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update

BY ANDREA S. GOLDMAN

# SOCIAL MELODRAMA AND THE SEXING OF POLITICAL COMPLAINT IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY COMMERCIAL KUN OPERA

ZHAO CUIER was a creation of elite male fantasy, as Wu Changyuan tells it, capable of ensnaring audiences—both lay and clerical—in the illusionary world of the eighteenth-century Chinese stage. Zhao Cuier is the lead character from the play *The Garden of Turquoise and Jade* (*Feicui yuan*). The play tells the story of a poor scholar's attempt to protect his land from annexation by a ruthless official. The scholar, Shu Depu, is assisted by a winsome vagabond seamstress, Zhao Cuier, and a bumbling deputy of the law, Wang Steamed-Bun. This trio of righteousness is held up as the moral antidote to the destructive power of masculine privilege. When legal channels fail them, the heroes

*When I was making my catalogue..., I found it a pity that there were not any actors from Hangzhou. Fu Tingshan told me: "Twenty years ago, there was a Kun opera boy-actress in a capital troupe who was originally from Hangzhou, but I've forgotten his name. He was outstanding in the role of Zhao Cuier, and very good in other plays too." Then I recalled a time in the fall of 1766 when I was attending some plays with Master Rang, the Abbot of Longxiang Monastery.... An Indian monk in attendance said to me: "The boy-actress in this troupe who plays the part of Zhao Cuier really makes one's mouth water." Master Rang looked embarrassed. I responded: "This teacher's sudden enlightenment exceeds even a cup of Zen tea...." We looked at one another and laughed. Now, as for the boy-actress who old master Fu saw, can I presume that he too made one's mouth water?*

— Wu Changyuan, *Yanlan xiaopu* (1785) <sup>1</sup>

take matters into their own hands. Justice is eventually restored by an emperor-*ex-machina*.

Audiences for commercial Kun opera rarely saw full plays, however. Commercially performed versions tended to truncate the story and dispense with its happy ending. The climactic scenes featured the daring deeds of the heroine and ended, typically, with the protagonists on the run and the seamstress grieving her mother's murder by the henchman of the corrupt official. Audiences, it turns out, were more attuned to sentimentalized depictions of injustice than to the restoration of order. The cross-dressed youths who played the seamstress clearly stole the show. Commercial Kun opera thus offered urban playgoers a space for escape *and* a vehicle for the voicing of pointed social commentary. This melodrama of *ressentiment* was inflected with class and gender sympathies: the good tended to be poor and/or female; the bad, rich men and their conniving flunkies. This sexing of political complaint—that is, both the gendered face of chivalry and the allure of the boy actresses—became a hallmark of Kun opera in the Qing capital.

## The Play and Its Sources

*The Garden of Turquoise and Jade*, attributed to the Suzhou-based playwright Zhu Suchen (ca. 1620—at least 1701), is loosely based on historical figures and events from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Its creation is dated to the early Qing

dynasty (1644–1911), likely circa 1660. In twenty-six scenes, *Garden* portrays the struggle between Shu Depu and the villainous official who covets his land, Ma Fengzhi. Ma wants the land to build a perfectly square Garden of Turquoise and Jade, which he intends to use to worm his way into the good graces of his powerful royal patron, the Prince of Ning. In the first half of the drama, when Shu refuses to sell the property, he is framed for a crime and hauled before the county magistrate. When the magistrate adjudicates in the poor scholar's favor, Ma gets the prince to appoint him as judge for a re-trial. Shu is imprisoned and slated for execution; however, Cuier, the vagabond seamstress, comes to his rescue. She steals the official tally authorizing the execution and hands it off to Steamed-Bun, who uses it to secure Shu's escape. The second half of *Garden* presents the rebellion of the Prince of Ning against the reigning emperor. By the end of the play, the forces of good (including the honest magistrate, Shu Depu, and Steamed-Bun) have vanquished the rebels.

The themes explored in *Garden* are typical of the plays written by contemporaries among the so-called Suzhou writers' group of early Qing dramatists. These dramas explore questions of individual moral virtue, draw upon historical materials for their plots, and often pair scholar-and-beauty romance narratives with court case dramas about social justice; but since justice is not typically served through official channels,

these plots also frequently showcase chivalric knight-errants.<sup>2</sup> Similar to so many of these early Qing dramas, abridged versions and selected scenes from *Garden* became popular fare for Kun opera well into the nineteenth century. The popularity of this play on stage reveals that urban audiences identified with the plight of the downtrodden.

For all its critique of a social and political order gone awry, *Garden* holds out hope for an ideal resolution, at least in the playwright's edition. For their righteous (albeit extra-legal) deeds, Steamed-Bun is appointed to a post in the Palace Guard and Cuier is joined in matrimony to the scholar's son (who has since won top honors in the metropolitan examinations). Old enmities are forgiven: Ma Feiyong, the charitable daughter of Shu's rich and powerful nemesis, is also married off to Shu's now-eminent son, and her virtue wins pardon for her

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father's crimes. In the end, those of low status have been elevated in the social hierarchy for their good deeds, those with learning have been recognized and accorded a position in the official bureaucracy consonant with the Confucian ideal, and those who have abused power have been reprimanded and punished. The travesty of social justice gives way to comedic order, and one young man gets "paired" happily ever after with not one but two beautiful and virtuous women.

## **GARDEN AND THE ETHICS OF THE EARLY QING SUZHOU PLAYWRIGTHS**

The social melodrama presented in *Garden* reflects both early Qing obscurantist and late Ming romantic sympathies. The play's showcasing of courtroom justice harkens back to Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) variety play (*zaju*) plots, although it also shares the structural and thematic characteristics of Ming romance drama. *Garden* is pro-establishment and pro-hierarchy, so long as rank within the social order is based on Confucian ideals of merit and moral worth. And yet, its treatment of the protagonists exhibits continuity with a critical strain of imaginings about gender and class that shaped so much of late Ming fiction and drama in which young women and the poor speak truth to power.

The choice by early Qing playwrights to return to the court case themes so central to Yuan drama was surely rife with symbolic import. The historical parallel of life under alien rule—then Mongol, now Manchu—was not lost on Han writers from Suzhou, one of the hotbeds of resistance to the Qing conquest. Literary depiction of judicial process was a relatively safe way of registering dissatisfaction with the status quo. Compared with their Yuan models, however, the early Qing court case plays exhibit much more cynicism toward the potential for justice to be served. The impossibility of redress of grievance within the system thus necessitates the intervention of chivalric figures such as Cuier and Steamed-Bun. This valorization of vigilante action as a tactic of the weak underscores a polemical bite to the play, traces of which were retained even as it circulated in truncated form in commercial performance over the next 150-plus years.

The gender politics of *Garden* are also a blend of old and new. The central figure of Cuier

is indebted to late Ming literati fascination with characters who exhibit *bense* or emotional authenticity, a trait that came especially to be mapped onto the young, desiring, and desirous woman. As literary historians have shown, what begins in the late Ming as a counterhegemonic discourse of cultural redemption is by Qing times often simply a playful literary trope, stripped of its more transgressive implications.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this development helps to explain, too, the marriage destinies in *Garden*. The late Ming "cult of emotions" ideal, which had begun to embrace singular romantic devotion, is passed over for the fantasy of getting "two-in-one," and thus foreshadows the resolutions of so much of later Qing fiction and drama.<sup>4</sup> In the character of Cuier, then, we find the outward trappings of authenticity, but this ideal type is now harnessed to a "restorationist" sentiment—socially, if not politically.

## **GARDEN ON THE COMMERCIAL STAGE**

The early Qing conservative re-appropriation of late Ming gender politics as reflected in *Garden* were re-directed toward social complaint, however, when scenes of the play moved into commercial production. When *Garden* moved from page to stage, the play was presented in truncated form, typically in eight to twelve scenes. It could

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also feature the solo scene “Stealing the Tally” (“Dao ling”), although sometimes in combination with the subsequent “Murder on the Boat” (“Sha zhou”). Less commonly, the “Stealing the Tally” scene was paired with the concluding scene, “Parading the Top Candidate” (“You jie”).

The earliest evidence of how *Garden* might have been performed on the commercial stage comes from 1770 in the excerpts published in the massive drama anthology, *A Cloak of Patchworked White Fur (Zhuibaiqiu)*.<sup>5</sup> The *Cloak* edition features twelve scenes, all drawn from the first half of the

play. The dramatic action of the linked scenes concludes with Cuier’s theft of the tally, the murder of Cuier’s mother, and Shu’s escape from prison. Another early nineteenth-century script of *Garden*, which claims provenance from the famous Sanqing commercial troupe in Beijing, turns out to be copied nearly word for word from the scenes in *Cloak*.<sup>6</sup> Yet another indication of how *Garden* was rendered in commercial production comes from an entry in the anonymous diary, *Playwatching Journal (Guanju riji)*, which records a staging in 1798 of all the scenes from the opening “Heavenly Pronouncement” (“Yubao”) to “Stealing the Tally.” This, then, was the favored abridgment when acting troupes staged the “complete” version of *Garden*.

This production choice ensured that the play ended at a climax of emotional intensity. While the *Cloak* selection ends with the escape of Shu Depu, the Sanqing script makes the final scene the one in which Cuier discovers her mother’s death. In this version, especially, the play becomes a vehicle for display of the virtuosity of the actor playing Cuier. In her final aria, Cuier combines pathos with filial remorse. She sings:

YA, YA, YA... YA, MY HEART IS PIERCED WITH PAIN!  
LOOK, LOOK, LOOK... LOOK AT THIS BODY SPLAYED OUT IN A POOL OF BLOOD; A MURDER MOST INHUMANE!  
IT MUST, MUST, MUST... IT MUST BE THAT SHE MET UP WITH AN OLD ENEMY ON A NARROW LANE.

(Spoken): Oh, I know! It must have been that old bastard Ma Fengzhi. Hating that I saved Scholar Shu through trickery, he must have sent someone after me to do me harm. But I was a step too slow in returning. My mother on the boat was accidentally murdered in my place. Ah, Mother...

YOU, YOU, YOU... YOU HAD LOOKED ONLY TO ME TO PASS YOUR TWILIGHT YEARS IN A PEACEFUL VEIN.  
AND NOW, NOW, NOW... NOW, ALL BECAUSE OF YOUR DAUGHTER, YOU INSTEAD ARE SLAIN.<sup>7</sup>

Such sentimentalized depiction of injustice was the stuff that grabbed at audience heartstrings. It worked all the better when it was enacted by the young female lead (played, no less, by an attractive cross-dressing youth).<sup>8</sup> And, as the opening epigraph demonstrates, comments by aficionados at the time speak of audiences drooling over the boy-actresses in the role of Cuier.<sup>9</sup>

By the late eighteenth century, more often than not, urban audiences encountered just one—at most two—scenes from *Garden* in any one theatrical viewing. The great majority of hand-copied scripts from the story cycle that have come down to us are for the scene “Stealing the Tally.” Clearly, then, the scene in which Cuier steals the tally out from under the nose of the sleeping Ma Fengzhi could be performed as a stand-alone piece. When performed alone, the scene would have been a showcase piece for the ingénue role, with plenty of suspense and stage business surrounding the theft of the tally. According to choreography directions in an actor-copied script from 1861, the moment of theft required the actor playing Cuier to display the highly demanding skill of scurrying about the stage on his knees. The actor also had to attempt the theft of the tally three times in response to coughs and snores from the actor playing the villain.<sup>10</sup>

Alternatively, sometimes the scene “Parading the Top Candidate” was paired with “Stealing the Tally,” although from time to time it could be performed solo as well.<sup>11</sup> This scene, too, elicited audience responses, particularly for the special joyous walk the character of Cuier performed after she learns that she will be married to Shu Fen, the new top candidate. In all versions of “Parading the Top Candidate,” however, the plot ends with the single marriage between Cuier and Shu Fen. No mention is made of a

second liaison between Ma Feiying and Shu Fen. Thus, in the telescoped two-scene version of the play, a companionate marriage becomes Cuier’s reward for her chivalrous deeds.

In contrast, the only extant version of *Garden* that preserves the two-in-one marriage of the original comes from a production script that was created explicitly for the viewing pleasure of members of the Qing royal household in the 1860s. This is the only production script that includes the final scene “Making the Jade Whole” (“Cui yuan”), which suggests that the nineteenth-century court appreciated the conservative social message of the original ending. Through contrast, this underscores the extent to which most performances for the commercial stage dispensed with the comforting restoration of social order and normative gender hierarchies at the conclusion of the play. Instead, audiences for commercial Kun opera preferred to wallow in melodramatic railing against injustice or, alternatively, to delight in the victories of underdog vigilantism. The erotic allure of the cross-dressing actors who played such roles further endeared audiences to the plight of the lead character. And thus, entertainment value did not have to cede way to a veiled polemic within the space of the commercial playhouse.

Granted, the scenes from *Garden* were but a handful among a much larger repertoire of plays that filled the stages of the capital playhouses, but they belonged, nevertheless, to an important

subset of plays that shaped the tenor of commercial Kun opera in Qing Beijing. Scenes from *Garden* and from other dramas by the early Qing Suzhou dramatists made up a full fourth of the 500-plus plays featured in the eighteenth-century drama anthology, *Cloak*. Time and again, the excerpted selections drawn from these plays in commercial performance emphasized the suffering of the wronged heroines and heroes. In these plays, too, young women and the poor both line up on the side of righteousness and authenticity. The commercially produced plays of the *Garden* plot, then, are one example of what I identify as the gendered face of social complaint.

We can find this gendered polemic of complaint in other facets of Qing metropolitan theater culture too. We can find it in the writing of guides to the cross-dressing boy actors, in which the marginalized literati authors deeply identified with the feminized and debased youths of the opera demimonde.<sup>12</sup> We can find similar sentiments in the mid nineteenth-century novel *A Precious Mirror of Boy Actresses* (*Pinhua baojian*)—an extension of that world—in which willingly playing the feminized part constitutes a pointed rejection of the privilege that comes with status. Perhaps we can find it, too, even in perceptions of the culture of sensuous Jiangnan (the Yangzi River delta)—epitomized in the Suzhou-derived Kun opera—which was rendered feminine vis-à-vis the Manchu-identified court in Beijing. Ironically, perhaps, the polemic

of complaint voiced via the space of the metropolitan commercial opera was strongest when the Qing court kept urban theatricals at a distance, that is, contained within the outer section of the capital city, which was dominated by the taste of Han literati. By the second half of the nineteenth century, as the court began to embrace and patronize commercial opera, it came to have much more influence over the content of performance within the urban space. Concurrently, the feminized polemics of complaint that had been so central to commercial Kun opera (and which voiced literati disaffection) came to be eclipsed by new narratives of male heroics, which were harnessed to the preservation of state-endorsed moral and social hierarchies.

**Author's note:** The above is excerpted from the fifth chapter of the manuscript, “Opera in the City: The Staging of Gender and Class in Beijing, 1770–1900.”

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## NOTES

1. Wu Changyuan, *Yanlan xiaopu* in Zhang Cixi, comp., *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao* (Beijing, 1988), 44. Hereafter, *QYLS*.
2. Some of the major playwrights associated with the mid-seventeenth-century “Suzhou writers’ group” include: Li Yu, Zhu Suchen and his brother, Zhu Zuochao, Bi Wei, Ye Shizhang, Qiu Yuan, Sheng Jishi, and Zhang Dafu. All were natives of Suzhou or its immediate environs, and most of them were friends or acquaintances, some even collaborating on the creation of long multi-scene dramas.
3. Maram Epstein, *Competing Discourses: Orthodoxy, Authenticity and Engendered Meanings in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction* (Cambridge, Ma., 2001), 107–11.
4. Li Yu’s *Lianxiang ban*, Cao Xueqin’s *Honglou meng*, and Wen Kang’s *Ernü yingxiong zhuan* come to mind as examples.
5. *Feicui yuan*. 1770. In Wanhua zhuren & Qian Decang, comp., *Zhuibaiqiu*. In Wang Qiugui, ed., *Shanben xiqu congkan*, vol. 65, 2685–2770 (Taipei, 1987); facsimile edition.
6. *Feicui yuan kunyi quanben*. Early to mid nineteenth century. Housed in the Traditional Drama Archive of the Zhongguo yishu yanjiuyuan.
7. *Ibid.*, 37a.
8. Eugenia Lean’s study of public sentiment in Republican China has shown that urban audiences were hungry for such soap-opera type scenarios, whether played out in real life or on the stage. Eugenia Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial*

*of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China* (Berkeley, 2007). Here, I suggest that the formation of popular sympathy predates the Republican era; the site for the expression of such public sentiment was the commercial playhouse.

9. Wu, *Yanlan xiaopu* in *QYLS*, 44.
10. *Feicui yuan*. 1861. Hand-copied by Du Shuangshou. Du was an actor in the service of the court. The cover page has a stamp with Manchu writing, which reads “ineggidari ichemleme biyadari iundehei.” This translates into Chinese as a four character auspicious phrase meaning “*rixin yuesheng*” or “May your days be many and your months plentiful.” This script is currently stored in the Rare Books Library, Beijing University. Du Shuangshou edition, 48b–49a.
11. *Playwatching Journal* (*Guanju riji*), 1a & 12a. Manuscript stored in the Traditional Drama Archive of the Zhongguo yishu yanjiuyuan.
12. Andrea S. Goldman, “Actors and Aficionados in Qing Dynasty Texts of Theatrical Connoisseurship,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 68.1 (June 2008): 1–56.

## Glossary

<i>bense</i>	本色	<i>rixin yuesheng</i>	日新月盛
Bi Wei	畢魏	“Sha zhou”	殺舟
Cao Xueqin	曹雪芹	<i>Shanben xiqu congkan</i>	善本戲曲叢刊
“Cui yuan”	翠圓	Sheng Jishi	盛際時
“Dao ling”	盜令	Shu Depu	舒德溥
Du Shuangshou	杜雙壽	Shu Fen	舒芬
<i>Ernü yingxiong zhuan</i>	兒女英雄傳	Wang Qiugui	王秋桂
<i>Feicui yuan kunyi quanben</i>	翡翠園崑弋全本	Wang Steamed-Bun	王饅頭
<i>Feicui yuan</i>	翡翠園	Wanhua zhuren	玩花主人
<i>Guanju riji</i>	觀劇日記	Wen Kang	文康
<i>Hongloumeng</i>	紅樓夢	Wu Changyuan	吳長元
Jiangnan	江南	<i>Yanlan xiaopu</i>	燕蘭小譜
Kun opera	崑劇	Ye Shizhang	葉時章
Li Yu	李漁	“You jie”	遊街
Li Yu	李玉	“Yu bao”	預報
<i>Lianxiang ban</i>	憐香伴	<i>zaju</i>	雜劇
Ma Feiying	麻翡英	Zhang Cixi	張次溪
Ma Fengzhi	麻逢之	Zhang Dafu	張大復
<i>Pinhua baojian</i>	品花寶鑒	Zhao Cuier	趙翠兒
Prince of Ning	寧王	Zhongguo yishu yanjiuyuan	中國藝術研究院
Qian Decang	錢德蒼	Zhu Suchen	朱素臣
<i>Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao</i>	清代燕都梨園史料	Zhu Zuochao	朱佐朝
Qiu Yuan	丘園	<i>Zhuibaiqiu</i>	綴白裘