The Making of a Star: *Huapu* and the Emerging Entertainment Industry in Eighteenth-Century China

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A large number of collected biographies of popular actors, known as *huapu* or "flower guides" in which the convention was to draw an analogy between an actor and a certain flower, had been published since 1785 when the first of its kind came out.[1] Although the compilation of an actor's biography was not something new, the sheer volume of flower guides that were published during this time is striking.[2] Featuring actors whom the author(s) admired, a flower guide usually included a short biography of each actor and poetic reviews of his acting and appearance. Which actor is popular? What play is his specialty? Answers to these kinds of questions, as well as gossip about actors' personal lives that an ordinary theatergoer may have wanted to know could be found in a flower guide. For example, *Yanlan xiaopu* (The Small Guide of the Orchids in Beijing)—the first extant flower guide—includes biographical information of sixty-four widely

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[1] See Zhang Cixi, *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao* (Collected primary sources about theater in Qing dynasty Beijing) (rpt., Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1988), pp.1-4.

[2] See "Qing lou ji", in *Zhongguo gudian xiju lunzhu jicheng* (Complete collection of classical Chinese theater critique) (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1982), v.2, pp.1-84.

known actors in Beijing between 1774 and 1785, with more than one hundred poems in tribute to them. There is also a supplement attached to this guide in which meticulous attention was paid to an actor's personal life, especially the romantic relationship between the female impersonator *dan* actors and their patrons.

The content of the flower guide suggests several features that are not associated with conventional biographical literature in pre-modern China. David Nivison's research demonstrates that traditional Chinese biographical literature falls into two groups: what he called "historical biography" that is usually part of standard history and what he called "social biography" that is written due to compelling social obligations such as *xingzhuang* (accounts of conduct), *biezhuan* (unofficial biography), and different types of epitaph.[3] The flower guide fits into neither of these two categories. Moreover the function of both historical biography and social biography, as Nivison suggested, is the paying of final respects to the dead, or the rendering of final judgment. By implication, the subjects of these biographies are exemplary or at least significant persons according to the norm of the time. The flower guide, however, is about the life of living actors, a group of people at the very bottom of Qing social hierarchy. This

[3] David Nivison, "Aspects of Traditional Chinese Biography," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 21 no.4 (August 1962), pp. 457-463.

feature of the flower guide leads to the question of the purpose and significance of the publishing of this unconventional biographical literature.

In this paper I argue that the publishing of flower guides is a result of the appearance of permanent public playhouses in Beijing. The content and format of a flower guide indicates that it can definitely be used as an effective way of promotion for this newly emerging entertainment venue. Meanwhile, the publishing and circulation of flower guides are made possible by the booming commercial publishing industry of eighteenth-century China. In this way, the flower guide embodied a changing pattern of cultural consumption, which in turn implied changing social dynamics in eighteenth-century China.

The Flower Guide: Its Contents and Format

In this section I attempt to illustrate some important features of flower guides by examining *Yanlan xiaopu* (Small Guide of Orchid in Beijing) in the context of the development of Chinese theater. *Yanlan xiaopu* was published in 1785, authored by Wu Changyuan, a Zhejiang native who had spent ten years in Beijing. In this perhaps the first published flower guide, the author set an important precedent for his successors, namely, the criteria for evaluating actors. In *Yanlan xiaopu* the list of "flowers" begins with Chen Yinguan, one of the most

famous actors in Beijing during the Qianlong era (1736-1796). To give the full flavor of the entries, I give the following full translation of the entry for Chen:

> Chen Yinguan (Yiqing Company), courtesy name Meibi. He is a native of Chengdu, Sichuan and is the disciple of the famous Wei Changsheng. He is shiny, pretty, and smart. Around the 1780s, together with Wei Changsheng, he used to be the co-star of the Shuangqing Company. [Watching his performance] is like eating preserved plums after having had too much meat, it is difficult for one to forget. It is said that Chen is even better than his master. Indeed, no matter what kind of role he plays, Chen's acting is always just right and unforgettable. Whenever he was on stage [he felt so at home] that he seemed like a fish in water or a monkey climbing a tree. I have watched him performing *Kaohuo* (Warming up); [his performance] actually reminded me of something from the *Book of Changes*. I heard that my fellow townsman, Mr. Shen composed twelve poems in tribute to Chen. [If you do not know enough about Chen] it is likely you are reading Wang Yuyang's poems on willows of the autumn—you can sense the beauty but can not express it. Now people view Chen as a big star, which means you need enough money to get to know him. Otherwise you can only see his back [when he is moving off stage].

This description is then followed as usual by poems extolling his qualities.

> A graceful creature, surprised even his creator
> So sentimental, never pretending to be tipsy
> You remind me of
> Tender willow shoots in the spring wind
>
> Pretty and skillful
> Funny and playful
> So many times, when I have watched your performance
> I wish I could shout a bravo!
>
> People say that the beauties from Sichuan are the most unforgettable
> No wonder your charms are so attractive
> Mt. Wu by the River Ba
> Can you still sing the songs of your hometown?

As wealthy as Mr Ji in his fur coats
Wandering around on his treasured horse
Who else can compete with him
Even if as graceful as Poet Du?[4]

Here we can see Wu's concern focused on three aspects of Chen: first is what he would call *se*, the appearance or look of Chen. Second is what he would call *yi*, the features of Chen's acting. Third is hearsay about Chen's social interactions with his clients. Throughout *Yanlan xiaopu* guide, these three aspects constitute the framework of Wu's interest in all actors. Compared with previous literature on actors, Wu's concern illustrates some noteworthy differences. First, in Wu's poems acting proper became the focal point. In previous poems, following the poetic tradition traced back to the Tang Poet Bai Juyi (772-846), an actor's performance was appreciated only at a very general level of aesthetics. In Bai's renowned poem *Pipa xing* (The Lyric of Lute), the sound of pearls falling into a jade plate was used as a metaphor for the heavenly sound of *pipa*. Similar metaphors were abundant in the great early Qing poet Qian Qianyi's poems as well. Although their literary imagination is certainly impressive, nonetheless there is a complete lack of a system of technical terminology for describing acting, which suggests the literati's lack of professional attention to acting itself. Moreover, in these poems the actor's performance primarily served as something

[4] Zhang Cixi, *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao*, p.17-18.

inspiring the poet's imagination. Second, in *Yanlan xiaopu* the strong personal bond between owners of private household troupes and their actors that was not unusual in late Ming disappeared. Appearance or looks *(se)* and acting (*yi)* became something that was accessible to more people. In Wu's description, the sense of involvement that used to predominate in previous poets' work was replaced with a sense of detachment. In other words, Wu's descriptions of appearance (*se*) were more "objective" and the expression of desire for the object was then restrained and, in some cases, even totally "disappears."

Third, the emerging interest in gossip about an actor's "affairs" could be regarded as a compensation for the literati's lost monopoly over actors, as well as the rising influence of actors themselves. Gossip was a way through which the actor, as a cultural symbol, was able to attract attention and somehow could help increase his desirability in the entertainment market. I argue that these features of *Yanlan xiaopu* demonstrate some important changes in the history of Chinese theater, especially the way in which theater was integrated into a highly commercialized urban culture.

Se

Se refers to the appearance or look of a person with a strong association of sensuousness or sensuality. In the biographical description of Chen Yinguan, Wu Changyuan cannot forget his charm—like a tender willow branch in the spring

wind. The feminized features of *dan* actors were the focus of Wu's concern for their appearance *(se):* the flower-like face, the pure eyes, the slender shoulders, the slim waist, the delicate skin, and the general sensuousness of what Wu would call *mei*. *Mei,* a sensuous attractiveness associated with femininity, is probably the most important criterion used by Wu in his evaluation of an actor's appearance. In spite of the different kinds of beauty that Wu described in his guide, those for whom Wu had the highest regard nevertheless must be *mei*.

However it must be noted that in his evaluation of *se*, Wu attempted to make a distinction between sensuousness and lewdness (often termed as *yao*, *ye*, or *yin*. These three Chinese terms were associated with excessive pleasure of the flesh.) The biographical sketch of Ge Guiguan provides a good example of an actor overstepping the line: Wu's comment on this actor was, "he is bright and vibrant, yet short of taste (*yunzhi*). He does not observe the strict rules of theater, but simply behaves lewdly in order to cater to some of his clients. Alas!"[5] Clearly Wu might appreciate sensuousness (*mei*) but not lewdness (*yao*). He attempted to keep sensuous pleasure within certain boundaries to avoid excessive pleasure of the flesh, such was exemplified in his praise for Cao Guiguan: "he is glamorous but not lewd, you could say he behaves like a lady from the inner chambers." In other words, he behaved with the strict propriety of a woman of good family.[6] He

[5] Zhang Cixi, *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao*, p.21.
[6] Zhang Cixi, *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao*, p.31.

despised those actors who simply wanted to develop their seductiveness through the use of powder and jewelry and who worked to augment their sensuality by being more enticing.[7]

The distinction between an aesthetic appreciation of female/feminized beauty and sexual indulgence seems to be a common theme in eighteenth-century Chinese literature. For the purpose of this paper, I want to draw attention to the fact that the emphasis on this distinction led Wu to be more concerned with the temperament (*tai*) or spirit of an actor rather than exclusively on physical features. He seldom focused exclusively on physical features, rather his description always fused his observation of an actor's "spirit" with his description of his beauty. Liu Er'guan, for example, was an actor from Cuiqing Company. Wu felt that Liu's beauty was not readily apparent, instead it required "spending time in savoring it." However, Wu argued, Liu's beauty was in no sense inferior to that of the famous Wang Xiangyun. Citing a poem from the *Poetry Classic*, in which a beauty's hand was described as soft as the spring grass, and her skin was as white and shiny as frozen fat, Wu believed that Liu had both qualities. Besides this, Wu also conveyed the fact that Liu did not always attempt to cater to his clients. On the contrary, Liu was quite "eccentric" and did not get along with those clients

[7] Ibid., p.28.

who were only interested in his beauty.[8] In this last example, Wu shifted our focus to the personality of the actor.

The search Wu Changyuan had made for the particularity and personality of his actors has deepened our knowledge of these actors. Throughout the *Yanlan xiaopu* guide various actors appear to us not just as sexual symbols, but as concrete individuals. This is not to say that actors became asexual in the guide's descriptions. The erotic aspects of cultural consumption never completely disappeared but they did evolve into a more complex pattern. Wang Qingguan of Jiqing Company, for example, once served wine at a banquet that the author, Wu, attended. Wu described him in the following fashion: "shout bravo for wine and all the guests can feel him. He looks tipsy but is actually quite sharp. A seductive grace was hidden in his seemingly down to earth look."[9] Wu sighed and decried that the customs of society have deteriorated (*shi feng bu gu*). What disturbed him perhaps was that the actor, Qingguan, manipulated the situation in the pleasure quarters. In this sense, Qingguan became an active participant in, rather than a mere passive object of, the consumer culture. Considering the replacement of private household troupes by professional troupes and the dissolution of the personal bond previously existing between the owners of private household troupes and their actors, this way in presenting an actor's appearance suggests a

[8] Zhang Cixi, *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao*, p.19.
[9] Ibid., p.31.

rising concept of individualism. Meanwhile we can feel the literati's sense of disillusionment in the context of the commercialization of culture.

This disparagement of sensuality or the complete pleasure of the flesh led Wu to propose opacity and vagueness (*yunji*) as the highest standard for the expression of feeling, desire, or *qing*. Just as a flower's beauty was most attractive at the moment when it was in half blossom, the beauty of *qing* lay in its imagined quality (*yi*) rather than its materiality (*xiang*). Wu's comment was perhaps a response to the excessive eroticism found in some theatrical performances during the Qianlong era, such as the staging of the infamous late Ming novel *The Golden Lotus* (Jin ping mei). Wu's attempt to set boundaries suggests that as the acting profession became more and more commercialized, in other words, when the popular leisure industry began to commodify sensuality, literati like Wu began to feel nostalgia for some lost unsullied "natural" beauty. Throughout the *Yanlan xiaopu* guide, Wu had a special fondness for what he described as the "shy boys from next door" – the kind of young man who was both familiar and yet reserved.

Wu's nostalgia was perhaps also because literati could no longer have the monopoly of sexual fantasy towards actors. In the *Yanlan xiaopu* guide, we never see any author publicly express his desire for an actor, even though explicit sexual allusions such as "cloud and rain" were used. Sexual innuendo was, however, an important feature of the poems in tribute to the famous early Qing actor Yunlang examined by Sophie Volpp. In those poems, on the relationship between Yunlang

and his literati companion Chen Weisong "the author testifies as witness to Chen and Yunlang's relationship, and at the same time engages in it by expressing the types of sentiments that Chen and Yunlang might express towards each other." Volpp explains this as a "poetic play," in which "Yunlang's presence as a mediating term in the deferral and substitution of desire implicitly eroticizes that desire [desire among literati friends] and sexualizes the bonds between Chen and the author." In this way, "The object of desire [Yunlang] is not nearly so important as the literatus's expression of his capacity to feel and express passion."[10] The poems in *Yanlan xiaopu* compared to those Volpp analyses always seem more detached and objective. Even Wu's poem on the painted fan in which he implied his favorite Wang was "the goddess of Mt. Wu" nevertheless left this as a poetic expression with no further engagement with the actor developed in the text.

Wu's attempt to restrain and regulate the expression of *qing* embodies one of the most important functions of classical poetry as explained by Stephen Owen. Wu's intention to uphold the poetic is further illustrated by an important feature of this guide, namely, the review of the actor's acting and looks through the medium of classical poetry. The frequent presence of classical poetry in a guide that otherwise is composed in the vernacular seems pretentious, perhaps even

[10] Sophie Volpp, "The Male Queen: Boy Actors and Literati Libertines" (Ph.D. Dissertaion, Harvard Unversity, 1995), pp.128-140.

ridiculous. As Owen explains, the legitimate "genuine" feeling that classical poetry is supposed to manifest included love, friendship, sadness, and the appreciation of nature. Topics such as greed, cruelty, ruthless ambition, and unromantic lust that were common in vernacular literature were not acceptable as poetically "genuine."[11] It is not unusual in the *Yanlan xiaopu* guide that, following a poetic review of an actor's acting style, the reader are then given the actor's nickname which always had an erotic connotation. The juxtaposition of the world of genuine feeling and the world of lust and rancor made Wu's effort to uphold the poetic a vain attempt. This impossibility combined with his longing for untainted, natural, and domestic beauty suggests a deep nostalgia in a time of commercialized cultural production and demonstrates the inevitability of the transformation of *se*, or appearance, into an object of mass consumption.

Perhaps overwhelmed by the description of *dan* actors' looks (*se)* in such flower guides, Wu Cuncun (2005) argues that "the tremendous prosperity of the theater in Beijing during the Qing dynasty was not at first a matter of dramatic sensibility, but was based on the admiration of boy-actors, a homoerotic sensibility." Her assumption of a dichotomy between sensuousness and "pure" art leads her to another dichotomy in this time between art and commerce: "The theaters of late imperial China, however, were not a place set apart for serious

[11] Stephen Owen, "The 'Poetic' in the Qing," in Huters, Wong, & Yu, *Culture and State in Chinese History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp.108-112.

cultural reflection; they were informal, lively, commercial and ever changing."[12] Based on this problematic assumption and unable to find a "pure" actor (perhaps in a modern sense) in her source, Wu frequently uses the term catamite to refer to *dan* actors. It is true that a *dan* actor assumed more roles than what we might think an actor should be in our time, but it certainly does not mean acting itself was downplayed in people's evaluation of *dan* actors. As we shall see in Wu Changyuan's standard for assessing an actor, acting or *yi* was at least as important as looks or physical appearance (*se*).

Yi

If there is a tension between the emphasis on erotic attraction and the emphasis on temperament in terms of Wu Changyuan's evaluation of an actor's appearance (*se*), then the attention to an actor's physical features is somehow at odds with *yi* or *ji*, literally talent but here meaning acting. Wu Changyuan noticed that some actors' fame, such as Ge Guiguan, simply came from their pretty face and being seductive but had nothing to do with their acting. The charged relation between *se* (appearance) and *yi* (acting) demonstrates an awareness of the distinctiveness of the acting occupation. Wu despised those who claimed that Ge should be compared with the famous Chen Yingguan. According to Wu, there

[12] Wu Cuncun, *The Homoerotic Sensibility in Late Imperial China* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p.132 & p.134.

was nothing to say about Ge as an actor. He emphasized that Ge did not observe the customs of the theater occupation (*bu cong li yuan fa qu zhong lai*), but simply used his seductiveness to cater to popular taste.

During the Qianlong era, appearance and acting abilities (*se* and *yi*) were the two main criteria used by theater critics for evaluating actors. Wu specifically warned against bias favoring looks over acting in some evaluations. For Wu, the refined air of an actor actually derived partly from appropriate theatrical training. Thus, Wu's emphasis on acting was consistent with his criterion for the evaluation of an actor's *se*, namely, that it should be a combination of physical beauty and cultivated refinement. Once *se* and *yi* were united in this way, it not only helped to enhance the visibility of the acting profession, but this combination helped to increase the distinction of literati themselves. As a consequence of Wu's emphasis on *yi*, comments and evaluations of an actor's performance throughout the *Yanlan xiaopu* guide became an important constituent. For most actors included in the guide, Wu highlighted the plays in which their performances were famous. This is different from the so-called flower guides that deal with courtesans. The *Yanlan xiaopu* guide became a guide for theatergoers rather than brothel clients, a product that makes sense only in the context of the commercialization of entertainment.

Besides this, Wu also highlighted their performance in his biographic sketch of each actor, especially in his poetic interludes, as we have seen in the

entry for Chen Yinguan. In general, these poems captured the signature moment of each play in which an actor specialized. Wu's concern then primarily focused on the play's plot or the actor's portrayal of a character. For example, in his comments on *San ying ji* (The story of three heroes), Wu was disappointed with the arrangement of the plot as it did not make sense that later on in this play the heroine lady Dou would volunteer herself as a matchmaker for her rival, Gao Lanyin, with her own fiance.[13] In the entry for Zheng Sanguan, in spite of his disdain for this actor's "lewdness," Wu nevertheless admitted that his acting in *Chi cu* (Jealous woman) and *Da men* (Knocking the door) brought the indecent women characters to life.

In this way, Wu's style of critique differed significantly from that of late Ming *quxue* theater connoiseurs: Wu's concern was theatricality rather than the meticulous attention to the meter of song lyrics, which suggests that the flower guide was intended for a broad section of theatergoers rather than a small, privileged group of theater connoisseurs. Moreover, shifting from song lyrics to theatricality technically means a shift from listening to arias to watching a performance. Such a change would definitely find receptive ears among those who are looking for immediate aesthetic and sensual satisfaction from theater—those in search of popular culture. In this shift, actors rather than theater connoisseurs became the masters of theater. Consequently, acting itself became

[13] Zhang Cixi, *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao*, p.19.

more and more prominent in literati comments on theater. Thus, it is no wonder that Chen Yingguan appears to us first as an actor in spite of many other roles he played off stage. By providing the information that an actual theatergoer would most likely want to know, the *Yanlan xiaopu* guide enhanced the visibility of acting as a profession. This enhancement in turn changed the ways actors were presented— actors simply became actors, or in other words, they were the objects of cultural consumption—in their acting as well as in their appearance.

The changing tone in these poems points to more profound changes. As a result of the dominance of professional troupes, actors entered into the public arena: they no longer belonged to a certain master but were accessible to all. The shift of concern from meticulous connoisseurship to a focus on acting also suggests a shift in theater from the literati's salon to the public space of the urban population. To emphasize the emerging distinctiveness of acting as a profession, however, is not to say that acting is a "pure" occupation untainted by the commercialized setting. *Dan* actors, actors who played female roles, did assume more roles in comparison with actors in modern society, but to call them catamites rather than actors is nonetheless an anachronism. I propose that the multiple roles *dan* actors played, and the notorious *siyu* or "private residence" system in which tea parties or even sexual service was provided, were the result of the flourishing of theater in a commercialized environment rather than the result of actors' sexual or social roles. Wu Changyuan's description of actors'

personal lives suggests that the commercialization of entertainment had a two-fold effect on actors: on the one hand the star actors were like magnets drawing fame and wealth towards themselves, on the other hand, it was expected that they use any means to achieve that fame and wealth, including selling their bodies and affections.

Affairs

Throughout the biographical sketches of the *Yanlan xiaopu* guide, Wu was equally as interested in an actor's personal life off stage as he was in his looks and acting skills (*se* and *yi*). How should we assess the social implications of an actor's personal life becoming the focus of public attention or even gossip? Actors' personal lives had not been the focus of public attention until the emergence of professional troupes in the eighteenth-century. In the era when private household troupes prevailed, the owner of a private acting troupe regarded the members of his troupe as his property and kept a close eye on any possible "infidelity" of his actresses. Their lives supposedly centered on him. If the owner ever had any interest in knowing what his actresses did, it was for the sake of supervision. In this sense, the attention to actors' personal lives, especially when they became the focus of commercialized news indicates the rising individuality of actors. The power attained from commercialization was at the same time ironically the same power that because of objectifying them also degraded them.

In his biographical sketch of each actor (chapter two through chapter four of *Yanlan xiaopu*), we can see Wu Changyuan's attempt to recapitulate the signature moments of an actor's career. In chapter five, which Wu referred to as "miscellaneous notes," he highlighted some actors' stories that he was structurally constrained from writing about in his previous chapters. Given the range of differences and individualities among the many actors that Wu portrayed, any generalization or collective image of the actors' community seems impossible. There were actors like Li Guiguan and Tang Yulin who illustrated the highest moral standards. Meanwhile we are also told stories of actors whose seductive power mesmerized people and even at times led to their bankruptcy. In a sense, the dramatic life stories of these actors are a kind of drama performed instead on a different stage. Wu definitely knew his readers' interest in these offstage "plays" was no less than their interest in actors' on stage presence. Similar to the plays enacted in the theater, an actor's personal story could also serve the purpose of either moral cultivation or aesthetic satisfaction, or simply leisure in the form of gossip—a function that theater connoisseurs might be reluctant to acknowledge.

From these stories we can see that Wu Changyuan paid special attention to the relationships between a *dan* actor and his patrons. The often sexually charged relations, along with the "private residence" system, were the main reasons why present-day scholars like Wu Cuncun refer to *dan* actors as male prostitutes rather than as actors. Although there are not many sources available for the study of the

"private residence" system, the *Yanlan xiaopu* and other flower guides evidence the prevalence of relationships between *dan* actors and their patrons. For famous *dan* actors such as Wang Xiangyun and Chen Yinguan, their affairs were certainly an important component of Wu's descriptions of the theater world. But to refer to them as male prostitutes rather than actors is an oversimplification. It is noteworthy that the offstage roles they played were so much entangled with their acting careers that whether or not an actor had a patron became a symbol of his status in the field and an index of his popularity. Even the "eccentric" Liu Er'guan, in spite of his differences with powerful clients, was certainly willing to establish a relationship with people whom he liked. "A poor literatus managed to get to know Liu through his brilliant literary work; they loved each other very much." Wu regarded their relationship as a "spiritual association through literary pursuits."[14] In other words, to have an unconventional patron was acceptable and was even highly regarded as a marker of individuality, but an actor without a patron was nonetheless considered pitiful. Wu Changyuan often used a sentimental tone in speaking of those of his esteemed actors who had unfortunately not yet found a patron. He opined that in many cases this was due to the "tastelessness" of the clients.

Dan actors did play more roles than actors in a modern society, but within the historical context these behaviors were the norm. The prevalence of

[14] Zhang Cixi, *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao*, p.19

relationships between actors and their patrons exemplify the different ways in which actors interacted with society at large in late imperial China. First, consonant with their commodified status as an object of consumption, in many cases monetary relationships rather than personal relationships prevailed. As we have seen in the case of Chen Yinguan, "the relationship lasted as long as the money was available." For Chen, owing to his superstar status, most people only had the opportunity to "look at his back" when he was off stage. Wu described another actor, Jin Guiguan, who several months after his arrival in Beijing had attained a "decorated cart and luxury clothes" thus "even to be his driver was a job that people would admire." How had he managed to achieve so much wealth?

> Fawning, in the deep night
> Like flowers in the spring wind
> A common boy who now joins the group of ethereal young men
> Who can even look down on the wealthy Deng Tong[15]

The poem implies that he could laugh at the legendarily wealthy Deng Dong simply because he had achieved sufficient wealth through his "fawning" activities during the night. Second, the patron's taste was very much influenced by theater trends. During Wu's time, most patrons were clients of *huabu* (regional dramas) actors rather than kunqu actors as regional dramas had become the fashion. Zheng Sanguan, the actor that Wu described as a "robust prostitute," could not find a patron simply because "northerners no longer like kunqu." Wu then sighed,

[15] Zhang Cixi, *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao* p.40.

saying: how can we say that it is easy to get rich through your body?[16] In the sex market for prostitutes, good looks would be primary and theater fashions less likely to be an issue.

Third, there is evidence that an independent sex market was already emerging from its entanglement in the acting profession due in part to the unresolvable tension between the multiple roles an actor was supposed to play. Wu mentioned with disgust that some patrons simply sought the pleasure of flesh and did not care about the actor's talent at all. Patrons, for example, frequently invited their favorites, Luo Rongguan and Shi Xing'er to sing at banquets. Both actors were from the Yiqing Company but, in fact, their acting was below standard and Wu regarded them as second-class actors. Their popularity was due to their looks: Luo Rongguan was often compared to the legendary handsome Pang An, and Shi was said to be "bright, seductive, and charming, with a lovely personality." Thus it can be seen that a separate sex market was already emerging in theater circles: and Wu sighed, saying: "you no longer have to please your clients with your acting."

> The Lotus of the early morning bears a graceful deportment
> The pretty face of Zhang is so bewitching
> Being handsome means being able to get sufficient luxury gifts
> Why bother to acting on stage as a woman?[17]

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[16] Ibid., p.20.
[17] Zhang Cixi, *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao*, p.30.

So good looks were sufficient to make a living, obviating one from the need to act. The same situation was true for Zhang Xi'er of Yongqing Company and Yang Bao'er from Taihe Company. In terms of acting, Wu likened them to baby birds studying singing,"far from mature!" Fifteen-year-old Zhang and Yang were so much like "the sprouts from the *doukou* in early spring" (*dou kou zhi tou er yue chu*) that patrons were attracted to them and they quickly opened their own private residence to entertain their patrons.

> How many audience members can be expected for an immature actor
> Especially when found drunk in their patrons' company?
> Who loves the one like the peach blossom
> And still expects the caress of the one like a tender willow branch?[18]

According to Wu, when socializing with actors became a fashion for those with ready cash, the fashion had itself become a vulgarity. Yu Sanyuan, the giggling creature whom Wu despised as having "the country bumpkin" actually had many patrons attending him at his residence. On the other hand, although Wu praised Zhang Lianguan as "pretty and elegant," he did not have any patrons because he did not follow the fashion of making himself seductive. Wu's sarcastic comment was, "why is it that only wild flowers catch your eye, and country wine that gets popular?"[19] Again, Wu's deep nostalgia for earlier days when actors were loyal to

[18] Ibid., p.30.
[19] Zhang Cixi, *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao*, p.21-22.

their masters is implicit in this comment. He finally finds an actor who still manages to keep the qualities he admires:

> Zhang Keting (Baohe Company), name: Mingyu, Keting (written with a different character) was his original courtesy name. He is a native of Changzhou, Jiangsu. He has a pure aura and a pretty look about him (*shen qing gu xiu*), reminding one of pearl blossoms in a spring shower. He used to act in the opera, *Xiaoqing tiqu* (Xiaoqing enacting Du Liniang); the play seems made for him. A certain gentleman loved his performance so much that he changed his courtesy name to the present one. When Zhang was in Suzhou, he had a close relationship with a clerk. In the year of Xinchou (1781), the clerk was arrested and brought to the capital whereupon Zhang decided to follow him to Beijing. He brought his family and found a position in a Beijing company so that he could visit the clerk in prison often. This spring, Zhang heard the news that the clerk was going to be executed. He promptly changed his clothes and went to the execution site, crying fit to die. Although the one Zhang favored was not a good man, yet compared to those who end their relationships whenever their clients' money is gone, Zhang's ongoing loyalty to people who had patronized him is such a rarity. After his patron's death, Zhang felt at such a loss that he came back to Jiangnan. He is really a crane among a crowd of chickens, such a sigh![20]

Another example of this loyalty that Wu admired so much is Defa'er. He started out as a page before becoming an actor. Then, after ten years of fame, he decided to return to his old master. Wu praised Defa'er for "being loyal to his old master and not forget his former patron's grace (*en*)." He also envied the old master in that he could still hear Defa'er's singing whenever he chose to have a cup of wine at home.[21]

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[20] Ibid., p.35.
[21] Zhang Cixi, *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao*, p.37.

Wu Changyuan's nostalgia actually points to the unstoppable force that had changed *dan* into an object of consumption. Whereas it is perhaps not appropriate to posit a dichotomy between "dramatic sensibility" and "homoerotic sensibility" that assumes there is a "pure" art uncontaminated from any other outside influence, whether it is sexual fantasy or commercial force, the history of theater in eighteenth-century China demonstrates the close relationship between the development of theater and commercialization of culture. Viewed from the perspective of cultural consumption, the obsession with actors' appearance, including the cult of boy-actors, and even the obsession with an actor's affairs is as important as acting itself. To say so is not to downplay the role of art but to show the complicated situation in which art becomes an object of consumption in a commercializing society.

Huapu **in the Commercializing Urban Culture**

The eighteenth-century witnessed the emergence of the first generation of permanent public playhouses in the history of Chinese theater, which is essential for us to understand the compilation of flower guides in this period. For a long time, a variety of stages—be it affiliated with temples, within the elite's mansions, or even in the periodic market—were the main venues for theatrical

performance.[22] It was not until the Qianlong period that the first group of public playhouses known as *xiyuan* (literally "drama garden") appeared in Beijing's Qianmen area, a booming commercial district located in the so-called "southern city" or "outer city" of Beijing.

It would be fair to say that it was more than a coincidence that public playhouses first appeared and then concentrated in this area. First of all, the booming commerce in the Qianmen district brought one of the most important sources of audience for public playhouses: the business sojourners and sojourners turned urban residents. Meanwhile it is worthy to note the literati's involvement in this commercial theater district, which directly resulted in the compilation of flower guides. The massive state apparatus and several exams held in the capital brought large numbers of literati to Beijing. According to some statistics, the number of candidates varied from several thousand to more than ten thousand.[23] Many of the examinees continued to stay in Beijing even after the exam was over.

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[22] For a general survey of the history of playhouses in China, see Liao Ben, *Zhongguo gudai juchang shi* (The history of playhouses in ancient China) (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1997), pp.1-6. I need to clarify here that by using "public playhouse" I refer only to those individual arenas that were exclusively used for theatrical performances. In this sense, I regard the public playhouse *xiyuan* of the Qing dynasty rather than the *goulan* (literally "surrounding fence") of the Song dynasty as the beginning of public playhouses in China. This is not to deny the significance of *goulan* in the history of Chinese theater. During the Song dynasty, as a result of the intensive commercialization of the urban life, entertainment complexes known as *washe* appeared in the major cities, with individual units within the complex known as *goulan* hosting a variety of shows, ranging from storytelling to music-drama. It is curious that *washe* ceased to exit in the Ming dynasty in spite of the continuing prosperity of theater in that period. Instead, hall-performance became the major form of theatric presentation as we mentioned before. It then suggests that there is not an immediate relationship between commercialization/urbanization and public playhouses.

[23] Hou Renzhi & Tang Xiaofeng, ed., *Beijing chengshi lishi dili* (The historical geography of Beijing) (Beijing: Beijing Yanshan Chubanshe, 2000), p.483.

Due to the restrictive quota system, there was a large pool of examinees in Beijing who were either waiting for appointments or ready to take secretarial positions in the capital.[24] Spending their time in the public playhouses and ranking actors thus had become an important part of these literati's everyday life. As mentioned before, the author of *Yanlan xiaopu* was such an examinee. In fact, our knowledge of the existence of public playhouses at this time largely comes from the random mention of *xiyuan* in those flower guides due to the lack of systematic description of this topic by contemporaries.[25]

In 1792, the theater guild of Beijing reconstructed its building. Usually the funding was donated by acting troupes. But in the stele that indicates the names of donors, for the first time we see the names of *xiyuan* listed side by side with professional troupes.[26] In this stele eight *xiyuan* were listed. It is thus safe to say that at least from the Qianlong era public playhouses had appeared in Beijing and became an integrated part of Beijing's theater profession.

The major difference between *xiyuan* and previous venues of theatrical performance such as stages affiliated with *huiguan* or taverns is that the performance in *huiguan* and taverns was on an irregular basis and was ordered by

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[24] On the quota system in civil service examination, see Iona Man-Cheong, *The Class of 1761: Examinations, State, and Elites in Eighteenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press,2004), pp.49-56.

[25] For example, in *Xiaohan xinyong* (New lyrics on winter leisure), another flower guide published during the Qianlong era, the anonymous author Shiping Jushi mentioned the names of three public playhouses. See Shiping Jushi, *Xiaohan xinyong*, p.75 & p.77.

[26] "Chongxiu xisheng zushi miao beizhi", in Zhang Cixi, *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao*, pp.912-913.

certain clients—be it an individual or a group of people. In other words, the *huiguan* or tavern simply provided the space for the performance. The existence of *xiyuan*, on the other hand, was completely based on the profit from the regular theatrical performance thus it needed an active way to promote its performance. The program of a certain *xiyuan* had usually been planned beforehand, although we do not know exactly how it worked. Usually a *xiyuan* would post an advertisement (*baotiao*) on the major thoroughfares of the city as well as in front of the *xiyuan*. In *Qilu deng*, a vernacular novel published during the Qianlong era, the character Song Youyun went out to such a place to see the *baotiao* and decided to which *xiyuan* he would go.[27] By the same token, flower guides helped to promote the fame of certain actors and provided a useful guide to theatergoers thanks to the comprehensive network of bookselling that had been built up in eighteenth-century China.

A recent study by Cynthia Brokawreveals some important developments in publishing and book culture in the eighteenth-century. Most noteworthy is the geographical extension of commercial woodblock publishing concerns to rural hinterland and frontier regions hitherto largely untouched by commercial book culture. During the eighteenth-century, a number of provincial capitals, as well as regional cities emerged as centers of commercial publishing, and we also see the rise of new intermediate-level publishing centers. The influential publishing

[27] Li Luyuan, *Qilu deng* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990).

industries could be found at even lower levels of the central-place hierarchy in the Qing, such as some market towns in Southeast China and Southwest China. Book trade networks also became more comprehensive at this time. By the mid nineteenth-century, all parts of China proper were integrated into a comprehensive hierarchy of book-producing centers and bookselling markets and distribution routes. As a result of this, we see the social penetration of texts to lower-status levels of the population in these regions.[28]

Although evidence that directly indicates the publishing, especially the circulation of flower guides, is negligible, episodes from two contemporary novels suggest that the custom of ranking actors and compiling such guidebooks was not unusual. In the famous eighteenth-century novel *The Scholars*, character Du Shenqin sponsored a performing contest. He invited actors from the troupes across the city to perform their special opera episode on a temporary stage set in the scenic lake Mouchou. Renowned literati were invited to constitute a jury. The first place actor was rewarded lavishly and the result was posted on the main entrance of the walled city. Another novel *Pin hua bao jian*, which is completely devoted to the romantic relations between literati and actors, begins with the discussion of a flower guide that is exactly the same as *Yanlan xiaopu* in terms of content and format. The characters in this novel not only follow the guide to find

[28] Cynthia Brokaw, *Commerce in culture: the Sibao book trade in the Qing and Republican periods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

good actors, their dialogues also suggest that an actor's fame and market value is closely related to whether he was included in such a guide book.

When theater became a form of commercialized entertainment, it also became an object of consumption similar to the luxury goods examined by scholars of consumer culture in early modern times. In this sense, flower guides provided necessary information for theatergoers as consumers. Moreover, in his attempts to make distinctions between sensuousness and lewdness, distinctions between actors whose success is based on acting and actors whose success is just based on appearance, and ultimately distinctions between elegant kunqu and vulgar regional dramas, the author of *Yanlan xiaopu* made it also a canon of taste in a society where the appropriate way of consumption could be used as a way of maintaining social status. In the remaining sections of this paper, I will examine the impact of this burgeoning consumer culture on the social stratification and the categories of gender and sexuality in late imperial China.

Actors In Two Worlds

In the preface of *Yanlan xiaopu*, the author Wu Changyuan recounted the story that inspired him to compile this guide: "in the summer of 1783, the famous actor Wang Xiangyun painted a folding fan. The orchid flower on it was so graceful that all my friends want to come and compose poems in commemoration

of this elegant thing." In Chinese tradition, painting was regarded as the privileged undertaking of literati. If an actor's involvement in painting was highlighted and commemorated to such a degree, does it mean that actors had been elevated to equal status with literati?

"Orchids are the most graceful among all flowers (*guoxiang*); painting is a cultured practice of elegant people; and Wang Xiangyun is the most beautiful actor of our time. Beauty and a fragrant blossom, such a match!"[29] Such were Wu Changyuan's compliments to Wang Xiangyun, which included his admiration that such a beauty could also wield a brush. There is a paradox here, however. Painting as a cultural practice and "beauty" and "fragrant blossoms" as cultural symbols signify two totally different worlds. Painting, the privileged undertaking of literati, allowed Wang to claim to be a peer of Wu and his friends. Meanwhile, the allusion of beauty and fragrant blossoms, however, distanced Wang from Wu by pulling Wang into another world. This world was occupied by courtesans and was where the literati played out their feelings and fantasies. This is a paradox worthy of consideration in that the fluid position actors occupied points to the power actors assumed through performitivity that was inevitably associated with their occupation, both on and off stage.

In the history of Chinese art, the Ming-Qing period (1368-1911) witnessed the flourishing of *wenren hua*, or literati painting. Paintings were painted by and

[29]Zhang Cixi, *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao*, p.7.

circulated among literati; painters were literati in the first instance, whereas "artist" was a subject position unavailable to them. The social history of Chinese painting demonstrates that, similar to the socio-cultural function of poetry, painting was used as a way to claim one's elite status. Pictures were usually produced within what art historians call an "obligation system." Pictures were usually made to be presented on certain "occasions." The occasion could be a friend or relative's birthday, or particularly important was the literati's gathering, usually followed up by a picture to mark the occasion. Dozens of inscriptions by participants would also be added to the picture. The picture thus became a site on which a social space for the literati was constructed. Painting, as well as inscriptions on the picture, was thus a conventional way of participating in the literati world.[30] This is exactly what the literati did to Wang's painted fan: more than ten people composed fifty-four poems to commemorate Wang's elegant work, through which Wang no doubt could claim to be a member of the literati world.

Throughout the poems on the painted fan, it is not unusual to see complimentary terms such as *fengya*, and *qingya* — all expressions for the concept of "elegant." However, this kind of compliment was always associated

[30] On *wenren hua* and its social application, see Sherman E. Lee, "Chinese Painting from 1350 to 1650," in *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting: The Collections of the Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, and The Cleveland Museum of Art* (The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1980); Craig Clunas, *Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming, 1470-1559* (University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

with a feeling of surprise that an actor could even paint — a talent otherwise taken for granted in literati circles. Wu Changyuan's narrative also unconsciously draws a line of demarcation between Wang Xiangyun and the world of the literati: "Wang Xiangyun is fond of things elegant *although he is from the acting profession* (italics mine). Besides his regular practice of singing and acting, he also spent much time studying painting."[31] In the end, the compliment of Wang's unexpected talent in painting reinforces the line between the world of literati and the world of actors. This underlying logic explains why so many authors of the poems would use allusions related to courtesan that were not appropriate for their own peers.

It is a general pattern in the collection of poems that, following the conventional pattern of Chinese poetry, the authors begin with the imagery of the orchid, which in turn reminds them of the pretty painter himself. Besides the feminized allusions, quite a few authors explicitly used the allusion of "sunny terrace" and "Mountain Wu" to point to Wang as an object of sexual fantasy. Thus Wang was at once the literati's peer and the literati's object of sexual fantasy. He embodied both male and female. Wu once mentioned Wang's painting as being something like a maid's imitation of her mistress. By imitating his "mistress" — the literati — the actor was actually transformed into a shadow literati, thus creating a mirrored world of the literati. In this mirrored world, actors

[31] Zhang Cixi, *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao*, p.7.

like Wang Xiangyun could freely cross the line between literati and actors, an act impossible in the world defined by the legal code of the Qing dynasty. According to *Qin din xue zheng quan shu* (Imperial commissioned statutes on the administration of civil service examination), slaves , bondservants, prostitutes, actors, and people classified as *jianmin or* "mean people" were forbidden to participate in the prestigious civil service examinations thus preventing any possibility of upward mobility for them. In reality there were strict legal barriers between actor and commoners. So how could actors enjoy great fame in the poetic world when the legal code locked them into the bottom rungs of Qing society?

There are two points to be made: First, the commercialization of entertainment was pulling actors into a public arena in which actors themselves inevitably became the masters of stage. Literati on the contrary no longer had exclusive access to the actors, and they had to compete with other social groups, notably the merchants, for the attention of actors. The subtle triangle between literati, merchants, and actors could give actors certain momentum to consolidate their own cultural influence, and consequently secured for themselves certain forms of power.

Second, some literati began to share the same residential urban space as actors. Wang Xianyun, for instance, lived in *Fenfang* Street, which according to Wu Jianyong (2001) was a neighborhood inhabited by many literati. Wu Changyuan himself lived on the same street as Wang. In many cases, Wu's

friends asked him to get them one of Wang's painted fans. The proximity gained from a shared urban space gave Wu a different perspective on Wang: a way that predicted a star culture was in the process of formation in a burgeoning consumer society.

The Cult of *Dan*

In *yanlan xiaopu*, when the author described the actor's appearance, he usually focused on the feminized features of the *dan* actors: the flower-like face, the pure eyes, the slender shoulders, the slim waist, the delicate skin, and so forth. The focus on a female impersonator's (*dan*) femininity was a result of, as well as contributed to, the cult of *dan* during the mid Qing when *dan* actors became cultural icons and to play around with them became a fashion. For some scholars, "the feminization of subaltern males was part of, and contributed to, a wider homoerotic sensibility — a structure of feeling that invested boy-actors with a magical allure, irresistible to the elite males who supported and enjoyed the fashion [for male beauty and companionship]."[32] For others, the homoerotic relations between literati and actors had the potential to redefine conventional

[32] Wu Cuncun, *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China*, p.131.

signs of gender and status. The symbolic femininity of the actors disturbed the neat alignment of masculinity and femininity with activity and passivity.[33]

I am not totally convinced by these explanations. First of all, current uses of the terms gender and sexuality in Anglophone scholarship are grounded in a set of Western intellectual traditions that cannot be applied wholesale to the history of Chinese gender. Historians of Chinese medicine have demonstrated that before the early twentieth-century, sex identity grounded on anatomical difference did not hold a central place in Chinese construction of gender. The *dan* actor who played the role of female on stage was somehow regarded as a woman rather than a man. During the early years of the Qing dynasty, the conquering Manchu required every Han Chinese man to shave the front of his head as a sign of submission to the new dynasty; lack of a tonsure could result in the unceremonious loss of a head. One day in 1653, troops arrested two traveling players for having full heads of hair and accused them of rebellion. Their defense was that they were *dan* actors who performed female roles. They were genuinely confused as to whether they counted as male and were thus appropriate bearers of the sign of submission. The two were excused.[34] On the other hand, according to the Qing dynasty legal code, a man could engage in homosexual behavior without calling into question his manhood so long as his behavior did not threaten the

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[33] Sophie Volpp, "The Male Queen: Boy Actors and Literati Libertines," pp3-4.
[34] See Mathew Sommer, *Sex, Law and Society in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

patriarchal Confucian family structure. Unlike the West, homosexuality was never singled out as a particular category of deviant behavior. Rather, it was thrown together with all kinds of extramarital sex, which were undesirable because they did not lead to legitimate procreation within marriage. This reminds us of the second difference between China and the West. In the West, heterosexuality is the primary site for the production of gender. By contrast, in China before the early twentieth century the family or lineage unit was the primary site for the production of gender. Thus, what Judith Butler says in her *Gender Trouble* that a normative heterosexuality is used to reinforce the gender order certainly does not apply to Ming-Qing China.[35]

An important social context for the pervasiveness of boy-actors in the Qing dynasty that both Sophie Volpp and Wu Cuncun ignore is the strict homosocial environment in which prostitutes or courtesans operated. The effect of homosocial arrangements meant that both prostitutes, and especially courtesans, assumed many more roles than simply sex workers; most notable is their role as social companions to their male clients in public—a role that their wives and consorts as "good women" could not fulfill. The services that a courtesan's house offered included "tea parties" (*da chawei*), "serving wine" (*you jiu*), singing at banquets (*ban yan*), and so forth. *Dan* actors, while off stage,

[35] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

inherited many of these same roles as the courtesans from tea parties to singing at banquets. The second background is the forced ending of the centuries long institution of guanji, the registered courtesans who were obliged to provide such service to the elite male, as well as to the government official. Thus, it is fair to say that the end of the institution of "legitimate prostitution" and the consequent decline of courtesans' houses had indeed contributed to the cult of *dan*. Besides their acting as women on stage, *dan* actors now began to assume the roles of a courtesan while off stage. It could be understood that *dan* actors — legally inferior feminized males — in an environment that was predominantly homosocial began to play the roles that were once more commonly assumed by marginalized women, namely, courtesans.[36] In this sense, the significance of the replacement of courtesans by *dan* actors in the life of Qing literati does not lie in its potential challenge to the established gender system as Sophie Volpp's work may suggest. This is because this practice of the group of people who were legally defined as morally debased did not have this potential. This could be analogous with the attitudes toward the "illicit sexual intercourse" among the so-called *jianmin* in the eighteenth-century. In his study of sex and law in late imperial China, Matthew Sommer points out that there was a legal space for the tolerance of what the Yongzheng emperor might term "illicit sexual intercourse" for these

[36] On the substitution theory and Wu's critique of this theory, see Wu, *Homoerotic Sensibility in Late Imperial China*, pp.30-33.

people because this kind of behavior was seen as part of the definition of their debased status.[37] In other words, the "debased-status people" could behave in a way that commoners (*liangmin*) could not just because this was their culture. It is thus hard to say that the behavior of this group of people would have any effect on the established customs of the general populace. The focus on the feminized features of *dan* actors did then reflect a change in the way actors were being made into objects of consumption in a commercialized setting; yet, as I have argued, there seems to be no overt intention of contesting the established institutions of gender or class.

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[37] Matthew H. Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*, p.266.

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