianjian dresses up for his wedding with Yang Yunyou. Yang brings no dowry but zither, books and ink stones. The crowd makes fun of Huang's inferiority to Yang.

Huang and Yang get on the boat that is departing for the capital city. On the wedding night, the fake Dong Qichang indulges in alcohol but remembers his promise to guard Yang's virginity. He tells Yang Yunyou that it is not an auspicious date for consummating their marriage. Realizing that she has mistakenly thought of Dong as an elegant man, Yang breaks down in tears. She wonders why someone as talented as Dong can be so vulgar.

Scene 12: *Cuoguai* 错怪 (False Accusation)

Jiang Huaiyi is still searching for the female painter who has forged Dong Qichang's work. He finally comes to Yang Yunyou's family house. Yang Yunyou's father, who is waiting for news from his daughter, receives Jiang. During their conversation, the father reveals Yang Yunyou has just married to Dong Qichang. Jiang is shocked by this information and feels betrayed. He believes that Dong Qichang has secretly married Yang Yunyou without telling him.

Scene 13: *Songxing* 送行 (Seeing Lin Tiansu off)

Lin Tiansu is about to start her journey back to Fujian. Chen Jiru worries that it is too dangerous for a woman to travel all the way to the south. Lin reveals her secret to guard her own safety—she disguises herself as a male scholar. Lin then puts on men’s clothes. Chen is surprised at her perfect disguise. They decide to trick Jiang Huaiyi when he comes.

Jiang is completely fooled by Lin and asks how she performs a man so well. Lin says it is important to believe that she is actually a man. Jiang also reveals his shocking discovery of Yang Yunyou’s marriage.

Chen and Jiang see Lin Tiansu off.

Scene 14: *Luchou* 露丑 (Revealing Disgrace)

Monk Shikong is traveling to the capital city by boat. He is following Huang Tianjian and Yang Yunyou closely. He can hardly suppress his urge for Yang anymore. He orders Huang to evoke Yang’s sexual desire and “prepare” her for his pleasure. He reassures Huang that his servant Miaoxiang will help him.

At the same time, Yang becomes more suspicious of her “husband’s” identity. She decides to find out whether he is really talented or not. She asks the fake Dong Qichang to comment on her painting and inscribe poems. Huang Tianjian fails to do both. He “rescues” himself from further embarrassment by crying out loud. Instead of helping Huang, Miaoxiang reveals Shikong’s plan to Yang. These two women plan to murder Shikong.

Scene 15: *Rumu* 入幕 (Becoming a Staff Member)

Lin Tiansu is passing Xianxia Mountain in the disguise of a scholar. The bandits, who are looking for a strategist, capture her. They decide to test “his” scholarship. Lin has to succeed in the test because the bandits will kill anyone who pretends to be a scholar. The bandits know that all literati are obsessed with drama these days, so they ask Lin to perform some arias. Lin passes the test with ease and is taken to the bandits’ camp. Soon she is appointed as their strategist.

The Second Half

Scene 16: *Wuzha* 悟诈 (Realizing the Fraud)

In his hometown of Songjiang, Dong Qichang is still waiting for Jiang Huaiyi to deliver news about his forger. Meanwhile, Yang Yunyou’s father, who is worried about his daughter, comes to Songjiang. He is stopped at the gate to Dong’s mansion. But his claim that he is Dong’s father-in-law makes Dong’s guards curious. At same time, Chen Jiru also arrives. Chen asks Yang if he is the father of Dong’s new concubine and then takes Yang to see Dong Qichang. When the three meet, it is revealed that Monk Shikong has fooled everyone.

Scene 17: *Du'er* 毒餌 (Poisonous Decoy)

Shikong accepts Yang Yunyou's invitation to her boat with joy. He thinks that Huang Tianjian is now useless and tries to force Huang off the boat. Huang begs for Shikong's mercy, but Shikong only enslaves him.

Scene 18: *Chenjian* 沉奸 (Sinking the Evil Man)

Huang Tianjian, who is trying to seek revenge against Shikong, agrees to help Yang Yunyou and Miaoxiang kill the fake monk. When Shikong comes to Yang's boat, Yang receives him with sweet words and wine. When Shikong is enjoying Yang's company, Miaoxiang puts poison into Shikong's drink. Shikong soon loses consciousness. Huang Tianjian dumps Shikong into the river.

Scene 19: *Qiuyuan* 求援 (Asking for Help)

Trapped in the bandits' camp, Lin Tiansu tries to seek help. She asks her servant to deliver a secret message to Chen Jiru and hopes Chen can rescue her.

Scene 20: *Jiebing* 借兵 (Borrowing Soldiers)

Jiang Huaiyi visits Chen Jiru who is anxiously waiting for Lin Tiansu's return. Chen tells Jiang about Shikong's evil plot and his worries about Lin's safety. During their conversation Lin's servant arrives and shows Lin's letter to Chen Jiru. Chen does not know how to help and laments his incompetence. Jiang says he can write a letter to a general who may agree to help if Chen can give him a poem. Chen writes a poem right away.

Scene 21: *Juanlian* 卷簾 (Rolling up the Curtain)

Miaoxiang tells the audience that Yang Yunyou has been selling her own paintings since she arrives in the capital city. Originally, Yang plans to select a husband from her customers. But the customers lack either talent or elegant demeanor. Furthermore, some of them start to accuse Yang of hiring a male ghostpainter. Yang decides to confront this accusation by rolling up the curtain and painting right in front of the male customers. The customers watch Yang paint and express their romantic interests in Yang. One customer, who is an official, continues to pester Yang until Yang's "husband" Huang Tianjian comes back. As Yang has accumulated quite some fortune from her paintings, she decides to buy Huang an official title so he can protect her.

Scene 22: *Jiumei* 救美 (Rescuing the Beauty)

Upon receiving Chen Jiru's poem, the general goes to clean out the bandits. He rescues Lin Tiansu from the bandits' camp right away.

Scene 23: *Fanzhao* 返棹 (Turning Back)

Huang Tianjian has enjoyed his life as an official in the capital city. He accompanies Yang for her trip back to Hangzhou. As Yang has decided, she and Huang separate when they arrive in Hangzhou. Miaoxiang, however, stays with Yang as her maid.

Scene 24: *Furen* 赴任 (Proceeding to the Official Post)

Yang's father hears rumors about a young woman, surnamed Yang, selling paintings in the capital city. Dong gives the father money to look for his daughter. Soon, Dong receives news of promotion. He will proceed to his official post in the capital city along with Yang Yunyou's father.

Scene 25: *Qianmei* 遣媒 (Sending the Matchmaker)

Jiang Huaiyi discovers that Yang Yunyou is back in Hangzhou. Jiang asks a matchmaker to inform Yang of Dong Qichang's marriage proposal.

Scene 26: *Jushuo* 拒约 (Rejecting the Marriage Proposal)

Unable to find her father in Hangzhou, Yang Yunyou is deeply worried. Miaoxiang reminds Yang that she needs to secure a marriage soon. The matchmaker sent by Jiang Huaiyi arrives. But Yang is convinced that this matchmaker is just another swindler. She rejects Dong's proposal immediately. Miaoxiang tells the matchmaker that Yang's future husband must pass Yang's tests on literature, calligraphy, and painting. The matchmaker says she will return with a perfect candidate.

Scene 27: *Sheji* 设计 (Designing a Strategy)

Jiang Huaiyi tells Chen Jiru that Yang Yunyou has turned away the matchmaker. He comes up with a strategy similar to Shikong's: he will find someone who can pass Yang's tests and then save this marriage for Dong Qichang. But both Jiang and Chen understand it is difficult to find someone who can do this job.

Exactly at this time, Lin Tiansu comes back. Jiang Huaiyi realizes Lin is the perfect candidate to pass Yang's tests and he makes Lin agree to disguise as a scholar again.

Scene 28: *Kuangyin* 誑姻 (A Marriage by Deception)

Lin Tiansu goes to take Yang Yunyou's tests. Lin declares if "he" passes the tests "he" will take Yang home right away. Miaoxiang helps Yang conduct the tests. After Lin passes those tests with ease, Yang asks to see how Lin looks. Yang is amazed by Lin's appearance and agrees to marry Lin immediately.

On the wedding night, Yang discovers she is fooled for a second time by a fake man. Lin reveals her true identity and tells Yang she is actually helping the real Dong Qichang secure his marriage proposal. Only then does Yang Yunyou feel relieved.

The two female artists admire each other's talent and beauty and decide to spend the night like a real couple.

Scene 29: *Jianfu* 見父 (Meeting the Father)

Yang's father is back in Hangzhou. He is informed that his daughter has married someone surnamed Lin. He finds his way to Lin Tiansu's home and finally meets his daughter. The father tells his daughter that Dong Qichang has helped him look for her, but he thinks it is too late for his daughter to unite with Dong now. Yang Yunyou then reveals to her father that Lin is actually a "surrogate husband" who helps Dong Qichang unite with her.

Scene 30: *Huizhen* 會真 (Meeting the Real One)

Dong Qichang receives a message from Jiang Huaiyi saying Yang Yunyou and her father are coming to the capital city.

Soon after the Yangs arrive, a wedding ceremony takes place. Dong Qichang finally finds his concubine ghostpainter.

Appendix Four

A Dream of Glory Synopsis

Main Characters:

Miss Wang, Wang Menglin: performed by *sheng* 生 (male lead)

Miss Xie: performed by *dan* 旦 (female lead)

Miss Hu: performed by *xiaodan* 小旦 (younger female, secondary female)

Miss Huang: performed by *tiedan* 貼旦 (supporting female)

Wang's mother: performed by *laodan* 老旦 (older female)

Wang's father: performed by *wai* 外 (older male)

Yaoqin: performed by *chou* 丑 (clown)

The First Half

Scene 1: *Chuangai* 傳概 (Prologue)¹

The prologue speaker invites the audience to enjoy the new drama. He summarizes Scholar Wang's adventures in the play. He then announces the adventures are just a woman's dream.

Scene 2: *Dutan* 獨嘆 (A Lonely Sigh)

Miss Wang, from a prominent family in Chang'an, laments the fact that her literary talent cannot bring fame to herself or her family. Her abundant boredom and sadness inhibit her from composing poetry or even reading. Unable to put her mind to anything, Miss Wang picks up a portrait of a beautiful lady and declares that if she were a man she would definitely marry this woman. This portrait also reminds Wang of Miss Hu and Miss Huang, the two young women she had met during her trips to Suzhou and Huangzhou.

Miss Wang's memories and regrets soon wear her out. She falls asleep.

Scene 3: *Rumeng* 入夢 (Falling into a Dream)

Shancai, Bodhisattva Guanyin's disciple, helps Miss Wang change gender in her dream. The dream male, Wang Menglin, is surprised at this change, but he adapts to the male identity with ease and joy.

Scene 4: *Chunxiu* 春繡 (Spring Embroidery)

Miss Xie, the daughter of an official family in Wulin, practices embroidery and enjoys the beautiful spring season.

¹ The scene titles in English are based on Wu Qingyun's translation of Wang Yun's play, with a few modifications.

Scene 5: *Ciqin* 辭親 (Saying Goodbye to Family)

The dream male, Wang Menglin, decides to visit the scenic lower Yangzi region. His father and brother support his plan. His mother, however, reminds him to focus on his scholarship and career. Soon Wang says goodbye to his family and sets off.

Scene 6: *Anhui* 庵會 (Meeting at a Convent)

Miss Xie visits a convent where she encounters Wang Menglin's mother. The mother is amazed at Miss Xie's elegance. She considers Miss Xie a perfect candidate to be her daughter-in-law.

Scene 7: *Qiuli* 求麗 (Seeking Beauties)

Wang Menglin is enjoying his stay in Hangzhou. He reveals that the main purpose of his travel is to find beautiful ladies. After knowing that Wang desperately wants to meet good-looking young ladies, Wang's friends decide to fool Wang by recommending Wang to visit a courtesan named Pipa Qian.

Scene 8: *Wufang* 誤訪 (A Visit in Error)

With high anticipation, Wang Menglin visits Pipa Qian's brothel. He is startled to find that Pipa Qian is both ugly and old. Pipa Qian, who is in desperate need for business and sexual intimacy, tries to force Wang to stay. But Wang manages to flee.

Scene 9: *Touyuan* 投緣 (Destined to Meet)

Wang Menglin's servant Yaoqin makes fun of Wang's escape from Pipa Qian.

Then Miss Hu appears onstage. Feeling lonely, Miss Hu is taking a rest in her courtyard. Wang Menglin happens to pass Miss Hu's residence and is startled by Miss Hu's beauty. Miss Hu's mother invites Wang in to have a cup of tea. After finding out that Wang is a promising scholar, the mother decides that she should seize this opportunity and arrange a marriage between her daughter and Wang. Wang tells the mother that he is just visiting the south and has to go back home soon. But after a moment of hesitation, he accepts the mother's arrangement. He gives Miss Hu a jade pendant as his love token. Before he leaves he promises Miss Hu and her mother that he will not forget his promise to marry Miss Hu.

Scene 10: *Qiuzhen* 秋砧 (Autumn Pounding)

Soon Wang travels to Suzhou. On an autumn night Wang Menglin hears the sound of someone beating clothes (to wash them) and wants to know who is conducting this chore. He climbs up a tree and sees the beautiful maiden Miss Huang. He leaps over the wall, approaches Huang, and reveals his romantic feelings straightforwardly. Scared by Wang's advance, Miss Huang is about to scream. But Wang's scholarly appearance rescues him from embarrassment.

Soon Wang's courtship moves Miss Huang and Miss Huang admits her equal admiration for him. Before Wang Menglin takes his leave, the two young lovers exchange their vows of marriage.

Scene 11: *Juyan* 菊宴 (A Chrysanthemum Banquet)

Wang Menglin's father receives the news that his son has succeeded in the autumn provincial examinations. The family arranges a chrysanthemum banquet to celebrate. Both the father and the mother are looking forward to Menglin's return but the mother is worried about the son's well-being. She also wonders whether the son is prepared for the spring metropolitan examinations.

Scene 12: *Xingcheng* 行程 (On the Road)

Wang Menglin is on his way home.

The Second Half

Scene 13: *Baojie* 報捷 (Reporting Success)

Miss Xie's parents receive the news of their future son-in-law Wang Menglin's success in the imperial examinations. The Xies celebrate Wang's achievement of the title "Top Scholar."

Scene 14: *Qinsu* 琴訴 (Murmurs over the Strings)

After winning the title "Top Scholar" and getting engaged with Miss Xie, Wang Menglin starts to worry about Miss Hu and Miss Xie left in the south. His brother invites him to a banquet. Wang Menglin is not in the mood of having fun, however. He plays the zither and sings about his longing for the two beauties. The brother, who comes to look for Menglin, overhears Menglin's sighs. Wang Menglin explains to his brother that he has made engagements with Miss Hu and Miss Huang during his visit to Suzhou and Hangzhou. The brother mocks Wang Menglin's luck with women but promises that he will help Menglin reunite with the two young ladies. Menglin pledges that he will find beautiful concubines for his brother.

Scene 15: *Rujin* 入京 (Moving to the Capital)

Wang Menglin's mother dispatches a servant to bring the two women from the south after the brother informs her of Wang Menglin's engagements.

Now her servant has come back with Miss Hu and Miss Huang. Wang Menglin is pleasantly surprised at Miss Hu and Miss Huang's arrival, but he has to keep distance from them as his wedding with Miss Xie is approaching.

Scene 16: *Hejin* 合巹 (Wedding)

When Wang Menglin's wedding with Miss Xie takes place, he regrets leaving Miss Hu and Miss Huang aside. But his melancholy disappears when he lights the candle and discovers the sublime beauty of his bride.

Scene 17: *Chunyuan* 春怨 (Spring Lament)

Miss Huang and Miss Hu try to dispel their sorrows and boredom when Wang Menglin is away with his wife. Friendship develops between these two young women who feel the same sense of abandonment.

Scene 18: *Guiju* 閨聚 (Unions in the Inner Chamber)

Wang Menglin's mother tells Wang's wife, Xie, about Miss Hu and Miss Huang. Xie finds her husband's silence about his engagements with Hu and Huang unreasonable. But she happily receives the two young ladies and praises their beauty. She promises that she will pick an auspicious date for her husband's reunion with these two women from the south.

Scene 19: *Shuangyuan* 雙圓 (Double Reunions)

Wife Xie decides to teach Wang Menglin a lesson before allowing him to reunite with Miss Hu and Miss Huang. She pretends that she is angry about Wang's engagements with the two young ladies. Her performance of jealousy startles Wang. Flinching before his wife's "outrage," Wang even proposes to dismiss Miss Hu and Miss Huang. Only then Xie asks the two women to come out and join her husband.

Scene 20: *Qiaoyi* 喬議 (A Fake Consultation)

Wang Menglin plans to realize his promise for his brother. He has found two young women for his brother and asked his concubines, Miss Hu and Miss Huang, to teach these girls singing and dancing. Wang goes to check whether the instruction is going well and enjoys intimacy with his concubines. Miss Hu and Miss Huang are curious about why Wang Menglin has obtained those two young women. Wang makes his concubines and his wife, Xie, believe that he has obtained these new girls for his own pleasure. When Xie and the two concubines protest against this expansion of the inner chamber, Wang is delighted to watch the outburst of their jealousy. He then reveals that these new girls are actually for his brother.

Scene 21: *Zengqie* 贈妾 (A Gift of Two Concubines)

Wang Menglin's servant Yaoqin is preparing a banquet for Wang's brother under Wang's order. He asks his master if he can arrange a marriage for him too. Wang grants his request right away.

Then Wang Menglin surprises his brother at the banquet. He presents two young girls as his gift for the brother and thanks the brother for helping him reunite with Miss Hu and Miss Huang. The two girls, however, are reluctant to leave the charming Wang Menglin.

At the same time Yaoqin's wedding takes place. The two brothers go to congratulate Yaoqing.

Scene 22: *Shangchun* 賞春 (Spring Reverie)

Quite a few years have passed. On a bright spring day, the Wangs invite Wang Menglin's in-laws to come and celebrate the beautiful season.

While preparing for the family banquet, Yaoqin and other servants talk about the two families' successes in the imperial examinations and officialdom. The two families drink, compose poems, and visit the Wang's garden.

Scene 23: *Xingjiu* 省舊 (Recalling the Past)

The family reunion continues, but Wang suddenly feels weary in mind and body. Wang Menglin goes to take a rest at his study. All of a sudden, he recalls his past as a woman and becomes lost. He wonders if his glorious career as a high official is just a dream.

The bewildered Wang Menglin falls asleep. Soon his wife and concubines come to his study. After lowering the curtain and taking Wang to his bed, the wife and concubines announce to the audience that it is time to end their twenty years of romance.

Scene 24: *Chumeng* 出夢 (Awakening)

Miss Wang wakes up and finds herself back in her female body. She realizes that all the glories she has experienced are just a dream. She grieves for the lost romance with the three women in her dream and then blames the books she has read for teaching her false ambitions. Miss Wang is overwhelmed by a sense of desolation.

Scene 25: *Xianhua* 仙化 (The Instruction from an Immortal)

The Daoist deity Magu is about to descend to earth to guide Miss Wang to enlightenment.

Meanwhile, Miss Wang's deep sorrow has harmed her health. Rising from her sickbed, Miss Wang is surprised by Magu's presence. Magu tells Miss Wang that her regrets about being a woman have conjured up her dream. This dream, just like all the other vanities in this world, is empty. Magu's words help Miss Wang understand her past illusions. Wang aspires to become Magu's disciple. But Magu tells Wang it is still not the time yet. Before leaving, Magu encourages Wang to contemplate her deep attachment to the dream of glory and strive for enlightenment and transcendence.

The play ends with Miss Wang's curious laughter. Wang's final aria states that both men and women should reflect on their aspirations for worldly ambitions.